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FOOD



MICHAEL KARAS/SPECIAL TO THE RECORD

The waterfall at Chakra in Paramus. A couple who had their wedding reception at the restaurant had it written into their contract that the waterfall be flowing during their event.

Water wonders to dine by

Restaurant centerpieces whet the appetite for atmosphere

It's the dramatic centerpiece of a dramatic restaurant — a towering stone waterfall, trickling gently into the ground, floodlit in changing colors — soothing yet edgy, setting the atmosphere at Chakra Restaurant in Paramus.

That is, when it's turned on. Just like the fire in restaurants I wrote about a few weeks ago, water can add drama to your dining experience — and sometimes, unpredictability.

Chakra opened in 2004, and its water wall was "a great hit since Day One," said one of Chakra's owners, Philip Chiaramonte. In the early days of the restaurant, it was also a bit of a

challenge to get the water to behave the way everyone wanted.



ELISA UNG
THE CORNER
TABLE

"It took us a little while to get it right," Chiaramonte said. "It was a question of getting the water flow at just the right speed. If the wall was smooth, it would have been easy."

When the restaurant opened, the original concept was to have a filled basin on the bottom and a pump that

drew the water to a trough at the top of the waterfall. "The thought was, as the water filled up the trough, it would spill over the edge and go down the wall," he said. "What happened was because the trough was so big, it was hard to get it level so the water would spill over equally."

Soon, water started splattering off. Chakra had to ensure that customers at nearby tables stayed dry, and eventually had to do some repairs around the base of the wall to make sure its wooden floors weren't ruined.

"There's a fine line between trickling, gushing and soothing" — and the water was always

meant to be a soothing influence, Chiaramonte said.

Finally, they hit on the solution: instead of a pouring motion, the restaurant installed hidden nozzles at the top of the waterfall that spray out water so that it gently trickles to the bottom. That seems to have worked.

That's not to mean it is always on. I visited Chakra three times recently for last week's dining review and saw the water trickle just once. At one point, a waiter explained there was a squeaking noise that would make it quite annoying to sit by, so the restaurant had turned it off temporarily. Chiaramonte said that lasted only for a few days, and the waterfall was almost always running.

One couple who had their wedding reception at Chakra even wrote into their contract that the water had to be flowing during their event — when they came in to look at the space, the staff was in the process of replacing the pump. "That gives you a sense of how people fall in love with it," Chiaramonte said.

Two other restaurants feature striking water features that also serve to separate their bars from their dining rooms. In Lodi, Henry Chok wanted to create an es-



TARIQ ZEHAWI/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The water wall at Penang, a Malaysian and Thai restaurant in Lodi, separates the bar from the dining room.

capist atmosphere inside Penang, his new Malaysian and Thai restaurant on Main Street. His designer wound up installing two glass panels with water trickling down through them, courtesy of a pump hidden in a nearby closet that gets refilled about once a week. Now, when Penang's lounge ramps up late at night, the seats in front of the water walls are popular.

And at a more sedate restaurant, Frank's Waterside in North Bergen, water shimmers from behind glass in seven-foot-high panels; a swimming pool pump

keeps it all moving. Owner Scot Heagney said the intention was to divide the two areas while maintaining an open feeling; the wall allows patrons a glimpse into each room while affording a clear separation. The sound of trickling water is also audible to diners, creating a relaxing touch, Heagney said.

With its location on the Hudson, did this restaurant really need any more water? Heagney said yes: "It brings it all together."

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