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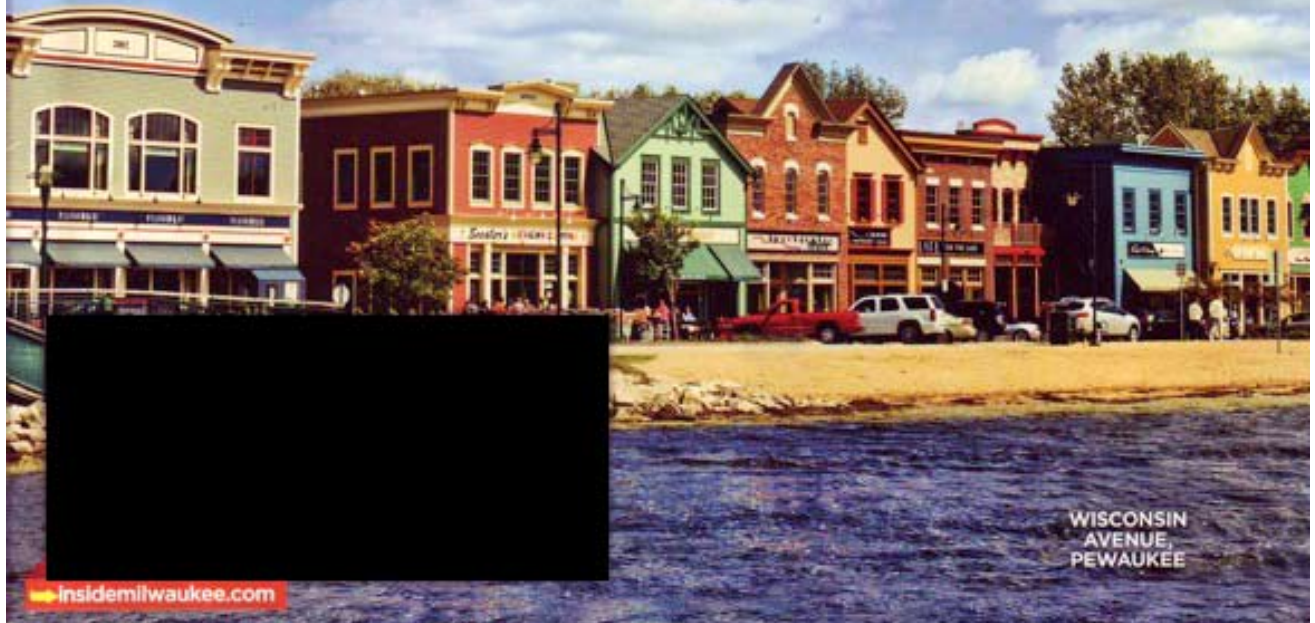
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BY KEVIN KOSTERMAN



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HARBOR HOUSE
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Appearance Is Reality

Make the restaurant look good and diners can feel good. So proprietors take every possible step on both counts.

BY THOMAS CONNORS

In the hospitality business, presentation is everything. And that doesn't just apply to what ends up on your plate. The way a restaurant looks can mean the difference between a good time and "I'll never come here again." Although fancy digs won't make up for mediocre food, the way a dining room looks is a big part of a restaurant's appeal.

Think of **Elsa's on the Park**, with its wonderfully odd and ever-changing installations. Or the sheen of hardwood under the galaxy of four-tops at **Ward's House of Prime**, where red and yellow napkins pop against the classic white tablecloths. And with its earth tones of rough wood and exposed brick, **Hinterland Erie Street Gastropub** epitomizes a no-nonsense, let's-eat-and-drink attitude.

Sometimes, when blessed with a great space, it's best to leave things alone. When Nebi Torbica opened **MOCT** in a large room on East Pittsburgh Avenue, he knew that beyond building a kitchen and installing the proper equipment, the trick was to let the industrial charm of the environment telegraph the excitement.

"My cousin in Canada had bought the building some years ago, and when he heard

I was looking to do something, he said I should check it out," Torbica says. "Once I did, I just loved the architecture of the place – the high ceiling, exposed brick and steel trusses."

At Sunday brunch, the huge skylight that runs the length of the space illuminates diners below as the monster garage doors open to the street and add a distinctly urban sizzle.

Tim Dixon, owner of the Iron Horse Hotel, waited eight months before he fleshed out **Smyth**, the property's dining room.

"**Branded**, the bar, opened when the hotel did, but we wanted to see how things flowed, how people responded to the property before moving ahead with the dining room," says brand development specialist Brigette Breitenbach. "The name Smyth pays homage to blacksmithing, a trade that was decimated with the onslaught of the industrialization that was happening when this building was constructed in 1907. So we wanted the space to feel almost like a workshop with the factory floor and the umber tones. But when you're in the space, you realize it has been designed for comfort, too. All the seats are leather, and they are designed to let you sit for two hours or more over a nice dinner."

Dixon and Breitenbach worked closely with artist and designer John McWilliam of Scathain Looking Glass Works. He created the moody, antiqued mirrors and gave the metal details in the restaurant a beguiling, weathered aspect. Antique butcher scales add to the space's character. And during brunch, Bloody Marys and mimosas are served from a vintage cocktail trolley.

"I think the decor of Smyth is very true to the hotel itself," Breitenbach says. "Whether you walk in as a businessperson or just got off your motorcycle, everything is approachable. Even though the cuisine at Smyth is at white-tablecloth level, there is not a white tablecloth in sight."

Joe Bartolotta has always had a hand in how his restaurants look, and **Harbor House**, which opened last summer, is no exception. "From a design standpoint, I am very active," Bartolotta says. "And I found a designer [Mark Knauer in