

INTERIOR DESIGN[®]

NOVEMBER
2020



face time



eastern influence

China Ma by Yod Group serves up flavors of traditional and modern Asia to Ukraine

text: *craig kellogg* photography: *andrey bezuglov*



Previous spread: On the mezzanine of China Ma, a two-story restaurant in Kyiv, Ukraine, by Yod Group, custom furniture includes chairs combining Soviet and Scandinavian influences and a brass tabletop that rotates for family-style dining.

Top, from left: Pendant fixtures by local industrial designer Kateryna Sokolova illuminate the main dining area downstairs. The restaurant's avatar, made from LED video screen modules, has been masked since the onset of COVID-19. **Bottom:** The kitchen connects to the dining room through a stainless steel-lined aperture inspired by traditional Chinese design.

Opposite: Electrical cable has been positioned to form three-dimensional bangs and pigtails for the avatar model, a local actress.



Chinese plump dumplings and succulent kung pao shrimp were not entirely unknown in Kyiv. But international fast-casual chains like Wagamama and Panda Express somehow bypassed the Ukrainian capital. So, after founding a trendy Georgian food group, a local restaurateur decided to switch her focus to Asia, dishing up her own fast-casual Cantonese concept for her sophomore outing. In 2019, China Ma was born, with Yod Group bringing the physical space to fruition last November.

The 2,100-square-foot café anchors a new mall ideally located across the street from Kyiv's buzzing city center, which contains the main train station, and down the street from reportedly the world's third-busiest McDonald's. Anticipating that same heavy pedestrian traffic, the debut China Ma required exceptional durability, according to Yod co-founder Volodymyr Nepyivoda.

A self-described specialist in "HoReCa"—hotels, restaurants, cafés—Nepyivoda used the commission to explore such technical architectural finishes as MDF paneling tinted the same "cardboard" color all the way through the café, anticipating, and camouflaging, the dings and scrapes expected from rail traveler suitcases. Frothy sprayed-on acoustical foam akin to mid-century airport ceilings lends a softness to the two-story environment. Such industrial solutions are a world away from the antique temple carvings and Chinese red napkins at Bao, a fine-dining restaurant Yod previously completed across town. "We refused all typical Chinese decor this time," explains Yod co-founder Dmytro Bonesko. "A modern atmosphere goes with the democratic prices at China Ma." ➤





"We refused all typical Chinese decor for this project"

Opposite, from left: The avatar reflects in the glass floor of the bridge, which leads to the restrooms. Chinese characters spelling out friendly slogans crawl down an LED screen in a restroom.

Top: More LED Chinese characters scroll digitally across a decorative pipe downstairs. Bottom: Custom stools stand near the bar, topped in stainless steel.

At Bao, Bonesko employed his "lazy Susan" turntable concept, borrowed from traditional Chinese dim sum palaces. He gives it another, more contemporary spin at China Ma, with the rotating central platforms, which encourage family-style sharing of dishes, banded in sleek brass. In another nod to Asia, admittedly a more esoteric one, he and Nepyvoda referenced the electrical cables that run, often exposed messily, across cities in China but also in Japan and Thailand. Translating the phenomenon into decor, the Yod team strung up miles of black rubber cables—only some electrified, of course—across the mezzanine ceiling. This spaghetti of wires swags over the tables, with individual lengths dropping down into slender pendants, each tipped with a tiny LED. Though simple in appearance, the fixtures required three iterations to achieve sufficient brightness. "Ukrainians want good lighting for Instagram posts," Bonesko notes. Illumination is more Soviet inspired downstairs in the main dining area, where a constellation of geometric green pendants recall early 20th-century suprematism. Seating on both levels also nods to vintage Soviet aesthetics.

Back upstairs, the same black wire not only wraps randomly around steel wire-frame globe armatures of various sizes but is also used in the "hair" for China Ma's godlike digital avatar—the café's most stunning feature. Forming enormous round pigtails and face-framing bangs, Nepyvoda himself climbed a 15-foot ladder with clippers to demonstrate the length workers should trim the wire for her final "haircut."

The avatar concept seemed straightforward at first but ultimately proved a hard-won tech triumph. Bonesko began by asking a casting agent to find a local actress. "We weren't concentrated on her nationality, more on general mood." His instructions directed the chosen model to run through a range of expressions on camera, and the video production company stitched them together later. So, following a few minutes of resting-face, she flashes a look of charmed surprise or licks her red-painted lips. Guests can view the 20-foot-tall avatar from nearly anywhere in China Ma, including close-up on the glass bridge Yod installed upstairs to access the restrooms, or from the bar, where Chinese characters spelling out messages like "always good" scroll digitally across a decorative pipe.

Her red lipstick is fiery today, but the video initially appeared washed-out in daylight—even when projected using the latest laser gear. Graciously, the restaurateur agreed to delay China Ma's grand opening while Yod retooled the avatar. Its new 3-D curved steel framework got tiled with a matrix of 10-inch LED video screen modules sourced from China. Another refresh and pause were a result of COVID-19. Since March, the avatar has been updated to appear wearing a face mask. But like all else during the pandemic, patience, particularly coupled with a healthy dose of wit, is a virtue. 🍵

PROJECT TEAM

NATALIYA TIMOSHENKO; NIKOLAY DOTSENKO; ALEXANDR KRAVCHUK; YOD GROUP.

PRODUCT SOURCES

FROM FRONT KITASS: CUSTOM TABLE (MEZZANINE), CUSTOM SEATING. PLAN B LABORATORY: CUSTOM TABLES, CUSTOM BAR COUNTER, CUSTOM PLANTERS (DINING AREA). NIC DESIGN: TOILET (RESTROOM). THROUGHOUT RUKI.IO: CUSTOM MEDIA SCREENS, CUSTOM CEILING INSTALLATIONS. MOTION GG: CUSTOM MEDIA CONTENT. NOOM: PENDANT FIXTURES.

