

Shrink Rap: High Decibel Dining

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It's time for a pop quiz for all who dine out at least occasionally – which is almost everyone along the coast, where there's so much disposable income available to indulge in culinary delight.

Choose the best answer to the following questions about your typical dining experience. The winner receives a gift certificate for two at the restaurant of his choice where the sound level measures at least 85 decibels.

1. Dining out at a family/casual restaurant may be hazardous to your health and the enjoyment of your experience because:
 - a. Infants and young children are often allowed to cry, scream, and rough-house with little or no parental supervision
 - b. Background music is almost always too frantic and too loud, making for a tense, hurried, and uncomfortable experience, affecting your nervous system and digestion
 - c. The Alcohol/Noise Ratio: The level of boisterous talking and spirited (but forced) laughter goes up in volume in direct proportion to the quantity of alcohol being consumed by patrons;
 - d. Jolly laughter and loud, fast background music to pump up the mood are (mistakenly) considered essential ingredients to a fun dining experience
 - e. All of the above
2. You're shelling out big bucks for fine dining at your favorite upscale chophouse. We're talking reservations required, mandatory valet parking with Aston Martins and Bentleys parked conspicuously in front, and the owner strolling the tables and schmoozing with the regulars. The ambient noise level here will predictably be:
 - a. Lower than your family joint but often still too loud to have a pleasant conversation because of the Alcohol/Noise Ratio and the fact that the tables are spaced too closely together
 - b. Very low, with only appropriate, quiet and tasteful background music never too loud to intrude on conversation or make diners feel anxious or hurried
 - c. Not as low as it ought to be given the amount you're paying
 - d. Forget the fancy meal - it's just wasted money and calories. It's a better idea to get some Chinese to go and bliss out in front of your 46" LCD HDTV.

Perhaps it comes with middle age and a more sensitized nervous system but many of the places I used to like are now intolerably noisy. I'm more irritated by decibel enhancers such as loud talkers, unruly children, incessant blabbing on cell phones while eating, amped up and chaotic background music, and distracting flat-panel televisions perched high up in corners with the volume too loud.

It's pretty obvious that the psychological purpose of inundating customers with fast music is to get us to eat faster and then out the door. But at what price to our digestive system when we're subjected to these noisy and chaotic conditions? Ever notice how many people are nervously shaking or tapping their hands, legs, or feet in these scenes? Restaurants should be places to relax and enjoy a meal - not to get artificially jacked up. An afternoon or evening out should not mean we're paying for high decibel dining.

While management gives a lot of attention to menu, food preparation and presentation, décor, staff training, and marketing - it seems none is given to background music and other sources of noise and distraction.

At a recent dinner at Kulettos in San Francisco, I noticed there was no music playing. It was such an unusual occurrence that I asked the manager about it. He said the conversation level was high enough at dinner, that they'd have to turn the music up too loud for it to be heard. How refreshing it was to hear a manager actually be aware of how noise affects his patrons. I welcomed the thought that more restaurateurs might think like this back home.