


# UNSUNG HEROES



The \$10 million Rouge Tomato "food spa" opened last October in Manhattan on the grounds of the old Copacabana nightclub.





Photographs by  
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The low-key firm of Bentel & Bentel could be the most famous restaurant designers you've never heard of. That may change with their newest creation, Rouge Tomate.

Eduard Hueber/courtesy Bentel & Bentel



**Rouge Tomate** opened on Manhattan's Upper East Side on October 28, 2008—18 days after the Dow Jones logged its worst week in history, 14 days after the federal government bailed out nine national banks, and the very day it was announced that the global credit crisis had claimed from international financial firms \$2.8 trillion (and counting). Ten blocks south, stragglers from Lehman Brothers were likely still pushing boxes down the street. Amid the dust, a posh new eatery had sprouted up, a massive, vaulting thing, covering 15,000 square feet over two stories and looking less a restaurant than a sort of health spa for victuvs. Built on the grounds of the old Copacabana, it was like something out of a different national mood.

Just crossing the main room at Rouge Tomate was an event—you'd pass a backlit triptych of trees and cream-colored banquettes and patches of red Ultrasuede on the walls and dining tables framed like theatrettes. The menu was no less luxurious: \$72 bought you a three-course dinner, not including drinks. With its lush textures and outsize ambition, the place was built for posterity.

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The restaurant's 16-square logo (left) inspired its boxy partitions.

Even Frank Bruni, the *New York Times* food critic who, in a single tart phrase, can turn grown men into hysterics and who makes a point of ignoring his surroundings in his reviews, effused in an otherwise tepid write-up that Rouge Tomate is "one of the prettiest, airiest dining environments this city has seen in some time." That it opened at an inopportune moment was just bad luck.

Still, had the architects been able to divine the future, they probably wouldn't have changed much. Bentel & Bentel—a 25-person firm whose bread and butter has been suburban community centers (churches, libraries, schools)—designs restaurants that could survive the apocalypse. Everything, from the materials to the division of space, is built to last. "When we got into hospitality, we took it on as if we were going to design institutions," says Carol Bentel, a partner who helms the firm with her husband, her brother-in-law, and his wife. "If you think about it like that, our work couldn't be frivolous. It couldn't be Disneyland themed, it couldn't be flavor of the month. That would be the downfall of it." The firm has become,

**GROUND FLOOR**

- 1 Rear dining
- 2 Lounge
- 3 Bar
- 4 Juice bar
- 5 Prep/service area
- 6 Coatroom
- 7 Entry



Bentel & Bentel preserved Michael Gabellini's walnut flooring but added strips of FSC-certified bleached oak for warmth.

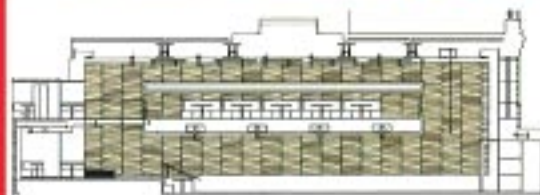
**NICOLE FARHI**

The Bentels were charged with softening Gabellini's stark design for Nicole Farhi's bi-level clothing store and dining room (right).



The lounge (left, in the foreground) affords views of a quirky glass-enclosed juice bar.





#### THE WHITE WALL

In a nod to Rouge Tomate's fresh cuisine, the architects turned this blank 78-foot-long wall (above) into a trellis (left and top). Slats of LED-lit blond oak by Mark Richey Woodworking overlay beige paint, and cubby holes carved into the wall showcase glass boxes filled with seasonal fruit and vegetables.

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romantic prints, or that the Modern, also for Meyer but wildly different, is more a work of art than half the paintings at MoMA. The firm's legacy runs deeper. "It's not a through-line style that they bring from project to project so much as an emotional aesthetic," says Meyer, who has hired them for five restaurants. "It's 'Let me hear what the problem is you're trying to solve, and

improbably, the favored architects of Manhattan's gourmand elite, giving the city such vaunted dining establishments as MoMA's the Modern, Tom Colicchio's Craft, Gramercy Tavern, and Eleven Madison Park—all from its perch on the tony north shore of Long Island, which to its restaurant clientele might as well be Kansas.

Rouge Tomate could easily have succumbed to shtick. Its European owners, who run an identically named restaurant in Brussels, were hawking high-concept cuisine based on a nutritional charter called Sanitas per Escam—an arty way to say the food is healthy. In lesser hands, the New York outpost would have been interpreted in literal or trendy terms. "We wanted avant-garde, modern, but we wanted timelessness too," says Emmanuel Verstraeten, the Belgian entrepreneur behind the space. "I knew, within two milliseconds of meeting Carol, they were the ones."

The Bentels certainly had the pedigree, and not just because their first restaurant, Gramercy Tavern, for the celebrity chef Danny Meyer, was a smash, all dark wood panels, rich fabrics, and



The Bentels drew inspiration from the Rouge Tomato (left) in Brussels, Belgium, with its red-and-cream palette.

BRUSSELS



Skylights figure prominently at the Brussels locale. In homage, the Bentels carved square holes in the lounge's new acoustic ceiling.

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Under the command of its executive chef, Jeremy Bearman, the restaurant adheres to a strict nutritional charter.

Below: A farm-raised-rabbit dish.

FOOD



then let me dig deep into our past for a solution."

The firm was started in 1957 by the Bentel brothers' parents, Frederick and Maria, who had crashed Walter Gropius lectures at Harvard and, in a more devout American moment, earned their keep designing pared-down churches on a burgeoning Long Island. Strong, basic materials such as bricks, stone, and wood, in addition to thoughtful spatial organization, were paramount to ensuring not only that their buildings would endure but also that they would accommodate daily life in all its variegated forms. The North Shore Unitarian

Layers of fabric—an inexpensive sheer lining and a box-patterned mesh from Kravat—divide semiprivate booths.

In this section of the two floors, the cantilevered booths are in red.



Church School, in Plandome, New York, looked like a campus when it opened its doors in 1966, with loosely connected gable-roofed structures, each built for a distinct purpose (learning, baby-sitting, praying). The partitioning enhanced a sense of cohesion and expressed a range of uses—it was, fittingly, a house of many mansions. Forty years hence, Bentel & Bentel brings the same ideas to bear on those cathedrals of 21st-century New York. "We think of restaurants as architectural places that need to accommodate many different parts," Paul Bentel says. "Restaurants are communities. Creating epicenters that reinforce a sense of diversity and strengthen the community is very much a part of our restaurant design."

It sounds a bit lofty, but there's something to it, particularly at Rouge Tomato, which occupies an old limestone building, at the foot of Central Park, that's rich with social history. Built in 1902 as a Beaux Arts hotel, it was later turned into the Copacabana, the venerable nightclub that helped launch the careers of Henny Youngman and Sammy Davis Jr. and acted as an incubator for yet another great New York institution, the mob. More recently, in the plush days of the early-to-mid-eighties, 10 East 60th Street was a Michael Gabellini-designed Nicole Farhi clothing store and dining room that served rapacious shoppers spilling over from Madison and Fifth Avenues.

To build on the space's legacy—a tricky task for a new restaurant in a city of more than 20,000 competitors—the Bentels split it up into pieces, creating, as their elders had done four decades earlier at North Shore Unitarian, a sort of compound. The main floor centers on a juice bar (it's a health-food restaurant, after all) and houses a low-slung lounge for casual eating, a strip of banquettes suited for business lunches and dinners, and a sequestered, semiprivate dining area fronted by two walnut-trimmed booths that hover above an open stairwell like picture frames. The booths are so pretty and romantic that you'd think the

Roque Temate photo, Edward Hubbar; bath and stairs photos, Oleg March; food and Brussels photos, courtesy Raaga Toratic; all other images courtesy Bentel & Bentel

Framed booths cantilever over the floating stairs. Although it appears to be wood, the floor is actually ceramic tile, made by Grespania.

BOXES

Trippich, Doug Martich, other photos, Edward Kuchel all images courtesy Bostel & Savat

## KITCHEN

A curved "golden ratio" kitchen anchors the basement. The dining room features custom white-oak tables and leather-backed beech chairs from Sandier Seating.



A glass triptych that doubles as a wine rack brings a taste of the outdoors to the windowless basement dining room.

ART



#### BASEMENT FLOOR

- 1 Unisex restroom
- 2 Private dining
- 3 Pool-level dining
- 4 Cranberry pool
- 5 Main dining room
- 6 Display kitchen
- 7 Garden-area dining
- 8 Kitchen



Butternut-wood doors [above] open to a decidedly unbathroomlike bathroom, with Lievore Altherr Molina seats and a long onyx sink [below].

#### BATHROOMS



architects would have pressed them up against the front windows to show them to the world—or at least to the discerning ladies across the way at Bergdorf's. Instead, they shunted the booths to the restaurant's rear, where they enjoy long-distance views of 60th Street without stealing the whole scene. "One of the big things was making sure every seat is the best seat in the house, including those in the back," Carol Bentel says.

As much as the restaurant is about distinct spaces, it's also about common ground. Downstairs, there are yet more divisions: a low-lit private suite; another semiprivate dining area that looks out onto a pool indulgently filled with cranberries; a central dining room presided over by an open kitchen. But the Bentels worried that patrons wouldn't dare venture into a dark, windowless basement, so they drew some of the brightness from upstairs. Oak trees printed on three glass panels, each 18 feet tall, descend from the first floor to the basement, introducing the outdoors into what would otherwise be a sea of place settings. The piece, by the Norwegian *continued on page 101*

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