



Rustic extravagance. *Simple refinement.*
Urban whimsy. Chic authenticity.
No matter what you call it, *modern luxury*
is getting dressed down and roughed up.

A Life Luxe-Ordinary

BY LINDSEY CANANT  Illustration by Daniel Fishel

ON ANY GIVEN NIGHT, GUESTS PICKED UP in chauffeured cars sleep on sumptuous linens turned down by smiling staff. Fresh flowers stand on the dresser, a plush robe hangs in the closet and expensive soaps precisely aligned on marble countertops foretell an impeccably pressurized shower. Tomorrow, as guests lounge poolside, inhale aromatherapy treatments or slice into seared tuna at the on-site restaurant, housekeeping will restore everything to its proper place. Such is the scene at a high-priced hotel. In Boston. In Shanghai. In Oslo. Anywhere, really. Somewhere amid the designer labels, luxury turned homogenous.

BUT RECENTLY, starched tablecloths began to seem démodé, and fancy started looking stuffy. “Twenty years ago, people felt that dining should be more buttoned up,” says chef/restaurantier Frank McClelland. Century-old restaurants Locke-Ober and the Oak Room once led our city down the path to fine dining, sport coats—only dress codes and all. But as those restaurants’ demographics climb slowly up in age and the buzz around them dwindles to a whisper, there’s a sense that change is in the air. Now, McClelland says, “People are more relaxed with themselves. They’re comfortable in their own skin.” New England’s tastemakers—McClelland among them—are bringing personality back to the art of living well.

On the scene since 1978, his L’Espalier is a go-to spot for snazzy, dress-to-impress occasions. But by 2010, McClelland had witnessed a shift. As diners grew more curious about their food, they took fine dining outside formal rooms. McClelland began hosting seasonal dinners in Essex at Apple Street Farm, the organic farm he established the year prior. Under starry, country skies, attendees dine on freshly harvested summer squash, heirloom tomatoes and farm-fresh eggs.

Theme dinners, like a Cowboy Barbecue or Festival of Tomatoes, marry haute cuisine with unbuttoned environs. Since they occur outside the restaurant, McClelland says, “It’s easier to give them a personality. These are one-of-a-kind events. Each one feels like a celebration.” Attendees are invited to dress casually, and the multicourse dinners with wine pairings conclude with s’mores served around an open campfire. “The evening has to evolve organically,” he says.

At \$175 per person, the laid-back meal isn’t cheap. And though the concept is simple, McClelland says, “The farm dinners aren’t about be-



JUST HANGING OUT Bungalows at Kennebunkport’s Hidden Pond combine rustic touches with ultra-luxe amenities.

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ing practical or making a profit. In fact, the cost to put them on is astronomical. I do them for selfish reasons. Because this is the ideal place to touch, see, partake and be nourished. That kind of exploratory, reflective dining doesn’t exist anywhere else.” Which is exactly the point. Well-heeled foodies don’t want an experience they can find elsewhere. They want a unique evening that reaches them on a level deeper than conspicuous consumption. “Diners understand that this is the source of day-to-day great living,” explains McClelland. “This is part of the transition back to what life is really about: breaking bread with friends and family.”

This mix of savviness and desire for the unique has transformed other corners of the luxury market, too. Some of Boston’s nattiest dressers are springing for hand-hewn garments. Local designer Sam Mendoza, who’s dressed everyone from hip high schoolers to their high-society grandmothers, says his clients share a level of discernment that comes from having experienced the world’s finest craftsmanship and quality. But the subject his client knows best is herself. And she’s not willing to pay for a pricey outfit unless it reflects something authentic.

“It’ culture has faded away,” Mendoza reports. “It’s not about dressing like a mannequin. Great style comes from picking pieces that stir up an individual response. Items should get to you from the core.” For Mendoza, that means recognizing that every woman’s body is different. Garments hanging on the racks in his studio or at Louis Boston are 70 percent finished. Once purchased, he fits every detail to his client, from hems to fastenings to straps.

For consumers with the means to purchase dresses from runway-level brands, it’s this level of service that makes all the difference. Plus, the willingness to drop a wad of cash comes easier with the insurance against a fashion doppelgänger, as no two garments are ever the same. Eschewing patterns, Mendoza drapes his raw-edged silks and atypical cuts directly on the body, letting its movement dictate the final product. “Clothing evokes emotion,” he explains.

Emotion is a theme that comes up again and again on this new luxury terrain. Whether he’s serving a meal at Apple Street or in his restaurant, McClelland says his goal is “an experience that moves the soul.” Under the old regime, human touches—perhaps deemed too risky since what tickles one customer may offend another—were stamped out. Nowadays, people are finding (and marketing) humanity, which means imperfections.

For instance, interior designers, including Jane E. Miller of the South End store J.E.M., have embraced a philosophy of “rough luxe.” Miller creates modern, comfortable interiors that incorporate vintage, reclaimed and salvaged finds. But the line between glam and grime is a personal one, and is thus subject to fickle emotions. Take the weathered industrial barrels Miller keeps on the floor of her shop. “They’re beautiful,” she says,

seeing patina in something others might deem plebeian. “Time and industry have left them dented, crumpled. That these once-shiny steel barrels stood the test of time and have become something completely unexpected and beautiful really speaks to our humanity, and that is beautiful too.”

Juxtapositions—like those between antique instruments and polished chrome, or between rusted metal and cowhide—energize Miller’s spaces. Her ultra-curated inventory is full of bold pieces with playful winks, like necklaces made of vertebrae, an iron bulldog or a candelabra made from salvaged piping. Though many pieces are pricey or one-

of-a-kind, items are for touching, smelling and lifting.

To choose between such products is to subjectively judge what’s trash and what’s treasure. It’s intrinsically personal, so the objects tell stories about their owners. Miller works with her clients so that the finished designs construct a narrative about each person’s geography, history and experiences. For instance, a vintage botanical diagram might speak to memories of a grandfather’s love of gardening, while antlers or driftwood recall a meaningful trek abroad.

In a world of instantly obsolete technology and 24-hour tweeting, the intimacy and paring-down of McClelland’s dinners, Mendoza’s fittings and Miller’s aesthetic seem almost cutting-edge. The same holds for the milieu of beauty and health. Futuristic injectables, depilatories, microlight facial therapies and laser massages are the tools of choice in high-end salons. So it’s noticeable, then, when a state-of-the-art spa makes a point of referencing the past.

At the Spa at Mandarin Oriental, Boston, therapists draw on ancient Chinese traditions, guiding energies and treating chakras. Since many guests will have spent the day in time- and space-distorting digital worlds, therapists apply earthy remedies like the New England Retreat, which uses local herbs, plants and botanicals to connect clients to the real, physical world. And rather than specific treatments, guests can book time itself in the form of tailor-made Time Rituals. These combine massages, wraps and other services with



ABOUT TIME The Spa at Mandarin Oriental, Boston



NO JACKET REQUIRED
Fine dining at Apple Street Farm

free time in relaxation areas, a vitality pool and a crystal steam room. The point is that lingering is the remedy to modernity’s woes. Turning off the BlackBerry is a passport to the here-and-now. “Simplicity is the greatest form of luxury when one lives in a world where we are making hundreds of decisions a day,” says spa treatment manager Karen Aleksich.

Developer Tim Harrington agrees that slowing down is the ultimate pleasure in today’s constantly connected culture. He also believes that luxury should look different in different places. Inspired by his own childhood vacations to New England cottages in the woods, Harrington opened the unconventional Kennebunkport resort, Hidden Pond. Childhood, it turns out, is a happy place trendsetters return to when looking to renew themselves.

“Our guests want to touch back to childhood memories and reflect on a simpler time,” he says. “Life is racing by, and time is our most valuable commodity.” With a design sensibility rooted in Kennebunkport’s geography, Harrington embraced the sensual cues of bygone New England summers—slapping screen doors, the scent of wood, the sensation of climbing on a bicycle and the all-too-rare sound of silence—and added luxury elements only insofar as it enhanced them.

“The very first word in any sentence defining luxury should be ‘comfort,’” Harrington says. “We need to realize we’re in the entertainment business.” Staff provide top-notch service but don’t take themselves too seriously. “Guests should feel like they’re playing house in their very comfortable home. With maid service,” he adds.

The resort elevates the mundane to something special. Rocks and branches make for art. A shed is a special dining venue. A ’56 Ford station wagon becomes a chariot. Because of that, it’s probably unsurprising that Hidden Pond is the site where Ken Oringer grows produce for a gourmet restaurant, Earth, the well-heeled dress to decompress, flea-market finds decorate one-of-a-kind (and state-of-the-art) guest cottages and natural beauty treatments are performed in a tree house. It’s a blueprint for the new luxury.

For those with the means, there’s no more tiptoeing through the good life. It’s about staying grounded. Mendoza sums it up best: “This isn’t about perfection or glossiness. It’s about intensity and authenticity on a human level. A lifestyle that’s about joy. There may just be the slightest detail that’s ‘off.’ But it’s there, and it’s real and you can feel its energy.” ***