



Lunch with...

Photography David Harrison

Joseph is a name that is synonymous with impeccable taste and style, which he has spread across his expanding empire. By Paul Keers

Joseph is a retailer. That is not a truism – think of the number of shop owners in the fashionable world who grandly dub themselves designers or dealers or entrepreneurs. But Joseph begins sentences with, ‘As a retailer...’ in the same way that another professional would speak as an architect, or as an artist. Joseph Ettedgui *is* a retailer, and proud of it – but he has sold us much more than simple objects of desire.

His name has become synonymous with a certain style. He has, of course, dealt in almost every aspect of a fashionable life, from women’s fashions to home accessories, from furniture to restaurant meals, from menswear to fragrances. He has discovered designers, presented us with his edited version of fashion collections, and selected things to present to us as desirable, expressive and absolutely right during the past 28 years. These range from a pullover to a percolator, from a scent to a salad. But what does Joseph the brand actually sell? ‘You’re selling an identity,’ he says, in his thick French accent, ‘which should change, but not drastically.’

He continues: ‘When you are a retailer, you must sell what you are good at. I have reached a stage where people come to one of my stores, and know what to expect. In some things, it is important not to change; the more a restaurant stays the same, for example like the Voltaire in Paris, then you go back with pleasure. But at the same time, it’s nice to have restaurants which are cutting edge.’

He adds: ‘I think of old-established names, old labels like Burberry, they let it...’ his hand flutters like a dying bird. ‘Suddenly they have to change radically, but it would have been more elegant to change slowly.’ Joseph admits he changed, ‘from black and white to beige. But I don’t think people even noticed it.’

The changes, while subtle, are certainly noticeable in Joseph today. During the power-dressing 80s, when everyone donned tailored suits, Joseph was scurrying about in black T-shirts and cotton utility trousers, and he single-handedly created the fashion for designer stubble. Now that everybody has adopted casual dressing, the 62-year-old Joseph is immaculately formal, in a bespoke suit from his tailor in Lucca, a white shirt with French cuffs, and an Italian silk tie. But the boyish smile remains, along with the French accent, scruffy hair, and



JOSEPH ETTEGUI DISPLAYS HIS IMMACULATE FORMALITY IN BESPOKE SUIT, FRENCH CUFFED SHIRT AND ITALIAN SILK TIE. OH, AND A LARGE CIGAR

the sense of someone whose home, work, personal and public lives have been suffused with a single style.

It is this sense of ease that seems to lie behind the expansion of Joseph's empire. Rather than plunge into a new area, he is likely to introduce it quietly into a corner of his shops. As he explains, 'Everything I start is very gentle. I do something I enjoy doing, and build up from there.'

Fashion was his starting point; selling a few pullovers in a hairdresser's salon window. 'I've always loved fashion,' he says, citing window displays, good adverts and anything to do with visuals and textures as early reference points. 'In the 60s, the King's Road had the likes of Mary Quant and Vidal Sassoon working on it. They helped me to know how far you can go with things.'

He says he liked to edit collections, to go behind the clothes and know the designer. He cites Kenzo as the first great influence, followed by Azzedine Alaïa and Yohji Yamamoto.

The Joseph empire began to expand; at one time, it seemed as if every other shop in South Molton Street was owned by Joseph. He sighs at the memory. 'Streets are started by individuals, they make it work, then huge High Street names come in. The way the rent is charged in England, contrary to France or Italy, means they suddenly leap to twice or three times as much. So suddenly, South Molton Street became a bit of a jungle.'

In each of his outlets, whether shop, café or restaurant, Joseph worked to create the right atmosphere. 'When I am in New York I love to visit Dean & DeLuca. When I first went there, I got such a shock seeing people's eyes shine when they saw a lettuce. I wanted to get that same look from people when they saw clothes.' It was only a matter of time before those shining eyes could alight on accessories, fragrances, restaurant dishes and home furnishings as Joseph expanded.

Most fashion designers have now launched a home collection, translating their clothing vision into interiors. Joseph's collection began in the 80s with Joseph Pour La Maison, one of his Sloane Street shops, where Andrée Putman furniture sat alongside Mont Blanc pens, Braun calculators and Joseph fashion in a single style.

'This was the 80s, everything was black and chrome – it was a lovely time for me,' he remembers. 'Whatever we sold blended very well, and everything had a sense of continuity, so people who came to buy clothes were attracted by the rest of the lifestyle.'

Typically, when the world zigs, Joseph quietly zags. While accepting that home interiors is an important area for future growth, Joseph's natural reticence to follow the pack keeps expansion in check. 'It's easy to take someone out to a restaurant, but very special to take them into your home. I have slowed down in the home area, because I am always frightened of too many people doing the same thing.'

Joseph now sells just six pieces which were designed for his shop, including chairs because so many customers asked him where his furniture came from. He describes them as, 'useful pieces, very versatile,' which work in the office, showroom or home. The new direction, he feels, is menswear and his latest store, specialising in menswear opened recently. 'Menswear is a very interesting area now,' he says, 'because unlike 15 years ago, there are men in the media and professions where they can be very creative in the way they dress.' He claims that even men in the City are aware of fabrics and collar shapes.

His biggest challenge is to continue his success well into the future, when retailing has become truly global. He claims success boils down to always improving on the way people are served. Joseph says he goes to some restaurants for the atmosphere more than the food, so he tries not to 'frighten people' in his shops. He claims to have no clear vision of the future, 'because you can lose spontaneity. I believe in not planning too far, but then acting very quickly.'

But wherever our tastes shift, whether we are dressing or dining, staying in or going out, something suggests that Joseph will be there before us. What we want will be in his shops – before we even know that we want it.



RIGHT: EXAMPLES FROM THE JOSEPH AUTUMN/WINTER '99 COLLECTION