

The 10 Most Important Things to Know Before Buying a Custom Dining Table

Often, when my clients are considering their first custom piece, they will start in the dining room. As cliché as it sounds, the dining room really is the heart of the home. Most of our important family discussions still take place around the dining table, not to mention devious giggles coming from our youngest child.

'When we eat together, when we set out to do so deliberately, life is better, no matter what your circumstances.' Thomas Keller

Building our custom family dining table was one of the reasons I was drawn to bespoke furniture making in the first place. My very first piece for the family was an [Elaine bench seat](#), which in turn led to our [Vaeda dining table](#). Although that first Vaeda has moved on due to a house/room size change, it is now serving another young family, right here in Kerikeri – more on this later.

You want a dining table that isn't just another piece of furniture, but instead an important part of your families story and in a world of mass

produced, disposable furniture you believe your family deserves something meaningful and durable.

And so! Choosing a handcrafted dining table is an important decision – let's take this step by step.

To choose the perfect dining table, follow these ten vital considerations—**the roadmap I use with every client.**



Volume: Feel it in 3D

Volume relates to how the piece feels in your room. Too small and it will be dwarfed by the size of the room and too big it will feel awkward and misplaced, not to mention impractical. Customers will often come to me with an idea of how many they'd like to seat which, although important, can sometimes neglect the relationship between table and room size. What most

advice on the internet doesn't emphasize properly is that **a dining table top is not a two dimensional object.** It takes up three dimensional volume in a room and this can only be determined properly by

feel.

For this reason, **do not put masking tape on the floor**. You won't get a feel of the piece in the room.

The most effective way to choose your size is by creating a **cardboard template**. Elevate it to 730mm to get a true sense of the table's presence and how it will interact with the room. Generally, you will need to allow for at least 1 metre between the table's top and any side walls, though you can sneak in closer with a bench seat and the appropriately matched table style. More on this later.

Height: Formal vs Convivial

Most dining tables are too high for relaxed dining. If you browse the internet, you'll find many dining tables at a height of 750mm. I'm not sure how this standard came to be but most likely came about after WWII when planet earth's fascination with mass produced furniture really took hold. A 750mm high dining table will work fine but it leads to a very formal dining experience. If it is your intention to have this feel in your room, perhaps in a formal dining area then go with a height of 750-760mm.

A height of 730mm, on a standard 450mm high chair will lead to a **far more convivial dining experience**. If a bit of casual banter over a hot meal is what you're after, go with 730mm. That being said, be sure your bespoke furniture maker does not obstruct leg room with a deep skirting around the table top perimeter.



Seating: Balancing Form and Function

Furniture design is always a balancing act between form and function. After you've found the perfect feeling three dimensional object for your room, take into account how many loved humans you'd like to share the experience with.

Rectangular

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- 1200 mm long seats four.
 - 1500 mm long seats six.
 - 2100 mm long seats eight.
 - 2400 to 3000 mm long seats 10.

Round

- 1300 mm diameter seats six.
- 1600 mm diameter seats eight.
- 1800 mm diameter seats ten.
- 2000 mm diameter seats twelve.

Oval

- 1800 mm long seats six.
 - 2200 mm long seats eight.
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Top Shape: How guests interact with each other and the room

Rectangular, round, oval and square, with these four shapes we can go anywhere?

Well, almost. I'm not a huge fan of square dining tables. I find them to lack balance when seating irregular numbers of guests. For instance, when seating five guests you may find yourself on the constant lookout for missing guest number six. Cluedo anyone?

Let's focus on the former four shapes...

Top shape has a huge impact on the entire dining experience.

When making this decision, think about **flow into and out of the room**, how you want guests to feel and the aesthetics of the entire roomscape. In modern homes, the kitchen is often nearby. Would you like guests to feel a part of that space as well? Are there entranceways or corners to your room that impede on space and which lends towards a particular top shape? Are there design features in the home like pendant lights, handrails etc which carry a certain charm and you'd like repeated in a shape motif?

I find myself building a selection of rectangular, oval and round handcrafted dining tables.

Rectangular tables are the most common and can be easily sized to suit

many variations of dining experiences.

Round dining tables, when the room allows, are wonderful for an engaging dining experience. Everyone faces each other so it feels very connected. They are great for board games too. One thing to watch with round tables is that when they get large, the central space becomes harder to reach. “Julie, could you please pass Tony the fork, who could pass it to George and then on to me?” Consider a lazy susan for tables over 1800mm diameter. I like to build a matching, low profile design for my [Anisha round dining table](#).

[Oval tables](#), despite losing a little seating room compared with rectangular tops can be the perfect fit to a space where you need more circulation space around the edges of the piece. What you lose in seating spots, you can more than make up for with a **table that feels like it was made for the space**.



Leg Placement in Rectangular Tables

Let us consider three main leg placements for this section. The placement of the legs affects how the table feels and how it seats.

Legs in corners. Example: [Carran](#), [Tizard](#), [Samantha](#).

Tables with legs at the corners, in a traditional design will have a skirt which joins the legs together, as in the Samantha table. If you go with this design from a furniture maker, be sure this skirt does not protrude too low or you will **take the skin off your thighs each time you sit down**. My Samantha takes this into account but I also like building skirtless tables as in the Tizard and Carran. This decision really is a trade off between tradition, aesthetics and space.

Inset or trestle legs. Example: [Vaeda](#) and [Jasper](#).

Tables featuring leg frames set in from the table top offer a completely different feel. Where legs at corners feels strong and stately, legs positioned in can make the table feel lighter and are often better for small spaces. Quite a few of my customers prefer the **Jasper design for small spaces**. This trestle legged style is great for **booth seating type arrangements** where you need to “slide” into your seat and a corner legged design would get in the way.

Pedestal tables. Example: [Frei](#), [Anisha](#) and [Burton](#)

Often the best option for round and oval tables, they can also make for interesting design features on rectangular shapes. As a maker, a very careful balance needs to be struck between leg room, aesthetics and stability. I find the pedestal table the most challenging to design but **my heart just sings when I get it right**. Pedestal tables work with some sizes and not with others, very much a custom design decision.

Joinery

Dining tables are put under a lot of stress over their lifetimes so it is a good idea to ask the furniture maker/manufacturer how they intend to join the legs to the rails. The strongest solution is a **timber to timber glued bond**. Often, I have come across dining tables which are screwed together and these typically come apart over time. Also, glued dowels will generally fail. The best glue joint for dining tables is a mortise and tenon so be sure to **find out what's going on under the hood before you buy**.



Veneer vs Solid Timber

Factory made, **veneered table tops** typically feature an MDF core with a very thin (0.5mm) coating of solid timber. Although dimensionally stable, any damage to the table top renders these pieces **unrepairable**. Veneer has a place in my shop, but when I use it, I will typically custom saw myself it from solid timber and only when the design calls for it, when it elevates the piece. It is my opinion that **a table top should always be solid timber**. This is because solid timber can be repaired again and again, making a table that can be passed down through generations. Check to see if the table you are thinking about buying is built from solid timber.

One caveat with solid timber is that it is hygroscopic, meaning it expands and contracts depending on the humidity in the air. Most clients are astounded to know that their dining table top **is 1cm smaller in the summer time!** For this reason, it is of utmost importance for the furniture maker to allow the table top to move on the frame. This is done with cleats, buttons or enlarged screw fixings. Before purchasing your dream table, make sure you ask the maker **how they have allowed for timber movement** in the top.

Timber Type: Tone, Grain and Density

A full discussion on timber type is a bit much for this article but in general we can think of timber and how it relates to dining tables to fall into three categories. Timber tone, timber graphics/grain and density. Timber tone: A

darker timber will have a heavier and more austere feel and generally speaking will lighten in colour slightly over time. Lighter timbers will darken/take on more amber tones over time and can do a great job of not overpowering the mood of the room.

Graphics/grain: The busier and dynamic the grain is, **the less it will show up any little dents or scratches.** My locally grown Blackwood and Walnut is fantastic at this. A uniform timber like Maple or Beech will be less forgiving in this respect.

Density: The denser the timber, the less susceptible to denting it will be. Generally, I find New Zealand natives to be a little soft for dining table tops. Kauri and Rimu are both softwoods. The best solution I've found are timbers that are grown in New Zealand but with overseas, hardwood characteristics, like **Walnut and Blackwood**. Out of these two, Walnut is harder/denser. Another good option is American Oak which is very dense.



Finish

Despite what you may read, there is **no perfect finish for a timber dining table**, only choices that balance moisture and impact resistance, feel, ease of repair, and the wellbeing of both maker and home.

The best approach is to know how the dining table is finished, what care procedure is necessary and **what to expect over time**. Finishes will range from non-durable to incredibly durable. This continuum will directly relate to the repairability of the finish over time and how it looks with age.

Here is a run down on common dining table finishes:

2 Part Lacquer – toxic to apply, unable to be maintained, hard wearing, yellows and fades over time

Epoxy resin – toxic to apply, unable to be maintained, hard wearing, yellows and fades over time, can crack and peel

Polyurethane – moderately toxic to apply, unable to be maintained, relatively hard wearing, yellows and fades over time, can crack and peel

Hardwax oil – less toxic to apply, can be maintained over time, moderately hard wearing, obscures amber timber grain somewhat, won't crack and peel

Oil/Varnish blend (my favourite) – less toxic to apply, can be maintained over time, moderately hard wearing, amplifies and accentuates depth in timber grain, won't crack and peel

Pure Oil Finish- non toxic to apply, can be maintained over time, susceptible to heat and moisture penetration, amplifies and accentuates depth in timber grain, won't crack and peel

As you can see, my favourite is the **oil/varnish blend which I mix up here in house**. It can be maintained over time with a completely non-toxic oil refresh and is easily repaired should damage occur. For me, this is the **ultimate balance between durability, look and sustainability**.

Sustainability: Meaning and Longevity

This topic is very dear to my heart. Seeing flat pack fall apart litter the sidewalks was a major frustration and another contributing factor to my pursuit of quality. I wanted to find a way to incorporate quality into our day

to day lives.

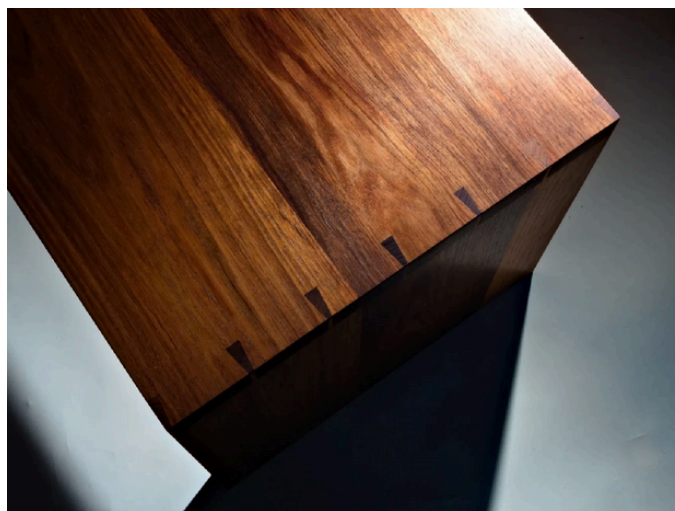
It is my opinion that if a handmade **table lasts generations** then that moves the needle the furthest with respect to sustainability. However, the table physically lasting is only one piece of the puzzle. **What makes a table stay with a family?** I would argue that it is meaning. The more meaningful a piece is, the more of a story it imbues and the more chance it has of sticking around. We just can't throw away my Grandfather's pieces. They carry too much meaning. **Ask yourself before you buy, does this purchase mean something to me?** Can I meet the maker and do I know where the timber was grown? **Can I tell a story about this piece?**

As discussed earlier, our first Vaeda table now lives with another local family. We moved house and our current Vaeda became too large for the space. Because the table was built with solid timber joinery, I was able to restore the table top to a new condition and sell it on to a local family who will cherish it for years to come.

Of course **the timber you choose is incredibly important with regard to sustainability. If you're unsure, I'm always around for a chat and am here to help.** The world of timber is confusing, even for us makers. Suppliers will always tell their "best" story, often obscuring hidden truths far back in the supply line.

Most factory made tables, **even if they are made in New Zealand are typically made with overseas timbers.** These timbers will typically come from either America or Indonesia/South East Asia. Think about the miles these timbers will have had to travel before ordering. From what I understand, the USA has strict rules in place with regard to sustainable harvesting but Asia does not. Where possible avoid Asian grown timbers. Anything grown in Africa or South America these days should not be used under any circumstances.

I'm lucky in that I have **a personal relationship with my main timber grower, Brian Simms**. He has won an environmental award for his farm and I've personally helped fell trees on his property and have seen the dedication and care he puts into his lot.



Conclusion

I hope this article has helped clarify some ideas and/or misconceptions you may have had about ordering handmade dining tables. Take your time with this important decision and if you have any questions, **reach out for advice anytime**. I'm more than happy to chat through purchases made elsewhere or what to do about your existing table.

Regards,

Lloyd