

The New York Times

FOOD

A Restaurant Where You Can Order a Dish, Literally

By **CHRISTINE MUHLKE** DEC. 18, 2017



La Mercerie, the new restaurant in the Roman and Williams Guild design store in SoHo, near Canal Street.

Robert Wright for The New York Times

La Mercerie, the cafe, bakery and restaurant in the furniture and design store [Roman and Williams Guild](#), which opens Thursday, is not exactly the kind of place you associate with takeout.

[Marie-Aude Rose](#) — a celebrated Parisian chef who has cooked at [Pierre Gagnaire](#) and alongside her husband, Daniel, at their now-closed restaurant, Spring — will serve what she describes as “simple but refined” French food. But after enjoying dishes like vegetables cooked in saffron broth beneath a puff pastry dome or buckwheat crepes with seafood in a sauce Nantua, diners can order something to go: the plates, the napkins, the tableware, the candlesticks and even the tables.



Place settings in La Mercerie. See anything you like? It's probably for sale.
Robert Wright for The New York Times

They're all listed on a dim sum-style illustrated card available from the waiter. Fill it out, and the items can be delivered that day — along with, say, palmiers and croissants from Ms. Rose's adjoining bakery.

Putting a restaurant in a design store isn't a new concept. Restoration Hardware has opened restaurants it calls "integrated hospitality experiences" in three of its [RH Galleries](#), in which all the furniture is for sale. (A New York City location is on the horizon.) This month, the Brooklyn-based design brand [Blackbarn](#) opened a cafe in its new Chelsea Market home store, where a try-before-you-buy strategy is also in place.

Blackbarn's co-founder, Mark Zeff, says immersive shopping like this is the future of brick-and-mortar retail, which he believes is being clobbered by online shopping in part because "people are sick of walking down the street and seeing these homogeneous big brands, one next to the other."



Vegetables under a puff pastry crust, one of the “simple but refined” dishes that Marie-Aude Rose, the chef, will serve.
Robert Wright for The New York Times

As luxury groups respond to evidence that millennials prefer food and experiences as much as or more than acquiring stuff, even Tiffany & Co. has opened [the Blue Box Café](#) on the new renovated home and accessories floor of its Fifth Avenue store. Customers can purchase the cafe’s teacups and plates, from the new Tiffany Blue porcelain line.

But La Mercerie, in the Roman and Williams Guild store in SoHo, has taken the idea the farthest — all the way to the flowers on the table, which are sold from a stand near the entrance operated by [Emily Thompson](#), who does the restaurant arrangements for the Grill and Le Coucou.

La Mercerie represents another new crossover in restaurants: The designers are also the owners. Robin Standefer and Stephen Alesch, the husband-and-wife team behind the interior design firm Roman and Williams, have orchestrated the looks at the restaurants Upland, Lafayette and, most recently, Le Coucou (where Mr. Rose is the chef), as well as hotels like the [Ace New York](#).



From left, the chef, Marie-Aude Rose, and the owners, Robin Standefer and Stephen Alesch.
Robert Wright for The New York Times

In opening Roman and Williams Guild — a store filled with their own furniture, lighting and other designs, as well as vintage finds — the couple said it seemed like a natural transition to own the restaurant, too. ([Starr Restaurants](#), with which they collaborated on Le Coucou and Upland, will oversee operations.)

“We just wanted to do something that was that comprehensive that we had real ownership and authorship of,” Ms. Standefer said. When designing other people’s restaurants, she said, “we could only control so much.”

Now they run the entire show, weighing in on Ms. Rose’s menu and, of course, how — and on what — it is served. In keeping with its “simple but refined” style, Ms. Rose’s food will be plated on a high-low, intentionally mismatched combination of ceramics sourced from Japan, Sweden, Australia and Denmark, eaten with vintage French silverware and dabbed away by linens made in Sweden. A light soup might arrive in a substantial Japanese clay donabe; a homey chèvre cheesecake on a delicate plate (also Japanese).



The new Roman and Williams Guild store, in SoHo.
Robert Wright for The New York Times

The cultural, and textural, misappropriations are intentional. While Mr. Alesch says that he and Ms. Standefer are seasoned business professionals, “we really try to take a chill pill when it comes to all the rules and regulations of interiors.”

As for food, Mr. Alesch, an avid home cook and host, said: “At home, we’re pretty wild. We use our donabes for Western food, we use the wrong wineglass”

“We’re interested in a strange tension and mix of things from a lot of different places,” Ms. Standefer said, adding that those who don’t wish to mix pieces can simply match, as most of the selections on the table are part of a full collection.



At La Mercerie, a doggie bag could include the glasses, plates and utensils.
Robert Wright for The New York Times

To demonstrate the range of styles and prices, she held up a lunar-surfaced teapot (a look that Mr. Alesch described as “high folk”) made by the Danish ceramist that sells to the restaurant Noma in Copenhagen, and — to the other extreme — a classic French coffee glass that she said was “completely reasonable: like, Amazon reasonable.” A set of six will sell for \$85; that teapot, though, will cost \$350.

All of the tableware was subjected to a stress test designed by their operating partner, Stephen Starr: put through the dishwasher 20 times to see if that metallic glaze remained intact. About one-fifth of their original choices didn’t survive. Even for those objects that can withstand the heavy use, Ms. Rose said, additional dishwashing and polishing staff will be required.

For Mr. Alesch, the idea of experiencing the goods in situ is a counterbalance to today’s online marketplace. “I spent the last decade exercising the glory of internet shopping,” he said. “I’m a little fatigued by getting the wrong things, doing returns”



The floral arrangements for the tables will be sold from a stand near the entrance operated by Emily Thompson, who also does the restaurant arrangements for the Grill and Le Coucou.

Robert Wright for The New York Times

He also wanted to reintroduce what he calls the “Old World” idea of having purchases put on a house account and delivered with flair from their warehouse in Industry City, in Brooklyn. (They can also be ordered online.)

Ms. Standefer said she understood that their soup-bowl-to-nut-dish approach might be overreaching in today’s shopping climate. “We just don’t believe — and we might get schooled — that retail is dead,” she said. “It just doesn’t have any soul.”

La Mercerie, in Roman and Williams Guild, [53 Howard Street](#) (Mercer Street), SoHo; 212-852-9097; [rwguild.com](#). Opening hours are 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. with baked goods, coffee and cocktails; a full menu will follow in mid-January.