



Tupelo Honey Cafe locations feature distinctive wooden communal tables.

# Table talk

*Create in-store dining areas that invite shoppers to pull up a seat.*

BY BARBARA SAX

**Whether it's carving out space near the deli department for communal tables or adding outdoor patios for seasonal dining, grocerants are creating comfortable and inviting areas for shoppers to sit down, relax and dig into breakfast, lunch or dinner.**

“Chains that do this well can really hit a home run with their customers, but they do have challenges in creating the

right atmosphere,” says Steve Starr, president of Charlotte, N.C.-based Starr Design. “Supermarkets are vast with high ceilings and bright lighting, and the in-store dining section has to offer a different experience.”

Seating area layouts and furniture styles are some of the most important details for grocerants that want to offer truly comfortable destination dining areas, say experts. The space must be large enough to accommodate strollers and wheelchairs, yet cozy enough to allow consumers to feel comfortable.

At the same time, the number of table turns is also a primary consideration in an eat-in area. “Fast casual and QSRs [quick service restaurants] that are lunch driven depend on high volume in a short period, so they have to →

balance comfort with how long they want people to sit at a table,” says Starr. “You don’t want to put a 90-minute chair in a 30-minute restaurant. You want a 20-minute chair.”

Starr says Panera, which has focused on getting customers in and keeping them there, is now rethinking its strategy. “Making the environment too comfortable can adversely affect long-term business,” he says. “Panera is looking at how they can create different zones within the space to include a lounging spot where customers can have coffee and read the paper, while another section can serve to keep people moving.”

## Two-seater options

Experts agree that the most flexible options for casual restaurant seating are two-top tables, counters with stools and community tables, which have become more popular recently.

“Two tops are more flexible than four tops,” says Karen Malody, a foodservice consultant based in Portland, Ore. “There’s nothing more discouraging for a restaurant operator than to see someone sitting alone at a four top because there’s no place else to sit.”



“A communal table . . . is also comfortable for single diners.”

— **Arlene Spiegel,**  
**foodservice**  
**consultant**

“The biggest mistake I see in fast casual is too many four-top tables,” agrees John Knight, principal of Allendale, N.J.-based Maverick Consulting. “Since 80 percent of customers coming into fast casual settings are either in groups of one or two, four-top tables should be kept to a minimum.”

## Communal vibes

Communal tables also are being used more frequently as Americans become more comfortable dining next to people they don’t know. “Community tables are extremely popular, especially among millennials,” says Malody.

“A communal table can accommodate people in a group →



Some AJ’s Fine Foods locations in Arizona offer year-round outdoor patio dining.



## Dining al fresco

Outdoor dining is fast becoming a draw for some supermarket grocerants, such as Chandler, Ariz.-based AJ’s Fine Foods, which offers several locations with outdoor patios that diners can enjoy year-round.

But even in locations where all-year outdoor dining isn’t an option, retailers can still take advantage of seasonal spaces.

“Stew Leonard’s [a grocery retailer in Connecticut and New York] creates inviting outdoor dining areas with picnic tables during the spring and summer seasons,” says Arlene Spiegel, founder of Arlene Spiegel & Associates consulting firm in New York City. “They even offer lobster dinners, so it becomes a real event to take the family shopping and then have dinner at Stew Leonard’s.”

Outdoor café tables in two- and four-top configurations are best for establishing a casual outdoor dining ambience, says Spiegel.

“To maximize the opportunity of an outdoor dining space, it’s not enough to throw some tables on the sidewalk,” adds Steve Starr, president of Starr Design in Charlotte, N.C. “Retailers really need to create outdoor rooms that are covered, and use green [privacy] screens to define the space.”





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**Starr Design**



clustered together and is also comfortable for single diners,” says Arlene Spiegel, founder of Arlene Spiegel & Associates, a restaurant, retail and foodservice consulting firm based in New York City.

Agata & Valentina, a specialty food retailer in New York City, installed a natural wood communal table at its Union Square location to serve dine-in customers. On a larger scale, Dallas-based Bruegger’s Bagels adopted a communal table in its prototype design for all new units and plans to use the tables in future renovations of existing sites at the 280-unit chain. Even McDonald’s has installed communal

tables at many of its locations during the past several years.

Starr says diners want to feel both protected and anchored while eating. Booths and high-back seats can provide that experience, as can a counter or table placed against a wall, but communal tables provide an anchor through sheer mass. Experts recommend that communal tables seat from eight to 12 people and be at least 30 inches wide to ensure enough space for both food and electronics, particularly if the tables include power strips to charge devices such as laptops and smartphones.

“The most effective communal tables are those that provide mass as well as a means of dividing the table into smaller units,” says Starr. “You can accomplish that by varying materials on a long table either with color or inlays, so there’s a visual division.”



A mix of regular and bar-height tables adds flexibility.

Starr says communal tables at Plano, Texas-based Whiskey Cake Kitchen & Bar, for instance, have wooden dividers that slide across the table to create a separation between diners.

While regular tables work best in small spaces, bar-height communal tables with stools blur the distinction between counters and communal tables and can create a visual element for the eating area too.

“High-top tables started in Chipotle, and now you see them everywhere,” says Knight. “The tables are space savers, and their tall height makes it more comfortable for diners seated around people who are standing while they wait for their food.” **G**

## Material facts

When it comes to tables and chairs, more restaurants are choosing real materials over synthetic choices and moving away from primary colors to more soothing naturalistic color stories.

“Fast casual restaurants are getting away from bright colors and molded plastic seating and moving toward natural woods and exposed bricks,” says John Knight, principal of Maverick Consulting in Allendale, N.J.

Steve Starr, president of Starr Design in Charlotte, N.C., says restaurant operators are opting for natural or “authentic” materials to reinforce their positions as purveyors of natural foods.

“Chipotle’s focus on integrity of ingredients in its menu extends to the materials it uses in its décor. They use plywood and steel and don’t cover the materials up with anything else,” he says.

Wood, especially reclaimed wood, is making an enormous comeback, along with natural stone and brick. Natural bamboo is also being used more frequently. Chick-fil-A’s location in Pasadena, Calif., is a good example of this style of authentic décor: The eatery pairs bar-height communal tables made of wood with metal stools in a white subway-tiled setting that reads as clean, fresh and modern.

Bar-height communal tables are more likely to be made of rustic or industrial materials that can meet the demands of high-traffic areas and at the same time look sleek and modern. “I’m seeing more wood and faux cement finishes along with industrial zinc, copper and other metal coverings making a resurgence,” says Karen Malody, a foodservice consultant in Portland, Ore.