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KILLER DECIBELS in Your Neighborhood Restaurant

by Mick Winter

They're IN YOUR HEAD – and they won't go away. Ever.

Feel those walls closing in on you?
They're hard. They're flat. They repeat EVERYTHING you say.

Don't turn to your waiter for help. He can't hear *you* either.



No one can hear you, no matter how loud you scream.
You're trapped in a trendy restaurant, with no escape in sight.

SUBMIT OR STARVE!

Restaurant owners! We implore you. Take the *din* out of *dinner*! Put the *rest* back in *restaurant*!

What's my gripe? Excessive noise in restaurants. But it's not just *my* complaint. The well-known Zagat survey gathers consumer-provided restaurant reviews for cities all over the United States and the second biggest complaint it receives is *noise*: (Well, okay. Since you asked, the first is service.)

“When did the manager's selection of music and its volume become more important than the comfort of paying guests?”

“If we who like quiet remain quiet about it, we will continue to suffer the inability to converse, the loss of hearing and the headaches that are induced by spending hours surrounded by noise.”

You might say that restaurants are privately owned and can do whatever they wish. What right do I have to tell them to turn the sound down?

My answer: Because you and I eat there! Sure they're privately owned, but they're patronized by the public. They can even be seen as *semi*-public. Government has the power to forbid them to allow smoking, and forces them to abide by health and sanitation requirements or they'll be closed down. Government even forbids them to produce excessive noise *outside* their premises. These government regulations are for the public good. All I'm saying is making restaurants quieter *inside* their premises would also be good for the public.

In the United States, there are minimal regulations about excessive noise inside restaurants but they're to protect the hearing health of *workers*, not the enjoyment of customers. Unfortunately, the maximum allowable sound level for health is far beyond the comfort level for restaurant patrons. The maximum (legal) sound of a busy restaurant is comparable to that of busy city traffic at 85 dB (decibels). At that level or above experts recommend wearing earplugs. In comparison, a washing machine at 80 dB is safe, as is a vacuum cleaner at 70 dB, but do you want to carry on a conversation next to one? (A gas lawnmower is 90 dB and an average rock concert is 110 dB, which is dangerous after two minutes.)

It's not just *hearing* that is in danger for restaurant staffs. Intense noise can cause headaches, stress, insomnia, high blood pressure and even heart disease. A recent study in the US showed that prolonged exposure to loud noises could lead to a two to three-fold increased prevalence of angina pectoris, myocardial infarction, chronic heart disease, and isolated diastolic hypertension compared to people that work in quieter places. The results were particularly strong for young male current smokers. The definition of “loud” in this study was “noise so loud that you had to speak in a raised voice to be heard.” That's a level that's *very* common in restaurants.

One problem is that in our society the *outdoor* public spaces are so noisy. You know what it's like. People are surrounded by noisy environments everywhere. They're resigned to the clamor, and think “That's just how it is”. So when they walk into a restaurant and encounter yet more noise, they just shrug. “Of course it's noisy in here. It's noisy everywhere.” And if the environment doesn't have enough noise, people plug earbuds into their ears so they can listen to their own portable noise generator. But that doesn't mean you and I have to put up with it everywhere.

Sure, restaurants should be able to create their own atmosphere and select their own clientele—within the law. But when almost all restaurants in a neighborhood or town are unbearably noisy, it's no longer just an owner's right. It's a *cartel*. Restaurant owners may not plot in secret meetings, but the result, whether by cabal or trend, is the same. It's very difficult to find a restaurant or café where you can carry on a comfortable conversation with your tablemates. You don't need to shout in order to have a conversation at the office; why should you have to put up with it when you're in a restaurant?

And, no, it's not just aging baby boomers who are complaining. It's even people in their 20s and 30s. Why? Because people can't hear each other talk. And it's not that easy to pick up someone at a lively

bistro if all they can see is your lips moving and not hear the intelligent and charming words you're saying.

Dining used to be, and in many countries still is, a pleasant experience where good friends could gather around a table and carry on a convivial conversation. Without shouting. In a large percentage of American restaurants, that's no longer the case.

Have you ever decided not to return to a restaurant because of the noise? Even worse for the restaurant's profits, have you ever turned around and walked out without staying after you realized the noise level? Did you tell the restaurant manager? Probably not. Few of us do, so restaurants are often unaware of how their "lost" customers feel. They'll often say "Our customers like the noise" without ever actually asking the customers. Do *you* like the noise? Right! I don't either.

How did this happen? What can be done? What, you can't hear me? You must be reading this in a restaurant!

A major problem is design. Industrial-style design with hard surfaces is "in." Curtains, carpeted floors, tapestries on the walls, and other sound-absorbing materials are "out." The result is that even low volumes of sound bounce around from wall to wall and floor to ceiling. The louder it gets, the louder patrons have to speak to hear each other. And the vicious circle continues. Fill up a room with people, and particularly with large group tables, and it gets totally out of acoustic control. Then add music, since Americans appear to be terrified by any possibility of silence, and it's worse. Throw in kitchen sounds—these days it's fashionable to have an open kitchen—add some joker talking loudly on his cell phone and another clicking on his notebook keyboard. Then mix in a television set showing sports, CNN, Fox or Oprah, and you've got a sonic atmosphere that's not conducive to talking, eating or much of anything else except stuffing food and liquids in your mouth, money into the restaurant's till, and getting quickly out of the place. The restaurant has achieved an impressive level of cacophony that's great for hearing aid companies but not so good for the humans who have to work or dine in the middle of this sonic assault on the ears.

People go to restaurants and cafés not just for food but for socializing with family, friends or business colleagues. Maybe even for romance. You've done that, right? They want an environment where they can relax and experience an enjoyable conversation. They should be able to leave the restaurant feeling nourished, energized and glowing from the warm, friendly experience, not staggering out with ringing ears or headaches.

A good rule of thumb is this: If you have to raise your voice to be heard by the people at your table, the room noise is probably too loud. That would put the decibel level at 75 to 80; legal but very uncomfortable.

Let me tell you about restaurants in my home area in California. Out of forty-seven Napa Valley restaurants reviewed by the *San Francisco Chronicle*, only fifteen offer an environment where you can talk easily. In eighteen of the others, talking normally gets difficult, and in another twelve diners can talk only by raising their voices. Two other restaurants are rated as too noisy for normal conversation. Period.

That means that at only one-third of the better restaurants in the Napa Valley will diners be able to carry

on a comfortable tableside conversation. At the other two-thirds, diners will pay twenty to thirty-five dollars for an entree—and far more for a full dinner with wine—in order to, at best, carry on a conversation with difficulty or, at twelve of these restaurants, shout at their friends all evening.

The Napa Valley is an internationally known wine and food mecca where renowned chefs prepare foods of great delicacy for the supposedly refined taste buds of their customers. You would expect these award-winning chefs to want to make very sure that their diners fully enjoy the complex flavors that they have worked so hard to assemble—and for which their customers have paid so dearly. I've mentioned the effect of the noise on the ears. How well do the *taste buds* of restaurant customers function in that sort of environment? Not very well.

One study in the UK found that “food saltiness and sweetness is diminished when eaten in the presence of loud compared to quiet background noise.” Salt is added very carefully to food by chefs in order to enhance the inherent taste of the food. How's that *diminished taste* working out for you, chef? And how are your guests enjoying their “diminished sweetness” desserts? The study did show that food tasted “crunchier” in the presence of background noise. That should help those high-end restaurants that give their customers pretzels and potato chips as complimentary appetizers.

Many restaurant owners intend the loud noise. Others are simply unaware. The intentional ones believe that the more noise, the more energy. More energy means they'll attract more patrons, and that those patrons will usually be a younger, loose-spending demographic. It also means the more those patrons will drink as they get caught up in the high-energy of the place.

But this isn't always the case. And it can mean the loss of many patrons who would spend quite well—if they felt welcome and comfortable at the establishment.

It's true that studies have indicated that faster and louder music increases the rate of drinking and eating. This will, with eating at least, likely result in faster turnover of tables. Correspondingly, another study showed that slower music would increase dining *times*, which would slow down table turnover. At the same time, it indicated that the amount of money spent by diners on beverages *increased*. In this case it is up to the restaurant manager if he wants higher beverage sales or higher food sales, but how do *you* feel about being manipulated like this?

What can you as a customer do?

Lots—and currently you have more leverage than you might normally have. The economy is in a severe downturn and restaurants are hurting. They need new customers more than ever, and to hold onto their current customers. So restaurant owners have a good reason to get smarter. And smarter means to offer an enjoyable dining experience to a wider range of customers than just the one narrow age segment they seem to have focused on. Here are some suggestions:

- Before you go or phone to make a reservation, check your local newspaper and the Internet to see if reviews indicate noise levels. Look online to see photographs of the restaurant; if it looks very open with hard surfaces, beware.
- If possible, go on a slow day and at quiet times.
- Ask for a table in a quiet location, perhaps in an alcove, or an area away from the bar or kitchen. Sitting on the periphery of the room is usually quieter.. Some restaurants have special quiet areas, and in even the loudest restaurant some locations can be considerably quieter—or at

- least less noisy.
- Whether or not you're actually hard of hearing, tell the host that you are. It might solicit some extra sympathy assistance.
- Avoid sitting near large groups; the more people, the louder they have to be to communicate.

Once you're seated, if it seems necessary, ask the manager—not your server—to turn the lighting down. People tend to talk more loudly the brighter the room and, conversely, more quietly when lighting is more subdued. If necessary, ask the manager—again, not your server—to turn the music down or, sadly but frequently, the television. People tend to speak more loudly to be heard over music. Be persistent. If he won't do it, ask to be moved to a quieter area of the restaurant. If he does do it, notice that not only is the music quieter but so are the conversation levels.

If your location turns out to be noisy, ask your server if there's another table you could move to. If the problem is loud patrons at another table, ask if the staff could speak to them or move you. The silence of mobile phones should be a given. Listening to someone at the next table talk loudly on their phone is particularly annoying because of a phenomenon that researchers have called “halfalogues”. Since you hear only half a conversation, whether you try to or not your mind is busy trying to figure out what the person on the other end of the conversation is saying. The result is that your mind gets tired, and you get irritated.

If all this seems like you have to be a whining complainer, it's not your fault. You're simply asking for the comfortable dining atmosphere that the restaurant should have already provided. After all, you're paying for it.

Lastly, many restaurants provide a small card for you to write comments about the food and service. Be honest about your experience. And let the manager or other key person know on your way out how you felt about the noise level. If it was so loud you won't be returning, let them know. But give them a carrot. Tell them to notify you when they've made changes and you'll be back.

But stay away till then. I will too.

[sidebar]

Hearing is Believing

Websites where you can see and hear decibel levels of a variety of sounds and, should you wonder, test your own hearing.

Dangerous Decibels

Oregon Health & Science University

www.dangerousdecibels.org/virtualexhibit

Free Hearing Test

www.freehearingtest.com

Noise Free America

www.noisefree.org

Noise Meter

National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health

<http://bit.ly/noisemeter>

Speech in Noise Test

<http://www.hear-it.org/page.dsp?page=5224>

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