

Restaurant Furniture Selection & Function

Going out to eat is a simple pleasure affordable to most budgets. Whether it's taking the family out for a sit-down, "home-cooked" meal, enjoying a night out on a first (or 500th!) date, or just meeting friends for drinks and appetizers after work, nearly everyone has pleasant memories of enjoying a meal outside of the home.

Many, however, pay little or no attention during these outings to the restaurant's furniture and décor. In most cases, business owners put a great deal of thought and effort into the selection and placement of such furnishings.

There are several options when it comes to restaurant furniture. While price and quality are likely among the top concerns for business owners, there are also other considerations to pore over before making a final decision.

Waiting Area Furniture & Amenities

Many patrons have been surprised to visit a business during what they may have thought was a less busy time of day, only to find the restaurant crowded with a long waiting list. Business owners should plan for these occasions, and be sure to provide their guests with a comfortable area in which to sit while they are waiting for a table to become available.

If a waiting area does not exist, or if guests are forced to stand for long periods of time or wait outside in sometimes unfavorable conditions, it is likely they will quickly move on to another dining option, which can prove detrimental to your business. On the other hand, providing a comfortable waiting area can help ensure guests will remain at your restaurant — ultimately purchasing one or more dinners and drinks, and possibly recommending your business to others.

The Importance of a Well-Designed Waiting Area

When guests arrive at your restaurant, you might make the safe assumption that they are hungry. But depending on the time of day and day of the week, they may also be strapped for time or experiencing stress. For these and many other reasons, it is important to provide your customers with an organized and comfortable area in which to wait for a table to become available.

The waiting area should feature ample seating, but not be so crowded that guests will be forced to sit unnecessarily close to each other, possibly violating people's comfort zones. It is also essential to ensure your waiting area is full of comfortable seats. Hard, straight-backed chairs are not a good choice for this area. Seating should feature plush and/or leather furniture — including couches and lounge chairs. 'Traditional' one-person chairs are also acceptable, however be sure they are padded at both the seat and back rest area.

Making your guests feel comfortable in the waiting area goes beyond merely seating, however. It may be wise to offer guests drinks and limited appetizers while they wait. In this situation, they will become less likely to become frustrated and leave, and you will be able to make sales before guests are even seated at their dining tables!

Waiting Area Essentials

- comfortable seating (chairs, lounges, benches, couches, etc.)
- coffee and end tables
- plants and décor
- trash and recycle bins
- server podium/host station

Tables & Chairs

Ensuring guest comfort should be a priority if you expect your restaurant business to grow. Patrons are unlikely to revisit a business where they were made to feel uncomfortable, or experienced a potentially embarrassing situation like a chair breaking underneath them, or worse. It is imperative that you do not underestimate the importance of selecting and purchasing sturdy, visually-appealing and comfortable tables and chairs for your business.

As you begin to make your selections, you will also want to keep in mind potentially-adverse weather conditions. In favorable weather, many guests will prefer to sit outside, if such a seating area is made available to them. Some guests will actively seek out a restaurant that features this type of seating arrangement. Be sure, then, when selecting your tables and chairs, to keep this preference in mind. Choose furniture that will not be destroyed by the elements, should you choose to place these items outside.

Table Designs & Features

There are many things to consider when selecting, purchasing and placing tables inside your business. You may first wish to decide on the type of furniture you will use. Most restaurant tables are made of wood, metal, plastic, or a mixture of many different materials. The material you choose will depend on the atmosphere of your business, as well as how it will be used. If, for instance, you are catering to teenagers and young adults, you may wish to consider purchasing a table that can withstand potentially vigorous treatment.

Another consideration involves how many guests you might expect to be seated at one table. If your restaurant is known primarily as a dating venue, you may wish to purchase mostly smaller, two-person tables. On the other hand, if you are expecting to attract families and larger parties, it may be wise to consider buying large tables and booths that can comfortably seat many people.

Also keep in mind your chosen theme. For example, a business that adopts a nautical theme may wish to purchase and place mostly round tables, given the potential for decoration as ship wheels (helm). If you operate a cafeteria counter that is frequented by construction workers, you may wish to select tables that are shaped like common road signs (stop, yield, etc.).

Maintenance and build will also become important considerations in your table purchases. Selecting tables that are prone to breakage or leg loosening could present a potentially hazardous situation (soup spilling into someone's lap, for instance). Adjustable height tables may be a good idea for restaurants that will be serving children, as well as adults of various sizes and heights.

What sort of table top will you decide on? There are, of course, many options, including glass, wood, steel, and more. This decision will be largely based on other factors, such as expected patrons, theme, restaurant design, etc.

Chair Designs & Features

While table appearance and stability will be important to the guests of your restaurant, it is imperative that you ensure their comfort and safety when it comes to seating. Many meals can extend well in excess of an hour. If customers are made to feel uncomfortable during this time, it is unlikely they will return to your establishment.

There are several choices you will need to make when purchasing and placing your restaurant chairs, including:

- design (stool, straight-back chair, low-sitting chair)
- base material (wood, plastic)
- seat material (cloth, leather, cushions)
- color
- other considerations

Some of these choices will be easier to make than others, and may be based on the existing theme and/or décor of your establishment. For instance, bar stools may not be appropriate for a five-star restaurant, just as an ornately decorated Victorian-style wing-tip chair with Italian leather would not fit in at a barbecue shack.

You may also wish to consider the potential wear your chairs may be subject to. Furniture intended for a country club, for instance, will likely last longer than chairs placed in the kids' section of a fast-food restaurant. Be aware of the fact that chairs will be subject to slow deterioration caused by scraping against the floor and/or being rubbed against the table in a sometimes aggressive fashion. This reality should become a factor as you select and place your restaurant chairs.

Though perhaps not first on the list when considering suitable seating for your restaurant, the importance of color should not be overlooked. Colors often convey emotion, and a poorly selected color scheme could upset customers, or otherwise create a potentially emotional guest response.

Booths & Family Seating

Though typically reserved for families with small children or elderly members and those dining in large groups, the truth is that booths are an attractive seating option to most diners. Many guests find booths more comfortable than chairs or other restaurant seating options.

There is also a nostalgia element at play when it comes to booths. For many people, booths remind them of a first date or pleasant childhood memory. For others, booths offer a private and/or intimate dining experience.

Booths are often placed against the inner walls of a restaurant, which allows customers to feel as though their personal space is being respected, while they are still able to enjoy an evening out in public. Though personal space may be a consideration for some patrons, the ability for a booth to 'expand' the dining party is often an attractive feature for many diners. If, for instance, a family of four chooses to sit at a booth and, later, two more guests arrive, it can be a relatively simple task for others to "scoot over," and create a place for these new guests to sit. This is not often possible in many chair and table seating situations.

Many patrons will find booths more comfortable than other seating options. As these patrons make a conscious decision to remain in your establishment for longer periods of time, they are likely to make increased purchases, which will, of course, provide a direct benefit to your employees and, ultimately, your profit margin. Taking all of this into due consideration, it is important, however, to understand that not all booths are created equal.

Booth Styles

As you begin to decide on which booth will work best for your restaurant, you will want to consider different styles, and how those styles not only fit into your establishment, but how they will be perceived and used by your customers. Booths feature many different shapes and widths. You will need to make decisions as to how high the back of the booth should be, what kind of cushioning it will feature, and other considerations.

Will your booth feature cushioning all around (including a back-rest cushion), or will it only be padded on the seat? Will the booth be pushed to the wall, or will it be "free-standing" and placed in the middle of the restaurant? These and other decisions should be made prior to researching which booth is right for your establishment.

It may also be wise to consider table placement during this process. Customers will not be happy if they are expected to sit in a booth that is too close to the table, or forces them to bend in an awkward manner in order to gain access to food and other items on the table.

Bar Stools & Sports Pub Furniture

Sports bars and American pub-style restaurants have become increasingly popular with patrons seeking a dining experience that is laid-back and informal, while still offering amenities such as big screen televisions, game room items (such as pool tables, arcade games and more), and family-friendly bar-style experiences similar to neighborhood gathering places. Customers will expect — and even seek out in some cases — furniture and décor that is different from other sit-down restaurant options.

Bar Stools

Like other seating, bar stools vary in color and cushioning, but also in height and other options such as foot rests. Some bar stools feature very straight back rests, while others offer curved and ergonomically-pleasing options.

The style of bar stools also varies from the ‘traditional’ metal and thin-cushioned stools without back rests, to downright fancy seating, worthy of inclusion in even the finest of restaurants.

You will again want to consider your clientele when selecting and placing your bar stools. Are you catering to a mostly older crowd, or will there be children present, who can often put stress on restaurant furniture? Will you expect patrons to spend large amounts of time in your establishment, or simply use it as a place to have a few drinks and then head home?

Beech Chairs

If you are considering a pub-style environment, you may also want to consider beech chairs, which can be reminiscent of the dining room table chairs you may have been used to as a child. This seating option traditionally provides for a shorter height than a typical bar stool, and also tends to lend a more detailed and decorative touch. Beech chairs are also a versatile option, in that they can be ‘switched out’ to accommodate table seating, should a large party wish to dine together in your restaurant.

Tables

If your restaurant features an actual bar, you may, of course, wish to focus first on bar stools with a height that accommodates comfortable seating at the bar. If there is no bar, or if you will be offering ‘floor’ seating, you will also have to consider what type of tables your restaurant will feature.

Because sports bar and pub furniture can often be subject to wear and tear that is not seen in furniture at other establishments, durability may be a consideration as you select and place your tables.

Additionally, height, shape (square, round) and style (pedestal, low-to-ground) will be important decisions that will contribute to the overall atmosphere of your restaurant.

Outdoor Seating

Outdoor seating can be a consideration for restaurants in most any climate. If your establishment is located in an area where the weather is typically favorable for at least part of the year, you may wish to strongly consider introducing outdoor seating.

Research shows that patrons are increasingly interested in dining outside. The reasons for this may vary, but many customers cite the fact that outdoor seating allows them to be ‘part of nature’ while still enjoying a dining experience outside of the home.

In order to deliver the outdoor seating experience your customers are seeking, you will want to keep in mind a few factors.

Outdoor restaurant furniture needs to be durable and able to withstand the sometimes harsh effects of Mother Nature. This furniture will also be subject to wear that inside objects are not, specifically, grating against the ground, becoming subject to street grime and other factors.

Will your outdoor furniture be close to the beach and thus subject to salt and sand abrasion? Will cooler temperatures affect the furniture's ability to retain its shape and structure? These are all items to consider when placing furniture outside.

Additionally, you may wish to consider other factors such as if pets are allowed to accompany outdoor diners, how close to the street your restaurant sits, and other considerations.

Restrooms

You are likely aware of the rules and regulations concerning restrooms and restaurants. For the most part, restaurants are required to offer their customers a place to use restroom within reasonable distance of the establishment. Most restaurants chose to fulfill this requirement by building and maintaining an on-site restroom.

Restrooms can, however, also be powerful tools customers use to gauge the entire restaurant itself. In many cases, a sub-par restroom can cost you current and repeat business.

Perhaps the first consideration of restrooms is location. Most restaurants place restrooms toward the back of the establishment, or otherwise as far away from the kitchen as possible. It is important, however, to ensure your customers are able to locate the restrooms without having to ask, and that they are not an unreasonable distance from the main dining area. Elderly customers and those with special needs will not appreciate a restroom that is located a very far distance from the main dining room.

The next consideration is to clearly mark each restroom for 'men' and 'women.' Though the tendency — especially in 'themed' restaurants — may be to offer cute wording and/or pictures, the fact is that this often confuses and frustrates customers. In this regard, it may be better to stick with a straight forward approach, at least when directing customers to the correct restroom. Creativity and personalization can be explored in more depth once patrons are able to locate the correct room.

Customers have become increasingly concerned and aware of germs and the potential for getting sick and/or contracting long-term illnesses. For this reason, you may wish to consider providing a 'hands-free' restroom experience, featuring automatic commodes, sink faucets, hand dryers and more.

To that end, restroom cleanliness is also an aspect you will not wish to take lightly. When possible, you may wish to assign a restroom attendant or, at the very least, an employee who is tasked with regularly cleaning the restroom and maintaining its supplies. This includes emptying the trash, cleaning the sinks, commodes and mirrors, and other considerations.

Many customers will visit the restroom before they order. If any member of the party feels they have had a negative restroom experience, there is a potential that the group will choose another establishment. It is also likely that they will report this experience to others, whether by word-of-mouth or through online discussion forums.

Special Needs

You will, of course, want to present a positive dining experience for *all* patrons. This includes children and persons with special needs.

While you may have already made such considerations as booster seats and/or lower-sitting tables and chairs, there may be other factors you'll want to keep in mind when it comes to kids.

Will you seat children in a different area than adults? Will you expect kids to eat at the same table with other adult members of their party, and, if so, will you be able to ensure the necessary kid-friendly accommodations to make this possible?

Another consideration you will not wish to take lightly is to ensure a comfortable and accommodating dining experience for those with special needs. This includes providing handicap-accessible furniture and amenities.

Failure to provide accessible options could result in more than simply “bad-press.” It may open you up to legal challenges.

Banquets, Tents, Events & More

If you are in a position where you are able to offer catering services to your customers, you will want to take several things into consideration, to ensure your ‘on-the-road’ function delivers the same amenities and experiences that patrons may have come to expect from dining in your restaurant.

There are many events at which patrons may wish to have a catering service present, including:

- outdoor fairs and carnivals
- children’s parties
- corporate functions and company events
- grand openings
- religious and/or social picnics
- weddings
- and more

Many considerations go into the planning and successful execution of an outdoor and/or off-site catering event.

Tents

Regardless of expected weather conditions, most patrons will want to have a tent at their catered event. Tents can feature top-covering only, but typically will feature full-surround, all-inclusive covering, with windows and accessibility flaps where possible.

Chairs

Chair selection will, of course, depend on the type of event. For instance, a celebration for children will feature different seating options than a formal wedding.

You will also want to take into account other considerations such as whether your chairs will feature straight or curved backs, what type of cushions they will have, as well as other factors such as color, style and material (metal, wood, etc.).

Tables

It is often a good idea to get at least a rough head-count for any outdoor catering event. This will also allow you to choose the correct shape and size table. Weddings, for instance, may require large, round tables capable of seating many guests at once.

Other events, specifically those that may be more informal in nature, might warrant smaller, rectangular tables. This option may work best for a corporate function, for instance.

You will also want to take into consideration whether patrons will be eating full meals or simply hors d'oeuvres-style fare. Knowing this may help you understand how much space each patron will require, which will, in turn, help you determine the correct table size for the event.

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Other Furniture

For the most part, catering furniture will feature mostly tables and chairs, as well as some extras such as serving tables. You will still, however, have to make important decisions on the type of furniture you will offer guests. This will include several factors such as material (plastic, metal), color, durability and what they furniture will be used for.

For instance, if the function is purely formal in nature, you will know that fancy and/or delicate furniture can be used. If, however, there is a potential that children or possibly inebriated adults may choose to rough-house on the furniture, you may wish to consider more durable options that may be able to withstand this type of treatment.

Parting Thoughts

There are several things to keep in mind while selecting and placing furniture in your restaurant. The items discussed in this article are only a few of the considerations you will want to take to heart, while ensuring your business is being viewed favorably enough by customers that they are motivated to grant you repeat business, as well as recommend your restaurant to friends, family members and professional contacts.

While attractive design and comfortable seating is important, you will also want to keep durability in mind. Unlike the furniture in your home, restaurant fixtures will be subject to near constant use. A successful business can expect sizeable “wear and tear” on the furniture, structure and other areas. This is not to suggest that guests will vandalize your business, but rather that restaurant furniture can begin to show its age after only a few years of use.

It may be best, then, to avoid styles and designs with many crevices, which are more difficult to clean than furniture that features smooth surfaces. Leather or durable plastic should be preferred over fabric, which can tear, fade and absorb stains and smells.

Aside from the furniture and décor in and around your business, you will want to take into consideration other factors, as well, including:

- **Restaurant Size**

Depending on the size and shape of your business, it may be better to choose compact booths over large tables and chairs. You will want to consider people and wait-staff walking to and from the seating areas, as well as guests visiting the restroom. Be sure they have enough room to accomplish these tasks. Be conscious of table décor and hanging lighting that may compromise guests’ ability to move freely, or converse with other members in their party.

- **Restaurant Design**

Once you have determined the chosen theme of your restaurant, you will want to be sure the furniture and décor you have selected “fits” into this design. Just as fine linens and chandeliers may look out of place in a pizza parlor, bar stools and sawdust-covered floors would not be acceptable in a fine-dining establishment.

- **Budget**

Every business does best when it is operated within a pre-determined budget. The fact is, restaurant furniture is not cheap. Purchasing multiple tables, chairs, stools and other amenities and décor can quickly add up to a massive bill. Keep this in mind when you are selecting items for your business.

A final tool in your restaurant furniture buying arsenal will be the customers themselves. As your business grows and becomes more popular, it may be helpful to solicit the opinions of select guests and “regulars,” and listen and take to heart their questions and concerns regarding the selection and placement of your restaurant furniture. In some cases, this insight can prove to be most valuable and effective at maintaining and increasing your establishment as one where people like to congregate and patronize.

Additionally, regularly ‘polling’ your customers may also make you privy to deals on new furniture and more. As time goes on, you will, of course, have to replace the items you’ve selected. Depending on several factors, this may occur all at once, or item-by-item, over the course of several months and/or years.

Keeping abreast of the happenings and changing dynamics of your community may allow you to sell all or some of this furniture to new and existing businesses, or take advantage of tax write-offs by donating select items to charitable organizations.

In addition, regular patrons can often become good friends, and even like family members, in some cases. As people grow older and retire, you may find that some patrons will want to donate select items to your restaurant. These items can be placed and used in your existing establishment, or sold to generate funds for future furniture purchases.