

Who Put the Din in Dinner?

By Bonnie Eisenfeld

“The point of eating is to slow down life long enough to promote what Brillat-Savarin called, with simple charm, good cheer. It doesn’t just take time, but makes time—carves out evenings, memories. That’s what Darwin meant when he said that we recall good dinners as happy days, wrapped like flies in a spider’s web by the silk of memory.”

Adam Gopnik, *The Table Comes First*

The reverberating din of loud music and loud voices. Restaurant patrons don’t like it. Staffers don’t like it. It has been linked to hearing loss, ringing ears, headaches, stress, and hypertension. And if you have to shout to be heard, after dinner you might end up with a sore throat. So why do restaurants deliberately increase their noise level by playing loud music and not using noise-reduction materials? We went looking for some answers.

Research studies have reported that when a restaurant plays loud, fast music, patrons consume more, eat faster, talk less, and leave sooner, thus increasing the restaurant’s turnover and profit. In addition, restaurateurs think patrons want an exciting, energetic, party ambiance and that a quiet restaurant will seem boring and dead. However, these restaurateurs may have overestimated how much noise their patrons will tolerate. The right sound level should enhance the dining experience, not spoil it.

Echoing the sentiments of many Center City residents, *Center City Quarterly* editor Nancy Colman complains, ... “the decibel level of too many restaurants has gotten way out of hand lately. One can barely conduct a coherent conversation, which is one of the main objectives of dining out with friends.” According to Zagat surveys conducted in several cities, noise is the number one irritant, and over 70 percent of survey respondents avoid restaurants that are too noisy.

Craig LaBan, restaurant critic for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, often criticizes the loudness of restaurants and even mentions the specific decibel level. Websites like Open Table include restaurant patron reviews rating noise levels, and comments on Yelp indicate that many diners are looking for quieter restaurants. Perhaps avoiding indoor



A packed house, an absence of soft surfaces, and noisy neighbors at the next table can make for a deafening dining experience.

noise is one reason people prefer to dine outdoors at sidewalk tables, with views of parked cars or idling trucks and the sounds of honking horns and traffic.

The Hartman Group reports that millennials (people in their 20s and 30s) are the most influential demographic segment, and appear to have a higher tolerance for loud noise. Restaurants have been targeting millennials, because in the past they dined out more frequently than older people. But the restaurant industry might be surprised to learn that the percentage of millennials who dine out has declined, from 60 percent in 2011 to 49 percent in 2014.

Baby boomers (people in their 50s and 60s), by comparison, spend more money dining out than younger adults, while restaurant visits by boomers have grown steadily. A research study by the NPD Group found that 76 million baby boomers accounted for 23 billion restaurant visits in 2012, and \$172 billion in revenue. It’s fair to say that healthy and active boomers with disposable income are out to enjoy life and want a total dining experience with a balance of cuisine, service and ambiance.

But it’s not just a matter of preference. Loud noise can adversely affect one’s health. About 26 million people between the ages of 20 and 69 have high-frequency hearing loss caused by exposure to loud noises. Restaurants that exceed government noise standards are actually breaking the law when it comes to worker exposure. Restaurant noise levels are equivalent to those found in industrial environments, where the Occupational Safety

and Health Administration (OSHA) requires workers to wear hearing protection if they are exposed to noise 85 decibels or higher. A 66-decibel reading is equivalent to the sound of normal conversation. Decibel levels in the 80s and 90s are equivalent to power lawn mowers, chainsaws, jackhammers, and roaring motorcycles.

I have enjoyed lunches and dinners without loud music at many restaurants in Center City. Two with quiet courtyard gardens are Le Cheri at the Art Alliance on 18th Street at Rittenhouse Square, and Branzino on 17th Street between Spruce and Locust. At The Prime Rib at the Radisson Blu Warwick Hotel, a piano player performs entertaining background music during dinner. Lunch at XIX at the Hyatt at The Bellevue may be the most pleasant, relaxing lunch in the city.

Other restaurants without loud music in our neighborhood and beyond include: Seafood Unlimited (20th between Spruce and Locust); Friday Saturday Sunday (21st and Rittenhouse; see article in Fall CCQ); Casta Diva (20th between Walnut and Locust); Estia (Broad and Locust); Bistro St. Tropez in the Marketplace Design Center (23rd and Market); Granite Hill at the Art Museum, Caribou Café on Walnut near 12th, and a host of Asian restaurants too numerous to mention.

Some other restaurants do not have loud music but could still stand improvement in the use of noise-reduction materials. Patrons are encouraged to make their opinions known to restaurants, either directly or through rating websites.