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THE MAGAZINE

RICKY GERVAIS

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QUITE SIMPLY, *THE* DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO WHAT'S ON IN LONDON

conran's kitchen

garden

Chelsea Flower Show gardens are often flights of fancy, and this year is no exception, with an Islamic-inspired retreat and a recreation of Ireland's emerald sward on the show list. But when garden designer Nicola Lesbirel was asked to co-design the Laurent Perrier/Harpers & Queen Garden with Sir Terence Conran, using restaurants as the theme, she began by drawing on memory. 'Our starting point was the nicest times we'd had in restaurant gardens,' says Lesbirel. 'Usually these have been small restaurants - often on holiday - where you're sitting in what is really someone's private garden. If we were being truly authentic, we might have added mismatched chairs and a few stray cats.'

Cats and mismatched furniture were left out of the final design - this being a smarter sort of establishment - but the Lesbirel/Conran collaboration has produced the kind of easy elegance we've come to expect from the man who brought affordable contemporary style to the British home before switching his focus to restaurants. While Sixties Habitat gave us chicken bricks and rustic earthenware, this outdoor restaurant setting includes today's sought-after chefs' ingredients - with Italian meadow rocket and wild celery germinating in pots.

Nostalgia is there if you look, though. 'I think for Terence there's an element of been-here-before,' says Lesbirel, a youthful 40-year-old with casually tied-back hair, wearing the working gardener's uniform of jeans and fleece, as she oversees construction in the frantic fortnight before the show. Certainly the butterfly chairs dotted around the Indian limestone terrace conjure up post-war enthusiasm for the clean and simple lines of modernity - which is where Conran came in. 'Some people may see this and be reminded of the gardens their parents planted,' Lesbirel adds. It's not just the brave new Fifties and Sixties that are alluded to - the centrepiece restaurant kitchen-cum-greenhouse is a flat-roofed steel and glass construction reminiscent of Thirties East Coast America. This building comes complete with proper working kitchen, and a pixelated backdrop shows a virtual restaurant behind.

This is not the first time Lesbirel has collaborated with Conran. She started her career as buyer and product designer with The Conran Shop, setting up the conservatory department there 15 years ago. 'I'd got to the stage when I thought if I saw another cushion cover I'd scream. But I'd always loved gardening and I can distinctly remember

Garden designer Nicola Lesbirel has teamed up with Sir Terence Conran to create a working garden incorporating a restaurant for this year's Chelsea Flower Show. **Libby Norman** met her



■ Nicola Lesbirel (opposite) and Sir Terence Conran's Laurent Perrier/Harpers & Queen Garden

taking all these watering cans and pots to a meeting and saying, 'I think gardening is going to be quite big.'

She was right on that score and after creating Conran's urban gardeners' nirvana, designed concepts for Nicole Farhi Home and Heal's. But the end vision was always to get outdoors and after working as a jobbing gardener, Lesbirel enrolled on a garden-design course at Inchbald School Of Design in Eccleston Square. This gave her the confidence and the qualifications she needed (Inchbald's design alumni include Kelly Hoppen and Luciano Giubbilei) and after a three-year spell working with Dan Pearson, she went solo.

Although her training might suggest she's a slave to restrained modernity, she has a relaxed approach to rules. 'I'd far rather see a garden stuffed full of multicoloured petunias than one that's over-designed. The key thing is to plant what you love.' That said, her plant list for Chelsea has no hot-pink bedding plants, relying on mass groupings of single species such as iris, viola, euphorbia and sedum for visual impact. 'I think eyebrows may have been raised when our garden was entered because the plant list was so much shorter than they usually are,' adds Lesbirel. Green is the dominant colour, since Lesbirel says this is the secret of creating enjoyable outdoor spaces. 'For most people, their most relaxing moments have been spent lying in a field or walking through a wood - it may sound silly but green is a much underrated colour in gardening.'

Although there's no lawn (unless you count the eco-friendly turf roof on the restaurant), Lesbirel has used grass as another border plant by placing miniature patches of green turf alongside the elliptical borders that frame the terrace and pathway. Traditional planting lore has also been overturned, since the tallest-at-the-back principle for borders has been abandoned in favour of a mishmash of plant heights. 'This means you don't see all the plants at once and as you move through the garden, new areas of colour and shape open up.' The most unusual plants are restios, a native of South Africa (grown for Chelsea by Trevena Cross Nurseries in Cornwall), which look like a cross between bamboo and tall grasses. Both Lesbirel and Conran are convinced they will be the next big thing.

Lesbirel is the first to admit the end design is one that not all visitors will admire. But it does have a simplicity and easiness on the eye that breaks with the artifice of many Chelsea plots. 'More than anything, I wanted this to be a garden you could install in your own home for year-round impact, rather than something that only works over the four days of the show,' she adds. 'With my retail training, I just can't escape the product designer's first principles - does it work and is it practical? This has been about designing a real working garden.'

■ Chelsea Flower Show, Tue 25, Wed 26, (RHS mems only), Thur 27 & Fri 28 May, Royal Hospital, Chelsea Bridge Road, SW3 (0870 906 3781). Nicola Lesbirel can be contacted at nicola@lesbirel.com.

