

WHAT MAKES A... *beautiful* DINING ROOM?

Mary Carroll looks at how to create an inviting space in which to enjoy spending time with family and friends over lingering meals



For many people, there is a strong desire to maximise space by opening up or 'knocking through' a series of smaller rooms to give one big living and dining area, meaning the formal dining room has taken a bit of back seat. Whilst there are many advantages to this concept, making the areas work as one can be a design challenge, and it may seem preferable to lean towards having a dedicated dining room. This is particularly the case in the autumn and winter months when a cosy, elegant space in which to entertain in style becomes more

appealing. The addition of freshly laundered napkins, beautiful china and sparkling glassware will make for a sensual occasion which will be memorable for everyone.

CREATING AN AMBIENCE

The decoration of the dining room is key. The walls need to be decorated in a way that adds warmth, which can come from colour, texture and pattern. Beautiful silk wallpapers – which become even more gorgeous by candlelight – could be the answer. Many of these wallpapers are produced with silk threads running horizontally across the paper, so the joins of each drop of wallpaper inevitably show and are part of its character. If this does not appeal to you, silk-effect papers have been produced to create a seamless look, so all tastes are catered for. Another equally-glamorous effect for walls is wallpaper decorated with pictorial or natural forms. Fromental and de Gournay have some of the most beautiful designs, skilfully created by hand, including exquisite Chinoiserie and panoramic vistas.

Wood panelling works extremely well in dining rooms, particularly when combined with pictorial wallpaper – you could consider panelling up to dado height and then filling in the top area with wallpaper. More economical is to use paint below a dado rail and wallpaper above or, equally effective, a beautifully deep shade of paint all over. Luscious matt paints with plenty of pigment, such as those by Emery & Cie or Francesca's Paints, create an intensity of colour and react well to wall lighting. Every decorating detail, from the coving to the skirting boards to the flooring, needs to be considered in the scheme so the mood you are trying to create is continued around the room.

Fabric adds another layer of texture and colour. Fine wool curtains, lined and interlined and hanging beautifully to the floor from handsome poles, add a comforting yet elegant approach to dining room windows, whilst silk weaves add contrast to a matt paint effect as well as reflective qualities to the room. Although swags and tails have somewhat given way to simpler window treatments, it is still possible to have smart curtain headings with fabric-covered lathes to hide a traditional track, and pelmets, poles and finials. These details produce a more sophisticated result, and many interior designers can advise on the latest treatments and collections to help take your ideas to the highest level. ▶



ABOVE A dedicated dining room gives every opportunity to enjoy dressing a table. For ideas and inspiration, Oka provides an interior design service from seven of its stores. LEFT In this elegant scheme by Stephanie Dunning Interior Design, the wall colour, patterned rug, dramatic chair fabric and original artwork add character and warmth to other classic elements. RIGHT Drama is created with a moody dining room wall colour and a striking chandelier in this design by Taylor Howes. Chairs in the same shade of purple draw the eye from the sitting room into the dining room.





Flooring needs to exude comfort and provide luxury underfoot, so opt for carpets or rugs. The many advances that have been made in carpet manufacturing over the last decade have provided a wealth of fibres that are both practical and luxurious, for instance, some have the look and appearance of silk and yet are much easier to maintain than the real thing.

Many carpets also make wonderful rugs, trimmed either in leather or cotton braid. If you like the idea of a rug over a wooden floor rather than wall-to-wall carpeting, make sure the rug contains the table and chairs comfortably so that even when you draw the chairs back a little, they still sit comfortably on the rug.

LIGHTING SETS THE MOOD

Wall lighting is wonderful for creating ambient light. Whether opting for decorative lights or picture lights, the style and position needs to be thought through before the decorating stage, as wires may need to be trunked from the skirting board up to the wall light position.

Pendant lighting, too, needs careful planning in order to create the right ambience. A pendant or chandelier ought to be positioned centrally and at the right height above the table to provide the best light for all, yet not obscure the line of sight. Dimmer switches are essential for both wall and pendant lights to adapt the level of lighting to suit the mood of the occasion.

INVESTING IN FURNITURE

Choose a dining table carefully, as different shapes and sizes give a different environment for entertaining. Round tables can work really well in smaller spaces and afford plenty of leg room for dinner guests. Do bear in mind that the larger a round table gets, the harder it is for people on opposite sides of the table to communicate with each other and reach things. This is also true of square tables.

Oblong tables suit most rooms due to their accommodating shape, with some even affording enough room at each end to fit two people comfortably. Check where the table legs are positioned – so many tables on the market have cumbersome legs that take up too much space and leave little room for everyone to sit comfortably around the table.

There is still value in purchasing a set of dining chairs to match a table, particularly if you favour a really traditional style, although matching a set of modern chairs with a traditional table can also work well. It is worth exploring all the possibilities, particularly if looking to buy good quality chairs that are built to last a lifetime and carry a price tag to match. For the ultimate in comfort, upholstered chairs are hard to beat, and are best when the chair hugs the lower back gently – this makes any number of hours at a dining table possible. When choosing fabrics and treatments, there are so many ideas ▶



TOP LEFT Period furniture is often a prerequisite for a classic dining room scheme. Here, interior designer Grant White has chosen petrol blue walls to warm up the room and show off the client's artwork, whilst the floor-length curtains with a detailed smocked heading add elegance to the period windows.



DIANA BLANCHARD

“The Gustavian dining table and chairs, upholstered in fabric from The Silk Gallery, together with a set of Chinese watercolours [not seen] were the inspiration and starting point for the decorative scheme of this dining room.

The rest of the house was decorated in shades of bone, ivory, soft grey and sage green, so when I came across the Adam's Eden Ivory wallpaper – designed by Adam Calkin for Lewis & Wood – it seemed to emulate the colour palette perfectly and is a

dynamic wallpaper with a convivial feel, perfect for a dining room. The high ceilings allow the large scale of the wallpaper to work well and the pattern is both charming and fluid.

Everyone loves dining in this room. When lit by candlelight, the wallpaper takes on an almost forest-like feeling and the birds and dragonflies look quite magical. The other elements, including the cream-painted floor and glass-fronted armoire, create a mix of Scandinavian and French style which give the room a timeless quality.

Finishing touches, such as the silver pineapple ice bucket and the china on display in the armoire, are not only useful but also symbolise the warm hospitality present in the room.”



DINING ROOM SUCCESS

- Lighting is key. Ambient light creates atmosphere, so think wall lights, picture lights, table lamps and candles.
- Comfort underfoot is important. Soften wood floors with a well-considered rug, the size of which should be calculated once all the furniture decisions have been made.
- Choose a table to suit the shape of the room and style of entertaining – formal or relaxed.
- Comfortable dining chairs are essential. Try them and make sure they fit around the table before buying.
- Enjoy the beauty of fabric in the choice of window treatments to make the scheme really beautiful.
- Remember to add useful pieces of furniture to provide storage and display surfaces.
- Allow time to prepare the table and make the dining room look really beautiful.



ABOVE In her own home, designer Nina Campbell's experience recognises the need to have excellent storage within an arm's length of the dining table. The bespoke cabinet has mirror-fronted doors to bounce more light around the room.

LEFT Here, Nina Campbell adds touches of modernity to a classic dining room concept. The statement chairs, dining table and chandelier are each individual yet come together beautifully as a whole.

to choose from, for instance, using one fabric on the front and another on the back adds an interesting touch, and piping and edging trims can both be employed to add detail to the design. Carver chairs at the end of a table add a sense of grandeur, but it is advisable to keep continuity with the fabrics used on all the chairs. Think about the leg finishes and how well the wood or paint colour fits in with the rest of the scheme. Where a dining table is positioned close to one wall, benches offer a practical, space-saving solution and add a more casual feel. If your design scheme allows, adding a back to the bench makes for a more comfortable experience.

MAKING ENTERTAINING ENJOYABLE

Having a cabinet, armoire or credenza in the dining room to store plates, cutlery, glassware and linen makes the process of entertaining much easier. A credenza or sideboard provides a surface on which to display dishes and drinkware and site table lamps for additional ambient lighting. Large display cabinets can create mood and atmosphere when fitted with

shelf lighting – any number of beautiful items benefit from downlighters, so see a display cabinet as another way to bring light and interest into a dining room.

Adding interest to the walls is all important in a dining room. Mirrors are an obvious choice with their ability to reflect the room and accentuate ambient light, however, do avoid placing them too high as for the most part they will be viewed sitting down. Mirrored panels have become increasingly popular and work particularly well when set either side of a chimney breast with useful console tables in front.

PREPARING FOR GUESTS

Once the dining room is decorated and furnished, concentrate on enjoying the preparations for entertaining. Set some time aside a day or so prior to guests arriving to really revel in the whole process. Iron napkins and store them alongside scented candles to provide a lovely fragrant introduction to the dining room. Clean and polish cutlery and give glassware a quick swill in hot soapy water then dry with a good linen cloth to create a beautiful sparkling effect on

the dining table. If you have a table with a polished-wood surface, and the time to spare, it will really benefit from a freshening coat of finishing wax to give it extra shine.

Flowers are seen as essential, but there is no need for elaborate flowers. Large flower arrangements and tall candleholders can often obscure someone sitting opposite, so aim to have everything at a height that will ease the flow of conversation. Small vases of flowers along the centre of the table can be very effective. Pretty personal touches work well, too, whether freshly cut lavender sprigs threaded through a napkin holder or handwritten place settings – guests do like to know where they are sitting. These are the small details which really make an event successful.

Lastly, a dining room can always look interesting whether or not you are entertaining. A dining table is the ideal opportunity to create a tablescape, such as a series of beautiful bowls or perhaps a row of antique jugs filled with country flowers. Never miss the opportunity to celebrate the home you own and how much you enjoy it. ■

ABOVE LEFT Understanding how to combine different functions within one living space is a skill. Here, Ham Interiors blends a dining area with a relaxed seating area and a kitchen. The finished result is harmonious and pleasing on the eye. Materials have been carefully considered to provide a synergy with everything you see and exude easy, comfortable living.

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