

by Monta Monaco Hemon

### If Walls Could Talk Would Yours Want Paint or Wallpaper?

Changing the look of walls can alter the appearance of your restaurant's dining room dramatically. Today, there are a plethora of paint and wallcovering options available to help provide a unique atmosphere. The choices include vibrant colors, tactile textures and personalized murals. Which to choose should be based on individual preferences, of course, but also on the practicalities of the restaurant itself.

For example, are there areas that continually are bumped, scratched, and scuffed? For Paul Gattuso, owner of Paul's Pizza and Hot Dogs, the answer is yes.

"I've never really done any of my stores in wallpaper. I don't know if it would hold because of the traffic and kids," he explains.

"If paint gets damaged, it's easier and less expensive to fix . . . Once wallpaper gets damaged, you have to replace it because it is not going to be easy to cut a section out and put a new section in," adds Susan Pitaccio, president of Maxey Hayse Design Studios.

With painted walls, the restaurant owner can fix most dings themselves. Janet Bloom, owner of d'Bronx Pizza in Kansas City, Missouri, always keeps the proper color on hand. "It's nothing to just go through (the dining room) and say get the paint," she says.

However, there are those that have found painted walls to be a nuisance.

J. Mark Starbuck, vice president of operations for The Loop Restaurant Group, calls maintaining them a "constant source of aggravation."

"(The painted walls) need touch-up continuously. They don't get it and in many cases have dings and nicks that diminish the experience in the restaurant," Starbuck says. The wallpaper, on the other hand, "lasted for years."

Using the term wallpaper in the commercial realm is somewhat of a misnomer. Most products are vinyl. They are engineered to withstand traffic and abrasions. There are different grades of vinyl classified according to weight. The heavier classes have more impact resistance, says Giselle Walsh, a regional market manager for Len-Tex Corp.

Special coatings provide wallcoverings a high degree of scrubability, making them easier to clean than paint, particularly that with no sheen, according to Pitaccio.



The experts say that commercial wallcoverings last on average at least seven to 10 years, whereas a room will need to be repainted more often, depending on the volume of traffic in the restaurant. Gattuso paints once a year, for example.

#### Which Price is Right?

The duty cycle can be directly related to price.

On average, wallcoverings cost \$25 per roll, while a gallon of paint sells for \$25 to \$30, according to Nicholas Cichielo, CEO of the Paint and Decorating Retailers Association. However, a roll of wallcovering covers approximately 27 square feet, while a gallon of paint covers 350 to 400 square feet.

Remember, however, that a wall will need to be repainted sooner.

"If you look at the initial cost, paint comes out a lot lower, but you will get a few additional years with the use of a good vinyl wallcovering," Cichielo says.

#### Proper Installation

The prices listed above do not include professional services. While nearly everyone can paint, the experts have mixed opinions as to whether restaurant owners should tackle wallcoverings. Cichielo says it is possible, but they must pay particular attention to wall preparation, using, for example, a special primer to protect against mold.

"A [wallcovering] product is only as good as the surface to which it is applied," he says.

Most commercial wallcoverings are wider than residential wallpapers, and therefore, are tougher to handle logistically.

"You have to know what you are doing," says Walsh, who recommends a professional installer.

Jim Turner, president of Regency Wallcraft, Inc., is more adamant in warning against do-it-yourselfers.

"If they want to consider (hanging wallcovering) themselves, take whatever money they plan to invest in the project to the oven, open the door and throw it in," he says.

Whether they heed his advice and whether they have chosen paint or wallcoverings, most restaurant owners find they do not have to shut down the dining room to get the job done. Gattuso, for example, paints on Sundays when the restaurant is closed. Turner says professional paper hangers will work after hours.

#### Other Options

Wallpaper offers a lot of flexibility in style, given the designs and textures that are available. Some manufacturers even offer the ability to custom-design patterns. However, a variety of techniques make paint versatile, too. These techniques do change the price equation because professionals almost inevitably need to be hired, depending on the talent of the restaurant owner.

The first option is a mural, which can entirely change the ambience.

"The size of our (one) wall is huge. Anything you put up there, like pictures, won't do that much. The mural is a nice focus point," says Gattuso, who recently commissioned a picture for his Westchester, Illinois, restaurant.

Gattuso's mural was done on canvas and mounted on the wall so that it can be moved should he decide to change locations. Other options for murals include applying the canvas like wallpaper or painting directly onto the wall.

A second option is faux finishing. Using different techniques, like layering colors, and different tools, like special brushes and rags, depth and even texture can be added to the wall. For example, a faux finisher can create the look and feel of a true Mediterranean café, says John Lindsey, co-owner of Vintage Interiors.

As for the cost, Coloney says that murals typically run between \$500 and \$5,000, and Cichielo estimates \$1,675 per room for faux finishing.