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"DESIGN IS NOT JUST VISUAL, IT'S THREE-DIMENSIONAL": AFRODITI KRASSA ON DESIGNING FOR HOSPITALITY

By [Sophie Killip](#)

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Having worked with some of the biggest brands and famous names in hospitality, we sit down with Afroditi Krassa to find out more about her game changing, multi award-winning studio.

Afroditi Krassa is a woman of many talents. Educated at the Royal College of Art, she originally trained as a furniture designer before setting up her own business in 2002. Years later, after a series of remarkable twists and turns, Afroditi Krassa Studio has become internationally renowned, working with clients including Itsu, Rosewood Hotels, and Heston Blumenthal. We sat down with Krassa to find out more about the incredible journey she's been on to become one of the most sought-after designers in the hospitality sector.

Our first discussion centres on how Krassa moved from product design to working with restaurant interiors. "I knew I didn't want to remain employed within a typical design practice," she explains. "At the time [we were] designing technical equipment. We did a lot of car interiors, and we did the last interiors for the Concorde aeroplane, so it was really high profile clients [but] it would take years to see any of our designs in the market place."



FEATURED



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"I didn't have the patience to design something for three years before it hit production, so I decided to set up my own business," Krassa continues. "In 2004 I met Julian Metcalfe, the founder of Pret a Manger. I had approached him to design custom pieces for Pret, but he said 'I'm opening a new business, which is far more interesting for me, and I'd rather we worked on that together' ... I was given this amazing opportunity, which was in a completely new sector. I had to learn a whole new set of technical parameters, I had to put my creative twist on a new area, and pull it all together."

Ten weeks after Krassa started on the project, the first Itsu was born. "I spent five years helping Julian roll out the whole brand, taking it from one site to 30," she says. "It was an amazing learning curve. I worked very closely with Julian; we would spend hours conceptualising and taking his thinking and trying to translate it into a tangible design." In 2008, however, Krassa felt that it was time to move on, and took a step back from Itsu. She began work on a second restaurant project with a completely new team – a project that would become Dishoom, the UK's beloved chain of Indian café/restaurants.



"It was a very similar exercise," Krassa mentions. "The team came to me with a very open brief, knowing they wanted to do something new. They wanted to innovate without knowing how to get there. I spent two years drafting what would become the Dishoom world – it involved a lot of trips out to India and a lot of research. We wanted to make it a cultural experience, rather than just a dining experience."

After finishing Dishoom's set up, Krassa realised that she needed to choose which path her design studio was going to take: follow the original plan and focus on furniture design, or explore the new world of restaurant interiors. In 2010, she decided to take the studio forwards into designing hospitality and food and beverage spaces, and built up a team of people who knew the industry.

"Fast forward from 2010 and we are now a team of ten people," she says. "We're highly dedicated to the design of food and beverage spaces. Even if we're working with a hotel, the food and beverage part of the project will be a strong part of our design. That's our expertise; it's the area I enjoy doing the most. I think it's the most expressive of all the hospitality design worlds."





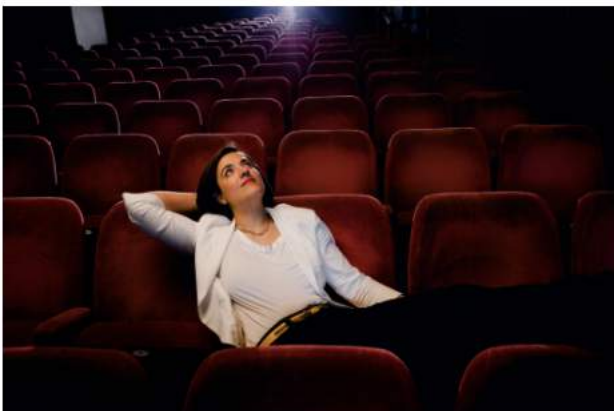
As a result, Afroditi Krassa Studio has become one of the few global agencies that specialises solely in food and beverage design. "We take projects from beginning to end, which is an unusual combination," Krassa says. "We're not your typical interior design agency. We create the overall concept, the brand, and the story, all the way to the final execution. Our client range includes large corporates and small independents. Again, it's very unusual because there aren't many agencies that have such a broad spectrum of clients."

Having worked with everyone from grass root, first-time restauranteurs to high-profile celebrity chefs, Krassa says that she has noticed that overall, restaurant offerings are becoming more design led. "We live in a more visual world – but design is not just visual, it's three dimensional," she says. "To me, the digital experience suppresses all the other senses – there's no way of expressing the other senses through digital media yet."



"I think the analogue world, the world of going into a restaurant or a bar, needs to augment the other senses and provide an experience that is much more than just visual," continues Krassa. "That is where design is asked to come up with all the goods, fulfilling the rest of the experience. I think it's very interesting; how do we go beyond the visual and provide the '360' to tick all the other boxes?"

Krassa explains that the way her team 'provide the 360' is by putting the food first, with it often becoming the base for the design and the world they create for the client. "I always ask, if that's the food you're tasting, what plate should it be sitting on?" she reveals. "What's the table that the plate is sitting on? What are the surfaces beyond that? The core of the experience should always be the food, and connect back to that fundamental."



Perhaps the fundamental idea that food comes first is what keeps Krassa so grounded and inspires her designs. After all, she says that no matter her client, she will always treat them the same; "I don't care how much they pay us or who they are. We have a responsibility to ourselves to create the best we can. I would never prioritise one client over another; every project is equally important, and if we don't think we can do our best then we shouldn't take it on."

Recently, the studio has delved into the world of luxury hospitality, with Krassa leading the team to design Gordon Ramsay's new Asian restaurant on Grosvenor Square, Lucky Cat (opening this summer). Despite her high-end clients, Krassa maintains that "the process of designing is the same whether you're designing for Louis Vuitton or Primark. I think what [designers need to ask is] 'how do I create something innovative and new within this category?' That's how we always approach a project."



Discussing how clients have helped shape the practice, Krassa mentions a restaurant she worked with previously, the Tel Aviv-inspired Baya Bala. The team behind the restaurant used a beg-and-borrow approach to building their idea, "because no one had any money to put towards it – but it opened and it's phenomenal," she says. "They're now looking to open a second site."

"There is a learning curve from [Baya Bala], which applies to Lucky Cat or Rosewood Hotels; why did it become successful?" Krassa continues. "It's simple – it's authentic, it does great food in a great space, and offers a great experience. It boils down to that. It takes a lot of hard work, but you will succeed. People make it complicated, but it's not."



This outlook, Krassa feels, is part of the reason why clients are interested in her studio. "We try to find the little hidden gems," she says. "[For example, with Dishoom], the first thing I said was that there was something about communicating heat that transports you to India – but how do you communicate heat? Fans are a good way to communicate it; when you see a fan, you subconsciously think [you're in] an exotic location. It's trying to find these ways of communicating the concept without being literal."

As well as the thriving interior design studio, Krassa also managed to find a way to keep to her furniture-designing roots, creating her own collection of products called AKollection. The collection is made up of furniture, lighting and finishes. "A lot of the pieces come out of us fulfilling a need within our own projects," Krassa explains. "It's geared towards the contract world – architects, interior designers, hotels and restaurants. As we design our own projects, we think, what doesn't exist in the market? What's missing? We design products that we feel are missing and put them out there and see whether people agree with us."

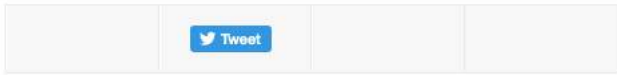




Between running Afroditi Krassa Studio and creating new products, Krassa is an extremely busy woman – and the studio’s bright future looks to keep her that way. Discussing Lucky Cat, she says, “We’re finalising our part, down to the last bits of the interiors and the last bits of the brand. Our creative side is now almost done so we’re helping everything come to life, which is not an easy task!” But what about the future of the industry itself?

“We’re entering a world that is not what you expect of luxury hospitality,” Krassa predicts. “It’s about ‘less’: less space and less people. It’s about exclusivity without excluding anyone. History is becoming more important, so more concepts are trying to work with a historical context. Being informal is a lot more relevant within today’s luxury hospitality, even down to food. It’s about being understated, and being able to create something beautiful out of resourceful processes.”

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