

# L.A.'S STAR DESIGNER COMES TO RENO

*Dodd Mitchell fuses old-school Las Vegas with Asian and modern elements at Grand Sierra Resort*

BY E. C. GLADSTONE    PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOMAS MUSCIONICO

Looking out over the 145-acre Grand Sierra Resort property from the panoramic windows of his room, Dodd Mitchell has a grand vision indeed. "This," he says, "is Las Vegas eight years ago."

Some might consider Mitchell a little overly optimistic, but while he is new to the world of casinos, the 40-year-old designer has already shown an eagle eye for creating happening hotspots, becoming the go-to guy for the high-end Sushi Roku chain, the Crescent Hotel and Lodge Steakhouse in Beverly Hills, Hollywood's celeb-magnets Balboa, Dolce, Falcon, Katana, Le Dome, Linq and the

Hotel Roosevelt redo, and the Hotel Valencia projects in San Antonio, Texas, and San José, California—among many other successful ventures.

Not surprisingly, Mitchell is the one person on the Grand Sierra Resort team whose work can be seen in every nook and cranny.

"Every inch of this hotel is me," the designer says of his responsibilities at the resort, which includes designing or overseeing logos, uniforms, lighting, wall coverings, sheets, towels, fireplaces and everything else. "When

I do restaurants, I'm at the food tastings." Sometimes he even names the venues.

"It's going to be very functional and timeless," Mitchell says of Grand Sierra. "I've mixed old-school Vegas with a touch of Asian and modern [elements]. You're not going to be able to walk in and say, 'Oh, it's this style.' That's what's going to give it longevity. Whatever your heart desires, we've covered it."

Mitchell says his goal was to make sure that the resort could take on a different personality depending on the time of day, people and mood.

"It takes on the personality of the crowd that's in that room. By the flip of a switch, it could become a totally different atmosphere, so we can keep things going and going. Why do you have to go into a nightclub to feel the music and have a good time?"

Mitchell's leap into the Grand Sierra project was typically swift. On a gala evening at Hollywood's Hotel Roosevelt just minutes before he was to receive an award for that venue's major redesign, Grand Sierra executives buttonholed him by the pool lounge. "I hear this all day long—everybody's got a project," he laughs. "You never know how real things are." But Grand Sierra, he could tell, was different. Though his company had enough work to keep it busy until 2010 and beyond, Mitchell couldn't resist the opportunity. Within five minutes, he said yes.

"The next morning, I was on a plane to Reno," he says.

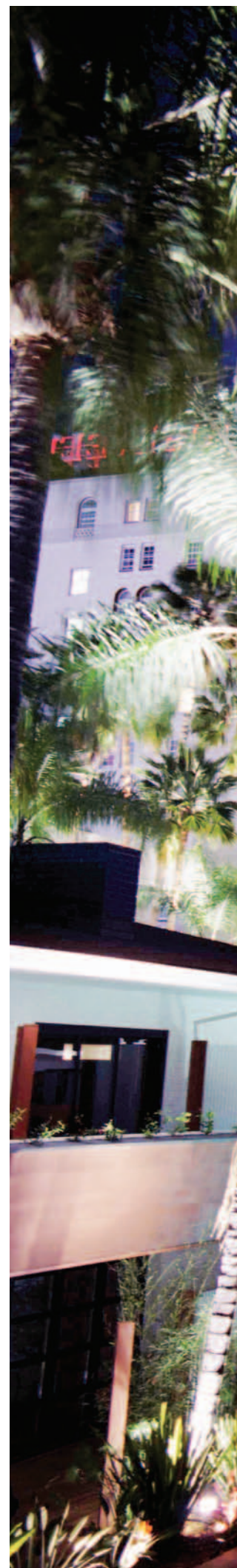
Initially, though, Mitchell was only expected to consult on the bars and restaurants. "But I saw how Vegas is getting oversaturated and said, 'Guys, we have 145 acres here, why aren't we taking it in this direction?' I thought they would kick me out of the room, but they listened." Suddenly, Mitchell found himself with a massive project on his plate, virtually the biggest he'd ever done.

"If you look at it as a whole project it's intimidating, just because of the square feet that need to be covered," Mitchell admits. Accordingly, Mitchell approached each part of the resort individually to try to ensure each space could stand on its own. "You shouldn't have any dead space."

Rather than feeling daunted by the responsibility, Mitchell found himself enthralled by the new challenges. "When you put me with something I haven't done before, it's like a kid in a candy store. My eyes light up. Like the \$45 million water feature we're doing out in the lake. Bellagio did it one way, but the technology has advanced so far since Bellagio was done, it's crazy. We've taken an approach where it's a little Moroccan, a little Mayan, a little tropical. Ninety-nine percent of the water parks I've seen are eyesores. I want it to have an elegance so that when it's closed at night it can be used for other entertaining."



**Dodd Mitchell's impressive résumé includes some of the chicest hotels and restaurants in L.A. Now his stylings can be seen throughout Grand Sierra Resort.**



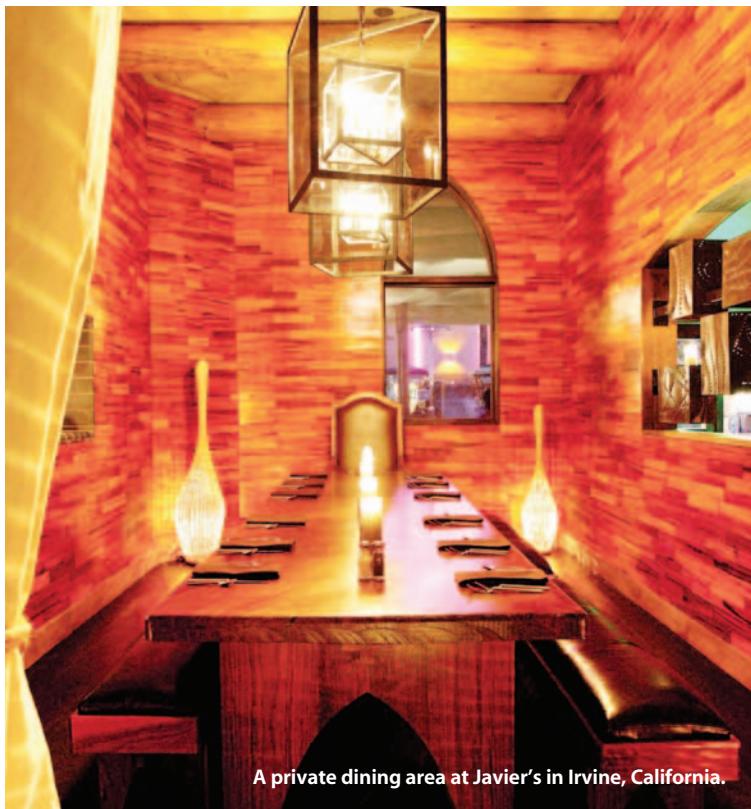


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Dodd Mitchell has garnered much acclaim for his design stylings at some of the country’s hottest hotels and restaurants, including the renovation of L.A.’s Hotel Roosevelt and its pool area, pictured here.



The pool area at Hotel Roosevelt in L.A.



A private dining area at Javier's in Irvine, California.



A bedroom-suite cabana room at Hotel Roosevelt in L.A.

As for the nightclub, he says, "The whole façade of it has peepshow windows with charged glass overlooking the casino floor, so you'll see a girl dancing in the window, then all of a sudden, the window frosts over and all you see is a silhouette, and the next window 10 feet away pops open clear. It keeps people circulating, keeps people mingling."

Retail, he promises, will offer "something for everyone. I don't like snobby people. I want people coming in here to feel comfortable."

And don't expect Mitchell to move on after finishing the Grand Sierra project. He says he takes pride in checking up on past creations to make sure the maintenance and management are up to par. "You want to make sure your designs come across, that they're not watered down. Once I'm finished with it, if the maintenance is not there, it's the designer that looks like an idiot."

But, according to Mitchell, much of the success he has enjoyed can be attributed to the strong support team he put together. "I have surrounded myself with brilliant people—all strong designers, all talented in their own right," he says. "My girl from Argentina is good with Spanish details, so she's working on the Javier projects. Leslie Kale, she has Kale handbags, she travels the world finding more exotic fabrics and leathers for me. Everybody's creative in their own right. You just have to find out where their strong points are and exploit them."

## **"Function is key. If you're going to put a chair in there, make sure it's comfortable."**

"Function is key," Mitchell insists. "If you're going to put a chair in there, make sure it's comfortable and it works, not just a piece that says, 'Hey, look how cool I am, I'm a designer.' That doesn't go over in my company." For restaurants in particular, he adds, "If it takes you two hours to get your food, no matter how cool it looks, you're not coming back."

Ironically, Mitchell has never had the opportunity to design his own living space. Since leaving home at 17 after dropping out of high school a year shy of graduation, he has lived almost entirely in hotels—just days before he spoke to *Grand Sierra*, he closed on his first house. Yet he credits this itinerant experience, which included a childhood spent moving around California with his sculptor mother and petroleum-engineer father, for giving him an uncommonly strong focus on hospitality and public spaces.

Considering Mitchell's anti-elitist attitude, it's ironic that he's attracted a huge following among the rich and famous. Not only do Hollywood stars invest in his projects, but many—Brad Pitt is reportedly a big fan—also flock to his openings, which he says he avoids. With other big projects in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico; Tempe, Arizona, Kona, Hawaii, and New York City, expect more surprises from Mitchell.

"Being normal is easy," he says. "Putting yourself out there to be judged time and time again, you're taking a risk. But that's how we keep getting project after project. We're risk takers." 🍷



The surreal entrance to the Double 7 in New York.



The many sides of the refurbishment in progress at Grand Sierra Resort include, clockwise from left: the grand exterior of the building; oversized bathroom; guest suite featuring a king-sized bed and sitting area; a modern kitchen area with an in-cabinet refrigerator and microwave and a wet bar; an expansive sitting area boasting ultracontemporary furniture.



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