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KIM KARDASHIAN

VEGAS HOTSPOTS



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HOT TAMALES

Just how do you build a restaurant inside a pyramid? The new **T&T** inside the **Luxor** offers a tempting study in Mexican flair

BY KATE SILVER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOMAS MUSCIONICO

When you're building a restaurant within a pyramid, standard construction rules don't apply. That's what Rafael Alvarez and Brannen L. Brock learned when their New York-based design firm, Alvarez + Brock Design, began building T&T (Tacos & Tequila) in the Luxor Hotel & Casino. T&T is on the atrium level of the casino, which overlooks the lobby and sits beneath hundreds of rooms along the pyramid's slant. The design team faced the challenge of a location with no roof and no walls, supported by a post-tension slab inside Las Vegas' most recognizable building.

To T&T co-partners Michael Frey and Craig Gilbert (who also own Drive This Entertainment),

that location is about the best thing they could have hoped for. "This is truly one of the most unique pieces of property in Las Vegas," says Frey.

The design team immediately understood why. "You see it from below and you see it from above, so we're provided with this unbelievable sight. You really had to take all of that into consideration," says Brock. "Most restaurants are an interior experience. And in this case, it's really an exterior and an interior experience."

The architects needed to come up with a design that would set the space apart while also drawing customers in. Their answer? A giant sombrero.

Actually, it's an abstract of a giant sombrero. Alvarez and Brock created a stylized version of the traditional Mexican hat and translated that image into a brushed aluminum sculpture, brimming with



From above: T&T (Tacos & Tequila) inside the Luxor Hotel & Casino surrounds diners with sexy matadors and an abstract sculpture of a sombrero above the bar; T&T co-owners Craig Gilbert and Michael Frey say the Luxor is one of the most unique properties in Las Vegas.



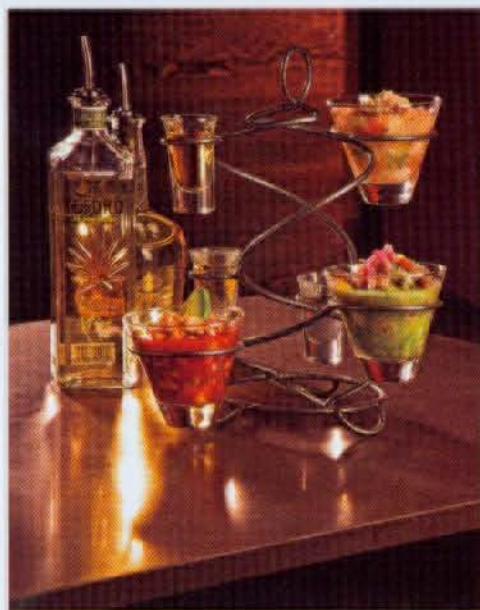
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thousands of laser-cut geometric shapes. The work of art now sits atop the restaurant's bar. “It's something to give a sense of dimension to the space,” explains Frey.

And that was exactly what Frey was looking for. The restaurateur, who studied film at University of Southern California and worked on projects including *Dallas* and *Knots Landing*, knows the importance of a setting. Take Casa Fuente, the cigar bar at The Forum Shops at Caesars, which was Frey's first large project. Walking through the space is like stepping into Cuba in the 1950s, from the décor to the spirit. His approach was no different with T&T. “When a customer comes in, you want to create a setting that transports them to another place, especially in Vegas and especially inside the pyramid,” he says. The wave-like sculpture does just that.

Nearby, the enormous photograph of a woman matador in action has a similar, albeit sexier effect. It's the closest thing to a wall the restaurant offers, but it acts as much more than a barrier. Twelve large photographic panels fill the 25-foot-tall, 65-foot-wide space, depicting a bullfighter baiting a giant bull amid swirls of red fabric. The photo was taken by New York photographer William Vazquez, and as Frey recalls, it was quite a process. “We bought 1.6 tons of dirt from the New York State parks department—it's the same dirt they use on the baseball field in Central Park—and they literally carried it up three flights of stairs in buckets, so they had a bucket brigade to get this shot. We bought a bull's head and put it on tripods, and they Photoshopped the rest in.”

If the woman in the photo looks familiar (she's also in three matador scenes further back in the El Salon area of T&T), it's because she's one of the Tequila



Clockwise from far left: Tequila Temptress Bridget Peters served as the model for the female bullfighter depicted in New York photographer William Vazquez's oversized images; a Vazquez matador; shots of tuna, mahi-mahi and shrimp ceviche paired with a flight of tequila.

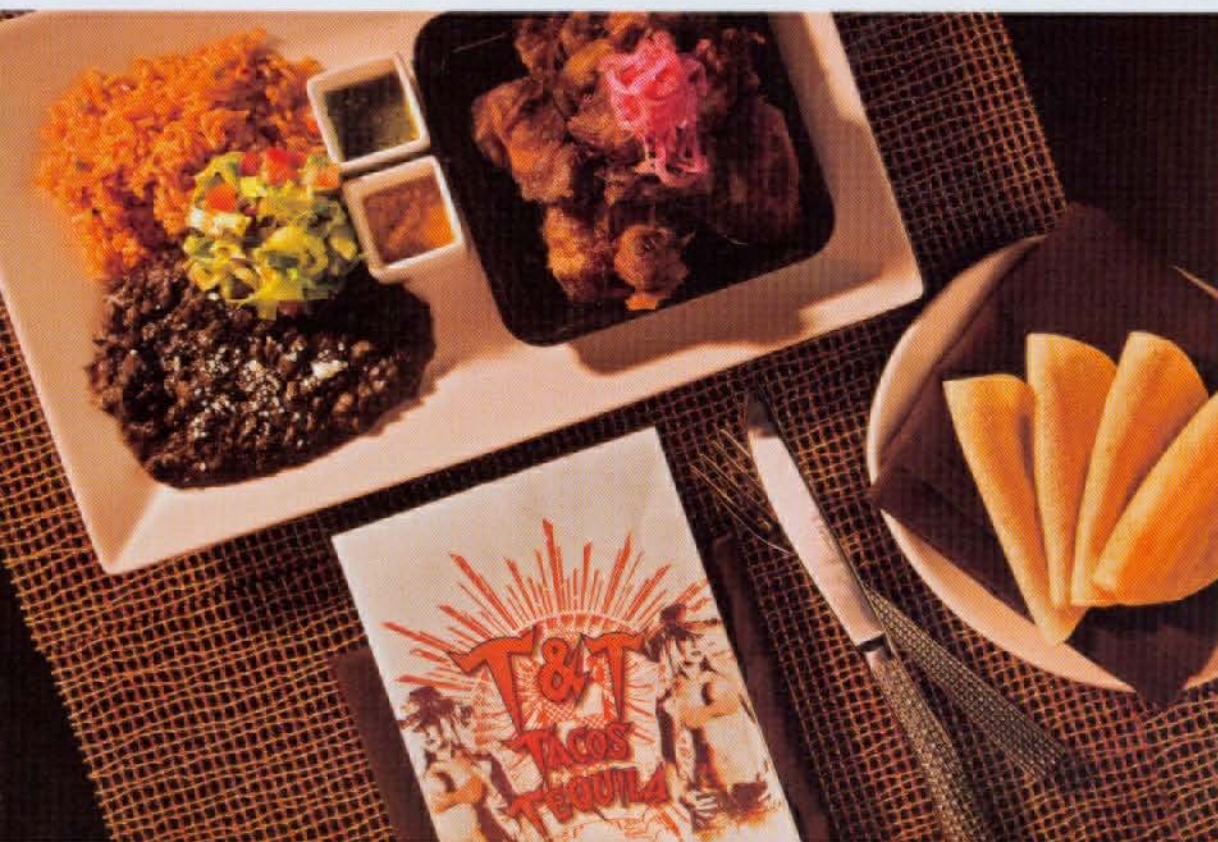
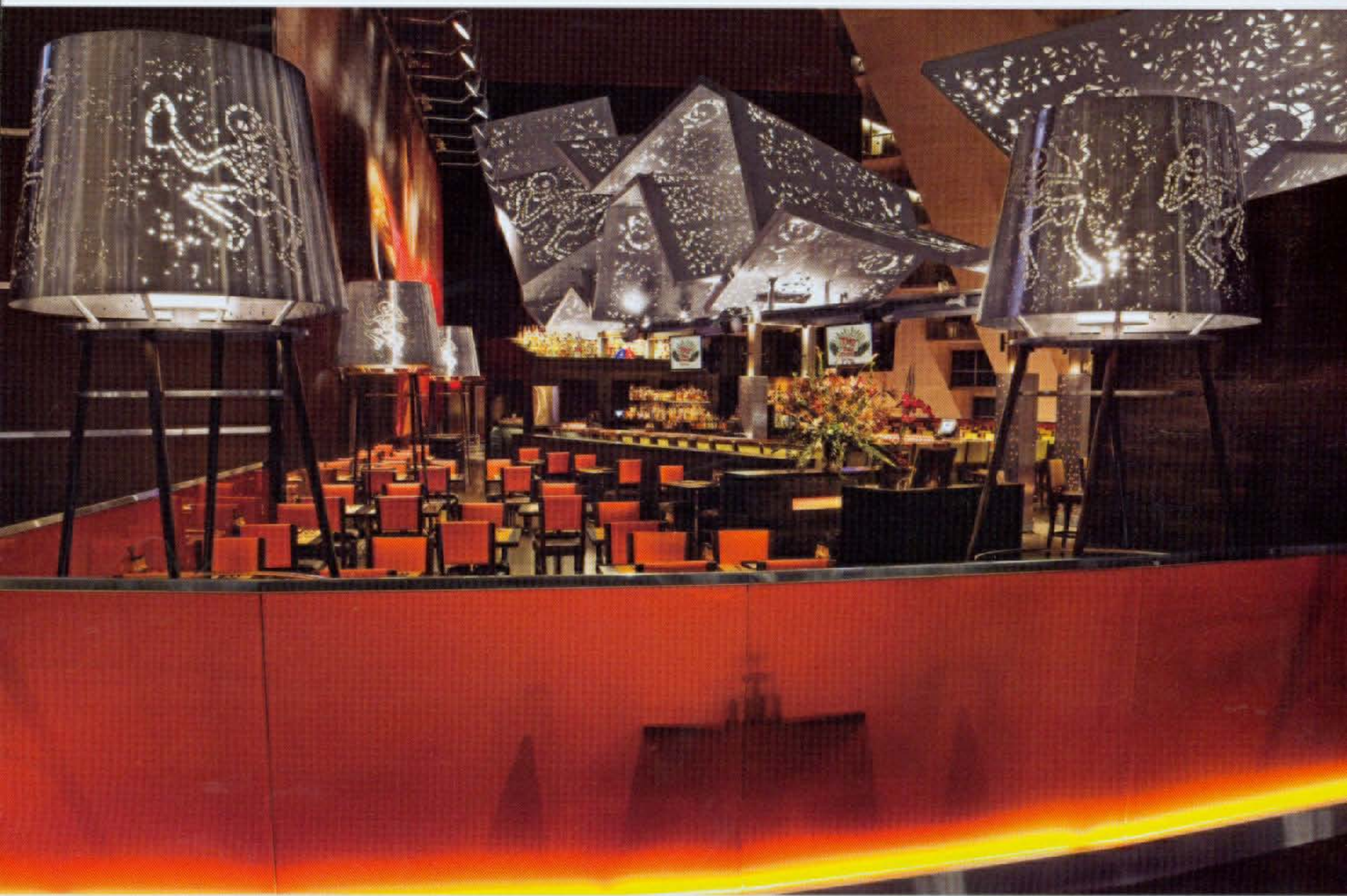
Temptresses roaming the restaurant with their tequila cart, educating customers and doling out libations. Bridget Peters, along with co-temptress Carly Dunlap, will expertly guide newcomers through a flight or help them find the perfect pairing for their dishes, including the tacos that give the venue its name.

It's this area—tacos and tequila—that serves as Gilbert's stage. He has spent more than 20 years in the hospitality and entertainment industry and is the former vice president of food and beverage for the Rio All-Suite Hotel & Casino. His goal, which he shares with

consulting chef and world-renowned restaurateur Richard Sandoval and executive chef Saul Ortiz (formerly of Isla Mexican Kitchen and Tequila Bar at T.I.), is to provide delicious, straightforward food with flavors as explosive as the restaurant's design. “I think the food is as sexy as the environment,” he says. “The quality of the product we can buy is the best. We buy the best meat and seafood that we can get, and we prepare it very simply.” Don't let him fool you. The food may be simple and traditional, but the tastes are intense.

The kitchen staff is up early every morning roasting chilies, creating fresh salsas and frying chips. That made-from-scratch philosophy holds true at the bar as well. “There's no sweet-and-sour mix, there's no margarita mix, everything is fresh every day using limes that are squeezed in the back. A lot of people say they use fresh lime juice, but they're buying a gallon of lime juice and it's not the same. And the only sweetener we have on the bar is organic agave nectar,” says Gilbert.

Around the restaurant, orange lights cast a warm glow to complement the dishes, while dark-brown walls and tables are enlivened by chairs of pink, yellow and orange that call to mind the colors of the popular Mexican soft drink Jarritos. Two structures shaped like shot glasses are under construction, soon to serve as a retail store and a frozen-drinks bar. Music pours through the restaurant and lights play off of the sombrero and through its laser cutouts. Frey takes it all in. “I have the best of both worlds. I have a really cool place, and great cocktails and great food,” he says. “So we should become one of the hottest spots in Las Vegas.” Literally and figuratively. ♠



From above: *Día de los muertos* skeletons are part of the Mexican iconography; slow-roasted pork with *habañero* sauce, *salsa verde*, pickled onions, black beans and rice.

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