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How to Choose a Dining Table

From [Fred Albert](#),
Your Guide to [Furniture](#).
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Guide Rating - ★★★★★

Dining tables are the Energizer bunnies of the furniture world—they just keep going and going. The dining table you buy today is likely to remain in your home (or in your family) for many years, and will see you through multiple residences and several decorating schemes. So choose carefully.

“Don’t make a purchase over a weekend, because this is something you’ll be living with for years,” says Seattle interior designer [Amely Wurmbrand](#). Wurmbrand suggests visiting many furniture stores before choosing a table, or perusing a Web site like [homeportfolio.com](#), picking a model you like, then finding out what retailer carries that brand in your community.

Before you shop, consider the following issues:

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Size

The dining table should be scaled appropriately for the room: a small dining room looks best with a small table, a big dining room demands a big table. To allow adequate space for seating and circulation, make sure there’s at least 48 inches between each edge of the table and the nearest wall or piece of furniture. If traffic doesn’t pass behind the chairs on one side of the table, 36 inches should be sufficient on that side.

Ideally, the dining table should measure 36-42 inches across. Narrower than that leaves no place in the middle for food; wider than that makes conversation difficult with the person seated opposite you.

Capacity

Although the table should be scaled to the room, it should be scaled to your needs, as well. How often do you plan on using the table, and how many people will you be seating there? If you host frequent large dinners, you'll need a large table. If you plan on using the dining table primarily for family meals or small gatherings, a smaller table will work better. (There's nothing inviting about four people dispersed around a 12-foot table.) If you only entertain large groups on an occasional basis, consider buying a smaller table that can expand with leaves. To figure out how many people you'll be able to seat around a given table, allot 24 inches in width for each diner.

If you have a large dining room but most of your entertaining is confined to small gatherings, consider getting two square tables. That way, you'll fill the space, but need only dine at one table.

Shape

Rectangular tables are most common, but many people prefer sitting at a round table because it's much more conducive to conversation. "A round table creates more of a social atmosphere," says Seattle interior designer [Christine Suzuki](#). However, round tables are best for small groups. A round table that's big enough to seat 10 probably won't fit in your dining room, and opposing guests will be so far away it will defeat the whole purpose of buying a round table.

If you have your heart set on a round table but want to be able to accommodate large groups, consider getting a round table with leaves that can expand the table into a racetrack shape.

Style

Let the architecture of the house, your décor, and the other elements in the room dictate the style of dining table you choose. "Complement the context," says Los Angeles interior designer [Jaime Laurella Rummerfield](#). If the atmosphere is traditional, a traditional table will usually look best; if it's contemporary, go with a contemporary table.

Likewise, choose materials that echo the materials used elsewhere in the home. If you're buying a wood table, select a wood that appears in the architecture or in another piece of furniture in the room, so the table will feel like a cohesive element in the home's decor. If you're going with a painted piece, repeat the color in the walls or other items in the room.

Finish

Traditional tables are usually made of wood. Certain woods, such as walnut and mahogany, will feel formal, while others, such as cherry, oak and pine, tend to look more casual.

Contemporary tables can be wood, glass, or another material, such as metal. If you want a table that extends, you'll probably want to pick wood, since few manufacturers produce glass tables that expand. (Ligne Roset is one exception: Their [Extensia](#) table features overlapping panels that can be extended to nearly double the table's length.)

How concerned are you about staining and scratching? A wood tabletop is more susceptible to damage than glass, but can be refinished if needed. Traditional wood tables are a bit more forgiving, because they tend to feature carvings or figured veneers that help hide irregularities in the surface, while contemporary wood tables have little to distract you from errant scratches or water rings.

Glass-topped tables are less susceptible to spills and staining, but show fingerprints more readily, so they require some diligence to maintain. Many hosts don't like glass tabletops because you can see your guests' laps and feet, but table settings will usually obscure the view.

New or Antique?

Do you want a new table or something with a bit of history to it? Antique dining tables can add a sense of age and character to a room, but offer their own shopping challenges. If the table has leaves, be sure you take them out and try them before you buy, to make sure they fit correctly and match the finish of the rest of the table. If you're buying an old farmhouse table or similarly rustic piece, check the height to make sure it's suitable for dining (29-30 inches is standard), and try sitting at the table with the dining chairs you plan to use. (Some old tables have aprons that hang down from the top, making it hard to slide your legs under them.)

Quality

Last--but certainly not least--buy the best table you can afford. You'll remember the quality long after you've forgotten the price.