

Interior design

The essential guide for Middle East interior design professionals

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LAMP LIFE



Lamp design is leaving other light options in the shade

POINT OF SALE

Burgeoning malls are making retail design big business

MINISTRY MAN

Colin Seah on redefining design his own way

ZEN ZONE

Ziqoo brings a contemporary Japanese interior to Dubai

The image shows the interior of a noodle bar. The room features long, light-colored wooden tables arranged in rows, with green cushioned benches on either side. Each table is set with a menu and condiment bottles. The walls are dark with vertical slats, and the ceiling has a modern design with recessed lighting and a long, dark, horizontal light fixture. The overall atmosphere is clean and contemporary.

Raise the NOODLE BAR

Adapting an established brand's interior design for local needs meant DBTA International needed careful creativity to bring an individual look to a chain of venues



Wagamama, the noodle restaurant chain, has gathered a bit of a cult following in its many international locations. Its distinctive branded design has become easily recognisable and part of the restaurant's appeal has been based on its simple utilitarian design and communal dining feel.

With patrons sitting themselves down wherever they like, the restaurant has taken an Asian-style fast turnaround dining experience to all parts of the world. But how would this style translate to the UAE and other locations in the region? A region where the dining experience is traditionally a longer, more leisurely one and sharing a bench with a stranger may not always be appropriate.

David Tokiwa and his Singapore-based interior design company DBTA International, were charged with the task. Familiar with the Dubai market through work on other restaurant and hospitality brands – including Frankie's and themed restaurants for the Intercontinental hotel – Tokiwa had to localise Wagamama's international brand, while staying within the parent company's guidelines. Although these are strict, Tokiwa found areas of flexibility and was able to adapt

1. Simple design has helped make the Wagamama brand famous, but in the Middle East it was a look that needed to be warmed up.





wagamama.ae



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aspects of the Wagamama look for two different locations in Dubai – one in the Greens, another in Al Fattan Tower – and one in Cairo.

“We were brought in by RMAL Hospitality, which owns the franchise rights for Wagamama,” said Tokiwa. “The company wanted to freshen the look of Wagamama because it understood that in Dubai there would be a need to add glamour. Our challenge was, how to spruce up the image to make it more appealing to the local market, while staying within the brand standards.”

The size and location of the sites had an impact on the design. The Greens operation was expected to get about half its business through take-out orders. As a result more space has been dedicated to the kitchen and back of house areas to allow for

the volume of trade that will not be seated in the restaurant. The kitchen is also a source of some theatre in the restaurant and as such the design puts it on show, allowing customers to see cooking in action.

“The Greens venue was a new direction for Wagamama, with a suburban location and a reduced seating scale,” said Tokiwa. “Investment-wise we were looking at how we can create these smaller modules and place them throughout Dubai, instead of always looking for huge sites.

“The Wagamama look is simple and clean, but we polished it with ceiling and wall finishes. We also looked at creating features within the design. In the case of the Greens, the feature is the open showcase kitchen. We also introduced some timber finishes



2 & 3. The trademark Wagamama long wooden bench was made smaller for the Middle East market and has also had a cushion added to improve comfort and increase length of stay.



to add warmth. In Al Fattan Tower, a larger location in a residential tower, the concept is taken a step further.”

One of the first issues addressed was comfort. With an extended dining time expected in the Middle East market, thin pancake cushions have been added to Wagamama’s trademark wooden benches, to accommodate expectations of comfort. Although benchtops are still long, the seats are broken down into six and four seaters – and even twos in Egypt. With international versions frequently seating up to eight people Tokiwa introduced the smaller versions to allow patrons the option of not having to share a seat with each other.

“What our client found is that people in Dubai needed a bit more comfort and colour,” said Tokiwa.

“In the local market comfort is viewed as a given and translates into a greater spend. We wanted to add this without deviating from the brand standards. By adding in cushions, just thin pancake cushions, it added an extra element of warmth.

“In Al Fattan Tower a wave feature wall is combined with the double volume height of the site and a feature ceiling to contribute to the colour. We also used recessed cove lights, which is quite different lighting compared to most Wagamama locations. We also introduced timber and stone, using

4. A kitchen on display acts as a design feature in the restaurant.



5 & 6. Although the design introduced new elements, it also had to conform to the internationally established image of the Wagamama brand.

granite with a honed, polished or bush hammer finish, depending on the application. One of our main philosophies is that it must look clean, which is really how we select our finishes. We were very pleased with the quality of the finish produced by Emirates Interiors, wave ceilings are not easy.”

Further adjustments were made to the Cairo location, where the site is part of a shopping mall. The site includes a lease line, which divides the indoors from a common outdoor area.

“We agreed with Wagamama UK that the indoor space behind the lease line would feature the typical Wagamama concept and in the outdoor area we could create a different type of feeling, something much cosier,” said Tokiwa.

To achieve this cosy outdoor atmosphere Tokiwa introduced pendant lighting and booth seating, a far cry

from the bright white look of the traditional Wagamama venues in the UK or elsewhere.

“Wagamama UK said to us to go for it, but within standards,” said Tokiwa. “Design work was done hand in hand, but with the understanding that the design is for the Middle East market. Wagamama UK has grown worldwide and sees the need for flexible concepts to make the brand work in culturally diverse regions.”

“The great challenge for us is that typically we are a master concept developer. In this case the concept was already done and we are doing research and development to try and enhance it for our clients. Time will tell if the ideas developed in this region are used elsewhere, but so far we’ve had positive feedback from what we’ve done in Dubai and Cairo. 