



COSY CORNER/INDIA MAHDAVI

True colours

When in Paris, the visionary designer heads for the tranquil – but suitably colourful – setting of her local bistro.

By *Laura Rysman*
Photography *Thomas Humery*

Ensnconced in a blue velvet banquette at the Petit Varenne bistro in Paris, designer India Mahdavi sits beneath a rainbow of expressionist art posters and a cerulean ceiling; an icy glass of Grenadine in one hand. The scene is characteristic of her own colour compositions, albeit with herself at the centre. Colours – vibrant, clashing, dream-like – are her language, pulled together with tactile materials, craftsmanship and a surreal charm. “I work on the senses,” she says, pressing a hand to the table. “Touch, sight, sound – that’s what adds emotion to a space.”

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After two decades of pushing her technicolour agenda, Mahdavi’s time is now. Her work is the perfect antidote to too much time spent online. “We spend most of our time behind a computer screen,” she says. “You need to be embraced by design.”

Mahdavi is a tall, broad-shouldered woman with large eyes but her stature is belied by a twinkling gaze and an easy give-and-take demeanour. Though not a restaurant she designed, it’s clear that an echo of her own style can be seen here. “Lots of designers come here – we’re all friends with the owner. He takes advice from each of us but in the end it’s just a cosy place where design doesn’t take over the room, where everyone in the neighbourhood likes to hang out,” she says. Her home, on a grand thoroughfare of limestone Haussmannian dwellings, is just a block from the bistro. Seated behind a table, it’s clear that for Mahdavi the bistro is a welcome retreat from the intensity of Paris. Today more so: while the rest of the city swelters the Petit Varenne feels cool.

Mahdavi’s work ethic demands that she has a space in which to switch off. While she drew renown for her redesign

The CV:

1962

Born in Tehran

1999

Launches her namesake studio

2000

Designs her first hotel, the Townhouse in Miami Beach

2015

Receives the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres cultural award

of Sketch’s Gallery restaurant – which saw the interior transformed into a pastel-pink wonderland – she is rarely running fewer than four projects. Autumn is busy: aside from expanding her line of furniture she has been engaged in an array of commercial and artistic work, from redesigning Tod’s Sloane Street flagship to creating a new line of coffee cups for Nespresso. But she is most excited about her coming exhibition at Homo Faber in Venice, which is scheduled to run until 30 September. Mahdavi has curated two rooms in the exhibition. “I’ve been working with artisans for 20 years so as a designer I wanted to illustrate how craftsmanship can be a tool,” she says. One room, a winter garden inspired by Henri Rousseau, inlays leafy branches with rattan marquetry to create a jungle-like space. The other features a couch encircling a colourful room.

“Colours contain memories,” she says. “Colours evoke feelings.” She rests her golden fan and smiles at the couples who fill the bistro’s patio. “I try to create places that are happy because I think that’s the emotion we’re really in need of.” — (M)

