



The installation in Harbourside consists of 100,000 silk flowers and 36 chandeliers made up of 76,000 multicoloured pieces; Gokson's cakes, pictured before the redesign, are still available; the Taste Bar is illuminated by Tom Dixon' lights. Photos: Handouts



Return to splendour

Sevva, the luxury restaurant at the Landmark Prince's in Central, has been revamped by owner Bonnie Gokson, whose famously elaborate cakes still take pride of place

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On June 3, Sevva, a restaurant at the Landmark Prince's building in Central, closed its doors and began renovation work. On October 3, it reopened. In between, the city had undergone its own makeover.

"We are not used to these protests," says one of the staff, on October 3, a few hours after Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor imposed a ban on masks. Twenty-five floors below, angry crowds are gathering.

Not that you would know it from up here.

Sevva, like Holly Golightly's vision of luxury jewellery store Tiffany & Co in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, is a place that wants you to believe nothing bad can happen inside. One of its cocktails may be called Liquid Courage and its signature cake may be known as the Crunch but, within its 22,000 sq ft interior, the new reality of the city does not intrude. Regular customers will be relieved to learn the revamp is less comprehensive than it sounds.

"It's a refresher," says Bonnie Gokson, who founded Sevva in



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BONNIE GOKSON, FOUNDER OF SEVVA

Sevva's lounge features a green wall of living ferns, a carry over from the venue's previous iteration.

2008 and is the midwife for what her press release calls "an icon reborn".

She looks, as she always does, fabulous – though perhaps a little fraught. Astrological word has it that October will be a difficult month. For her? "For the world." Today, she's in white with touches of crimson, including a dainty ruby necklace. In Vedic, or Hindu,

As Tsao later wrote in Gokson's book, *Butterflies and All Things Sweet*, Gokson had the "gorgeous frosting" appeal of the cakes she is famous for, but "like their rich flavours, the depth of character lies much deeper". Together, they created the perfect recipe for a new dining hotspot.

"Don't forget, this is a 1960s building," Gokson says. "It was office space, and we had to work with its architectural structure. We negotiated with the government, not with [landlord] Hong-kong Land."

In the end, two restaurants emerged – named Harbourside and Bankside, depending on the view – with a long lounge connecting both. Unusually for the time, it had a vertical green wall of living ferns, which still thrives.

"People said it couldn't be done, there would be worms coming out, but we kept it for 11 years," she says.

The renovation was a completely strapped-to-the-bones job – she has the video to prove it – so how did the ferns "from Belgium, not China" survive?

"My saving grace was my sister," Gokson says. That would be Joyce Ma, founder of Hong Kong fashion retailer Joyce, a

astrology, as she later explains, Friday is the day to wear red.

Eleven years ago, when Bonnie was still Bonnie (the vowel change is the result of a Kabbalah formation for good health; Kabbalah is the ancient Jewish tradition of mystical interpretation of the Bible), she and architect Calvin Tsao worked together to create Sevva.

pioneer who changed the luxury retail landscape in Hong Kong.

"I was actually in tears when we closed Sevva," she says. "I'm very attached to this green energy. Luckily for me, Joyce has a very large home. [American architect] Ed Tuttle built it for her. It has 365 days of air con – that's how we were able to maintain the ferns."

Other survivors of the renovation include the four huge photographs by German photographer Candida Hofer in Bankside and, at the entrance, the floor-to-ceiling drawings by fashion illustrator Gladys Perini Palmer. Along with the illustrator's name cards, coasters and mats, the drawings help set Sevva's tone of whimsical sophistication. Perini Palmer, a fashion-world icon in her own right, lived in Hong Kong in the 1970s, when she met the sisters.

"I have known her my whole life," Gokson says. "Her strokes [on the artworks] are so strong that when people see them they know it's Sevva."

For her part, Perini Palmer – who now lives in Canada – has fond memories of meeting Gokson, who back then was married and living on The Peak before then becoming a follower of meditation teacher Gurmehji Chidvilasanaanda in India and discovering communal labour.

"I remember how she raved about the joys of washing up and drying a glass," Perini Palmer recalls in an email.

What does she want her Sevva illustrations to convey? "Food, beautiful people – and Bonnie, of course."

These, then, are the enduring stalwarts. In fact, quite a lot of Sevva still looks familiar. "Don't forget, this is a refresher," Gokson says, a little testily. "Have you been here before?"

As she remarks, however, the "insane" cost of replacing leaky pipes and upholstered decking – never mind the architectural limitations of a commercial space – meant that she had to fall back on her own abilities.

Her credo is quoted in the release: "Always remember, creativity is intelligence, a gift that keeps on giving, and I live my life every day with these values in mind."

Earlier this summer, she went to London with her sister in search of fabrics for the renovation.



One of Bonnie Gokson's signature Christmas cakes.

"I'm pretty good with colours," Gokson says.

"But how do you match them if you don't have the fabrics? That was my challenge. I had to use my gut feeling. Sometimes you get really scared – a pitch too dark, a pitch too light, and it doesn't work." Luckily, she's come through, right down to the finest detail on the reupholstered furniture.

I wanted to put some strength in here, not just keep things pretty

BONNIE GOKSON

Regulars who come for more than tea-drinking will also notice the enlarged Taste Bar with gold-leaf trim, lit by the bar's original lights from British designer Tom Dixon. "Everybody talks about him now. I had his lights 12 years ago. Hello!"

Most impressive of all is the new installation in Harbourside. When Sevva first opened, the six-metre-high ceiling contained a lighting installation. "Then, we gradually built in flowers. Now what am I going to do? Friends say, 'You do flowers so well, it's iconic.' OK, but if I keep the flowers it's boring. Do you know Nick Cave?"

Of the Australian rock band, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds? "No, the artist. I saw one of his installations and I thought, 'Wow, I really wanted to do this thing, a floral thing with chandeliers. I love kaleidoscopes.'"

As there wasn't the budget to commission Cave or import crystal from Prague, in the Czech Republic, Gokson worked with a company in China and with florist Phillip Coops in London. The result is 100,000 silk flowers and 36 chandeliers, each 1.7 metres long, made of 76,000 multicoloured pieces.

The effect is spectacular, even during the day. By candlelight, it must feel like dining beneath a magically inverted garden with strange glints between its borders. That clash of textures is very Gokson.

In a dining booth to the side, there are also sketches of Russian ballet dancers on the wall and marbleised cowhide on the chairs. "I wanted to put some strength in here, not just keep things pretty," she says. "It's yin and yang, like my own character. A bold thing, but pretty."

Naturally, Gokson's famously elaborate cakes continue to be available, such as her Marie Antoinette's Crave (pistachio chiffon, rose-petal jam, whipped cream, raspberries, rainbow macaroons, dragées, candy floss).

Out on the Terrace, which was gutted out and relaid, there's a new German "concert-level, state-of-the-art" sound system.

Here, as you listen to a curated soundtrack and watch the city light up as the sun goes down, you feel as if you are protected from the changeable city below. Sevva is pronounced "savour" and that is its motto: savour the moment.

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