





# STRIKE ATONE

Nothing keeps a restaurant's brand alive like custom matchbooks

BY CAROLINE EUBANKS

Neither a smoker nor a pyromaniac, I've spent much of my life picking up matchbooks from every restaurant or bar that offers them, and my collection overflows from an oversized glass brandy snifter. Some remind me of bygone restaurants; others I pocketed from establishments I hardly remember visiting.

I faintly recall a time when restaurants had "smoking" and "non-smoking sections," but they vanished in my youth—often taking novelty matches with them. But in the past few years, matchbooks have made a comeback.

Chef Ford Fry of Rocket Farm Restaurants remembers seeing branded matchbooks scattered around his grandparents' house growing up. "Smoking in restaurants pretty much got banned ... so a lot of people stopped doing matches," he says. "But when we opened JCT [Kitchen], I thought, let's bring back the matches."

The process has now trickled down through many of his restaurants, including, most recently, Little Sparrow and Bar Blanc, all designed by the Atlanta firm Family Bros. Casual Supercasual features a sassy cowpoke on the design, while another high-end spot has a sliding matchbox with green-tipped matches and cursive font.

"There's always usually some sort of humor involved in the matchbooks, and the styles typically try to match the restaurant. The more formal the restaurant, the more fancy the matches," Ford notes.

Matches are also essential souvenirs at the buzzy establishments of Major Food Group like Dirty French and Carbone. Capri Club, an aperitivo bar in Los Angeles, hired Club Studio to handle branding, including the matches, which bear recipes for classic Italian cocktails on the interior.

"Matches at restaurants or bars, they really signify the type of establishment that it is, and they set the tone for the whole place and the whole concept," says Owner Robert Fleming. "In a weird way, it sort of pays homage to the past and tells you that it's a place that maybe has a history or is trying to make its own history."

They also serve to keep the restaurant top of mind: "It's kind of a marketing tool. People just started collecting them, and then people started making artwork out of them, and they're framing them," says Fry.

Finding a company to make the matches can be challenging, especially as there are fewer to choose from. Atlas Match is one of the longest-running, but many restaurants work with The Match Group for the variety of colors and styles. It's also costly: Atlas quoted \$1,600 for 5,000 boxes using a simple design.

"You're not getting customers because of your matchbooks, so your marketing dollars would be better spent somewhere else," says Fleming. "Like a lot of parts of the restaurant business, it's a labor of love."

But it's still worthwhile for many restaurant and bar owners.

"When I'm standing at the bar during service and I see someone walk up and grab a pack of matches, I start to wonder where they're going to end up. How are they going to use them?" says Fleming. "They're going to be at their fireplace or in their drawer or on their counter, and they're probably going to be there for a very long time because people don't go through matches that quickly. It's interesting to think about: someone grabs them, and now they're a part of their life, at least for the foreseeable future."

Caroline Eubanks is an award-winning writer and author from Atlanta.