



Creative Comforts

Ralph Brennan's café b blends into the neighborhood with casual décor

It's comfortable, stylish, and attractive. It's not too fussy, not too formal. It's grounded in the past, with clean-cut modern touches, and has punches of whimsy and flights of fancy. And when you don't want to stroll any further than just around the corner – there it is.

In the Ralph Brennan Restaurant Group's more than three-decade-span of mostly white tablecloth establishments, café b is a stand-out. It may be the smallest in the family, and perhaps slightly more formal than you'd expect from a 'café,' but it is the gregarious neighborhood hangout that Ralph Brennan envisioned, a place where the staff remembers your name and your neighbors may well be at the next table.

With a slightly retro feel, thanks to the pressed tin ceilings [perforated, so they actually absorb sound, rather than reflect it] and vintage-style finishes and lighting, it is also an atmosphere with an energetic edge, thanks to the long mid-century modern cylindrical pendant lights hanging over the bar, and the spare white architectural arches that visually divide the dining zones, so that no one is actually seated in a back corner.

The bar itself is framed in warm cypress, and faced in handmade Mexican encaustic cement tiles in traditional patterns of olives and blues. That is the subtle color scheme throughout: a restful, neutral environment evoking the hues of the sea and of cypress bark. Light colored, fabric covered walls and soft Scalamandré bistro curtains in the front windows are defined by natural heart-pine woodwork and vintage reclaimed beams. The dramatic focal point of café b is the lustrous iridescent blue-black tile surround framing the bar's riveting handmade backdrop of glistening smoky mini-mosaic mirrors.

The bare bamboo 'plyboo' tabletops are naturally anti-microbial, and despite their warm amber finish, provide a stylish note of 'green.' The banquettes are covered in a whimsical cork-screw pattern. The chairs are classic woven bistro chairs you'd expect to find outside – at a European sidewalk café.

Artwork by [mostly] local artists reflects the air and sea in attractive and compelling ways: turquoise laser-cut steel pelicans and an installation of three-dimensional butterflies fashioned from aluminum cans that flutter in the air currents of the ceiling fan; an oil painting of a ship on moody waters, and a pair of large-scale photographs of single oysters.

The Brazilian cherry floors gleam, the brass bar rails and light sockets shine with an old-fashioned warmth, and the mercury bulbs surrounding the bar glow in the reflection of the darkened mosaic mirror – all casting you in a flattering light as you settle back and make yourself at home. With its bright and airy, cozy and casual, warm and welcoming as it is, café b is indeed what home-away-from-home should be.

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