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## FOOD &amp; DINING

## Stunning design: The ingredient owners want in their restaurants

These Atlanta designers consider every detail to make you savor the space.



**By Olivia Wakim**

July 22, 2025



Walking into a beautiful restaurant can feel like stepping into a private universe.

Whether it's the soaring ceilings and dazzling chandeliers of [Zakia in Buckhead](#), or the intimate, classical trappings of the [Consulate in Midtown](#), a well-designed space has staying power.

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"I think that every restaurant is kind of its own little world," said Jordan Smelt, co-owner with Katie Barringer of [Lucian Books & Wine](#). "To me, a good restaurant is, in a way, talking to you the entire time that you're there," Smelt said.

As a restaurant's ambience becomes even more of a selling point with social media's priority for catchy visuals, interior design is a defining tool in a restaurant's identity and experience.

## Designing for a connected world

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Hanes' firm is behind restaurants across Atlanta and nationwide, including popular eateries like [Brasserie Margot](#), [Carmel](#), [Lyla Lila](#) and [Marcel](#).

**Explore** Remodeling your kitchen? Look to restaurants for inspiration.



Credit: Courtesy of Tomas Espinoza

Smith Hanes Studio designed the interior of Brasserie Margot, the Four Seasons Hotel's Parisian-inspired restaurant. (Courtesy of Tomas Espinoza)





By Kroger

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There are hundreds of little details that go into designing a restaurant, from the technical side of the kitchen's layout down to how a server navigates a space.

It's about "articulating a brand," Hanes said, and making each restaurant feel like an original place. "That's how you know it's successful. When it really feels kind of effortless."

There can be unexpected elements incorporated into Hanes' designs — like a witty neon sign at the back of a hallway — but too many "bells and whistles" drift into trend territory.

Several designers referred to these as "Instagram moments." Erin Graves, co-founder with Lindsay Miller of [DIGS Architecture & Design](#), said she suspects some of the premium placed on restaurant design now has to do with the higher expectations younger generations have for a restaurant.

A space is almost guaranteed to be photographed by social media users and content creators who build their following by documenting restaurants, Miller said. Although those "Instagram moments" may stir up enthusiasm for the brief time the trend is popular, it doesn't always translate to a sustainable restaurant design.

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Graves and Miller left their previous firm to launch their own architect and interior design studio about four years ago. DIGS is currently working on the architecture and design for Sargent, the forthcoming sister restaurant to Lucian Books & Wine in the Old Fourth Ward neighborhood.

When Smelt and Barringer were planning Lucian in 2020, the pendulum in the city had swung to a very casual sort of environment, Smelt said, so they wanted to move it back to something that felt “warm, comfortable and neighborly, but also elevated, smart, sophisticated.”

The space is small, particularly for a city that’s used to large restaurants, so it was important to them “it had a level of finish that felt warm and charming but also a little bit grand at the same time,” Smelt said.

Take, for example, Lucian’s wooden bookcases that house for-sale books curated by Barringer. They stretch across one wall in the dining room and spotlight their denizens with warm lighting and arched tops. Or consider the floor-to-ceiling windows at the front of the restaurant that make the space feel bright and open when the sun streams in.

Now, as the owners and designers think about Sargent, timelessness is key to their aesthetic.

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Credit: Chris Hunt

The owners of Lucian Books & Wine placed creativity at the forefront of their restaurant's design. (Chris Hunt for the AJC)

Miller and Graves look toward building a space “that’s going to stand the test of time, because (our clients) are investing a lot of money and heart and soul into what they do,” Graves said.

“How do we help them usher this into the next decade?” Miller added.

## Ballooning budgets

Metro Atlanta has plenty of variety within its restaurant scene. You’ll find anything from fine dining outposts to \$2 taco joints, but Miller said she’s seen the amount of investment restaurateurs are willing to put into their interior design grow as the city evolves. Construction costs have also grown, however.

Douglas Hines designed the Consulate, which he co-owns with executive chef Mei Lin. Hines said they put aside just under \$500,000 to complete their build-out and decor in 2016.

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That was almost 10 years ago, so things are certainly more expensive now, he said, including labor costs, tariffs, inflation and shipping.

Although Hines doesn't do as much interior design for other restaurants anymore, he said the costs can vary drastically based on what the interior designer charges, the size of the restaurant and the aesthetic it's going for.

Tony Akly, founder and president of Restaurants Consulting Group, has designed and consulted with more than 300 restaurants since launching his business in the '90s.

That number includes three restaurants Akly co-owns with his sons: Mission + Market, Tre Vele and Zakia. Akly said the operators and landlords he's worked with often want more trendy, modern designs, but it's "very difficult to build like we used to," he said.



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Credit: Henri Hollis

Zakia Modern Lebanese Restaurant in Buckhead has high ceilings and impressive light fixtures. (Courtesy of Zakia/Erik Meadows)

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Akly estimated that, since opening Zakia in 2022, costs have increased 25-30%.

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Akly said recently he's seen restaurant operators pivot to remodeling second-generation spaces, or properties that were built-out and occupied by previous restaurants, to cut down on costs. He added, "If you have a good kitchen staff and you have the people to run the restaurant, regardless of what you do, you're going to make money."

## 'Good design is a good business'

"Design brings money," said Maria Dominguez, the designer behind [Casa Balam](#), [El Valle](#), [Giulia Italian Bakery](#) and other restaurants.

"In the hospitality industry, good design is a good business," she said.

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The quality of food has always been, and still is, very important, she said, but restaurants have to be prepared to go up against local and regional competitors with larger interior design budgets.

Dominguez takes into account a restaurant's location, its clientele and the story it's trying to get across.

Casa Balam's aesthetic began with the ownership team's vision, Dominguez said. Balam means jaguar in the Mayan language and was considered a sacred animal in Mayan mythology, according to a brand identity outline Dominguez shared. She designed the restaurant around this vision, from the color palette to the lighting and upholstery.

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Credit: Courtesy of Maria Dominguez

Maria Dominguez designed the interiors of Casa Balam with the jaguar in mind. (Courtesy of Maria Dominguez)

The pieces that go into designing a restaurant are copious and often invisible to the consumer. Beyond the aesthetics of the space, it has to be functional, too. Barringer said this attention to functionality is one aspect they appreciate in Graves and Miller as they design Sargent.

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No matter how beautiful a restaurant appears on Instagram, “good design is the difference between a 10-minute martini and a 25-minute martini,” Barringer said.

The interior designers interviewed for this story all said they approach the dining experience from every minute detail, including the soundtrack, the temperature of the room and the flow of how customers and servers move throughout the space.

The painstaking details and unique narratives are what Dominguez finds so beautiful about designing restaurants.

“You cannot copy and paste. Every restaurant has their own life,” she said.

## About the Author



### Olivia Wakim

Olivia Wakim is a digital content producer on the food and dining team. She joined the AJC as an intern in 2023 after graduating from the University of Georgia with a journalism degree. While in school, she reported for The Red & Black, Grady Newsource and the Marietta Daily Journal.

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