

What's Hot?

9 Restaurant Interior Design Trends to Consider for Your Next Build, Buildout or Remodel

What drives restaurant design trends?

The answer is as diverse as designers themselves.

By Stephani Robson

If you want to see which direction the interior design wind is blowing, look no further than restaurants. The combination of this nation's passionate foodie culture, the relatively frequent turnover of restaurant spaces in most major cities meaning more new restaurant designs every month, and the limited design budgets that restaurants often have to work with all make eateries a crucible of new ideas for exciting and in many cases very cost-effective design.

Even restaurant blogs and reviews are making a much bigger deal about design than they did a few years ago, with pictures and critiques of what the restaurant looks like side by side with the obsessive documentation of the food being served. Today's restaurants have become a bellwether for all kinds of interior style, influencing other building types like retail stores, university buildings and even hospitals.

What drives restaurant design trends? The answer is as diverse as designers themselves. Some derive inspiration from the art world, particularly sculpture and installation art, in major world art cities like London, Miami, Berlin and New York. Others build on architectural styles and trends that are documented in glossy design trade journals, making the editors of these publications de facto arbiters of high style. Several top restaurant designers have a background in set design or other theatrical arts and they borrow lighting, decoration and even space planning tricks from what you might see at the best off-Broadway shows.

Ideas also come from within the hospitality industry as innovations in food production and service equipment make it possible to change the way an open kitchen looks and feels, freeing the designer to make more creative connections between the front and back of house.

But the major driver of many front-of-house design trends is the dining public. As we well know, restaurant patrons vote with their feet, and a more sophisticated and demanding "foodie" clientele wants to eat in a space that is as exciting as the food. Restaurants that capture and keep the guest's attention with their designs quickly become models for other restaurant developers chasing the same market segments. And with it being so easy to check out other restaurants' designs with a simple Google Image search, it's usually not long before a great restaurant idea at one place becomes a bona fide trend around the world.

In fact, the danger in writing about restaurant design trends is that often by the time the article appears in print, the latest look could be yesterday's news. Restaurant development also has a relatively long lead time when compared with, say, fashion design: Designer clothes on the runway are often copied and in the stores within weeks, but most restaurants take many months and in some cases years to go from initial idea to opening day. However, there are a number of restaurant interior design trends that appear to have the legs to be influential for quite a while yet, so you can consider including them in your project even if you won't be ready to renovate or open for some time. Here are some of the hottest.

1. Applied Geometry

Perhaps the most dominant restaurant interior design trend at the moment is the emphasis on linearity: long, straight spaces augmented with horizontal or rectilinear features. A quick perusal of some of the most talked-about recent restaurant openings in major U.S. markets shows that the vast majority of these places don't appear to have any curves at all: walls, furniture, artwork, light



Bobby Flay's latest venture, Bobby's Burger Palace, shows real retro flair with old-school counter seating, bold and bright colors, and the swirling shapes made popular in California's coffee shops of the 1950's and 60's.

fixtures — everything is shaped like or decorated by rectangles. Drift Bar and Restaurant in London is a great example; although the space itself is bisected by a severe angle, the bar area is dominated by square and rectangular forms with the only curves in sight represented by wasp-waisted light fixtures and some homey décor elements on the towering metal shelving behind the bar.

Long and lean makes a lot of sense for the kinds of spaces that startup restaurateurs often rent. Many streetscape sites in older cities are long and skinny as are a lot of strip mall locations. Using horizontal lines can make a smaller space feel bigger, so designers play with the orientation of materials to emphasize the length of the room. Take a look at the staggeringly popular Momofuku Ssam Bar, which is a “best of breed” example of this long, linear look. You’ll also see a lot of grids being used to define spaces, partially screen an exposed ceiling or add dimension and life to a plain wall surface. But this isn’t your parents’ white-painted, 45-degree-angled garden trellis from Home Depot; slender, open gridwork made of high-gloss wood or metal is more the style.

Other geometric forms can have a place too. Circles and ovoids, particularly in the form of pendant lamps or ceiling details, are popular choices as counterpoints to the straight lines in many restaurants. You’ll also see rounded booths, like the ones at Marrow or Arlington Club Steakhouse, both in New York. (Note that rounded forms like this are more expensive to build. The operator on a budget might want to focus on other ways to spend that hard-won capital budget, at least at first.) More complicated geometry can be seen in wall covering patterns or wall art, or in sleek “exo-skins” that wrap around spaces or indeed even some buildings if budget permits.

2. Retro References

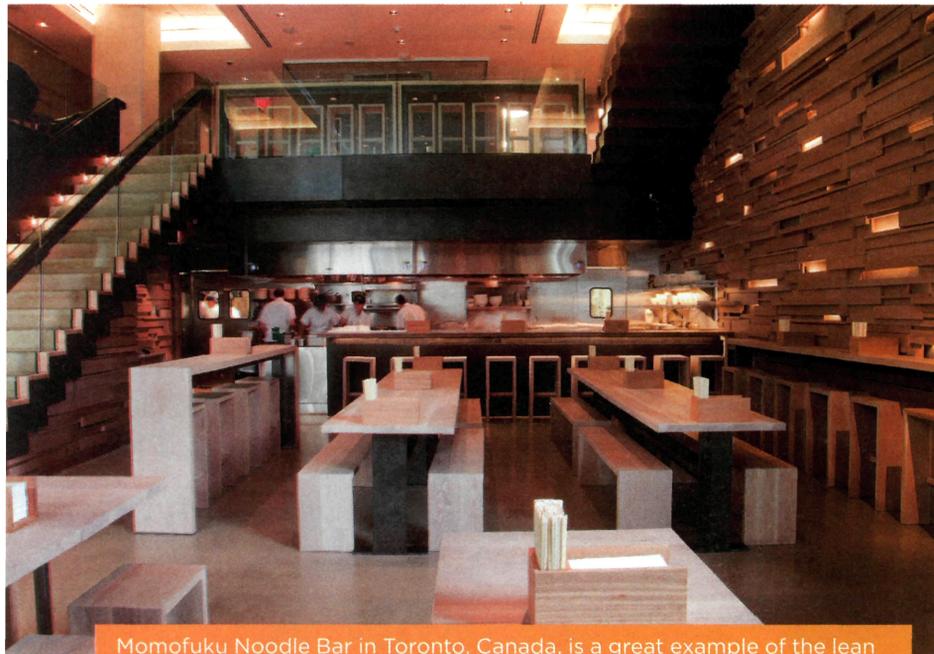
Sometimes, the most up-to-date design is actually kind of old-fashioned: Witness the wave of “retro” design in restaurants. The term “retro” actually means “backward,” so any design that looks to the past could be defined as retro. However, interior design that refers to the middle of the 20th century gained popularity in the late 90s but really took off in the past 10 years, not the least owing to the popularity of the tele-

vision show “Mad Men.” You might have heard this look being called “midcentury modern” to distinguish it from earlier styles like Art Deco or Arts and Crafts, which could just as accurately be called “retro.”

Because “retro” can mean so many looks to so many people, you’ve got quite a bit of leeway in choosing precisely which era you are trying to evoke in your front of house. Area 31 in Miami, for example, suggests mid-century fine dining with its armless upholstered chairs, unadorned wood paneling and clean lines, whereas Bobby Flay’s latest burger joint (aptly named Bobby’s Burger Palace) uses swooping curves in the counters and ceiling coupled with lime-green vinyl seating to make you feel like you are right back in 1962. Good retro design in today’s restaurants uses only some design elements to suggest an earlier time rather than tries to completely re-create the look and feel of 50 years ago. In fact, making too strong a retro statement can backfire if guests perceive your restaurant as “themed.” Themed restaurants were all the rage in the 1980’s and early 1990’s, but are now viewed by many as outdated and overwhelming.

3. Industrial Meets Rustic

If you had to come up with a single philosophy behind a great number of recent restaurant designs, it would be the desire for authenticity: honest materials, used in highly visible ways. By “honest,” I mean materials that are unadorned and perhaps even blemished: galvanized metal chairs that show some dings and dents (even if the designers actually put them there), paint on the columns that looks rubbed away in spots, wood on the walls that shows its grain and perhaps some nail holes or rust stains. When you think about it, unembellished materials are a logical accompaniment to unembellished food — ingredients that are locally sourced and prepared in ways that bring out their native flavors and colors — so you’ll see this design style in farm-to-table operations or in restau-



Momofuku Noodle Bar in Toronto, Canada, is a great example of the lean and linear design trend for restaurants. Notice the remarkable openness of the space — you can see everything and everyone which adds to the high energy of this hot dining spot.

rants that pride themselves on crafting beer or other house-made goods.

There are lots of great examples of the marriage of industrial and rustic design in restaurants. Blue Star Donuts of Portland, Oregon, is one of a number of artisanal doughnut concepts (you knew they were coming, didn't you?), and the shop's interior combines the kind of cabinetry you'd expect to see in a particularly well-appointed country house with the gleam of stainless steel refrigerators and vent hoods. Schoolhouse light fixtures come down from a tangle of pipes and ductwork, made all the more noticeable by the "stage set" look of the tile walls that end several feet below the ceiling. Cakes and Ale in Decatur, Georgia, has a down-home feel but with an edge, courtesy of counter stools bolted to the floor and the kind of light fixtures you'd expect to see in a high school gymnasium. Designers are getting creative with industrial materials, too. The late restaurant designer Larry Bogdanow used window screening to great effect as a ceiling treatment in the much-missed Savoy in New York. The combination design/restaurant owner firm AvroKo builds its own custom light fixtures

for its restaurant projects using odds and ends you'd expect to find in a machine shop and at their restaurant Saxon and Parole they showcase a blacksmith's anvil as if it is a piece of fine sculpture.

4. The Death of Color and the Birth of Texture

If you read the trade press, you might think that the only color options for new restaurants appear to be white, black and brown. Sure, some places paint one or more walls a deep, highly saturated color like orange, especially if it's a quick-serve concept, but of-the-moment upscale restaurant design emphasizes materials in their natural form, which means you won't see much color in many of the hottest new restaurants. What you do see is great attention to the texture of the materials being used and an effort to offer contrasts: smooth floor but etched walls, for example (as at Corton, Drew Nieporent's fine dining restaurant in New York), or varying textures using the same material in different ways the way that dark wood is used at Pittsburgh's popular Burgatory.

5. Ethnic On the Plate But Not In the Design

Today's diners are keen to explore new flavors and new cuisines. Familiar food cultures like Mexican and Chinese have been joined by a much more diverse selection of ethnic choices, including foods from a wide range of Southeast Asian, Middle Eastern, North African and Latin American traditions. But the design of these restaurants, particularly those created by second-generation immigrant families, are avoiding the standard ethnic clichés associated with their cultures. Co Nam in San Francisco combines the sleek, modern look that is so popular today with subtle Vietnamese references: the furniture, color palette and visual motifs suggest rather than scream "Vietnam." And at Crios Modern Mexican in Washington, D.C., instead of the usual Mexican iconography on every wall, the interior boasts many restaurant design features that are particularly on-trend: exposed, industrial ceiling; bold, bright (but not particularly "Mexican") colors; dark furniture; high-contrast lighting.

6. Hard Times and the High Life

When was the last time you saw carpeting being installed in a restaurant? Even at the very high end, restaurants are going with hard floor finishes: wood, tile, stone or manufactured flooring that looks like, well, just about anything. It's not surprising that hard flooring is popular with operators because it's easier to keep clean and may stand up better to wear; but hard flooring has a dark side: noise. Mix a hard floor with the many other hard finishes in a restaurant — walls, ceilings, windows, tables, bar tops — and you may have set up a perfect storm of reverberation. Guests frequently complain when sound levels impede conversations, and so many restaurant reviews now make a note about the noise level in restaurants.

Contributing to the noise quotient is the current penchant for high, exposed ceilings. True, it is often cheaper to

leave whatever is running through the ceiling (ducts, pipes, conduit, joists, trusses and all manner of other building inwards) exposed and masked by slapping around some black or, less commonly, white paint. And a high ceiling certainly makes spaces more dramatic. In general, the bigger the dining room, the higher the ceiling needs to be to keep the space in proportion. But sound tends to bounce up and around all that painted metal and concrete in most ceilings, so smart restaurant designers use noise-taming materials that carefully blend in to keep sound levels at a comfortable 65 decibels.

7. Creative Repurposing

If you've ever started a restaurant from scratch, you'll appreciate that anything you can do to keep the budget in check is highly desirable. This cost-cutting mindset dovetails nicely with sustainable practices: what can you reuse or recycle rather than buy new? As a matter of course, restaurant designers are turning to used furniture, which by no means has to match, as one way of keeping costs down and projecting a "green" vibe, but the more interesting trend is toward using other kinds of items in creative ways. Bottles are being turned into light fixtures. Used No. 10 cans are holding breadsticks. Walls are being covered with wine corks (which, by the way, are a good way to dampen the sound from that new hard floor). And while many restaurants have used old barrels as bar tables for years, the current wave of farm-to-table restaurants is coming up with new ways of repurposing farmstead staples into functional parts of the dining area: Uncommon Ground in Chicago has picture frames made of old fence boards, and an old hand cart forms a service stand at Henry's at the Farm in Milton, New York.

8. All Together Now

The first communal tables in restaurants started showing up about 10 years ago, and now they are appearing everywhere at all price points and service styles. Restaurateurs love them because they are space-efficient and make the dining area seem more convivial but diners appear to have a complicated relationship with communal dining. In some operations, notably trendy bars and eateries that cater to a young, affluent crowd, the communal table is a popular choice, and you'll see this kind of table being more acceptable in cities where real estate costs are sky-high like New York. But if you ask most people if they would like to share a table with people they don't know, the vast majority will say no (hibachi rooms in Japanese restaurants notwithstanding). A more acceptable application for most people is the "half-communal" table — a long, narrow and high counter with seats on only one side, ideally facing out onto the street. This style of shared table has been used with great effect in the fast-casual segment and in the window of many a Starbucks.

9. Spotlight On the Food

Although it didn't start the trend, the celebrated restaurant Alinea in Chicago demonstrates the movement toward making the diner's experience all about the plate. Providing simple, clean surroundings that are reminiscent of a modern art museum offers a striking contrast to the restaurant's carefully considered food and beautiful plate presentations. In restaurants like these, the goal is to stimulate the senses with what comes out of the kitchen; the rest of the space is the serene backdrop that lets the food be the star.

A great example of this trend can be seen in the popular Los Angeles restaurant Animal. Animal's design is perhaps best described as "Spartan," with plain white walls, simple wood furniture lining the walls, and a small bar at the rear of the restaurant. (Places with the bar at the rear suggest, at least to me, that the focus is going to be on the food rather than the beverage program, and that no one is going to be encouraged to drop by for happy-hour shots.) This kind of minimalist design works best when what comes out of the kitchen is colorful, highly textured, and thoughtfully plated.

Hand in hand with this focus on the food is restaurateurs' continuing enthusiasm for open kitchens. Some operations use the open kitchen as a way to liven up the dining room but still limit how much the guest can actually see by putting the server pickup as a visual barrier between the dining area and the open kitchen. Diners can see and hear the kitchen staff at work but are far enough away that they can't get a close-up view of some of the less-attractive aspects of what happens on the line. Other places, like Danny Meyer's North End Grill, are quite happy to have diners belly up to the kitchen to see the chef and his or her team at work. (If you are lucky, Chef Floyd Cardoz himself will pass you your meal and pause for a quick chat.) Open kitchens are all the rage in small, chef-driven concepts where a seat facing the line is highly coveted or, in some cases, the only seats in the entire restaurant, as is the case at the Michelin-starred, 18-seat Chef's Table at Brooklyn Fare.

There's Still No Replacement for Sensible and Smart

The nine restaurant design trends noted here represent what many successful projects are building right now. But what will be the next hot trend in front-of-house design for restaurants? I wish I knew, but no matter what it ends up being, there is still no replacement for a smartly planned seating arrangement, sensible server station placement, attractive and flexible lighting, and sound levels that balance a lively room with comfortable conversation. Good design is first and foremost design that works: form should definitely follow function, especially in a "satisfaction factory" like a restaurant. So go forth and be brave with your front-of-house interior design, but don't forget about your most important creative mission: happy guests.

RS&G