

THE NEW BLACK

Merkato

Valencia, Spain

Francesc Rife Studio

Photography by David Zarzoso

The space was large and evocative: a disused airplane hangar behind a storefront, with a lofty, trussed shed roof and huge, column-free space. What was not to love? The brief decided on a new gastronomic marketplace; food, drinks, people, atmosphere. You'd come here, wander around, see friends, eat, imbibe, kill time, and gawk at the chic black-and-grey enclosure, maybe wondering what it had been before. Mystery is at the heart of the scheme, it would appear; you really don't know what's old, what's new, what's in-between. That helps it all. Without lapsing into by-now cliched industrial-chic, the design team nonetheless keeps everything dark, sexy, pared down, clean.

At street level, it begins with an uber-simple entryway of dyed-black boards and a minimal moniker. It's a bit like entering through an armoire, given the scale of what's beyond; a pinched threshold to a realm of scale. Then you come upon a fish 'market', display shelves of groceries, tasting points, a bakery lying centrally in the plan. Some chairs and tables show up, so you can pause to taste. After this there is the 'nave' of the space, a covered courtyard under steel trusses and skylights – a soaring roof. It's an indoor plaza, almost public in scale. A partially open kitchen shows the magic happening, behind patterned terracotta tiles, with black ductwork leading steam and smoke away overhead. There are two metal-mesh-clad pavilions in the space, hiding access to service cellars and toilets and offices. Potted trees soften the hard surfaces somewhat, and further the 'piazza' sense of the main hall. And to be fair, in bright days of sunshine, Merkato opens up with light. But after dusk, its true colour shows through.

Seating is on benches or at small tables laid out in orderly grids and lines, joinable for larger groups or parties, which Merkato loves to host. This space is manna to events and reservation-only feasts. But there's also Cuarto Oskuro – a private warehouse that diners needing seclusion can occupy. You get to it via a hidden door in the fish market. After all, no great restaurant these days can omit the chef's table, or private dining room.

Is it all a bit Darth Vader? Who doesn't love black, when it's worn well? The layers and varied ways the tone is employed rewards closer admiration... It's not all just dark paint. It's a forgiving, complementary hue, but ask any model: you still have to wear it with aplomb.



