



Interior designer Deborah Wiener, here at Crate & Barrel, knows a good value. See page 100 for her favorite buys at chains like Storehouse.

Storehouse's crescent-shape, Cirque sectional encourages conversation. It starts at \$2,500.



Chain Reaction

Is furniture at Crate & Barrel a good buy? What about Pottery Barn? One designer sizes up the offerings at four chain stores.

By Sherri Dalphonse

Here's a secret: Much of the furniture at Crate & Barrel, Storehouse, Restoration Hardware, and Pottery Barn is made by the same manufacturers—makers such as Mitchell Gold & Bob Williams, American Leather, and Lee Industries.

So what's the difference between these chains? Are they each better for certain purchases?

I asked interior designer Deborah Wiener of Designing Solutions in Silver Spring to shop with me at these retailers. What follows is her comparison of the four and a critique of the furniture.

How do chains keep down prices? Volume. And while higher-end retailers let you customize every sofa leg, arm, and cushion, the chains limit that. Want to add a skirt to a sofa? You're probably out of luck. Fabric choices are more limited, too.

But shopping at these stores is not intimidating. You can often get furniture within days. You get a lot of style for your money.

Where do you get the most for your dollar? It is just one designer's opinion, but Wiener ranks the stores this way, first to last, for style and value: Restoration Hardware, Crate & Barrel, Storehouse, Pottery Barn.

RESTORATION HARDWARE

The furniture: Big, masculine, and architectural. Oversized, updated classics made for very large rooms. Unlike at the other chains, the wood pieces here have interesting details, especially on the legs.

Wiener's favorite find: Bedroom dressers—very well made, they feature dovetailed joinery, jewelry trays, and cedar-lined drawers. "I'm really impressed with the cedar. That's a nice touch. I'd take this in a heartbeat," said Wiener, admiring the 11-drawer Sutter bureau (\$2,095).

What else she really liked: The gleaming nickel—and not oversize—Nottingham Bed (\$1,195 in queen). The supportive Savannah dining chair (\$325, \$415 with arms). Store displays that pull together everything to complete a room—from linens to curtain hardware—so you don't have to.

What she didn't like: You might need a step stool to get into some of these beds, and once you do, you might feel like Edith Ann.

Also check out: Bathroom wall mirrors that tilt up and down, for family members of different heights. The great selection of lamps. And the ready-made curtains. "Beautiful. Look at this silk," Wiener said of the selection of Thai Silk drapes.

Bottom line: If you have the space, the furniture is exceptionally well made and handsome for the price. See restorationhardware.com

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Crate & Barrel has the best selection of contemporary side tables, like the glass-and-chrome Era line.



Wiener likes Pottery Barn's classic Ridged mirror (\$299).



The best of the four chains for bedroom dressers? Hands down, Restoration Hardware.

CRATE & BARREL

The furniture: Stylish and varied, with a range of quality and prices. Though many pieces are contemporary, there's traditional and transitional (those are styles with clean lines but comforting curves, which blend into modern or traditional homes).

Wiener's favorite find: Neuvo sofas by American Leather—zippers keep the back cushions from sliding, the leather is buttery soft, and the queen sleep sofa (\$3,999) has no bar in the middle of your back. There's a lifetime warranty on the frame.

What else she really liked: The Nova, a round dining table (\$1,299) with a contemporary light oak-textured finish. Era brushed-chrome glass tables (\$199 to \$299). The well-made Shaker-style Cabot bedroom set. Folio leather dining chairs (\$249) and barstools (\$329) in cool colors like fern green, red, and chocolate brown.

What she didn't like: Fabric choices include a lot of linens and cottons—harder to keep clean than synthetics. Crate & Barrel does allow customers to upholster pieces in any fabric, even if bought elsewhere; during the fall upholstery sale you'll get the best prices.

Also check out: Wiener found the best selection here of furniture for apartments and small homes, such as the Mesa leather sectional (\$5,498). The rustic iron Blacksmith Etagere (\$299), a tall set of shelves, can store books or plants in tight spaces.

Bottom line: In Wiener's opinion, the best of the four for leather seating, contemporary side tables, apartment-size pieces, and accents such as kilim pillows and baskets. See crateandbarrel.com.

STOREHOUSE

The furniture: Colorful, stylish. While many things are similar to what's at Crate & Barrel, Storehouse is both more modern and retro. Upholstery has more interesting detailing, like welting—although the welting doesn't always run straight or line up.

Wiener's favorite find: The circular Cirque sectional—put a left and right end together for a crescent-shape sofa that encourages conversation. It's \$2,500 with standard cushions, \$2,800 with down blend.

What else she really liked: Dining chairs, especially the versatile Nova (\$299 or \$319 for armchair) and the Octavia (\$359), which looks French and very '20s. Jonathan Adler's nostalgic Woodhouse armchair (\$1,550), with curved legs and contrast trim. The Havanna, a low leather-covered cabinet (\$1,899).

What she didn't like: Wooden pieces, some of which have drawers that are not dovetailed.

Also check out: Jonathan Adler's stylish modern vases and other ceramics.

Bottom line: Wiener found Crate & Barrel and Storehouse comparable—giving an edge on quality to Crate & Barrel—but Storehouse is the place for design that's more modern. See storehouse.com.

POTTERY BARN

The furniture: Simple styling, heavy in feel. Pieces are similar to Restoration Hardware's—updated traditional—but smaller in scale.

Wiener's favorite find: A towering Arc floor lamp (\$399)—unlike most lamps that can arch over a sofa, it's transitional, not modern, so it could fit in a traditional or contemporary home.

What else she really liked: The classic, round wooden Ridged mirror (\$299). "It would be great for a powder room."

What she didn't like: Everything we saw was brown or beige or gold, with just a few hints of color. Floor displays in the store we visited were uninspired—although some locations do a better job of pulling together a look. There was a lot of cotton fabric—harder to clean. Wooden pieces had "clunky" legs and craftsmanship that Wiener felt was below competitors'.

Also check out: The catalog—it has more choices and can be inspiring. In the catalog, Wiener likes the nickel Ethan table lamp (\$179) and, for tight spaces, the Fletcher lamp with shelves (\$349). Tanner glass occasional tables are simple but substantial looking for \$249 to \$399. Wiener also loves the Pottery Barn Kids catalog—she's ordered fabric-lined baskets and bulletin boards for family rooms and kitchens.

Bottom line: Of the four chains, this Wiener's least favorite for style—a matter of taste, of course. But she likes the catalog and Web site; see potterybarn.com.

(left to right) courtesy of Crate & Barrel; courtesy of Pottery Barn; courtesy of Restoration Hardware