

Salamanders & Stars



THE MOSAICS OF LAURENT RIBIS

MASONRY RARELY JUMPS OUT AS MODERN. For Laurent Ribis, however, marble, glass, broken plates and seashells are parts of a complex puzzle that solve not only his clients' quests for decorative permanence but also his own desire to merge time-honored techniques in a new context.

Quite literally—since the 28-year-old French artist's mosaics include, for instance, a chest of drawers in a skin of creamy pastel seashells. Ribis enjoys working the way his Paris teacher taught him, but a city like New York is far less accustomed to such Old World splendor. "Americans are much more interested in the old arts," says Ribis, in the un-

mistakenly Continental accent that implies he *must* know these things. His mosaics, he adds, "have a story to tell." New Yorkers love craftwork that tells a tale, and mosaics lend an instant aura of time and myth.

And so it is, thanks to Ribis, that the garden floor in the SoHo restaurant Provence has come alive with a rich stoney tapestry of salamanders and stars; another client's newly minted bathtub speaks volumes, Pompeian style; and another's fireplace mantle is covered with seashells that the client's children found. An Upper East Side kitchen, now marbled in black and white to the tune of \$7,000, is a typical, though large, project for Ribis. The breakdown for the job, which took one continuous month (he usually devotes



FLOORED:
Ribis (inset) and his
handiwork at SoHo
restaurant, Provence
(above and page 65)

his entire schedule to such jobs), includes \$4,500 for materials and \$3,500 for an assistant. Marble is not cheap, ranging from \$23 per square foot for the more common Italian marbles in white, black, red, green and yellow to \$260 per square foot for the rarest shade—blue from Brazil. That's another difference between Ribis' American and European clients. "There are more people here willing to spend money on that," he says. "In Europe they know about these things. It's all around them. It would be considered extravagant."

Ribis does use other, less costly materials, doing a bathroom floor in glass tiles, for example. The result may be more colorful, since the range of colors is much greater, but the floor will only last 20 years or so, rather than the lifetime of marble. It's not for nothing that builders of the Egyptian pyramids used

time-tested method of practical construction and a dweller's personal stamp of character. And Ribis creates smaller pieces, like a portrait of an African man, or a small coaster-like object—a tiny terrazzo for a tea cup.

Ribis, who grew up in the small village of Sanary-sur-Mer, left France three years ago feeling depressed that a friend was dying of AIDS. Clearly, he felt early on that he must make his creative mark stand out. With a glue



ing, the grooves run through his images like rivulets of his imagination. How strongly they will hold over time is one of his greatest challenges. "That's my responsibility," says Ribis,