



Designs to Savor:

DC Firms Create a Pair of Beautiful New Restaurants

by Ronald O'Rourke

Main dining area at Proof.

The restaurant business is notoriously competitive—only a fraction of those that open in any given year survive over the long run. But a well-designed interior, while no guarantee of success, can certainly give a restaurant a leg up on its competition—in short, good architecture, as usual, means good business.

A full-service restaurant is a challenging space for an architect to design. It must accommodate, in a finite area, a wide variety of functions with highly different design requirements—an entry and reception zone, a bar, one or more dining rooms, a high-performance kitchen, storage areas, and bathrooms. These spaces need to be arranged so as to provide sensible circulation patterns for both customers and staff. The design must promote a relaxed and enjoyable experience for diners while at the same time supporting an efficient operation from the owner's perspective. And finally, a good design will complement the cuisine and the overall theme of the restaurant—without descending into kitsch.

When the architect gets it right, the result looks effortless. Two new restaurants in DC's neighboring Penn Quarter and East End areas—Proof and Co Co. Sala—are cases in point.



Wine cabinet with access ladder.

Proof—A Restaurant That's Also a Wine Bar

Proof is located at 775 G Street, NW, in the bustling Penn Quarter district, across G Street from the Smithsonian Reynolds Center that houses the National Portrait Gallery and the Smithsonian American Art Museum. The restaurant serves modern American cuisine along with fine wines, cheeses, and charcuterie. As the restaurant's name suggests, it's a wine bar as much as a dining establishment, with 1,000 selections available by the bottle, and 40 by the glass, half-glass, and quarter-glass.

To design this restaurant-cum-wine bar, Proof owner Mark Kuller turned to **Griz Dwight, AIA**, a principal at the DC firm **GrizForm Design Architects**. Grizform has designed more than a dozen existing and planned DC-area restaurants. Before starting the firm in 2003, Dwight gained experience in restaurant design as a project architect at the DC firm of Adamstein & Demetriou Architects, where he worked on the designs for several of that firm's well-known area restaurants.

"Our firm specializes in restaurant design, but there's no such thing as a typical restaurant for us," Dwight said. "Every one of our restaurants is different from the others."

In the case of Proof, GrizForm's task was to create a restaurant that, in the words of Proof's website, "exudes both contemporary chic and rustic warmth." Consequently, Dwight said, "We wanted the restaurant to have both contemporary and traditional elements to reflect the menu. The space needed to somehow feel familiar yet also new and exciting."

To achieve that goal, Dwight's design incorporates a mix of older and newer materials, including exposed-brick walls (suggesting a wine cellar); wood floors; leather banquettes; wine-rack space dividers; a temperature-controlled, stainless-steel wine storage and dispensing system over the bar; and pendant lights suggesting an updated and refined take on bare-bulb fixtures.

"We chose the materials to tie in with the theme and tried to strike a balance," Dwight said. "Oil-rubbed walnut verses frameless glass; a hand-stamped pewter bar next to a row of high-tech wine dispensers; [and] top-cut Jerusalem stone contrasted by polished concrete."

"Proof started as a blank canvas," Dwight added. "The walls, floor, and ceiling were concrete and the space is in a fairly faceless office building. It's always difficult to make the first decision when the space is so plain. The choices are almost limitless at first, but once you pick one material the second must tie in, and by the time you get to the third or fourth choice, your options narrow quite a bit."

Generous windows on the long G Street side of the dining room reinforce the restaurant's connection to the neighborhood—and to the museum across the street in particular—and prevent the dining area from looking too much like an actual below-grade cellar. The bathrooms are minor design adventures in themselves, with the men's room, for example, featuring black walls printed with large-scale, sensual photos of partially-dressed women.

"There are so many things that I like about Proof, but two stand out," Dwight said. "I'm really happy with the twist on the typical flat [video] screens at the bar. Rather than showing the ubiquitous news or sports, they show images from the Portrait Gallery across the street. For me, this kicks it up a notch and adds some glamour to dining out. It may sound pedestrian, but I also love the bathrooms. Stepping into the men's room is like entering a film noir, and the woman's room is an adult version of a girl's childhood room (it took eight different pinks before we got it right). You'll have to check them both out on your next visit!"

Like many successful projects, Proof featured a close interaction between the client and the architect. "Mark was a very hands-on and interested client," Dwight said. "He wanted to know everything about each decision that we made. He challenged us. 'Because we like it' was not a good enough answer for him. We really had to evaluate and justify our decisions and clearly think through why one choice was better than the other."

"I don't think that you could do a project like this without an architect," Dwight said. "Designing a high-end restaurant is too complex to accomplish without training and experience. The architect must be well versed in many disciplines, including not only design but also commercial kitchen equipment, mechanical systems, and the ins and outs of how a restaurant must flow and function. It's one thing to make it look pretty, but it's a completely different thing to make it function properly."



Main bar at Proof.



Men's room at Proof.