

Taste of the Town

By Angela Pettera



A CONVERSATION WITH **EDDY BITTON**

Meet the man responsible for the look of many restaurants in the 805 and beyond.

I'M SITTING INSIDE TRATTORIA FARFALLA, located at The Promenade in Westlake Village, eyeing the concentric rings of copper screens around the light fixture over my booth dressed in chocolate-brown leather. While waiting for the restaurant's designer to arrive and join me, I admire his handiwork: thick wooden flooring made from reclaimed planks brought over from France. On the back wall, a collage of wooden stamps (used for fabric printing) are strung together with wire. These warm natural materials mesh well with the very modern mirrors, bronzed to an almost-black finish, that slant down from the ceiling over the open kitchen.

The guy who brought this scene to life (it's loud and festive in here tonight, from the cozy pub tables in the lounge area to the elegant outdoor furniture on the tented patio) slips into the seat across from me. Eddy Bitton looks nothing like a design guru. His large frame betrays no hint of arrogance or self-importance. There's no gel in his hair and nothing on him is pierced. He's not wearing anything overly stylized. Plus, he's smiling. He's the Ward Cleaver of the design world. Bitton's background is as solid as he is: 17 years with one design firm before launching Bitton Design Group in Agoura Hills in 2000. Now he has a staff of 12 "extremely talented people" (in his words), which allows his group to provide services ranging from architecture to interior decorating. His client list reads like a dining guide: Safire in Camarillo, Shave It in Thousand Oaks, Bandits' Grill & Bar in Thousand Oaks, Granville Casual Gourmet Cafes in Burbank and Glendale, The Habit Burger Grills, and Ruth's Chris Steakhouse in Santa Barbara, to name a few. Bitton considers himself fortunate to be able to focus on eating establishments exclusively. Of restaurants he says, "I design them; I frequent them; I love them."

The owners of Trattoria Farfalla, John Borghetti and chef Santino Coccia, approached Bitton to design this, their third restaurant. Galletto Bar & Grill in Westlake Village and Trattoria Farfalla on Hillhurst Avenue in LA are more casual spaces. "I wanted to show them how we could get the design environment to live up to the quality of the food," Bitton told me as we scooped up fresh mozzarella on crostini drizzled with olive tapenade. When the wood-fired pizza with arugula, mushrooms, and a house-made sausage called *salsiccia* was set down before us, he said, "I get a lot of joy out of the success of my clients." No wonder he smiles so much.



Opposite page: Designer Eddy Bitton loves his work. "I design [restaurants]; I frequent them; I love them." This page: Pub tables surround the bar at Trattoria Farfalla, which has a nightly happy hour from 4 to 7 p.m. (top). Bitton also designed the dining room at Safire in Camarillo (above).

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I asked him about a hypothetical client, Du-par's in the Thousand Oaks Inn. What if they came to Bitton Design Group for a makeover? We agreed that despite being an LA institution, this particular Du-par's has zero eye appeal. Bitton got excited about the history of the space. "It's been there for so long," he said, "but it could totally be reenergized. The easiest thing to do would be to create a 1950s diner. But that's so expected. It should have nostalgia but also current materials, clean lines, and fun patterns." He immediately wanted to dig up black-and-white photographs of coffee shops that existed in the fifties in Thousand Oaks, frame them, and put them on Du-par's walls. He summed up his hypothetical design theme by saying, "constantly play with yesterday and today; make it a diner for today."

As he pulled out his laptop, setting it beside a plate of Torta della Nonna, a creamy and warm sweet ricotta cake with pine nuts, Bitton said, "It's funny that you asked, because I did this for Richie's Real American Diner in Rancho Cucamonga. The difference for Du-par's is that I would tie it to the community more." He proceeded to show me pictures of a modern diner with Naugahyde booths and neon lighting but also a Death Star-like hanging globe light and wooden buttresses reminiscent of a Viking ship over the counter seating. It was as though someone in Japan or Norway had reinterpreted an American classic: familiar yet new. Ultimately, it looked comfortable. Like Farfalla. A space to enjoy delicious food with friends who like to eat. ■