

# THE BIG EASY

The outdoor room at hotels, restaurants and bars, has never been so important. Debbie Loat looks at why the British are finally falling into line with their European neighbours and predicts this airy space will soon steal more of the limelight.



The recent hot summer has certainly helped. If nothing else, it has reinforced the importance of the 'outdoor room' for the hospitality industry. Its significance is no longer up for debate. 'Everyone is into outdoor spaces now, they are almost as important as the indoor spaces,' confirms Harry Gregory, director of ara Design. 'It used to be the case that the outdoor space was only used occasionally, now people are spending as much time as possible outside. I think hotels now regard the space with some reverence and see that it can bring in extra revenue if it's done well.'

The rise in status of the outdoor room has much to do with our increasing awareness of different cultures, suggests Susan Redgrave, design director at Inter Arc Design. 'People travel to Europe and they enjoy sitting outdoors, and they want to do it here. And global warming has meant our weather is better!' Putting tables outside is, of course, an obvious way of extending the size of the venue. 'From a designer's point of view it is much easier to use this space now, because there more products available. Obviously though you have to find a balance with the furniture.'

Making the most of the outdoor

environment was a key factor in her project to re-style the RS Hispaniola, a floating restaurant on the Thames. 'What we did was move the entrance and provide an open canopy. We were moving away from the idea of an enclosed entrance and making more of the excellent views of the river. It was a way of making the site part of the experience.'

The new emphasis on the café courtyard or hotel garden is having far-reaching effects on the outdoor furniture industry. Suddenly, it is being asked for something new. Heavy, chunky items, handsome though they



may be, are not what hoteliers or restaurateurs want any more. The market, which has seen more changes in the last 15 years than an Underground trip across London, is again in transition. Not so long ago, white resin was king, soon to be followed by teak. Now it's the woven rattan look. And good design is vital. 'You just have to keep up with the pace. You are always looking from year to year at different ideas and products, constantly developing new ranges,' says Harvey Ockrim, managing director at Satelliet UK, and director of Browns Furnishing Company in Scotland. 'People are more demanding now and

I think they are right to be.'

'It used to be either plastic or teak. It was one extreme or the other,' agrees designer Adrienne Chinn. 'Now there is everything in between. So much choice, with a lot of sleek designs. Some really lovely stuff, and so easy to move around, fold and store away. The look is much more relaxed now. We are moving away from formal entertaining and people have more leisure time and income to spend on their outdoor space.' Among the seating options Chinn most admires is the German-made Dedon woven furniture, which is pushing the boundaries of contemporary furniture design.

'We don't follow, we lead,' insists Chris McCormack, managing director of Leisure Plan, Dedon's sole UK distributor. 'Dedon is market leader and the strongest brand and has achieved that position by being innovative. The company has top-notch designers who are continually developing and introducing distinctive new styles.'

It is not just the eye-catching designs that puts Dedon creations into a class apart, explains McCormack, it is the extraordinary durability of the furniture, with its aluminium frames and webbing, hand-woven from Hularo plastic fibre. 'These chairs can stay outside for twenty



Above & top left: Canopy and furniture from Inter Arc Design. Left & top right: Outdoor ranges from Leisure Plan.

years and not change colour. It is this weathering quality as much as anything that makes this furniture so special. It is also extremely comfortable, easy to clean, and can be used anywhere, so hotels and restaurants can continue their indoor theme outside, and recreate the same level of comfort.'

The fashion for the woven look is inescapable. 'Virtually every furniture stand at the most recent exhibition I

went to had woven furniture on it,' recalls David Evans, marketing manager for Barlow Tyrie, with its long tradition of superior teak designs. From March 2007, the company will also be selling woven seating. 'For the last 18 months we have been working in collaboration with Vladimir Kagan, who is well known in the US, and he is putting together some top (woven) designs for us. In a way we had to do it. At the exhibitions what people

wanted was high quality woven designs from a well-known name. That's what we will provide.'

While some of Barlow Tyrie's competitors have dropped teak altogether, Evans is confident that a teak market, albeit slimmed down, remains. 'Although we do still sell some traditional styles, there's been a move away from this type of furniture. Now we also use teak with some metals. Our



Above: Satelliet UK's Almelo range.  
Below: Delta, Equibol and XET from furniture specialist, PS Interiors.



most popular seller is stainless steel and teak. We've just had a big order from the US for our Equinox range (stainless steel and teak) and one from P&O for a range in aluminium.'

Like Barlow Tyrie, Indian Ocean Trading now combines teak with other materials. 'Teak is still our bread and butter, at around 60 per cent of our sales, but yes, we are seeing more of our commercial clients looking for aluminium and even nylon resin,' says sales manager, Ralph Shand. 'The market is much more contemporary now. It is evolving.' And that evolution, he predicts, will get a significant boost next

year. This is not due to the competitiveness of the market, or the increasing attractions of the café culture, but to something far more tangible - the smoking ban. Affecting all public enclosed areas, the new law comes into force next summer.

'The smoking ban will be very important for the furniture industry,' says Shand. 'A lot of the feedback we are getting now is to do with that. It will be a big issue.' A similar ban is, of course, already in force in Scotland and Ireland and the hospitality industry is taking note of its impact. 'Working for Browns in Scotland,' says Harvey Ockrim, 'I've seen

the ban (introduced in March) make a huge difference to the market place. It has made proactive companies a lot more innovative while the others are suffering. The people who brought basic chairs are now buying something different and spending a lot more on good furniture, parasols, and awnings. There was a slight nosedive in sales before the ban, but it soon recovered, and I would expect to see this in England. I think the effect on the furniture market here will be very positive.'

The sort of chairs that bars and restaurants will want, and are in many



Left & above: Outdoor furniture from Satelliet UK.  
Top: Heatstore's patio heater prolongs the ability to use outside space in cooler climates.

cases already buying, suggests Ockrim, are contemporary designs that are practical and good looking. Thomas Downes, in charge of sales at PS Interiors, agrees. 'They want something that they don't need to maintain, in synthetic fibres and modular systems.' He is not surprised that the Kettal furniture, for which PS Interiors is the sole UK distributor, sells well. 'It is lightweight and available in stackable versions. Our designs in 'porotex' mesh and aluminium are popular too.' One of the keys to buoyant sales now, he suggests, is good lead times. 'Ours can be as short as a week, which I think is attractive to customers.'

'Whether you are a hotel, a club or a pub, in reality you have to accommodate the smoking ban because if you don't,

someone else will,' adds Clive Blishop, group manager for Heatstore Advent Group, manufacturers of electric heaters. The timing of the smoking ban is opportune. Heatstore is launching a new outdoor weatherproof electric heater which provides a safe alternative to gas patio heaters. 'The gas heaters are dangerous when there are smokers outside. Our new heaters use a quartz infrared halogen lamp and are made from stainless and galvanised steel with an IP65 rating. They can stay outside 365 days a year.'

With the arrival of the café culture and the prospect of the smoking ban, there's no doubt that the message for both the outdoor furniture industry and the hospitality industry is the same. Ignore the outdoor space at your peril!

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