

## The man who makes people beautiful

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Arnold Chan is currently Britain's greatest yet least well known restaurant expert.

So far this year he has fine tuned the opening of more than 15 top restaurants round the world including two new Mr Chows as far afield as Seoul and Mexico City. He is currently working on the soon-to-open KittiChai in the fashionable Thompson Hotel in New York as well as on hotels and restaurants in South Beach Miami, Los Angeles and the Maldives. Anyone who has eaten at The Wolesley, London, Georges in the Pompidou Centre in Paris or at The Landmark Hotel in Hong Kong will also have felt the influence of Chan and his company Isometrix.

But rarely will anyone have seen his name. Chan specialises in one particular aspect of the restaurant business to such a professional extent that restaurateurs often come to talk to him about their next project before even talking to an architect let alone hiring the chef. Chan's forte is lighting which as most women know only too well is one of the two most important factors in every restaurant long before even the food, wine or location of the table are considered (and for anyone who cannot guess the second it is the state, condition and overall cleanliness of the ladies' lavatories).

And although installing lighting that is both flattering and conducive to mutual appreciation has been important, Chan is the first to admit that his business, which now has offices in London, Paris and Hong Kong, has benefitted from a fundamental change in restaurant ownership.

"Most new restaurants today are no longer Mom and Pop affairs where the focus is on the food, friendly service and value for money. They are increasingly multi million dollar start ups where the minimum involved is \$2 million and the maximum, although this is a one off, is the \$12 million spent on Per Se in the Time Warner Building. It is difficult to put a figure on what my involvement will cost but I tell restaurateurs to budget on £5-8 per sq ft but as fine dining restaurants become ever more sophisticated, the system I am asked to design has to deliver an increasing range of effects."

"The first and most crucial to the restaurant's eventual profitability," Chan explained, "is in effect to create two restaurants, one that customers enjoy at lunchtime, the other one that they will return to in the evening. This is not as easy as it sounds now that restaurants are being constructed as part of a new building with limited natural light. If the space, the feel is not bright enough at lunch then people will just not come in. And yet if the lighting is too bright in the evening then as restaurateur Ian Schrager puts it 'no-one feels sexy!'"

And that is good lighting's role, to make us feel and look better and surreptitiously to induce us to spend more.

"Lighting's role early evening is to set the stage, to create a friendly ambience throughout the place so that customers can see who is there and what is going on. But then the table becomes the stage and it has to be lit as though it were in a theatre. Initially, I light the table and then I work backwards from where the table is to light the customers' faces. That is the principle, to work from the centre of the table back to the customer."

Although that is not always the case. At the highly successful L'Atelier du Robuchon, with branches in Tokyo and Paris and undoubtedly more to follow, where customers sit next to one another at a counter, the centre of attention is not the other guests. This therefore Chan has lit directly and only from above so that the light falls on to the principal actors, the kitchen, the chefs and the food.

And it is no longer a question of simply installing the most appropriate system. "During the course of an evening our lighting systems will have to change four or five times but so subtly that no-one realises what is happening. That is when I know that I have done my job properly because unlike the architects or the interior designers I work alongside no-one should ever notice what we have done. Good architectural lighting should never stand out - it must just be seen as part of the interior."

Chan, 46, was born in Hong Kong then educated at St Paul's, London before an architectural training that eventually led to a career in lighting which has brought out a latent passion. Over lunch he mentioned his love of good food on several occasions and the obvious excitement and pleasure working with restaurateurs and chefs over the meals that forms an integral part of the planning stage.

Despite working with some of the world's super egos in the shape of today's architects and designers, Chan remains seemingly modest and calm. The only explanation he offered for his success was that he seems to have an ability to understand what the finished design will look like at a very early stage. And the only time he sounded at all exasperated was when talking about the new Hotel Puerta America in Madrid where he is installing the lighting for the whole building but each floor is being individually designed by one of the world's top architects.

Perhaps most importantly Chan appreciates what and how we want to feel. "There is a synergy between the lighting work I do for private clients, for offices such as Clifford Chance's in London's Canary Wharf, for Dolce & Gabbana and Burberry in retail and for anyone who eats out in any of the restaurants I have worked on. We are becoming more sophisticated while simultaneously more casual, more aware of quality and less reluctant to tolerate even the second best."

And while Chan admits that technology, particularly in the shape of LED's, light emitting diodes, is increasing the capability of what any sensitive lighting specialist can do in any available space, the one piece of lighting he is most proud of involved no technology whatsoever. "It was a dinner for 800 in Malaga for the new Picasso Museum in a long black tent with the King of Spain present. I lit it with 5,000 candles along the tables and on 120 chandeliers. It was fantastic," Chan said with a huge smile, "and would have made a great restaurant."

Arnold Chan can be contacted via [isometrix.com](http://isometrix.com)