



Appropriate Restaurant Design

Time to redecorate? Well, don't blend in with the crowd. Let Chartered Designer, **Nigel Witham** show you the ropes in decorating your restaurant to make it in a league of its own.

Over the last few years I have visited any number of ethnic restaurants, many of them Indian, Nepalese, Pakistani or Bangladeshi. Often I am unable to help them - hiring a professional designer is too much of an expense for many small businesses - so, at the risk of denying myself some extra business I have agreed to write a series of articles to help you avoid some common issues and make the most of your opportunities.

My most fundamental piece of advice is that you should try to be different in all you do.

It has always seemed to me that 95% of Indian restaurants have too large a menu always containing the same dishes, it is almost as if each has photocopied another's just changing the name at the top and afraid to leave anything out in case one person in a thousand asks for it. Well dare yourselves! Stretch your chef, give him the chance to create, use him to excite your customers, make your restaurant stand out. Get it right and you will be booked weeks ahead and be able to charge twice as much as your local curry house with it's photocopied menu.

The most successful Indian restaurant that I worked for did just this, every dish there is a work of art, you can't get a table without weeks of notice and they charge accordingly.

Of course I realise that there is a market for average curry house fare, but is it an average business that you want or would you rather stand out?

And this is where appropriate design comes in. If you have a unique product the clearest and most immediate way to sell it is to present it in a unique way. If you have a small-town curry house and you are happy with it then decorate the same as every other curry house and your customers will know what to expect in terms of both quality and price. Don't expect to get any more business than the next curry house though.

Ten years ago the standard interior design would have incorporated red flock wallpaper, patterned carpet, Taj Mahal shaped arches and pictures of elephants and tigers, or both. Many are still like this but times are moving and specialist companies, who it has to be said have very varying degrees of skill, price and professionalism have moved the standard on very significantly. Now in parts of London and Birmingham one can hardly turn for multi-coloured chairs, hanging rugs and strip wood floors. This fashion is in danger of being overdone - it is very obvious and may go the way of flared trousers and platform shoes very quickly as a result. Today's fashionable trend is always tomorrow's new naff.

The answer is straightforward. If you want to create a high profile to differentiate your product, which

will promote your unique sales points and improve your sales then you have to be the first with a new design and you have to make it a true sensory extension of the food you serve. In this way you can create instant reputation. You can rise without trace!

If you have good taste (everyone thinks they have, but few do), or the right instincts you may be able to create your own design - the most successful private restaurateur I ever worked for often had better ideas than me. If not, a skilled architect or designer will help. Find the best you can. The fees may seem high but they will still be a tiny proportion of the building cost and it will be money well spent in ensuring the money you pay your builder is put to best use.

Be careful to make sure your food is up to the reputation you create with the presentation of the restaurant though. If not, the customers you have cleverly attracted with the implied promise of exciting food will be disappointed and they may not return. Conversely, a poorly designed restaurant with good food will do well but business may be very slow to grow since reputation will only spread by word of mouth.

Remember design classics always look good. They do this because they are original and appropriate. Restaurants are no exception. No one made a design stand out by photocopying.