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**Down the rabbit hole:
Food and fashion collide in Dining by Design, DIFFA's
outrageous fundraiser of cuisine and color**



For nearly 20 years, DIFFA Dallas' jean-jacket collection has raised millions by offering designers a chance to show their creativity by creating a custom coat. But a few square feet of denim isn't much real estate on which a designer can flex his artistic muscle. Wouldn't it be nice if you had more space — an entire room, say — in which to create?

Which may be why Dining by Design — only in its third year in Dallas — has already attracted a loyal following among attendees and those who pull it off.

"That's what makes this event different: The emphasis really is on the designers," says Dean Driver, a Dallas-based event planner and decorator.

"It is a battle of the designers," adds David Stark, owner of David Stark Design & Production in New York, who describes his job as "looking at some of the most basic things in the world and trying to find ways to make them not look basic. You try to break new ground creatively" with a project like Dining by Design.

Certainly Stark didn't hesitate to play with his palette — and because his room was sponsored by paint company Benjamin Moore, his palette was virtually unlimited.

“When it’s your own table, you have to keep coming up with your own ideas, but when you’re working with a client there’s something else to inspire you,” Stark says. Because Benjamin Moore recently celebrated a milestone anniversary, Stark decided to fashion his room like a child’s birthday party — an explosion of exciting pastels and dramatic flourishes. He even created a front wall that makes the room look like a playhouse. But it all served a particular purpose.

When you have such a small space to deal with, the design is about creating a sense of surprise,” he explains. “You do not want everything revealed at once, even in a tiny space. And one thing about the event is there is a lot of visual noise, so your experience stands up a little bit better if you can put a separation between it and the other ones, define that space. You want to be like Alice in Wonderland going down that rabbit hole.”

Stark, who has always loved flowers in his designs, incorporated a sense for them in his DIFFA room — although they aren’t quite what you’d expect.

“The flowers in the room are actually made from wood-shavings off a floor,” he says. But the floral impact is almost as if they are alive.

On the other end, the flowers in one of Driver’s rooms for Dining by Design are completely real (he developed two for the Dallas show). In creating his look for DIFFA Dallas chair Donna Fishel, Driver was inspired — and constrained — by his client’s needs.

“Donna’s table is right off the dance floor, so there were some technical challenges,” Driver says. Organizers didn’t want Fishel’s room, which is double the size of most rooms, to block the view of the floor, so they asked Driver not to build a fourth wall. He decided the best way to make the design all the more impressive was with a splash of color.

“The table is 22 feet by 22 feet, but you won’t see any of the wood,” he promises. Instead, all the exposed space will be covered in flowers — “about 4,000 blossoms when all is said and done. There will be live doves. It is like being in a garden indoors.”

Driver won’t tell how he’ll attach the flowers or make them last for the two days of the event because “it takes away some if you know how it’s done. It’s almost like magic.”

His second table, which he designed for Don Gaiser and Roger Kobes, goes in the exact opposite direction. "They are two completely different styles of table, which is what I love," he says.

Because Kobes is a serious art collector, Driver drew his idea from one of his most avant garde pieces —a painting by Frank Stella — and built the entire room around it. He describes the final product as looking "like an Erector Set of metal painted black and then pieced back together. It's like dining under a bridge."

Driver even found porcelain, flatware and vase manufacturers whose items haven't been seen in Dallas before but which complemented his design. He asked to borrow some of their product; all of the accessories were kindly donated, as was Driver's own work.

"I reached out to people and every one of these companies has loaned me all these items, and people volunteers to help me construct it," he says. "This is charity."

Stark echoes that sentiment.

"A lot of what fundraising is about is giving back to the community," he says. "I can think of few more worthy causes than what DIFFA raises money for. My desire is to be an active and responsible participant."

Hilton Anatole, 2201 Stemmons, Trinity 1 ballroom. Cocktails by Design, Sept. 26, 6-9 p.m. \$50. Table Hop and Taste, Sept. 27. 11 a.m.-3 p.m. \$35. Gala dinner, Sept. 27, 6-11 p.m. \$500. 972-239-6999. DIFFA.org.