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by By AnnaMaria Stephens | Riviera Interiors magazine | April 7, 2011

Where cement and steel once ruled as the go-to materials for creating sleek, standout spaces, wood has quietly taken over as the reigning design element. And almost everywhere, designers are turning to timber for innovative interiors that range from the exquisitely refined to the seriously rough and rustic. With eco-friendly options abounding, wood has never looked—or felt—this good.

At the new Venice showroom Mafi, the Austrian luxury wood flooring manufacturer, wide-plank styles are not just stunning, they're also highly sustainable. Made from renewable European species and treated with all-natural oils—not lacquer—Mafi's products have shown up stateside in multimillion-dollar Beverly Hills homes and the new Nikki Beach Resort in Vegas.

"People are more educated about using green, natural products," says architect and Mafi America CEO Nic Neumann. "They're not only using wood as flooring, but also on the walls and ceilings."

Particularly covetable: Mafi's Tiger Oak Illuminated, filled with clear resin to allow for subtle, sexy backlighting.

For his Urban Logs series, designer Ilan Dei, also in Venice, contrasts rustic and contemporary, pairing locally sourced log sections with sleek red stools, tabletops and lighting fixtures. He calls the look "lush minimalism."

"The Japanese invented the concept a long time ago," says Dei. "They have a word for it, shibumi, meaning rustic elegance. They took a cut of wood, didn't refine it, and used it as a supporting column in a room that was completely white and clean."

To go with his tailored-trunk furnishings at über-cool eyewear boutique A. Kinney Court, Dei crafted display walls from construction-grade plywood, with sinuous cutouts inspired by his studio's beachside surroundings. "Like the soft, undulating forms of the waves and sand," says Dei.

Nature may be the source of Costa Mesa designer Sean Woolsey's materials—at least some of them—but his end products tend to have a more industrial vibe. Take his Slab City series of lamps, created from reclaimed wood and rusted cans collected in the Salton Sea, or his latest lighting collection, made with wood and salvaged shipyard parts.

Woolsey, who also makes large-scale abstract art—raw, mixed-media pieces on sheet metal framed in barnwood—says he's drawn to the Japanese philosophy of wabi-sabi. "It's an overall feeling of appreciating things for what they are," he says. "Not over-analyzing and wishing that they were perfect."

Perfectly imperfect describes wood-centric interiors throughout Southern California, from Culver City's Korean-inspired eatery A-Frame—housed in a former IHOP, original Douglas fir ceiling intact, walls newly paneled with knotty pine—to San Diego's Searsucker, a Gaslamp restaurant designed by Thomas Schoos and helmed by Top Chef alum Brian Malarkey.

"The first thing the owners wanted to do was rip out the scuffed wood floors," says the German-born, L.A.-based Schoos, whose colorful language makes for mostly unprintable quotes. "I said, 'Don't you dare!' They have history. Finally—finally!—things don't have to be new and shiny to be fantastic."

Searsucker's lofty space, a former Z Gallerie with bones to die for—exposed brick, steel beams, open rafters—lent itself to a casually rustic-chic design with wood as the common denominator, from topiaries in massive black-palm jars to the long, communal dining tables with a shocking secret: They're unsealed. "Let them have rings from olive oil and red wine," laughs Schoos. "It makes it better!"

Beyond the chopping block, home accessories are catching on too. At the top of the must-have list: any of the rugs from Niba's new Wood Collection, especially the Abney Park (resembling bark) and Moon Lake (a cross-section of trunk), and Ferm Living's The Fir Tree wallpaper, a dense black and white forest fit for Scandi-modern interiors.

The best thing about this whole trend? New talent is coming out of the woodwork, like San Diego Urban Timber, a two-man design-build firm that cuts and mills its own wood. Their pieces have turned up in hip haunts like El Take It Easy and Analog.

"For us, being woodworkers and furniture makers, there's this connection to wood," says co-owner Alex Devereaux. "You mill it down and get it to being a beautiful piece of furniture. It's an amazing process."

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