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Smart table manners

Though the days of eating formal dinners at home may be long gone, says Trish Lorenz, buying the right centrepiece has never been more important



Medina table £825, bench £250, chairs £350 per pair, Laura Ashley; Table £449.50, chairs £174.50 per pair, Select range, Debenhams

Britain has finally caught up with its European neighbours and embraced a love of good food. This passion is reflected in our homes — particularly our kitchens — but has the dining room, once the domestic entertainment hub, passed its sell-by date? “Dining rooms have become much less common,” says Carolyn Parker, an interior designer. “Today it’s all about open-plan living. People want bigger rooms and are happy if that means fewer rooms.”

Anne Lise Kjaer, a trend forecaster for Bo Concept, says: “The most essential room now is the ‘timeshare’ room, which combines the living room and kitchen as one united space.” With that, she says, comes a need for “flexible furniture to cater for busy lifestyles”.

We may rarely sit down together for formal dinners, but that doesn’t mean we no longer need dining tables. In fact, they are more important than ever: from providing the focus of slap-up meals to serving as a desk for homework, they fill a variety of roles.

Parker says wood is still the favourite material for dining tables, with pale, bleached types, such as Pippy Oak, particularly popular. Ocean’s pure oak Baltic dining table, priced from £395, has simple lines that work well in an open-plan kitchen and dining space. A matching bench, £195, is also available. Laura Ashley’s solid oiled

oak Medina range features tables from £825, a bench seat at £250 and chairs with a rope-weave seat at £350 per pair.

For sleek, contemporary lines, try Twentytwentyone's Home dining table in oak, priced from £1,785 and created by Barber Osgerby. The table top is also available in coloured Corian.

If you like traditional styles but want to avoid the slightly heavy, ponderous look that too much wood can achieve, then distressed finishes offer a less domineering alternative.

For a flavour of the French countryside, try Marks & Spencer's Loire dining table at £499, with its gently distressed antique white finish, or Laura Ashley's Provencale collection of hand-painted, ivory-coloured dining tables, starting at £500.

If your dining area is part of a large sitting room rather than kitchen, a more luxurious look may be required. Bo Concept's wengé tables, from £349, and Nicole chairs, from £99, would suit a modern living space.

Debenham's Select range is another neutral choice — a pale oak table costs £449.50 with chairs at £174.50 per pair.

Or banish wood altogether and make a fashion statement in glossy black. The LC6 from Geoffrey Drayton, £1,421, is a stunning glass-topped table with an enamel base, designed by Le Corbusier. Black Cab chairs by Cassina, £599, work well with it. Or try Habitat's all-black Lari table, £449, and Tallow chairs, £119, in red.

Tom Faulkner's handmade metal furniture, which includes a range of dining tables with elegant metal bases and glass tops, also offers an alternative to wood. The Albany, from £799, is simple and modern; the Atlas, from £1,250, is a curvy statement piece.

For those terminally short on space, Ikea has a great selection of tables that fold to become extremely compact. Try the Bjorkudden gate-leg table, £125, which seats four when in use, folds down to just 26cm in width, and has six convenient drawers for storing cutlery and table linen. Combined with stackable Herman chairs at just £9.99 apiece, who says you can't have a dinner party in a bijou studio flat? If you're working with a difficult space or know exactly what you'd like, why not commission a table, specifying its materials, size and shape? Firms such as Nottingham's 101fs accept private orders and work in everything from wood to glass. Or create a bespoke table with a young furniture-maker, such as Ed Carpenter or Sam Johnson, whose pieces should gain in value as their careers develop.

- 101fs, 0115 987 9631, www.101fs.co.uk
- Bo Concept, 0845 605 0565, www.boconcept.co.uk
- Debenhams, 08445 616 161, www.debenhams.com
- Ed Carpenter, www.edcarpenter.co.uk
- Geoffrey Drayton, 020 7387 5840, www.geoffreydrayton.com
- Habitat, 0870 411 5501, www.habitat.co.uk
- Ikea, 0845 355 1141, www.ikea.com
- Sam Johnson, 07887 656 555, www.samjohnsondesign.com
- Laura Ashley, 0871 230 2301, www.lauraashley.com
- Marks & Spencer, 0845 603 1603, www.marksandspencer.com
- Ocean, 0870 242 6283, www.oceanuk.com