

## Meet the Latest Dining Aesthetic: Darkroom-Core

Restaurants across the United States are opting for red lighting as a way to sell intimacy, danger and, sure, food.

By Ella Quittner

July 31, 2023

When David Yun commissioned a custom sign to hang on the wall of his Korean-Southern tapas restaurant, C as in Charlie, he chose LED lighting over neon so that he could change the sign's color on a whim. Soon, though, the hazy red glow spilling out onto the street became a calling card for the dugout-size restaurant in downtown Manhattan.

“Red is risky,” Mr. Yun said. “But it really sets the tone. It shows our identity.”

With its bright red sign, C as in Charlie joined a herd of restaurants that have embraced a certain aesthetic: dim interiors lit primarily in red. In April, the New York magazine columnist Tammie Teclemariam wrote that C as in Charlie's lighting makes “it feel as much like a darkroom as a proper eating establishment.”

Some, like Baru, in Cincinnati, and Rouge Room, a Paris-inspired lounge in Las Vegas, embrace darkroom-core as a way to signal a transition to a nocturnal atmosphere. Rouge Room's crimson-hued ceiling and backlighting smooths the shift from daytime — when the restaurant opens up to the pool at the Red Rock Casino Resort and Spa — to dinnertime, when the drapes close and ruby light reigns supreme.

Diners “love the whole energy of the room — they just call it a vibe,” said Nick Mathers, who owns the hospitality company that manages the restaurant.



With a flip of a switch — and the help of saturated red lighting — the Rouge Room in Las Vegas goes from pool lounge to just lounge. Marshall Scheuttle for The New York Times

“Red is easy on the eyes,” said Zach Belden, who recently took a first date to the cafe and cocktail bar Bar Valentina on the Lower East Side, where the tomato-colored lighting and dozens of burgundy votive candles line the walls. “It’s fiery. It illuminates, but doesn’t overwhelm.”

Red in restaurants has, of course, been done before. Red checkerboard tablecloths are an iconic feature of the Italian American trattoria, and because red is an auspicious color in Chinese culture, it is used heavily in Chinese restaurants, including in lantern form. And orange-red neon smolders within and blinks above bars and red-light districts everywhere.

More specifically, red light is thought to stimulate hunger, diminish the appearance of blemishes, and evoke associations with sexiness and dangers, said Jennifer Guerin, a color consultant based in San Diego. Its incandescent tones are “a lot more immersive” than, say, red leather booths or carpet, so it promotes the impression of intimacy.

“You have this proximity to your friends or the romantic person you’re with” in a red-lit room, Ms. Guerin said. “You get lost in space, like a time warp.”

Madison Lanese, who has visited the Capri Club, in Los Angeles, lighted in red and amber, said she believes that darkroom-core also helps scratch the itch of a cozy, crowded, buzzing venue, without the actual crowd, good news for those still reeling from the mental effects of the pandemic.

“We’re still kind of nervous around crowds,” she said.



At est.1864 in Bozeman, Mont., a windowless basement space is given a theatrical feel.  
Louise Johns for The New York Times

At est.1864 in Bozeman, Mt., red light also serves as a set piece, a way to make a windowless basement space feel intentional and experiential, rather than like a real-estate compromise.

“Going into the basement was a difficult thing for me to want to do,” said Blake MacKie, an owner and the general manager. Then, he and his business partner, Allison Fasano, decided to think of it as an opportunity.

But red light is not without its drawbacks. On a recent evening at Bar Valentina, a pair of visitors held their menus up toward the dim ceiling fixture in an attempt to make out the text. Another, seated at the bar, had to pull out his iPhone flashlight to read the list of dishes.

At C as in Charlie, Austin Kim almost sent back his mug of crab drop soup, because it looked like the wrong item. “We thought it was a latte,” said his partner and dinner mate, Odelia Leon.



The red lighting at C as in Charlie adds to the atmosphere, but can also change the look of certain foods. Brittainy Newman for The New York Times

While red light can make certain foods appear more appetizing — think warming lights on roast beef at a carving station — it can also distort the colors of others. Something that’s already red, like a Campari soda, or the ’nduja toast with chile oil at Bar Valentina, might look even more saturated, said Michael Murdoch, the head of the Integrated Sciences Academy at the Rochester Institute of Technology. But, “spinach could look more black, because there’s less energy reflecting off it.”

But these restaurateurs are willing to make the trade-off — and in some cases, to adapt accordingly. At C as in Charlie, Mr. Yun and his team selected dishware in mustard yellow and sky blue to combat any muting of their dishes by the red lighting. The food is also plated cheekily for extra visual appeal, as with a gelato-filled monaka sandwich that, under the lights, resembles a deli bagel.

“The red light is a worthy trade off,” said Mr. Kim, who did enjoy his crab drop soup after the initial confusion. “You can’t get as good of pictures, but the vibes are worth it.”

“When I think of C as in Charlie,” agreed Ms. Leon, “I will think of red light.”

*Follow New York Times Cooking on Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok and Pinterest. Get regular updates from New York Times Cooking, with recipe suggestions, cooking tips and shopping advice.*