



# How to Avoid the Din when Dining Out

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*Editor's note: It's good to see that there are other acoustic rating systems in the world for eating establishments. Interestingly, our own CRAI system gives more stars to good venues in the same way as food ratings, whereas the system mentioned in this article uses bells to indicate noise level and hence 5 is considered very bad.*

## Some patrons want restaurants to turn down the volume

Hip and trendy restaurants encourage buzz. Loud conversation and music are considered mood enhancers, and young customers, especially, equate din with good times. Sometimes that is exactly what you want. But when the buzz becomes a roar and you have to yell at your table mates, then there's a problem.

Think about your last restaurant experience. Did you have to raise your voice to carry on a conversation? Did background noise make you repeat and repeat what you said? Will you ever go back?

"I can't relax if it's too noisy in a restaurant," said Keith Wormsley of Carnegie. "I don't like to get up too close in somebody's face and have to yell to be heard."

"When a restaurant is really noisy,

the tables are too close together, cell phones are going off and people are talking too loud, it's not relaxing," said Georgia Blotzer of Mount



Washington. "I want to eat and get out. So, I just avoid noisy places."

**Bottom line: Noise annoys.**

Nevertheless, restaurants have a job

to do and a demographic to please, and that can get noisy. What you may not realize is that there is accountability and responsibility on your end, too.

We talked to both sides—restaurateurs and hearing experts—and we've come up with some tips to make your next restaurant visit a win-win experience. And, we think we might have a way to let you know in advance which restaurants are a good fit for you and which ones can give you fits.

## The restaurant

Of all the reasons we go to a restaurant, good food isn't always top priority. Companionship, business, socializing, celebrating, relaxing and just hanging out are what lure us into the dining rooms. But anyway you cut it, conversation is an essential part of the deal.

Increasingly, some restaurant owners shoot themselves in the foot.

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Upscale restaurants traditionally muffled loud conversation with thick carpets and plush drapery.

More modern restaurants, however, look to attract customers by projecting a unique image with contemporary interiors, crowded tables and loud music.

Sound reverberates and minimalist interiors accentuate the problem. Hard floors, glass windows, high ceilings and sleek tables are ideal for careening sound. On their own, each of these has little effect, but taken collectively, they add up.

Often, acoustics are not the main problem. One of the most influential factors in noise levels is the proximity of the tables.

Restaurants are out to make a profit, of course. So they might pack in as many tables as they can, not just for ambience, but for business. If they would halve the number of tables, there would be half the noise but also half the income. That's one solution that's not going to happen.

Pack, say, 80 people into a small space, serve them drinks and they can create a deafening noise. Acoustic engineers call this the "cocktail party effect." After a glass of wine or two, people talk louder and louder.

When this happens at tables all over the restaurant, the volume goes up and up until people have to resort to yelling, and the volume goes up even more.

Gregg Leblanc is director of marketing for McCormick & Schmick's Seafood Restaurants, based in Portland, Ore. In his business, he said, it's all about the guests.

"We want to create an intimate environment that allows enough ambient noise to create a balance of liveliness and yet be comfortable for conversation," Mr. Leblanc said.

"We do this by the way the tables and chairs are set up, and we hope

that, say, two guests can lean in and talk but be confident that no one behind them can hear their conversation. Guests can ask to be moved to a different table or request to sit in a booth, which we call 'snugs.' You can't get more intimate conversation than when in a snug."

The bar, he said, is not designed as a waiting area for the dining room. Instead, the bar will have its own social environment and its own music. Guests should know that the restaurant can and does adjust the music, and that's dictated by the number of guests in the room and the social feeling in the group.

"A Friday night at 9 will have a different energy and noise level



**Patrons enjoy dinner at McCormick & Schmick's. The chain's marketing director says the restaurant tries to create a lively but intimate environment.**

than, say, a Tuesday night at 6," he said.

Restaurant owners who want both quiet and busy do have options in which they can keep good, clean design, but not at the expense of the ears. Carpeting, tablecloths and drapery all absorb sound. Banquette seating and booths offer barriers to sound. It might even be possible to break up the dining room with screens and install sound-proofing material. In a best-case scenario, there could be a section that is meant for diners who like it quieter.

Pittsburgh diners can count on a relatively quiet dinner at Le Pommier Bistro Francais on the

South Side.

"People do come to our bistro expecting an acceptable sound level," said Jeremy Carlisle, co-owner and house manager. "They know that they can count on having an intimate conversation without the next table hijacking their private sound space. The two quietest, coziest tables are in our small bar in an adjacent room."

The restaurant always plays background music, especially when voices get loud, because it blurs conversation, Mr. Carlisle said. "We do like a buzz because it gives good energy to the room."

Many people, however, can do without background music. So how

about dividing the sound system into zones that can be individually controlled, to allow background music to be played in some parts of the restaurant and not others?

## Self-defense

On the other hand, most people don't want to go to a restaurant that is too quiet, a social dead zone where you are afraid your conversation will be overheard, or you feel stilted and get overly polite.

What's a person to do?

Elaine Mormer, clinical audiology coordinator at UPMC, offers suggestions for coping skills in restaurants for everyone, not just those with a hearing problem.

"To make good choices, you need a strategy," said Ms. Mormer. "A little research and lots of common sense go a long way." Here are her suggestions for picking a restaurant environment with listening-friendly seating:

- Scope out a new-to-you restaurant in advance if you can. Stop by for a drink and notice rooms and table arrangements. Several smaller rooms will be quieter than one big, cavernous

room.

- Lighting matters. It's hard enough to hear in a din, and visual cues from the person you are listening to help understanding. Avoid places where it's so dim it's hard to read the menu.
- Make reservations well in advance, rather than walking in. You can ask the host for a location where the odds are you will be able to hear well.
- A couple is better than a foursome is better than a gang at the table, because cross-conversation can be difficult. More than four people at a table and conversation usually breaks into twos and threes anyway.
- Choose where you sit. Ask for a corner table, or one along a wall. That way, the voices as well as noise will be coming from only one direction. Avoid the center of any room, where you will be surrounded by sound. Booths are a good choice because of the

barriers between tables.

- Avoid sitting in or near the bar, especially when it's crowded. The more people drink, the louder



*“...Pittsburgh diners can count on a relatively quiet dinner at Le Pommier Bistro Francais on the South Side...”*

they talk. On the other hand, sometimes you can hear best when sitting side by side on stools at the bar, because you can talk right into your companion's ear.

- Table spacing is key. No matter how much drapery is in evidence, if tables are jammed together and people are cheek by jowl, hearing conversation will be a problem.
- Before you unfold that napkin, notice the people at the tables sitting near you. If you accept a table near a group in full swing, partying full blast, expect disaster.
- Avoid toddlers and babies in high chairs unless they are yours.
- Wide tables and deep chairs may be gracious, but the wide distance between diners only encourages loud talking. A reasonable table width between diners is 30 inches. The farther away you are from the speaker, the more you will be bothered by reverberant sound.
- Wednesdays and Thursdays are relatively calm days in a dining room. Friday can be mayhem. If you make a reservation for 7 p.m. on a Saturday night, you

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are asking for it.

- Be assertive. Most people have no problem asking if the air-conditioning can be turned down, but they are shy about asking if the music, or what passes for it these days, can be made lower.
- Remember: It's your money. You are paying for the whole experience. If you have tried everything, and your complaints have fallen on deaf ears, vote with your feet.

## The invisible problem

If you have tried all that and you still have trouble hearing, well, it could be you.

Right about the time that your eyes sense the need for bifocals, say, around 45 or 50 years old, you might be having the beginnings of hearing loss. As people age, their hearing suffers just as their eyesight does. And because it is an invisible problem, hearing loss is often ignored.

Catherine V. Palmer, director of audiology at UPMC and associate professor in communication science and disorders tells it like it is.

"Hearing loss does not come from occasional loud noise. Loss depends on how loud and how long you are subjected to noise.

"Many things can cause damage to ears. Genetic factors contribute, of course, and certain medications do. But occupational factors play a role, too. You are in line for hearing loss if you work as a musician, as a dentist, a hunter, a truck driver, a server in a restaurant, work in construction or in a factory.

Yes, include the kids who walk

around with earphones, music blaring nonstop in their ears. The abuses eventually come home to roost."

The first thing to go, according to Dr. Palmer, are the high frequencies, especially when there is background noise. And one of the first places you will notice it is in a restaurant.

"The No. 1 complaint we get in the clinic is that people cannot hear in restaurants," she said. "Besides conversation, there is background noise from clattering dishes, piped-in music and loud talking at nearby tables. How the noises combine depends on how the restaurant is set up.

"A person with a hearing loss describes the sounds as babble with everything being smeared together. If speech isn't loud and clear enough, it is impossible to sort it out. It has gotten so bad for some people that they simply refuse to eat out at all, or they find one restaurant and stick with it regardless of food quality.

"On top of that, noisy restaurants contribute to vocal strain. The louder the environment, the louder you have to talk or yell, the harder it is on the vocal cords. Add second-hand smoke and alcohol to the mix, and you're asking for a hoarse voice."

## An early warning system

About a decade ago, restaurant critics at the San Francisco Chronicle decided that it was important to rate restaurants for noise as well as food and ambience. Working with experts in acoustics, they developed a system to measure the decibel levels. Their restaurant

reviews, whose food ratings use stars to indicate quality, now include a chart to rate sound with bell icons, for sound level. Their system looks like this.

- One bell: Under 65 decibels. Pleasantly quiet.
- Two bells: 65-70 decibels. Can talk easily.
- Three bells: 70-75. Talking normally gets difficult.
- Four bells: 75-80. Can talk only in raised voices.
- Bomb: 80+. Too noisy for normal conversation. Yelling.

To get some idea of what this means, this reporter trekked around to South Side restaurant bars and dining rooms on a recent Friday night between 7:30 and 8:30 p.m. Readings were taken with a sound-level meter borrowed from UPMC.

In no way are these findings scientific. They are rough, ballpark noise levels:

Le Pommier, 65 decibels, or 1 bell; McCormick & Schmick's, 80, or 4 bells; Cheesecake Factory, 80 or 4 bells; Dish Osteria and Bar, 91, the bomb; Nakama Japanese Steakhouse and Sushi Bar, 92, the bomb. A passing motorcycle on East Carson Street from 10 feet away, 95 decibels.

There isn't a similar system here [in Pittsburgh] that could guide people with normal hearing and those with hearing problems about challenging dining environments. But such a guide could help people plan in advance where to hold a celebration blast or a romantic rendezvous. Otherwise, restaurant servers might have to learn a new script: "Want ear plugs with that?"

*Sunday, August 20, 2006*

"...Command that your marshal be careful to be present over the household, and especially in the hall, to keep the household, within doors and without, respectable, without dispute or noise, or bad words..."

Robert Grosseteste, English Statesman, 1175—1253

"...Three days in a city now and I'm quite flipped. There's too much noise. I just can't do with it..."

Lou Harrison, American Composer, 1917—2003