

GUEST EXPERIENCE

8 Design Fails That Can Hurt Your F&B Business

Michele Meyer • Jan 6, 2022 07:59am



Lighting, music, layout, even the bathrooms - every element of design in your venue contributes to your success, or failure. (Goode Company Cantina / Gin Design Group)

Before launching a new eatery or nightspot, you and your team may toil in the kitchen for weeks, refining and redefining the dishes and cocktails that could make or break your business.

You may fall asleep fretting about the menu, only to awake and tweak it yet again.

We hear you.

But the big miss of such a fixation is that you may not consider the secret ingredient that can burn your bottom line before customers even sit down: [the design](#).

Poor design can be a recipe for restaurant disaster, no matter how fine the fare.

Lighting, music, layout, bathroom fixtures—even the carpet on the stairs—can sabotage your success.

Here, two food and beverage veterans give their hard-won insights on what sends customers fleeing, and [what to do instead](#).

Gin Braverman, creative director at Houston’s Gin Design Group, and Jared Haibon, owner and designer of Audrey’s Coffee House and Lounge in South Kingston, RI, each worked a decade as bartenders, waiters or managers before setting out on their own.

They know how vital surroundings are to the magical chemistry that is cuisine.

“There’s a synergy where the design and food play off each other,” says Braverman. Without it, beware.

Read on to find eight common [design disasters, and simple fixes](#).

Floor Plan



Eunice / Gin Design Group (Eunice / Gin Design Group)

Fail: Your table can be too close to the action. Being jostled, distracted by kitchen clamor or chilled by air from the front door detract from dining.

“Nobody wants to be blasted with cold air or to feel people brush past on the way to the kitchen or restroom,” says Braverman, a former bartender and waiter and now creative director at Houston’s Gin Design Group, whose firm specializes in food and beverage design, including Eunice, Traveler’s Table and Axelrad Beer Garden.

Fix: Strategically oversized and upholstered chairs and booths with generous side arms make guests feel protected, even in highly traveled areas, she says. Leave ample space between service stations and tables, create a niche in front of kitchen exits to block the view from the dining area. “Also, never have table sightlines point into the restrooms or vestibule,” she says.

Lighting

Fail: Too bright, dim or glaring light can distract and detract from the meal. And being lit from the wrong angle can make guests look older.

“If you cannot see your magnificently plated food, you won’t enjoy it as much,” Braverman says. “It’s called mood lighting because it affects mood. Within seconds of entering a restaurant I want to stay or flee.”

Fix: Lighting solely from above casts unflattering shadows on diners’ faces so [use multiple sources](#), including wall sconces and exterior and on-table lights. These should highlight your eatery’s architecture and spotlight the meal, she says. “Other patrons should just be a backdrop. Also, keep in mind that the right amount, color and temperature of the light can give you a nice glow.”

Theme



Audrey's Coffee House and Lounge / Sydney Gordon (Audrey's / Sydney Gordon)

Fail: Your restaurant has no [identity](#), or your message is muddled.

Fix: Your establishment's logo, menu and décor should tell the same story, without being kitschy—unless that's your goal.

“Starting with a [mission statement](#) can help you keep consistent,” explains Braverman.

At his venue, Audrey's Coffee House and Lounge, the goal is cozy. The homey vibe reverberates through leather-tufted sofas, a stone fireplace, faux brick wall, a tapestry, velvet chairs and custom mugs.

“Even if people come to grab a coffee to go, we want them to feel compelled to stay and have a hot apple cider in front of the fireplace,” says Haibon, who opened Audrey's last December with wife Ashley Iaconetti Haibon.

If their names sound familiar, that's because they met in 2015 on ABC's *Bachelor in Paradise*, a connection they play up in their rose-adorned logo and a mural. Their menu touts ‘The Most Dramatic Mocha Ever’, ‘Here for the Wrong Reasons Nutella Latte’ and ‘Ashley's Tears’, all of which have significance for their ‘Bachelor Nation’ fans.

While Ashley's mom is named Audrey, Haibon says, “I chose the name because it's cozy. If someone says, ‘Let's go get a drink at Audrey's,’ it makes you think of going to your grandmother's house. When I was mulling names, I kept going back to Audrey's.”

Visual Drama

Fail: Boring, passé white plates.

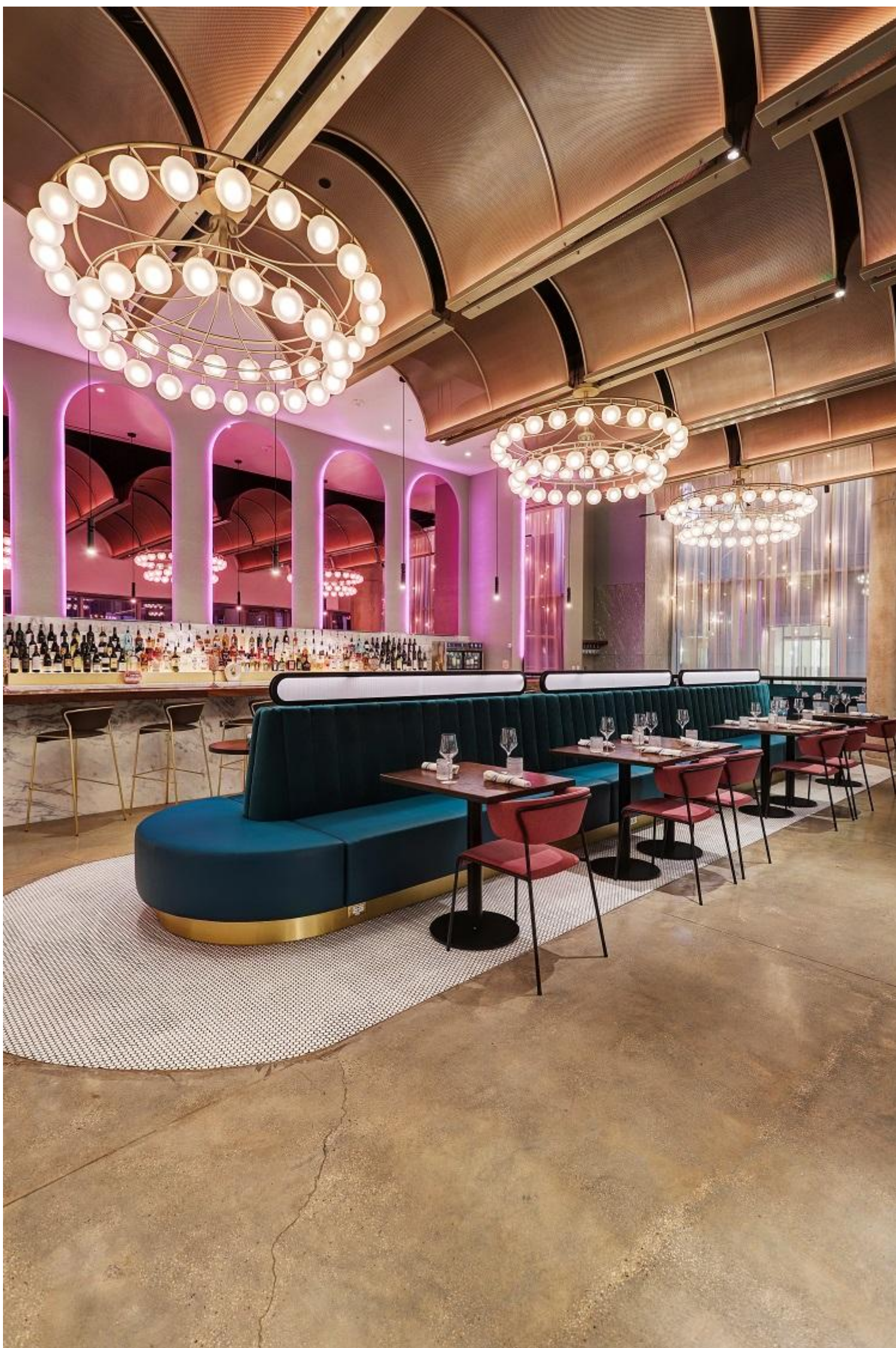
Fix: Stylishly plated meals, no matter how pedestrian the food, are vital, especially in an Instagram-driven world. You want to add visual drama to entice customers to post on their social media feeds. When you choose platters and glassware make them unique and buy with eyes in mind. Think of every wall as a potential backdrop.

To create [Instagram moments](#), Haibon recommends arrange vignettes within your restaurant.

Audrey's also hired local artist Abbie Cates to create a mural with their logo and nods to Rhode Island (an anchor) and *The Bachelor*. “People love taking pictures there, which is great marketing for us,” he says.

The couple also frequently posts photos and lighthearted reels on their restaurant's Instagram and on their personal feeds. (Hers has 1.2 million followers, his has 700,000 and the lounge has 25,000.)

Music & Volume



Common Bond / Gin Design Group (Common Bond / Gin Design Group)

Fail: Diners are drowned out by deafening music and kitchen clatter.

Excess sound bites, unless your concept [centers on music](#), Braverman says. “If you want a raucous dance party, that’s one thing. Romance is another. But generally, diners should be able to converse without shouting.”

The fix: Ceiling insulation, fabric wall panels, double-paned glass, carpet and drapes absorb or block sound. Don’t put music on too short a loop if the meal pace will be leisurely. She suggests keeping [louder equipment](#) farther from the front of the house.

This is essential to fine dining, Braverman says. “When it’s too noisy, the vibe is of an elevated cafeteria.”

Maintenance

The fail: Sticky floors, stained carpet or wonky toilet paper holders leave a bad impression.

“Dining is about creating an illusion: You don’t want a chink in the armor,” Braverman says. “Unless it’s a [dive bar](#). Then you’re there for the muck.”

The fix: Look down, look up, look around—and spiff up your joint.

What worked for the previous owner may not have. After all, they shut their doors.

So, [replace anything that’s threadbare](#), crooked or broken. Rust isn’t rustic. It’s past its prime.

Powder Rooms

The fail: Stinky, dirty lavatories with empty soap and toilet paper dispensers repel customers. Bathroom corridors should not be dark and narrow. You don’t want to stage a horror show.

“You don’t want to put people on edge,” Braverman says.

The fix: Not only should [bathrooms sparkle](#), but automatic faucets should function, dispensers should be filled, and trashcans should be empty.

To avoid lapses, Haibon’s team checks their bathrooms every hour. Audrey’s also uses bright, white bulbs. They may be less flattering than rosier bulbs but they telegraph cleanliness “and you can see what you’re doing.” Full length mirrors are also appreciated.

Do the sniff test regularly and avoid pungent cleaning products, Braverman says. “There’s no place in restaurants for smells, other than of excellent food.”

Colors



Ginger Kale Restaurant / Gin Design Group (Ginger Kale Restaurant / Gin Design Group)

The fail: Haphazard use of hues is a missed opportunity.

The fix: It’s not so much the colors but how they’re thoughtfully considered as part of the [ambience](#) that affects the patron, Braverman says.

The Haibons painted the wall of Audrey’s in neutrals and used the palette of furnishings to form three intimate niches within the wide-open, 1,500 square foot front-of-the-house space. One area has royal blue velvet sofas, another red velvet chairs and a third burnt sienna tufted leather sofas at the fireplace.

Don’t skimp on these design details, advises Braverman. “The whole point of the hospitality industry is to make people feel comfortable and welcome.”

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