

# Green Practice: An Empirical Investigation on The Interiors of Healthy Restaurants in Penang

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## ABSTRACT

Green practices are typically categorised into four (4) areas: food and beverage, service, management, and the environment. The implementation of green practices, particularly those emphasising green interior design, however, is still in its infancy state and remains scarce. This study delves into the realm of green practices within the context of healthy restaurants, with two (2) primary objectives. First, to understand the interior design rationale of healthy restaurants in Penang, and second, to explore the perception of restaurateurs regarding the implementation of green practices for the interiors of their respective healthy restaurant. To gather primary data, the study conducted semi-structured, key informant interviews with restaurateurs in Penang, Malaysia, who met specific criteria which include the adoption of food-focused green practices, the presence of aesthetically pleasing interior designs, and the given positive reviews for both food quality and restaurant ambiance. The findings revealed that these restaurant owners effectively conveyed their concepts through their interior designs, using natural materials like wood, cement, and indoor plants. While they demonstrated awareness of environmental sustainability and health concerns, their understanding of green practices was somewhat basic. They were more focused on applying green practices to food and beverages than on creating a green interior ambiance.

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## INTRODUCTION

A green interior environment is known to exert a positive influence on customers, encouraging patronage by inducing positive emotional reactions, such as reducing customers' stress levels. Restaurants with a natural ambiance are associated with the promotion of healthy food choices and sustainable consumption (Vanhatalo et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2018). In this regard, the adoption of green practices in the foodservice industry appears to be increasing. However, Malaysia has been reported as a country that is less concerned

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and supportive of the green practice agenda (Langgat, 2020). This seems ironic for the country, especially considering that it boasts restaurants honoured with prestigious Michelin awards and a state that has been boldly labelled as the "food heaven" - Penang. While the number of healthy restaurants is on the rise in the state, it's fair to say that the primary focus of green initiatives is placed on food attributes. The implementation of green practices emphasising green interior design, however, is still in its infancy and remains scarce. With that in mind, this study aims to achieve two (2) objectives: first, to understand the interior design rationale of healthy restaurants in Penang, and second, to explore the perception of restaurateurs regarding the implementation of green practices for the interiors of their respective healthy restaurant.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretically, green practice is the action that businesses or organisations do to decrease the carbon footprint and other harmful effects they might cause to the environment (DiPietro & Gregory, 2013). Green practice is classified into four (4) categories namely food and beverage, service, management, and environment (Houssain et al., 2022). The "green" idea has gained more prominence in the recent years- as sustainability turns to be one (1) of the most vital concerns within the foodservice industry (Herrero et al., 2020). Apart from reducing negative environmental impacts, most businesses opt for green practice to strive for financial and economic sustainability (Han, 2020). Economist Intelligence Unit (2021) reported that green practice has now spread to developing countries, including Malaysia. Evidently, the Malaysian government shows strong commitments towards the green movement by initiating MyHIJAU programme to support small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in producing green goods and services (Rahman, 2018). Contextually, Malaysians are concerned and supportive with restaurants that embrace green practice and conscious on environmental impact (Langgat, 2020). Local restaurateurs' views on green practice are positive, believing that it is a key to propel business to greater heights (Ismail et al., 2010).

Despite the prevalence of green practice in Malaysia, reportedly there is no specific guidelines or official Environmental Management System (EMS) standards of green practice in both food and environment attributes in place for restaurateurs to adhere to (Tan et al., 2018). Hence, restaurateurs lack the awareness of the current environmental situation and knowledge to address the environment problems (Ismail et al., 2010). An existing study finds that green consumerism is influential to consumers in making ethical choices, in regard to their purchasing behaviour and green perceived values, eventually improving the overall service quality and encouraging revisit intention (Riva et al., 2022). The mushrooming of wholefood stores, vegetarian or vegan restaurants, and healthy eateries indicates that there is an increase in demand for green products, leading to more green efforts focusing on food attributes such as providing a healthy menu, food choice, and food presentation.

Owing to the fact that many restaurateurs are environmentally conscious but have inadequate knowledge of environmentally friendly practices (Ismail et al., 2010), their active participation to integrate green practice in the foodservice industry is therefore imperative. Understanding of their perceptions towards the implementation of green practice in restaurants is key to trigger further policy formulation and implementation in fostering the green practice (Tan et al., 2018).

It is worth noting that the green food environment influences consumers' food consumption behaviours, including food choices, preferences, product acceptability, and intention to patronise (Kwasny et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2018; Tan et al., 2017). In fact, even before consumption takes place, the actual conditions of restaurants and on-the-spot observations assist consumers in gauging the extent to which their quality expectations are met. The quality of the surrounding plus the set of elements such as sound, lighting, aroma, and temperature project the space ambiance (Liu & Jang, 2009), which in several combinations pose a significant effect on customers' emotional reactions affecting their post-dining behavioural intentions (Ryu

& Jang, 2007). In tune with that, positive emotions (contentment, joy, and calmness), leading to more beneficial behaviours such as increased satisfaction, healthy food selection, and decreased plate waste can be induced by immersing in a “natural” ambiance. The “fast-food” environments on the other hand, evoke negative emotions (anxiety and discontentment), which further influence consumers to choose less healthy and unsustainable meals as well as produce more plate waste (Vanhatalo et al., 2022).

Technically, there are six (6) criteria emphasised in the Malaysian Green Building Index (GBI) Assessment for interiors which include energy efficiency, Indoor Environment Quality (IEQ), sustainable site planning and management, material and resources, water efficiency, and innovation (Greenbuildingindex Sdn Bhd., 2022). Integration of natural elements via interior design contributes to optimising the IEQ of a space as well as promoting inhabitants’ physical and psychological well-being (Kinanthi et al., 2013). Seminal research that linked interior ambiance attributes and green practices in restaurants are summarised in Table 1 as below.

Table 1. Interior ambiance attributes of green practices in restaurants

Attribute	Criteria	Item
Interior ambiance (Environment-focused green practice)	Interior decoration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nature-related images</li> <li>• Calming and nature colours</li> </ul>
	Soundscape	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sound of nature</li> </ul>
	Lighting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slightly dimmed lighting</li> <li>• Sunlight as natural lighting</li> </ul>
	Vegetation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plant trees to make environment feel greener</li> </ul>
	Cleanliness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tidiness of environment</li> <li>• Clean facility</li> </ul>
	Air quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain fresh air</li> </ul>
	Furnishing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recycle, repairable and sustainable material</li> </ul>

Source: Vanhatalo et al., 2022; Maynard et al., 2020; Yu et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2013; Liu & Jang, 2009

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Upon scrutinising relevant literature on green practice and identification of relevant questions, the study then acquired primary data through semi-structured interviews. The restaurateurs who operated their independently owned casual, healthy restaurants in Penang, Malaysia, were selected as the key informants for the interviews. In this context, independent casual dining referred to a restaurant that was unaffiliated with any national brands and offered a laid-back ambiance, full table service and moderate meal rates. To study the consciousness of Penang’s restaurateurs towards ambiance-focused green practices, this paper targeted healthy restaurants that had already adopted food-focused green practice in their operations. The identification of the restaurants was performed through online research and observations. The key informant must meet the criteria of owning a restaurant that: (1) adopted food-focused green practice; (2) had an aesthetically pleasing interior design with a concept; and (3) received high ratings and positive reviews in regard of food and interior ambiance.

Through literature review, four (4) semi-structured questions addressing the objectives of this study were developed. The informants were then asked about their awareness of interior ambiance-focused green practice, the design rationale of their healthy restaurants’ interiors, the relationship between the restaurants’ interior design and ambiance-focused green practices, as well as their personal opinions on the implementation of interior ambiance-focused green practices in their restaurants.

In this paper, the identified informants were initially contacted via telephone and email to obtain their permission to conduct the personal interviews. Three (3) informants agreed to participate in this study and

the interviews were arranged based on their convenience. Prior to the interview session, the respective informants were briefed on the objectives of the interview and informed about anonymity and confidentiality. All interviews lasted between thirty (30) and sixty (60) minutes and all sessions were recorded with the consent of the informants. The information and insights obtained from the interviews were then transcribed using narrative analysis. The process was performed properly and carefully to prevent the loss of original and important idea.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Key Informant Profiles

All informants are restaurateurs who operate their independently owned casual, healthy restaurants for over five (5) years in Penang, Malaysia. The informants selected meet all the criteria listed above and are coded from number one (1) to three (3) to ensure their anonymity, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Key informant profiles



Restaurateur	Years Established	Description
1	5	A healthy restaurant that has a 4.3 Google rating, offers fusion healthy menu and has a playful, green and pleasing interior.
2	8	A vegan pet-friendly restaurant that has a 4.4 Google rating, offers plant-based cuisine, healthy menu options and has a contemporary, aesthetic and green interior design.
3	2	A healthy restaurant that has a 4.7 Google rating, offers a fusion meatless menu and has a simple and chic Zen-inspired interior.

Source: Authors, 2023

### Design Rationale and Restaurateurs' Perception

#### Interior Design Rationale

Table 3. Interior design rationale

Restaurateur	Summarised Feedback
<p>R1</p> 	<p>R1 aimed to embrace a green and healthy concept while avoiding any perception of a purely vegan eatery. R1 used different shades of green to symbolise the concept of healthy eating. R1 incorporated vibrant and warm colours like orange to create a welcoming and playful atmosphere.</p>
<p>R2</p> 	<p>R2 drew inspiration from their vegetarian poodle to open a pet-friendly vegetarian restaurant. R2 sought to create a chic, nature-inspired, warm, and cosy dining environment to promote ethical dining and positively impact human health, the environment, and animals. R2 integrated natural elements, such as wooden furniture and decor, along with indoor plants to establish a tranquil and harmonious atmosphere and bring a touch of nature indoors.</p>

R3



R3 envisioned a fun, engaging, and interactive modern-chic casual dining space. R3 translated their food philosophy, which celebrated the simplicity of ingredients, into the Zen-inspired interior design. This design emphasised tranquillity, simplicity, unrefined aesthetics, and the incorporation of nature within a contemporary setting. Raw and natural materials like cement, wooden features, and pebbles were used for furniture, finishes, and decor, maintaining their original tones. The addition of plants enhanced the ambiance, and a skylight brought in natural light. R3 prioritised seating capacity while offering customers an authentic experience.

Source: Authors, 2023

The interior designs of all three (3) healthy restaurants successfully conveyed their unique concepts and objectives. Even though they had different design ideas, they all used similar methods, including natural materials like wood and cement, along with indoor plants, to create a natural atmosphere. They applied these elements to their furniture, finishes, and decor.

### Green Practice Awareness

Table 4. Interior design rationale

Restaurateur	Summarised Feedback
<p>R1</p>	<p>R1 associated green practices with a recent initiative in the restaurant, which involved replacing take-away packaging with recyclable materials to reduce waste. R1 stated that they had no relevant knowledge or experience in using green practices to enhance interior ambiance.</p>
<p>R2</p>	<p>R2 emphasised their efforts to explore new and innovative vegan dishes to promote ethical food choices, benefiting both health and the environment while saving animal lives. After receiving examples of green approaches for interior ambiance, R2 began to relate green practice to restaurant operations and discussed a collaboration with a planter to sell soilless small plants in the restaurant. Restaurateur 2 expressed the intention to promote the use of indoor vegetation to create a warm and inviting atmosphere.</p>

R3



R3 highlighted their food philosophy of serving healthier food with simple ingredients and minimal cooking processes. Although they were initially unfamiliar with the term "green practice," they understood the fundamental concept and provided examples of green approaches. R3 demonstrated a higher awareness of green practice. They were more familiar with green approaches and shared ideas about using raw and natural materials in furniture and finishes to add character, creating a visually appealing, relaxing, and nature-inspired environment.

Source: Authors, 2023

Based on the design concepts of all three (3) healthy restaurants, it's clear that all restaurateurs are conscious of the environment and care about human health and the planet. However, their understanding of green practices appears to be somewhat basic, as most of them are not familiar with the term "green practice." When explained in more detail, they all mentioned that they have heard about environmentally friendly approaches, and some have already put similar practices into action in their restaurant operations. However, their discussions mostly centered around how green practices relate to food and beverages rather than creating a green interior design inside the restaurant. We reminded them that green practices cover various aspects, including the environment, service, and management. When we asked about their knowledge of using green practices to enhance the interior atmosphere, most of them were initially unsure and hesitant to respond. In general, these restaurateurs have a fundamental understanding of green practices, but they are more familiar with how it applies to food and beverages. Their awareness of green practices that focus on interior ambiance is relatively low because they lack knowledge about how to implement such practices effectively and comprehensively in this aspect.

### *Relationship Between Interior Design Rationale and Green Practice*

Table 5. Relationship between interior design rationale and green practice

Restaurateur	Summarised Feedback
R1	R1 mentioned that when they consulted with designers and friends in the industry about starting a restaurant business in Penang in 2018, the concept of green practice never came up in their discussions. When asked about the use of natural elements like plants and wooden furniture in the restaurant, R1 explained that it was a matter of personal preference and not associated with green practice. However, R1 did mention the use of warm and vibrant colours like orange in the dining space to enhance customers' appetites. This indicated a connection between the restaurant's design and interior ambiance-focused green practice, as one (1) of the approaches was using colour to improve the dining experience.



R2



R2 admitted to having no knowledge of green practice when they founded the restaurant in 2015. However, during a renovation in 2022, they started considering indoor greenery and sustainable furniture materials in the interior redesign. R2 believed it was the right time to begin implementing green practices in the restaurant. They opted for dining seats and tables made of sustainable wood, and they hung plants from the ceiling and placed them on the ground to envelop customers in greenery. This combination of natural elements aimed to connect the dining space with nature. Additionally, warm yellow lighting was used as ambient lighting to create a warm and welcoming atmosphere. Despite being knowledgeable about enhancing interior ambiance through design, R2 had not been aware of interior-ambiance-focused green practice in their initial considerations.

R3



R3 considered the interior design concept to be fundamentally related to green practice. After consulting with an interior designer, they integrated the food philosophy with the dining space to bring a sense of tranquillity and simplicity to the bustling restaurant by creating a connection to nature. R3 explained that the intention behind incorporating natural elements into the restaurant's design was to help customers feel more connected to their surroundings. They used raw and natural materials like pebbles and wood to add an organic touch, as well as a skylight to introduce natural lighting into the interior. R3 chose wood and cement for furniture and finishes to ensure durability in the busy restaurant environment, reducing the need for frequent repairs or replacements. The restaurant's goals and design intentions were clear and closely aligned with green practices.

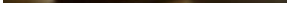
Source: Authors, 2023

Considering that all restaurateurs showed awareness of green practices related to food, and some had already adopted them, it was expected that their restaurant designs would also reflect these practices. We further asked the restaurateurs if the interior design of their restaurants considered green practices. Surprisingly, it became apparent that the initial designs of all the restaurants did not take green practices into consideration. Most restaurateurs admitted that, to the best of their knowledge, green practices were not widely recognised in the Penang foodservice industry when they started their restaurants five (5) to eight (8) years ago. In summary, our conversations with restaurateurs and on-site observations revealed that, despite their different intentions and goals, all restaurateurs incorporated natural elements into their restaurant's interior design. They had incorporated green practices to some extent in their interior design, although they were not fully aware of the concept of green practices focusing on interior ambiance.

### *Restaurateurs' perception towards the implementation of green practices for their restaurant's interiors*

Table 6. Restaurateurs' perception towards the implementation of green practices for their restaurant's interiors

Restaurateur	Summarised Feedback
R1	R1 displayed interest in the concept and approaches of green practice. R1 believed that going green was gradually becoming a growing trend in the industry, and this development was expected. R1 mentioned that some restaurants in Penang had already adopted green practices, such as conserving energy with solar panels and implementing recycling programs. Inspired by this, R1 decided to start using recyclable products in the restaurant. They expressed the intention to further integrate green practices into both food and the environment, provided they had sufficient knowledge and stable financial support to carry out these practices.



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R2



R2 pointed out that restaurateurs' perceptions of green practice could be influenced by customer demand and market trends. While consumer preferences for healthier and more sustainable dining options were still in the minority in Penang, they were on the rise. Restaurateurs might view the adoption of green practices as a strategic move to cater to this growing market segment and enhance their brand reputation. R2 expressed an interest in further implementing green practices to enhance the restaurant's interior ambiance, as they aligned with the restaurant's concept and had the potential to boost business.

R3



R3 agreed that using green practices to create an appealing atmosphere in restaurants was a viable approach. However, R3 pointed out that this could be highly subjective because not all restaurant interior designs were suitable for combining with the green concept. R3 considered green practice as an opportunity to differentiate their restaurant in a competitive market and attract environmentally conscious customers. Attracting customers who shared the restaurant's values could help build a loyal customer base. Word-of-mouth recommendations from these customers could lead to increased brand visibility and customer growth.

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Source: Authors, 2023

All the restaurateurs strongly support the idea of implementing green practices to enhance the ambiance of restaurants. They believe that as Penang increasingly adopts sustainable and eco-friendly practices, these green initiatives can attract environmentally conscious customers and new visitors to their establishments. In addition to promoting a sustainable and healthy lifestyle, the restaurateurs see this as a chance to boost their restaurant businesses. They recommend taking steps and launching initiatives to further promote green practices and educate both customers and restaurateurs about them, creating a situation where everyone benefits from a sustainable lifestyle.

## CONCLUSION

This study addresses two (2) main aspects related to the interior design and green practices in Penang's healthy restaurants. Firstly, concerning the understanding of the interior design rationale in these restaurants, it's evident that all three (3) restaurateurs effectively conveyed their unique concepts and goals through their interior designs. Despite having different design ideas, they shared a common approach by using natural materials like wood, cement, and indoor plants to create a natural ambiance within the dining spaces, including furniture, finishes, and decor. Secondly, when exploring the restaurateurs' perceptions regarding the implementation of green practices in their healthy restaurants, several key findings emerged. While all restaurateurs demonstrated a level of awareness and concern for environmental sustainability and human health, their understanding of green practices appeared to be somewhat basic. Most were unfamiliar with the term "green practice", and their discussions primarily centered around applying green practices to food and beverage aspects rather than creating a green interior ambiance in their establishments. This limited knowledge was due to their unfamiliarity with comprehensive green practices and their potential integration into interior ambiance. Despite initially lacking awareness of the concept of green interior design, all restaurateurs incorporated natural elements into their restaurant interiors. They also expressed strong support for implementing green practices to enhance the restaurant's ambiance. They saw green practices as a means to promote sustainability, a healthy lifestyle, and enhance their restaurant businesses. They recommended taking proactive steps to promote green practices and educate both customers and



restaurateurs about their benefits. While their knowledge in this area is still developing, there is a clear willingness to embrace green practices for environmentally friendly and inviting dining spaces.

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None.

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