



To create an intimate, "why not stay awhile?" feel in the restaurant's back section, Mike Blea and Breton Lujan created a snug slatted cedar division screen (which visually "folds down" from the identical, aromatic, cedar ceiling slats), adding tables and chairs they hand-built out of maple, with powder-coated steel bases. The banquette was covered in a matte forest green vinyl by Denver Upholstery. The floors are low-maintenance LVT luxury vinyl tiles. "The idea here was for diners to be able to focus on the food and each other, without distractions," said Blea.

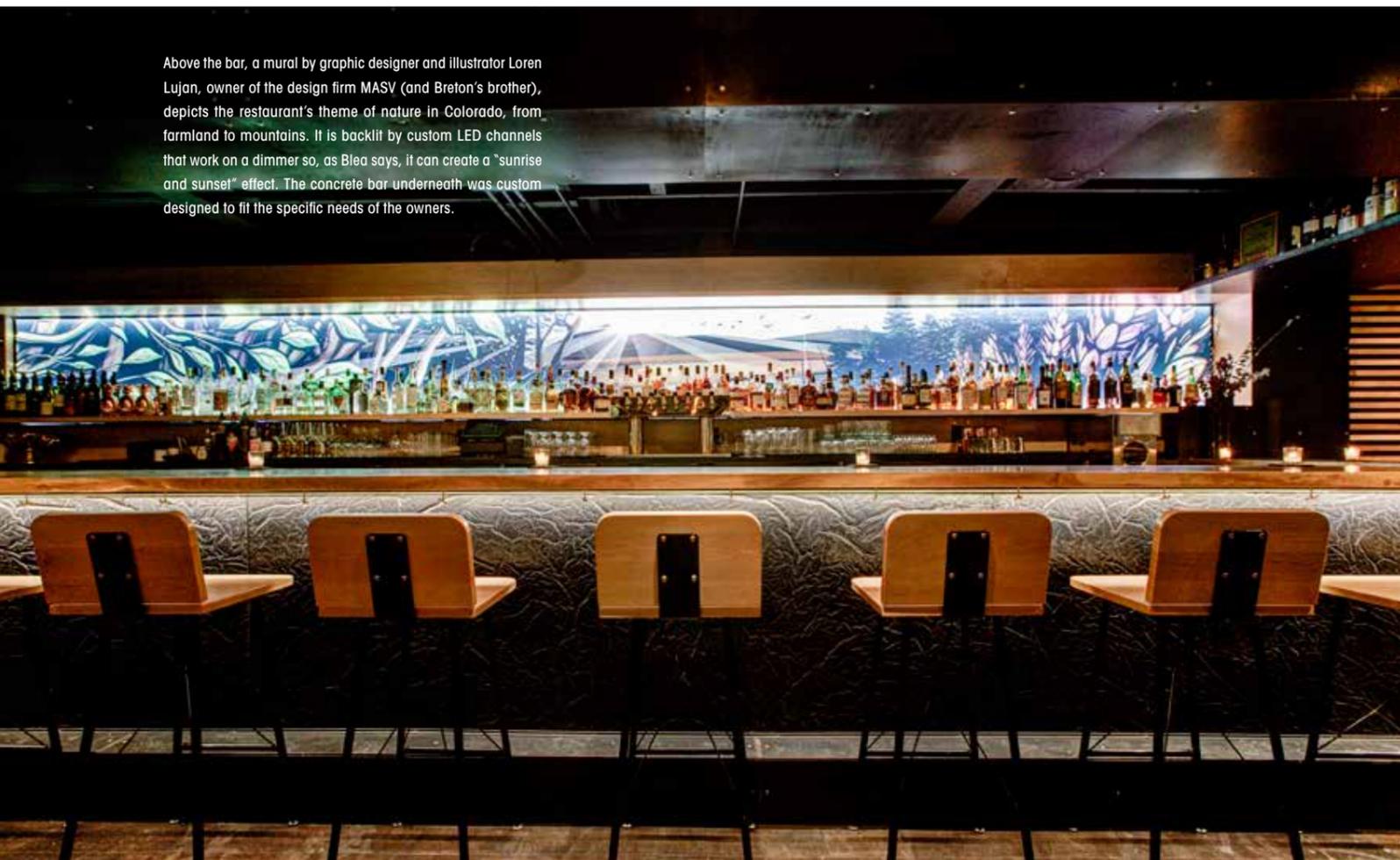
SOUP TO NUTS

DESIGN-BUILD-FABRICATE FIRM **RAW CREATIVE** IS UPENDING THE NOTION OF WHAT ROLE ARCHITECTS PLAY IN THE DESIGN PROCESS. CASE IN POINT? THEIR BOLD, IMAGINATIVE WORK AT THE HOT BERKELEY RESTAURANT **THE WAY BACK**.

WORDS: ALISON GWINN

IMAGES: DAG LARSON

Above the bar, a mural by graphic designer and illustrator Loren Lujan, owner of the design firm MASV (and Breton's brother), depicts the restaurant's theme of nature in Colorado, from farmland to mountains. It is backlit by custom LED channels that work on a dimmer so, as Blea says, it can create a "sunrise and sunset" effect. The concrete bar underneath was custom designed to fit the specific needs of the owners.



creative new ways to manipulate them—such as blackening the steel, charring the wood, or using handmade molds to make uniquely shaped and colored concrete sinks.

Since graduation, Blea and Lujan have had a steep learning curve. Through self-study and independent courses on subjects like concrete fabrication, they now share every aspect of every job, from overall design of a space to custom furniture building to the nitty-gritty of on-site construction. "It's hard to explain to people the breadth of what we do," said Blea. "We do all the casework, all the cabinetry, all the steel work, all the hand-mixed concrete tables and sinks." Added Lujan: "We believe in being well-rounded.

And because we are building everything ourselves, we know exactly how long it will take and how much each component will cost, so people who hire us can choose where to spend their money."

After starting out doing kitchen remodels in grad school, the duo designed and built the patio for UNCLE, the hip ramen fusion restaurant in the Highlands, then did all the finishes (including a custom bar and concrete fabrication of tabletops) for UNCLE's new sister restaurant in RiNo, Hop Alley.

But the apotheosis of their work so far (and their first complete restaurant build) is The Way Back, a rustic-chic neighborhood eatery that opened this

year on West 38th Avenue in Berkeley. "Just as the name suggests, our menu tries to pull from how things once were," said Kade Gianinetti, one of three co-owners of the restaurant, which has already twice topped Denver Eater's Heat Map. "I let Raw Creative have a lot of control over how the space would be laid out and the feel of the colors, and their design totally matches our concept—they balanced the use of raw materials with new technology."

Gianinetti's faith in the duo wasn't blind. A childhood friend of Lujan's, he gave Raw Creative its first work space, at his small-batch coffee company Method Roasters in Globeville, before they moved into permanent digs. He had seen enough to



Talk about local sourcing: Lujan and Blea built the bar out of a piece of wood milled from a maple tree cut down in nearby Wheat Ridge (and sourced from Mile High Tree Care). "We tried to leave in as many imperfections as possible to give it an organic nature," said Blea, including an old, square nail that remains in the wood. "This bar really tells the story of that tree, so while you're sitting at the bar, you can think about all the decades it has been in the area."

CALL THEM PERFECTIONISTS. CALL THEM CRAZILY AMBITIOUS. CALL THEM CONTROL FREAKS. THEY DON'T CARE. Mike Blea and Breton Lujan, founders and owners of Denver's one-stop shop Raw Creative, don't just design spaces; they fabricate their own furniture and do all the construction, too.

Blea and Lujan met as undergraduate environmental design majors at the University of Colorado, then reconnected as architecture graduate students. While classmates were looking to land jobs at big architectural firms, Blea and Lujan opted for a different path, launching Raw Creative while still in grad school.

"We actually got ridiculed by some of our classmates," said Blea. "They were like, 'Oh that's cute. You guys are starting your own firm.' They didn't really believe us." But according to Rick Sommerfeld, Assistant Professor of Architecture at CU Denver and director of the school's Colorado Building Workshop, the two knew what they were doing.

"It's very unusual to do what they did, because for a long time the architect and the contractor were separated," Sommerfeld said. "It's only within the last 30 or 40 years that the American Institute of Architects even allowed architects to build their own projects. But Mike and Breton really wanted an intimacy with their clients, and they

wanted to be able to control the details of the fixtures and furniture and building designs they came up with. It was very gutsy, but they've done a really nice job with their company."

Blea and Lujan bring complementary skills to the business: Blea, whose two uncles are general contractors, "grew up on job sites" and later worked in the architectural fabrication shop at CU, where he learned to weld and do woodworking. Lujan, on the other hand, started out as more of a pure designer. "I'm very detail oriented," he said, "so I always want to be in control of building something." The name Raw Creative refers to their desire to use raw materials like wood, concrete, and steel, and to find



In the women's powder room, Lujan and Blea repeated many of the materials used throughout the restaurant: Maple walls are offset against a hand-cast black concrete sink with an "invisible drain" underneath a small maple screen; the brass faucets reference the brass rivets used throughout the main restaurant room. The duo also fabricated the wall and door to the toilet area (on left) out of blackened steel.



Breton Lujan (left) and Mike Blea are founders and owners of design-build-fabricate firm Raw Creative.



To create an organic texture on the front of the bar, Lujan and Blea "tried probably 100 different combinations of materials that we cast concrete against," before finally settling on a crinkled, shiny plastic that gave the concrete a unique textured quality. "We wanted it to be free-flowing, and to create shadow play and play up the light in the space," added Lujan.

"MIKE AND BRETON REALLY WANTED AN INTIMACY WITH THEIR CLIENTS, AND THEY WANTED TO BE ABLE TO CONTROL THE DETAILS OF THE FIXTURES AND FURNITURE AND BUILDING DESIGNS THEY CAME UP WITH. IT WAS VERY GUTSY, BUT THEY'VE DONE A REALLY NICE JOB WITH THEIR COMPANY." -RICK SOMMERFELD

know these were the right designers for The Way Back, and his confidence was rewarded. "They were able to create a functional, livable design space that felt comfortable but used techniques that push the limits of sustainable building. They had the imagination to really think outside the box. Their passion for design, and pushing the limits of what it could be, was infectious."

The result is a modern but rustic space that feels unique (with custom touches like a backlit, hand-drawn mural behind the bar and a textured bar front) and friendly (Gianinetti says that guests often want to linger for hours in the inviting spaces). And, as with all of Raw Creative's work, The Way Back was a totally hands-on project. "We'd be there at 6 o'clock in the morning, and stay until 10 at night, doing all the framing, installing sinks we had built—everything," said Lujan. "I was out here in a Bobcat one day building the rock wall around the patio. And then we also built all the interior pieces," including the maple-and-steel bar stools, concrete-topped tables, cast-concrete bathroom sinks, and raw, industrial-looking lighting fixtures.

"I think what makes us successful as a team is our collaboration," said Lujan. "We each have a different perspective on design. We'll start bouncing thoughts back and forth, and watch as an idea grows quickly and organically. The result is that the design just gets better and better." ■

Two family-style cast-concrete-and-steel tables in the middle of the dining room allow for both large group gatherings and, because The Way Back was envisioned as a neighborhood spot, a place where strangers can meet and forge friendships. The cedar slats on the ceiling and the handcrafted maple chairs make for continuity, and the capacious garage door allows for an indoor-outdoor flow onto the patio in the warmer months. Raw Creative designed and built the long light fixture that runs the length of the tables to unify the space and "create more of a community feel," said Blea.

