

design

# working the relationship

Pullman, a Montreal wine bar designed by Cabinet Braun-Braën, pushes the envelope with décor, layout, and service

By Sofia Galadza  
Photography by Cabinet Braun-Braën

When a client loves their designer, there's a good chance that trust, sound communication, and confidence in a good result are in the bag. But when it's romantic love between the two, constant collaboration and taking risks can be exciting, to say nothing of making a design more intriguing. Catherine Belanger and Bruno Braën, client and designer, respectively, are also partners in love and in business. So when they built Pullman, a wine bar in Montreal, they took advantage of the situation. "It's impossible to create a project like this with a normal client and a normal designer because we both brought our ideas together, step by step," says Belanger. Spending a lot of time together meant the couple could articulate concepts and achieve a whimsically sophisticated aesthetic that they dreamed of.

As oenophiles and owners of another Montreal eatery, Le Petit Italien, Belanger and Braën have spent much time touring wineries around the world. It was during those trips a few years ago that they had the idea to open a wine bar—Montreal's first. "The vision grew from many suppers and a lot of wine," recalls Belanger. They wanted a comfortable space that fostered socializing. And they were firm about the venue being a wine bar serving only finger foods, not a restaurant with a full menu.

The couple decided on a raw space in a 125-year-old building on a side street in downtown Montreal. Braën, a principal at Cabinet Braun-Braën, which specializes in restaurant design, began the project the way he always does, with an in-depth analysis of the space. "I try to draw the circulation of the future guest. If I'm sitting in one corner of the space, I try to feel the sensation that they will have," he explains. "For me, the guest is the fundamental element of a design." That's why his trademark is creating fluid environments so that clientele can move about a space freely. Belanger comments, "Many people make the mistake of doing something very nice but very static. We wanted to avoid that. That's a great point of the design. That's what makes good parties."

"Found" architectural elements, like a painted concrete wall discovered during the demolition (left) account for part of the relaxed, comfortable aesthetic. The ground-level bar (opposite) is one of three distinct areas where guests can imbibe and order from a finger-food-only menu. A chandelier made of a bent wineglass rack and glasses fills the void in front of the mezzanine.





## design

The 2,800-sq.-ft. space, which can accommodate up to 70 people, is divided into three distinct areas. To the right of the entryway is a ground-level bar that gets afternoon sun through the floor-to-ceiling windows. Also near the entryway is the staircase leading to the mezzanine level, the area designated for sit-down wining. The lower level, on the other hand, is the Grand Bar, most suitable for mingling. The kitchen is also located here, with only the finishing area exposed to clientele. The most notable feature is the S-shaped bar. It's not the typical shape, explains Braën, but has more of a communal table feel, with patrons being able to face each other. "Some clients can say 'I trust you' and present me with another kind of thinking, another kind of design." Obviously, that's what happened here.

The aesthetic features of Pullman either reference the overall concept for the restaurant or sheer resourcefulness. Braën opted for leather because "I


try to be a client and think what kind of material can make me feel most comfortable." On the bars, he shied away from glass or a metal slab, explaining that it is not a comfortable sound—the "tink tink"—when a wineglass is put down on a surface other than wood. There is no shortage of glass, however. The key feature is the chandelier. When a crystal one did not price out, Braën got creative with a standard wineglass rack; he reshaped it and inserted halogen lamps and wine glasses. Guests will also notice decidedly raw elements. The walls in the front section of the ground level, for example, are exposed foundation with old paint. "I like to work like an archaeologist," says Braën. "When I demolish the wall, I always take care of what is behind. I prefer something with history."

The design challenges for this project meld with those of simply starting a business. There were budget concerns, especially because they were revamping a space that was not previously a restaurant. But the pair

Surrounding the S-shaped bar (below) in the cavernous lower level are a range of textures, including wood, animal hides, metal, ceramic, and brick.



addressed that challenge through resourceful solutions, and with a “less is more” approach. The other two challenges—location and making the wine bar concept work—were in part addressed with the unique design. Pullman is centrally located, but not on a main street like many Montreal restaurants. “The street’s a bit trashed, but it’s an area starting to develop,” says Belanger. Sticking to their business plan is still a challenge—Montrealers are not accustomed to restaurants without entrees. According to Belanger, “many restaurateurs get scared and change their concept.”

But Braën and Belanger are confident the design of the venue will help business. The layout lends itself to the many corporate and private parties held at Pullman. Moreover, the comfortable, boundary-free environment is one reason why they have repeat clientele, says Belanger. Braën admits that Pullman isn’t (yet) a Montreal fixture. What is clear, though, is the fact that mutual trust and collaboration—and a healthy dose of unconditional love—helped this design come to fruition. 



The S-shaped bar (above) blurs the boundary between staff and guests. It fosters more fluid movement, which, says Belanger, adds to a better atmosphere for all.

who

*Project:* Pullman. *Client:* Catherine Bélanger. *Architect:* Didier Gillon. *Interior/lighting designer, photographer:* Cabinet Braun-Braën. *General contractor:* INT. *Restaurant supply contractor:* Empire. *Furniture dealer:* Jack’s.

what

*Paint:* Pratt & Lambert. *Laminate:* Abet Laminati. *Dry wall, ceiling:* Proroc. *Flooring:* Dal Tile. *Lighting fixtures:* Custom, vintage. *Doors:* Doorcorp. *Door hardware:* Dorex. *Glass:* Prelco. *Window treatments:* 3M film. *Railings/screens/grill work:* JDI. *Dining chairs, lighting fixtures:* Custom by Cabinet Braun-Braën, vintage. *Dining tables, cocktail tables, architectural woodworking:* Custom by Nicolas Baier, Christian Miron. *Lounge/cocktail seating:* Custom by Cabinet Braun-Braën. *Banquette/built-in seating, upholstery, cabinetmaking, planters, accessories:* Custom. *Window treatment:* JDI. *Signage:* Catherine Bélanger, Cabinet Braun-Braën. *HVAC:* York. *Fire safety:* GEM. *Security:* Signal. *Guest toilet plumbing fixtures:* Eljer. *Refrigerator/freezer:* Kool air.

where

*Location:* Montreal, QUE. *Total floor area:* 2,800 sq. ft. *No. of floors:* 3. *Average floor size:* 800 sq. ft. *Total capacity:* 70. *Cost/sq.ft.:* \$110 USD.

