

Paul Franson Interview - Transcript

Interview by Mick Winter for Sonic Media

Mick Winter (MW)

Paul Franson, you live in the Napa Valley¹, you're a freelance writer, you write for a number of magazines, journals. You write for *Wines and Vines*² magazine, and *Wine Business Monthly*³, both of them leading magazines on the wine industry in the United States. You also write for local magazines, and you have your own weekly subscriber newsletter, *Napa Life*, which is available at napalife.com⁴.

And you're very familiar with both the wine scene and the restaurant scene. And I wanted to talk to you today to see what you can tell us about the restaurant scene, in terms of noise, decibels. People come here and spend a lot of money in restaurants and enjoy themselves apparently..but how is it for people who encounter..well, let me just ask you about your own personal experience. How is it for you going to restaurants in the valley?

Paul Franson (PF)

I find that a lot of them are noisy, and I think part of that might be that as I get older, I...it's well known that your hearing often deteriorates at the high end which makes it more difficult, so I think older people have problems hearing in restaurants that young people don't. Early in my career, I worked for a company that made sound measuring equipment and I did have to learn quite a bit about that subject, and used their instruments and we actually went out and tested a lot of things. And it's pretty clear that a lot of restaurants here are very noisy, and there are a lot of reasons for that. Part of it is that it is sometimes cheaper to make a restaurant noisy, and in fact, for example, no carpets, no drapes, no tablecloths. Unfortunately, that's also the chic type of décor these days. People want that sort of hard, industrial look. And it's very reflective, it's very noisy. And so that's one reason that it happens. On the other hand, some restaurateurs actually think that a noisy restaurant makes people happy. They think people want to be around a lot of noise and activity. And again pick the young people who are used to having iPods in their ears all the time and stuff like that.

So they want it to be noisy. Some people say that that actually encourages people to eat up and leave, which is not something you'd want in a bar, and bars are notoriously noisy anyway. But that's one thing that happens. There are certainly some restaurants in the valley that are very quiet. If you go to the French Laundry⁵, it's like eating in church almost. I think that's partly because of the attitude of the people there. They're almost there in a reverential mood. And the same is true of a lot of the more expensive restaurants. I think people go there for an old-fashion, fine-dining experience, and so they have to wear coats and ties even...not ties definitely but certainly, but I think the French Laundry requires jackets in the evening. And certainly Auberge⁶, étoile⁷ or La Toque⁸ are not places where you would think young people or sloppy people in the back and make a lot of noise. And of course if a restaurant isn't very successful, it's pretty quiet, too, which is another side of things. As we all know, if

1 For more information, see NapaNow, www.napanow.com

2 *Wines and Vines*, www.winesandvines.com

3 *Wine Business Monthly*, www.winebusiness.com

4 *NapaLife*, www.napalife.com – Emailed weekly by annual subscription. Some information available on website at no charge.

5 The French Laundry is a well-known restaurant in the town of Yountville – www.frenchlaundry.com. Meals are prix fixe - US \$250.00 per person, beverages not included.

6 Auberge du Soleil, www.aubergedusoleil.com - in the community of Rutherford

7 Domaine Chandon, www.chandon.com/etoile-restaurant.html - at Domaine Chandon winery in Yountville

8 La Toque, www.latoque.com - in the city of Napa

you go to a restaurant where there's not much business, it's probably going to be pretty quiet. And sometimes they even crank up the music to make it seem like it's a little bit livelier.

I recall not too long ago being at BarBersQ⁹, which is a barbeque place, at lunchtime, and it was not...there were very few people there, at least when I got there, and they had pretty loud music on, and it was hard to talk over the music and I asked the server about that and they said they liked to have the music and people liked the music. I wonder if they did...I doubt that they did a survey.

So you have a lot of reasons for these things. I know that I personally cannot go back to a place that I can't hear and it's hard to enjoy a meal in that case. And I don't see any sign that restaurants in general are trying to become quieter. I don't see that they're trying to address that.

Redd¹⁰ is an example. When it opened it was so noisy it was just impossible to talk. I remember going there with Margaret Mondavi [wife of the founder of Robert Mondavi Winery¹¹] and we were sort of like yelling at each other across the table at lunchtime, which is ludicrous. And I know that Richard [Richard Reddington, owner of Redd restaurant] recognized that, and I talked to him about it and he spent a lot of money retrofitting, and he admitted the reason he didn't do it in the first place, was because it was so expensive. It cost \$40,000, and he didn't feel it was necessary till he saw the results.

MW

The San Francisco Chronicle¹² gives decibel ratings to restaurants¹³ and they gave him a “bomb”. In other words, four bells, which is the loudest, there's one other category, seldom used, and it's just a large, round bomb with a lit fuse on it, and he ended up getting that.

PF

Well, I, he doesn't anymore I don't think [Ed: the Chronicle now rates it at two bells – 70-75 decibels - “talking normally gets difficult”], but it's still pretty noisy there. I really can't think of..other than certain fancy restaurants, and ones that aren't really as successful as they'd like to be, that are quiet. And it is a problem, and yet I know...Uva's¹⁴...I like to go to Uva. Now their noise comes partly from the music. I mean they have live bands in the evenings.

[6:33 phone rings -- ends at 7:28]

MW

You were saying that Uva has live music so that adds to the...

PF

...the level of the noise, and it's in the bar particularly, and because of the music it's hard to talk, but I think people who go there, go there because they like the music and, of course, if you're sitting at the bar tables they're very small, so at least you're close to each other. On the restaurant side it's not particularly noisier than other places. So that is an exception because they actually have live music. A lot of places have piped-in, you know, recorded music and some of them, it's a big ego thing, that they play music that they think people should like and sometimes they brag about some DJ who

9 BarBersQ, www.barbersq.com - in Napa

10 Redd, www.reddnapavalley.com – in Yountville

11 Robert Mondavi Winery, www.robertmondavi.com – one of the best known and earliest wineries in the Napa Valley

12 *San Francisco Chronicle*, www.sfchron.com/chronicle– daily newspaper in San Francisco

13 SFGate, Napa County Restaurants, <http://tinyurl.com/napafood> – Decibel ratings for many Napa Valley restaurants

14 Uva Trattoria, www.uvatrattoria.com – in Napa

programmed the music for them, and in that case it's rarely going to be something I like, I must admit.

MW

I was at...a few months ago I went to the Napa Airport and..er..actually not the airport, the industrial park. In that direction. Francis Ford Coppola¹⁵ has a...

PF

Mammarella's¹⁶

MW

...and people think he meant that maybe as a kind of test restaurant for more...

PF

I suspect so, yes.

MW

I went in there for lunch, it was fairly quiet. There were hardly any people there, except there was very loud music. And finally the person I was with went up to the staff and said could you please lower or even turn off the music? And she said *thank* you, she said Mr. Coppola insists that we have loud music here and we have to play it unless a guest says something...

PF

Interesting. And I know some young people who really like loud music, and it's what they're used to and a lot of the servers and a lot of the chefs are like that...it's certainly not something I like. Some of my favorite music is at Mambo Sushi [Napa]. They have big band music and jazz and Ella Fitzgerald singing and stuff like that. It's not too loud but it's pretty pleasant music, I must admit. I don't know of any place that plays classical music but I suspect some of those high-end restaurants may very discreetly in the background.

MW

Right. Peet's does a little bit. Peet's Coffee [small coffeehouse chain in six US states, based in Berkeley – the inspiration for Starbucks].

PF

Oh, really

MW

Yeah, I think they do sometimes. One of my favorite restaurants is a little neighborhood place my wife and I go to, Villa Corona¹⁷ [Napa].

PF

Oh, yes

MW

..a Mexican restaurant. They play, almost always, Cuban music. And it's wonderful.

15 Francis Ford Coppola, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_Ford_Coppola - Well-known American director and screenwriter

16 Mammarella, www.mammarellafoods.com

17 Villa Corona, www.villacorona.com – in Napa

PF

As long as it's not too loud. I must admit, some of the music I would not like no matter what level it is, but that depends on where you are. But in general, I think that it's pretty average around here, about the same as most parts of the country.

MW

But that average is pretty painful and quite high. I know that you've mentioned...touched on...several reasons restaurateurs...studies have shown that, well for one thing, really loud music, a certain kind of music, keeps the over-30 crowd away.

PF

Yeah.

MW

So they can get the younger crowd. It also causes a good turnover. In restaurants that want a fast turnover, it will often help them do that.

PF

Right. I would suspect there are not many restaurants in Napa Valley—that we would go to most of the time—that are that sophisticated. I mean an Appleby's [large chain] or something like that. Or an Olive Garden [large chain] might do that, but these people...I think it's mostly just coincidence or often incompetence; they don't know any better.

MW

The theory works generally, but not specifically. In other words, all the acoustic experts and sound people recommend testing your own restaurant...your own business. Don't just take what everybody says because you have to experiment for each one. There are some studies, also, that show that quieter music increases wine sales in good restaurants and causes people to buy higher level, higher priced wine and higher priced food items.

PF

Well, I can see that. If you look at the list of restaurants that are quiet...Auberge du Soleil, étoile, French Laundry, La Toque, Meadowood¹⁸, Terra¹⁹...And of course also in there are a few others...Napa General Cafe²⁰ and Pizzeria Tra Vigne²¹. So, they don't quite fit into that category.

MW

Right. There's also an interesting study, not directly related, but a wine store, a wine shop, on the East Coast...I think it was in New York City...somewhere back in that area, a few years ago...there was a study...they had a variety of international wines, but they had one section that was heavy on...they had French wines on display and another on German wines. And on days when they would play French music over the intercom, the French wine sales zoomed something like sixty percent over normal, and when they switched to German music, the German wines sailed. And the customers generally were unaware there was *any* music going on, let alone French or German²².

18 Meadowood Resort, www.meadowood.com – in St. Helena

19 Terra, www.terrarestaurant.com – in St. Helena

20 Napa General Store, www.napageneralstore.com – in Napa

21 Pizzeria Travigne, www.pizzeriatravigne.com – in St. Helena

22 A. North, D. Hargreaves, and J. McKendrick, “The influence of in-store music on wine selections”, *Journal of Applied*

PF

So maybe this subliminal stuff works. And what would they play for California?

MW

“California, Here I Come?”²³ I don't know.

PF

“The Most Happy Fella”?²⁴ [Broadway show set in the Napa Valley]

PF

Well, I was up recently at Farmstead²⁵, a new restaurant in St. Helena which is a beautiful place. It has a very high ceiling cause it was built in a barn. And it looked like it might be a noisy place just because there are a lot of hard surfaces and all, but I was sitting in the bar there when it was really full, and it was not hard at all to talk. It was pretty quiet. But the people who own it and run it are pretty sophisticated, and they probably have done a very good job of figuring out what they want in the restaurant. Ted Hall [owner of Farmstead] was a high-level consultant with one of the big consulting firms—McKinsey, I think it was—and so he's...and he's an engineer, so I suspect he really looked into it. But that's not true of most people.

It's really unfortunate more restaurants think they have to be so casual they don't like to have to have white tablecloths..there's a big cost for those...but they think it gives the wrong impression, particularly in these times when businesses are weak anyway and people might be turned off and think it's an expensive place if they have white tablecloths. But those certainly...white or red or red and white checked do cut down the noise a lot.

MW

There are some restaurants that even pad underneath the table.

PF

Right

MW

...who are very concerned about that

PF

I think in Redd's case, the biggest thing he probably did was put acoustical tiles in the ceiling area. But drapes, and of course, cushioned chairs, and stuff like that helped a lot too. But I'm certainly no acoustical engineer. I just know that I don't like going back to a place where I can't talk

MW

Psychology 1999, Vol. 84, No. 2, 271-276. Over a 2-week period, French and German music was played on alternate days from an in-store display of French and German wines. French music led to French wines outselling German ones, whereas German music led to the opposite effect on sales of French wine. The authors also refer to another study in which Classical and Top 40 music were played in an American wine cellar, and although these two types of music had no influence on the number of wine bottles sold overall, classical music led to sales of more expensive wine.

23 *California Here I Come*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/California,_Here_I_Come - California's unofficial “state song”

24 *The Most Happy Fella*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Most_Happy_Fella - Broadway musical from 1956 set in the Napa Valley

25 Farmstead, www.longmeadowranch.com/Farmstead – in St. Helena

And I think you bring up something. You say that generally the restaurant owners, managers, say...well nobody really complains, a lot of people seem to like it, you point out they probably aren't doing surveys, and the chances are the people who don't like it, just don't come back again.

PF
Right.

MW
...so they never know.

PF
I love the food at Bouchon²⁶, for example, but it is absolutely impossible to have a conversation there, you know at lunch time particularly, unless you're sitting right next to someone. And then their business lunch, you know you sit across the table from them, it's just uncomfortable.

MW
And what about cell phone use in restaurants?

PF
Groan. I think that's very rude to use a cell phone when other people are around anyway. In a restaurant it's very annoying, because people seem to feel they have to yell in their phones. There are actually technologies available that can block, but they're illegal. And you base a transmitter at a certain frequency and you can wipe out and keep the cell phones from working. And that apparently has been done in Canada, at least in some symphony halls. Just blocked them out. But it would be nice if people were just polite.

MW
Right. We went to a restaurant a few years ago, which we have *not* gone back to, where the couple next to us talked the entire time on their cell phones to other people. Not once did we see them talk to each other. The only time they talked to humans in the place was when they chatted with some of the staff who they were obviously friends with.

PF
What a relationship, right?

MW
Have you heard of hypersonic speakers²⁷? Hypersonic speakers. They direct sound so that, for example, we're sitting here at a table...we could have a cone of sound over us, and somebody two feet away would not hear a sound. So if...they're a thousand dollars a speaker...so...but the technology is there so you can isolate sound so that people in one part of the room...the same room...can hear loud sounds, loud music, and it's totally quiet for the others.

PF
Well, that would be wonderful, as long as you get volume control at the table. I remember, as you do, I'm sure, we've been to many places where they have little jukeboxes in each of the...control for the jukebox at each table, and you get to choose what you want.

26 Bouchon Bistro, www.bouchonbistro.com – in Yountville, also owned by French Laundry chef/owner Thomas Keller

27 Major producers in U.S. of hypersonic speakers are American Technology Corporation www.atcsd.com and Holosonics www.holosonics.com

MW
Right

PF
Of course you don't get to choose the level of the sound there.

MW
There's another thing to, that's also an aside, but something called Silent Discos²⁸, and they started somewhere in Europe...I forget where. People go to a dance, an event, a party. It could be indoors or outdoors. And there's no amplified music. All music comes electronically so everybody is given a pair of wireless headphones. So basically, it started...one reason it started was to do a music...a music event outdoors in a national park in England where they couldn't make any noise. So everybody has headphones on, they're all dancing to the music, but anybody who's watching it hears nothing.

PF
That should be weird to watch. Very strange.

MW
Do you have any...there are organizations in the States and other countries that are devoted to lessening, if not eliminating, noise pollution²⁹. And some of them...on their websites you can print out little cards to give to restaurants. Have you ever had any thought about ways the problem could be addressed here in the Napa Valley?

PF
Well, I don't hesitate to complain when I go places. But sometimes it doesn't matter; they just really don't care. I was recently on vacation in the Caribbean and I went to a place where they seated us in front of the band. And this is a Caribbean band. Not only that, it had a trumpet, which is very unusual down there, plus it was very loud. And we were at a normal-sized table and you literally would have had to be...you know...lip readers to be able to speak. And I talked to the owner about it, and he said "But people like the music", and so eventually we were able to move to a table around the corner and out of the way that still was too loud. But I never would consider going back to that restaurant not that I would be likely to anyways since it's in Antigua.

MW
Do you have...are there restaurants here in the valley you won't go to because of the noise level?

PF
Well, I mentioned Bouchon is not a place I go to for either lunch or business lunch...

MW
You like the food...

PF
I like the food a lot, and I will go sit in the bar once in a while. But that's a typical example. For that matter, Bistro Jeanty³⁰ is pretty loud. It's very small with low ceilings. I think in the evening,

28 See Silent Disco, www.silentdisco.com

29 For examples, NoiseFree, noisefree.org and Pipedown, www.pipedown.info

30 Bistro Jeanty, www.bistrojeanty.com – in Yountville

when it's more of a dinner crowd it's a little different, but lunch time those places are quite loud.

MW

It's interesting you mentioned the atmosphere in the French Laundry was almost reverential, like being in a church. The Laundry is, of course, classified by some as the finest restaurant in the world, and certainly in the top ten by most.

PF

Absolutely.

MW

But Bouchon, who you also mentioned, is also owned by Thomas Keller and that one is so loud you avoid it.

PF

Yeah, and obviously Keller's a very sophisticated guy. He has other Bouchons, one in Las Vegas and now one in Los Angeles area. And I think that those are probably much larger than ones here, and they're very successful. I've gotta believe the one in Las Vegas is loud. You know that's almost required.

But I do like places, particularly on a romantic date or something like that, where you can talk to somebody and enjoy that. There are some places that differ in the seasons. I mean obviously if you sit outside, in general it's quieter. Like with Angèle³¹. If it's summertime, you can sit out on the patio, it's very pleasant. In the wintertime, when it's totally crowded inside it's very hard to hear. And the only time it's not, is when they're not very busy and I don't want to wish that on them.

Celadon³² seems like it's pretty quiet.

MW

The Chronicle gives Celadon a good rating.

PF

And that also has a semi-outside area, too. And that's a pleasant place to go.

MW

The Michelin guide³³ gives something like 10 or 11 stars to restaurants in the Napa Valley, ranging from one to three. Three for the French Laundry, one and two for some others. And it's interesting, Angèle, for example...has a star...I think...but they're also listed high on noise. Am I wrong about Angèle? Maybe I am. [checks list]

PF

Angèle's high here [in decibel rating in the SF Chronicle]

MW

But I might be wrong about the star. Let me see... [around 20:00 minutes]

PF

31 Angèle, www.angelerestaurant.com – in Napa

32 Celadon, www.celadonna.com – in Napa

33 *Michelin Guide to San Francisco Bay Area and Wine Country*, www.michelinguide.com/us/sf_stars_2010.html

You do go to places...

MW

I am wrong. I'm sorry. Angèle does not have a star, but Bistro Jeanty does...but... my point is that four of the stars given out by Michelin Guide are given to restaurants with “Difficult Hearing”[according to decibel rating].

PF

Interesting.

MW

So it's not too strong a factor for Michelin

PF

Well, I guess they have to judge about many things. I'm a little bit dubious about any of those ratings of restaurants or wines or anything else for that matter. I believe it's totally up to you and what you like. I didn't see Cole's³⁴ on the list, which is interesting. I think they're fairly quiet. I mean not *really* quiet, but I've always been able to speak...talk when I go there. And it's more of an old-fashioned type place. Maybe that's why. Great food but...it reminds me more of a San Francisco place. More of an old established restaurant than one that's trying to be trendy.

MW

Just as an aside, what about other noise in the Napa Valley? How do you find...how do you find the city of Napa? Do you find it peaceful? Do you find it typical urban?

PF

Well, it's not as noisy as a big city, but I work at home and...you know..I do hear fire engines go by and stuff like that, but it...we don't really get any aircraft to speak of over us. It's rare enough that you almost notice it. And...helicopters...every few weeks one goes by my the house. I even hear the hot air balloons³⁵ with that swooshing noise they make when they turn the propane. So it's not too noisy. But particularly when you get out of the city it's very, very quiet around here. There are very few sources of noise compared to most places.

MW

Well, thank you. Any other thoughts?

PF

No, I would love to see most of the restaurants turn down the noise level. I'll say that.

MW

How about writing something on that for the local paper?

PF

Good idea.

MW

34 Cole's Chop House www.coleschophouse.com – in Napa

35 NapaNow, www.napanow.com/balloons.html - Riding in hot air balloons is a popular tourist attraction in the Napa Valley

Thanks for your time, Paul

PF

Okay. Thank you.

- end -