

# how to choose a DINING TABLE

We give you the need-to-know pointers to help you find the perfect piece to sit at the heart of your dining space WORDS FIONA JOY

**Y**our dining table is many things: yes, it's a place for dinner and family gatherings, but it's also somewhere to do homework and jigsaw puzzles, a centrepiece for your home and can even make a half decent investment. If your table is well crafted and strong, it will outlive you by a long way so it's not something you want to buy on a whim. Here are the essentials to consider before you send the dinner party invitations.

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## 1 SHAPE

A rectangular dining table wins the popularity contest, coveted for its classic form and proven functionality. Most dining areas are rectangular, too, so there's a pleasing symmetry about it. "Think about how you like to entertain," says our Panel interior decorator, Lisa Koehler. "You can easily reach across a rectangular table but the width you buy will impact on whether you can have large platters in the middle."

Round and oval tables mean no-one has to sit at the end. Visually, they offer softer lines and come into their own in smaller rooms – especially those with a pedestal base – as they take up less space and they don't break up the flow. "Round tables are great for conversation," says Lisa. "But any more than six people and the intimacy is lost."

A square table can be an option to get the best of both worlds. They take up more space so can be a great way to fill up a large room. "With a smaller square table, remember that you won't be able to push all the chairs in at once so they'll be set out a little," says Lisa.

## 2 SIZE

"The table size has to be based on the size of the room it is going to call home," says Lisa. "You need to allow for pushing back of chairs and for people to circulate without having to suck in a breath, so 90cm from the walls – or other large furniture items – is the minimum space you'll need." If you want to be able to squeeze a few more at the table for a special occasion, an extendable or drop-leaf table is a safe bet. Don't forget the height can vary, too. Most modern tables sit around 76cm but antique tables may vary from that. That's something to consider when you're choosing the chairs to go with it (see page 119).

## 3 MATERIAL

If you're looking for something that will stand the test of time, hardwood is the best option. Engineered timber or MDF will be cheaper and won't fall apart overnight, but they'll never be as strong as mahogany, walnut, blackbutt, oak and gum. "I love salvaged wood in a family home," says Lisa. "It can take markers and keys being thrown on it. Over time, it adds character to the timber and tells a story."

## the checklist

The bigger the furniture item, the bigger the potential for mistakes. Here are Lisa's tips to minimise the risk of retail regret.

### take it for a test drive

Test your table for comfort and stability. Take a friend or two with you so you can be sure the table has enough elbow room and is the right size for passing dishes comfortably. Lean on the table from all angles and make sure it feels solid and sturdy.

### map it out with paper

Make a template of the tabletop and put it on the floor so you can see exactly how close it sits to the doorways, the walls and/or other pieces of furniture. Leave it there for a few days so you can get used to how you'd navigate the space.

### see the full picture

Consider the whole setting. What sort of light do you want above it? And what about the rug beneath? Make sure all the elements work together so it's a cohesive story.



A glass-topped dining table is great in a small space because it's not visually overpowering. "It will get scratched though and it's hard work to keep it clean," says Lisa. "And it can be a bit awkward when you can see your guests' legs!"

Other options are marble and, more recently, concrete. "Concrete is awesome," says Lisa. "It looks beautiful and is super durable. And it can work outside, too, although you don't want to be moving it too often as it's a four-person job."

## 4 STYLE

"Dining table styles are almost infinite," says Lisa, "but the majority fall into these five basic categories: traditional, contemporary, transitional, country and industrial."

- + **Traditional tables** are the more formal option, generally made from dark timber with details such as turned or carved legs.
- + **Contemporary tables** have clean, simple lines and may be made of sleek modern timber, or feature a glass top or metal base.
- + **Transitional tables** do a bit of both, using traditional materials and shapes with a simplified, more casual silhouette for a classic and relaxed look.
- + **The country or farmhouse look** makes for a solid table with a time-worn timber finish or an antiqued painted look and hand-carved details.
- + **Industrial style** combines metal and weathered wood for a purposeful, bold look and a utilitarian feel. **10**

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LISA KOEHLER, PANEL INTERIOR DECORATOR

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## choosing chairs

Once upon a time, picking your dining chairs wasn't even an option, as your new table came with a matching set. Happily that's rarely the case now, but it does make room for a whole new layer of decision making.

### the practicalities

Consider how the chairs fit with your table. Make sure they sit comfortably under the table and that the arms (if you have them) don't bump the table when you push them in and out. Sit down and cross your legs to make sure there is adequate space between the table and your thighs. Check the table legs don't get in the way.

### the aesthetics

"It looks interesting when you put different chairs together but it's important to maintain a harmony of shape," says Lisa. "For example, a curve could be the connecting factor. If you have a curved back on two chairs, choose curved rails on another pair."

Want to seat eight but not every night? "It's best to not have all the chairs out, as it can look cluttered," says Lisa. "If you want a couple of spares, try ottomans that can live in the lounge room or stackable stools that can be hung up in the laundry when not in use."