



Smart Casual: The Transformation of Gourmet Restaurant Style in America

Alison Pearlman

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Fine dining and the accolades of Michelin stars once meant chandeliers, white tablecloths, and suited waiters with elegant accents. The stuffy attitude and often scant portions were the punchlines of sitcom jokes—it was unthinkable that a gourmet chef would stoop to plate a burger or a taco in his kitchen. And yet today many of us will queue up for a seat at a loud, crowded noodle bar or eagerly seek out that farm-to-table restaurant where not only the burgers and fries are organic but the ketchup is homemade—but it's not just us: the critics will be there too, ready to award distinction. Haute has blurred with homey cuisine in the last few decades, but how did this radical change happen, and what does it say about current attitudes toward taste? Here with the answers is food writer Alison Pearlman. In *Smart Casual: The Transformation of Gourmet Restaurant Style in America*, Pearlman investigates what she identifies as the increasing informality in the design of contemporary American restaurants.

By design, Pearlman does not just mean architecture. Her argument is more expansive—she is as interested in the style and presentation of food, the business plan, and the marketing of chefs as she is in the restaurant's floor plan or menu design. Pearlman takes us hungrily inside the kitchens and dining rooms of restaurants coast to coast—from David Chang's Momofuku noodle bar in New York to the seasonal, French-inspired cuisine of Alice Waters and Thomas Keller in California to the deconstructed comfort food of Homaro Cantu's Moto in Chicago—to explore the different forms and flavors this casualization is taking. *Smart Casual* examines the assumed correlation between taste and social status, and argues that recent upsets to these distinctions have given rise to a new idea of sophistication, one that champions the omnivorous. The boundaries between high and low have been made flexible due to our desire to eat everything, try everything, and do so in a convivial setting.

Through lively on-the-scene observation and interviews with major players and chefs, *Smart Casual* will transport readers to restaurants around the country to learn the secrets to their success and popularity. It is certain to give foodies and restaurant-goers something delectable to chew on.

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