

# SUMMER!

# Indianapolis

## MONTHLY



+

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# SMOOTH SIMPLICITY

A bare-bones downtown space is transformed into a sleek, appealing dining atmosphere.



The name Elements says it all. The food, the image, the philosophy—it's all reflective of the back-to-basics *modus operandi* of the new downtown Indianapolis restaurant and its owners, Michael Sylvia and Greg Hardesty. But building the basics that make up Elements wasn't an easy task.

Sylvia and Hardesty had found a prime location—the lower level of a building at the corner of Massachusetts Avenue and Alabama Street—but the space, a near-empty shell, had plenty of room for improvement. Architect Mark Demerly, owner of Demerly Architects was called in to perform the transformation. "I had a pretty good idea of their personalities," says Demerly, a frequent patron of H<sub>2</sub>O Sushi, the duo's Broad Ripple restaurant. "We were already acquaintances, and then Mike's wife had seen some of my work through a situation with one of her clients."

Knowing the restaurateurs wanted to develop an entirely different type of restaurant and yet retain their trademark simplicity, Demerly and cohort Lynn Smith of DesignSmith worked to trans-

form the space into an appealing 50-seat dining establishment without compromising casual elegance. With its concrete ceiling beams and dark interior, the long, narrow space presented more than a few design challenges. A cozy interior with plenty of vertical breathing room emerged, however, bearing two of the best street-level views of downtown Indianapolis: the downtown War Memorial to the north and the urban skyline to the south. The views were created early in the project, when Demerly and Smith knocked out a large opening in the south wall to provide a huge window area and plenty of natural light.

The dramatic remodel was performed on a limited budget, so the space's decorative character was extracted through simple but skillfully applied materials such as paint, carpet and upholstery. "Since we were dealing with a long narrow space, we put two six-foot banquettes on opposing walls on opposite ends of the restaurant as a vertical complement," says Demerly. "They have good color and texture, and provide an acoustical property so the room becomes very intimate from table to table. I've heard people say they feel like they're the only ones in the restaurant."

Further utilizing the vertical space, Demerly installed a series of high niches filled with artful origami light fixtures. The exposed concrete ceiling beams were painted for additional warmth. Demerly also complemented the space with a large hanging ceiling plane, as well as down lighting to further soften the space's atmosphere. The restaurant's inviting color scheme includes warm Mediterranean shades of rust,

gold and deep green. "Nothing is overdone, overstudied or overpresented," says Sylvia. "Our furniture is simple but pleasing to the eye."

The same can be said of the menu. The contemporary American cuisine is simply presented with rich, French-based sauces. Food preparation was also incorporated into the atmosphere: a bar area and etched-glass wall separate the semi-open grill kitchen from the dining area. "We liked the concept of an open grill, but wanted to protect the customers from all the noise and activity," says Sylvia. "A glass wall seemed to be a good way to do both—you can see what's going on without having it right in your face." This proved to be a good decorative element as well. The restaurant logo—an E designed by Jim Sholly of Antenna—is formed by three horizontal parallel lines etched in clear and frosted glass, which provides a pleasing background for the wine bar.

Elements' relaxed outdoor ambience is as aesthetically pleasing as the inside's. "There was already a pergola that separated the open area and the restaurant, but we needed to add a patio area and develop the landscaping," Demerly says. The resulting greenery around the garden and outside terrace provides privacy without disconnecting patrons from the restaurant. Inside and out, Elements' atmosphere is a winning combination of modest design components, deft architecture and creativity. By setting the charm of *al fresco* dining in an urban area, the once-empty space has been transformed into one of downtown's most popular new eateries.



## COMMERCIAL SPACE

Gold Medal

STORY BY LYNNELL NIXON-KNIGHT PHOTOS BY CASEY CRONIN