If These Walls Could Talk: Front-of-the-House Wall Covering Choice Pros and Cons

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Abstract
While often overlooked in restaurant building, buildout and remodeling projects, your choice of wall covering affects not only initial cost, but the long-term appeal and maintenance of your restaurant.

Keywords
restaurant, wall covering, remodel, interior design

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If These Walls Could Talk
Front-of-the-House Wall Covering Choice Pros and Cons

While often overlooked in restaurant building, buildout and remodeling projects, your choice of wall covering affects not only initial cost, but the long-term appeal and maintenance of your restaurant.

By Stephani Robson

Of the thousands of decisions you make while you develop or remodel your restaurant, the finishes you put on the dining room and kitchen walls are probably low on your list.

Guests hardly notice the walls, you might think, so why should you? It might be that guests typically don’t comment that much on design details like wall finishes but you can be sure that they do notice if those walls are in poor condition or detract from the dining experience. And you’ll notice too if your choice for the dining room or the kitchen ends up being more costly to install or maintain than you can afford. So here is a primer on the basics of wall finishes for restaurants and some handy hints about making the right selection for your operation.

Before selecting a wall finish, identify what jobs you want your dining room walls to perform.

Jobs, huh?

Well, do you intend the walls to display artwork or to provide color to the room? Should the walls be able to change quickly to accommodate variations in your concept? Do you need to deaden sound? Clean off smears? Hide flaws? Have a clear idea of your goals for the walls before you narrow your choices of finish so that you don’t waste time or money on wall finishes that won’t give you the results that you need.

Restaurants that cater to groups or families at flexible tables will have different wall finish needs than those of a fine dining restaurant that is lined with booths. But even in the swankiest of restaurants, staff is always
pushing tables and chairs against the walls, bumping them with vacuum cleaners, or scraping them with tray jacks, so a durable wall finish is crucial. Some of the wall finishes that your designers might favor — exposed and sculpted plaster being a prime culprit — just won’t stand up to the realities of restaurant operations.

Do not install something you’d like to put in your dining room at home. Always go with commercial-grade materials and finishes to get the maximum value from your investment.

Finish Choices

Face it, most restaurateurs are working with a fairly limited budget for dining room FF&E (furniture, fixtures and equipment) and the smart operator puts most of that budget into the furnishings and finishes that guests are most likely to come into contact with regularly.

Consider dividing your walls horizontally with chair rails or wainscoting so that the areas that guests will see and feel when seated are more interesting and, more importantly, more durable than the upper portions of the wall that can be finished in an attractive but much less costly way.

And for most operators, that way is with paint. **Paint.** If you are budget-conscious or cannot decide on a look for your dining room, paint is your best friend: familiar, easy to install and change, and almost infinite in color. It also offers a variety of finishes and textures that can be manipulated for specific design effects. High-gloss paints add drama and pizzazz but can be unforgiving if your walls are less than perfect. Semi-gloss or satin finishes are the best choices for restaurant walls because they are easier to care for but not as prone to show application errors and flaws as high-gloss.

Eggshell and flat paints offer a higher proportion of pigment but show wear and tear more readily and are therefore an appropriate choice for surfaces well out of reach. Mixing and matching paint colors and finishes can create interesting effects: You can paint the wall in a solid color using eggshell finish paint (a useful finish somewhere between flat and semi-gloss), then add masking tape stripes and paint the wall again using the same color in high-gloss to get a wallpaper effect. A talented specialty painter can create “faux” wood, stone or marble effecting on the wall. No matter what, if you have a unique hand-applied finish applied to the wall, covering it with a protective coat of clear sealant is a smart idea.

For commercial paint applications, the best choices are either acrylic paint or epoxy paint. Both can be readily applied by brush, roller or spray and are easy to clean. Epoxy paint is very durable and effective at resisting stains or the corrosive effects of chemicals but it takes a long time to dry and even longer for that distinct fresh paint smell to fade, while acrylic is pretty much odorless and dries very quickly but doesn’t stand up over time quite as well. Generally, you’ll need to repaint walls every three years, more often if your restaurant takes a real beating from staff or customers.

Painted walls can be touched up as needed; however, recognize that many paint colors will fade over time, particularly if the walls are exposed to strong sunlight, making after-the-fact touchups problematic. Be sure to keep all leftover paint and label both the lid and the bucket with the specific walls and date when the paint was used. **Wall coverings.** Not limited to just old-fashioned wallpaper, wall coverings offer a tremendously selection of patterns and textures for your restaurant’s walls. The most common material for commercial applications is vinyl wall covering or “VWC.” VWC comes in 52- to 54-inch-wide rolls and is quick to install or change, and is generally easy to get on relatively short notice, although some selections might take a few weeks to arrive on your job site. The product is also relatively inexpensive, a boon for the budget-conscious start-up. Note that some operators have had mildew issues because of the impermeability of vinyl if dining room moisture is not controlled, so work with your HVAC to ensure that the indoor air quality in your operation isn’t too humid.

Wall covering can also be made of woven fiberglass. This material is washable and highly durable, and offers a range of patterns and textures that can be painted over to create interesting effects. It usually costs a bit more than VWC.

While vinyl and woven fiberglass wall coverings offer a low-maintenance finish to walls, other kinds of roll goods can give you a beautiful and high-style finish in a huge array of design choices. Natural grass cloth wall covering is an environmentally friendly product that offers unique texture to walls and hides minor imperfections particularly well. This material doesn’t come prepped, so you’ll need to use a clear and strong adhesive that can provide the strength that this relatively heavy material needs. You’ll also pay more for this than for synthetic wall covering so you might want to use it only in small, highly visible and low-moisture areas such as the entry or host stand, or as an accent in the dining room.

You can also go with fabric either applied directly to the wall or stapled or tacked onto some kind of framing or underlay. This is an expensive choice but the result can be truly spectacular. One of fabric’s main advantages is the way it can help dampen sound and provide a richness to the walls that is hard to accomplish with any other material. In addition to what can be a substantial material cost is the need for highly skilled installation if you are applying the fabric to unfinished walls: pattern matching and seams require special care. Fabric walls can be gently vacuumed but cannot stand up to any moisture.
And, of course, there’s always classic wallpaper, but wallpaper can be problematic for a restaurant application because it might not stand up to the wear and tear or the moisture of daily operations. Most designers rely instead on synthetic roll goods for wall surfaces that might come into contact with hands, feet, chair backs and table edges, or the occasional exuberant splash of beer. Save the more delicate wall covering finishes for the upper portions of walls, well out of harm’s way.

If you are feeling particularly brave or innovative, you can try a wall covering that is really unorthodox: food. Designer David Rockwell lacquered sheets of nori onto one large wall for Nobu Next Door in New York, a feature still talked about in reviews and blogs. While no one can try a wall covering that is really unorthodox: food, because it might not stand up to the wear and tear or the occasional exuberant splash of beer. Save the more delicate wall covering finishes for the upper portions of walls, well out of harm’s way.

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front of house their coldness and absolute lack of sound absorption make tiles a better choice as an accent rather than for entire "walls."
Tile can also be extremely expensive, especially for hand-painted tiles. But if you have an open kitchen or counter, tiling the back wall behind your workers can be both attractive and practical. If you do apply tile as a wall finish, make sure that you have your installer put in molding or other materials to protect the tile on convex corners to limit the potential for damage as people pass through openings.

**Mirrors and mirrorlike finishes.**
True mirrors can be heavy to mount but are well-known for their room-expanding capabilities and can add sparkle and drama to any space. There are many mirrorlike lightweight laminates that offer a similar effect but use them sparingly. More than one mirrored surface in a space creates a disorienting "infinite room" look. It is often less expensive and certainly more traditional to hang framed mirrors on a painted wall rather than cover the wall itself with a mirror finish. A classic use of mirrors in restaurants is in a narrow strip along the top of banquettes to allow those seated facing the wall to still see what is going on in the dining room. There are also interesting decorative and lighting effects that you can achieve with reflective surfaces in small doses. Your designer can help you figure out the best places to use the flash that mirrors can add to your concept.

**How Much Should You Spend?**
While the initial purchase price of your wall finish is important, consider the life-cycle cost of whatever material you choose. (See “Comparative Costs of Wall Finish Choices” on this page.) Life-cycle cost includes shipping, installation and cleanup, ongoing repair and maintenance, and even the cost of disposal should you decide to make a change. Clearly paint finishes are the least expensive in most cases but often require more frequent maintenance than more durable kinds of finishes and will need to be redone much sooner than most other kinds of wall finish. Vinyl wall covering and tile range in cost from a few dollars to well over $50 per square foot depending on your selection and the installation conditions but have a longer life than paint. Natural materials can range greatly in price and are generally comparable in price to the higher-end laminate products, while simpler laminates and fiberglass-reinforced panels are quite a bit cheaper. And the sky is the limit on specialty finishes like custom-printed fabric or luxury wood veneers.

There is no “rule of thumb” for how much wall treatments should cost per square foot, as every project is different, but some restaurateurs have found success by sticking to a total interior finishes budget of not more than the restaurant's intended average check. (This total budget includes not only walls but floor and ceiling finishes too.)

For a typical startup, it's safest to go with inexpensive finishes to begin with and to upgrade once your operation is established and has positive cash flow. A major cause of restaurant failure is spending far too much on initial buildout, often the result of an operator making impractical or overly expensive FF&E choices. Although you might feel like the restaurant is your home because of the amount of time you spend there, it's not. It's a workspace intended to generate a profit so make wall finish choices that will help you do just that.

**Comparative Costs of Wall Finish Choices**
Wall finishes are usually priced on a per-square-foot basis. The actual amount you'll pay will vary a lot depending on the specifications of the finish you select, the going rate for labor in your area, the complexity of the installation, and even the amount of surface area you wish to cover — it's often more costly per square foot to do a small installation than a larger one. But here are some general cost ranges to help you budget your project. Notice that the price ranges for the more expensive finishes are much broader. Pine paneling will be relatively inexpensive, but book-matched cherry wood will really set you back. Always get an estimate from a local vendor and installer as early in your budgeting process as possible so that you work from realistic numbers for your area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wall Finish Material</th>
<th>Typical Price Range</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plain paint</td>
<td>$ 0.50 - $ 1.50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wallpaper</td>
<td>$ 1.20 - $ 6.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VWC</td>
<td>$ 1.55 - $ 4.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fabric</td>
<td>$ 2.60 - $ 6.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Laminates</td>
<td>$ 4.00 - $ 16.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Custom painting</td>
<td>$ 5.25 - $ 20.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wood veneer</td>
<td>$ 6.75 - $ 20.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wood paneling</td>
<td>$ 10.75 - $ 25.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tile</td>
<td>$ 22.00 - $ 250.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>