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Tastes of California, Imported to the East Coast

By **Ted Loos**

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Woody Allen may have called Los Angeles a city where the only cultural advantage is being able to make a right turn on a red light (that's from "Annie Hall"), but the bicoastal restaurateur Michael McCarty and his wife, Kim McCarty, an artist, have spent 40 years proving that wrong, bringing top examples of West Coast creativity to the Big Apple.

This couple have a Midtown Manhattan apartment filled with California-flavored art and objects, many of them works on paper, by Los Angeles residents like Tim Hawkinson, Frank Gehry, David Hockney, Laura Owens and Ed Ruscha.

From their large terrace, they can see the back of the building that houses the New York branch of Mr. McCarty's restaurant, Michael's, a favorite for media types that was established in 1989. The original Santa Monica version, still going strong, opened in 1979. (Mr. McCarty is featured in the cover photo for Andrew Friedman's recent book about the era, "Chefs, Drugs and Rock & Roll.")

Surveying the five-room penthouse that they turned into a two-room apartment (it includes a studio space for Ms. McCarty), Mr. McCarty, 65, said: "Basically, the restaurants look like this apartment — wood trim, a garden, art and track lighting. That's our look."

Ms. McCarty, 62, added, "We go back and forth a lot." They own dozens of artworks, some stashed in her studio in the couple's Malibu home when they are not on view in their restaurants, where art-filled walls have been a signature from the beginning.

"It gives us the ability to rotate when we want to rotate; they're in the bullpen waiting to play," Mr. McCarty said.

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Recently, the couple talked about how their collecting developed. These are edited excerpts from that conversation.

Curtain opens on late-'70s Santa Monica: What was that time like for collecting?

MICHAEL McCARTY The art world was just like the food-and-wine world — small. Santa Monica and Venice had been this little hotbed for the bad boys and girls of the Ferus Gallery. We really wanted to know artists. So that's what we did, meeting Tony Berlant, Ed Moses, Hockney, Richard Diebenkorn, Sam Francis — everybody.



Richard Diebenkorn's "Small Red" in the McCarty collection. Daniel Dorsa for The New York Times

How did you get them for your restaurant when you were just starting out?

MICHAEL McCARTY I said: “We don’t have any money. We do things on trade.” And, of course, 90 percent of them said, “Forget it.”

How did the works-on-paper focus come about?

MICHAEL McCARTY The first year we opened, we had paintings in the restaurant. And 12 months later, we had red wine and duck sauce splashed on them. Kim said: “We can’t do this anymore. We’re going to ruin all this stuff.” So we took anything that was not behind glass and took it out. We brought in only watercolors, drawings, prints — everything that was behind glass.

How did you get the David Hockney and the Laura Owens on this wall, both with such California colors?

MICHAEL McCARTY David was a very good client of the restaurant because he loved to be able to smoke outdoors. Our garden was the last of the smoking spots in Santa Monica.

KIM McCARTY The Hockney is actually two drawings together, in crayon and pencil, a study for a big painting of Santa Monica. The Laura Owens drawing we got at an event about 12 years ago, a fund-raiser for the museum that’s now the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

Her career has really taken off, as seen in the recent solo exhibition at the Whitney.

KIM McCARTY I think Laura’s always been a star, unique in her approach to making things. She has an amazing sense of color; her tones are just always very beautiful and very fresh. And everything looks effortless.

So you two have personally met every artist in the collection?

MICHAEL McCARTY The only one we never met was Marcel Duchamp. But we met his widow.

How does that change your collecting?

KIM McCARTY Well, if you don’t like the work, you don’t take it. [She laughs.]

There are a lot of artists who we love personally and who are talented, and we know even better than these, but we don’t own a piece of their work.

MICHAEL McCARTY Awkward!