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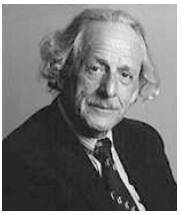

Quiet Restaurants and Noisy Discos—There's a Time and a Place

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Several years ago, I resigned my membership in the Downtown Club of Philadelphia. My main reason was the club's unwillingness to do something about the noise level of the main dining room. I regretted their adamant position on this question since they served excellent meals in a huge room on the top floor of the Public Ledger Building near ISI®. I have often wondered why the members of this institution returned with such relish and regularity for a "treatment" that, to say the least, is maddening. These same people would protest noise pollution anywhere else, why not where they dine?

This madness is not confined to Philadelphia. Recently in Paris, I was taken to one of the new "in" restaurants. The place was elegant, and the menu was most interesting. But by the time we had placed our order, I realized that the noise level in the place must have been in excess of 90 decibels (db). I conversed with Dimitri Viza, editor of *Differentiation*, and another guest. I had to raise my voice to a shout in order to be heard over the background noise. For this to happen in Paris seems to me the ultimate denial of French culture. If you cannot find peace and quiet in a French restaurant, what else is there to live for? But as Gloria Gaynor sings in the disco tune, "I will survive."

For me, a good restaurant is a place where one can escape from the noise of the street. Don't misunderstand me. At times I can enjoy eating a hot dog sold by a vendor in the streets of Philadelphia. The background noise is a pleasant reminder that life is going on. But if one is to enjoy a meal and conversation with friends, noise is your worst detractor.

And it is not a question of price. I have entertained many ISI visitors at a nearby Indian restaurant at the lowest possible cost, with excellent food and an almost non-existent noise level. The background music creates a pleasant atmosphere that is conducive to good conversation. So if you are going to spend a lot of money at an "exclusive" restaurant, you surely should expect more than excellent food and service.

I find it remarkable and distressing that so few restaurateurs appreciate the importance of silence—or rather, how irritating noise can be. In a busy downtown restaurant at lunch time, one can understand it when they crowd people together like cattle in a feedlot. But is it necessary that the sounds of conversations reverberate due to faulty acoustics? Their preoccupation with finance is epitomized by locating ringing cash registers within earshot of your table.

I'm really not sanguine about convincing such entrepreneurs, if you can call them that, that noise reduction is esthetically pleasing. Some may in fact argue that noise and hubbub are just what some people want. Otherwise, why do so many of them return again and again? One definition of noise is "any sound that is undesired or that interferes with something to which one is listening."[1] What may be desired by some is noise for others. Rock music is a good example. Even as I complain about noisy restaurants, the trade journal *Restaurant Hospitality* reports that a chain of restaurant/discos called Bob-

by McGee's is doing a booming business![2]

The subjective nature of noise is also demonstrated by the experience of the Hoover Company. Some years ago, they developed a quiet vacuum cleaner. The machine did not sell well, however, because consumers did not believe that a quiet vacuum cleaner could be as powerful as a noisy one.[3] (p. 6-7)

The story is significant because it symbolizes the prevalent notion that noise must accompany power. There is an oft repeated truism that a noisy environment is the price we pay for progress. I for one don't believe it. Almost ten years ago, I wrote an essay calling for more R&D into noise abatement.[4] Even when industrial progress is necessary, we now know that the price is too high, that noise can and must be reduced. The proliferation of such anti-noise groups as Citizens Against Noise (PO Box 59170, Chicago, IL 60659) and the National Organization to Insure a Sound Controlled Environment (4620 Wisconsin Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20016) attests to this fact.

In their campaigns against noise, such organizations note that aside from the esthetic considerations, noise can have deleterious effects on people. The Better Hearing Institute (1430 K Street, NW, Washington, DC), for example, estimates that more than 16 million Americans have hearing problems, a good number of which may be noise induced.[5] A recent article in the *Futurist* asserts that five million people under the age of 18 suffer hearing impairment largely from exposure to rock music.[6] Studies also show that noise can aggravate or trigger a wide variety of psychological disorders.[7] Whether or not noise can cause various physiological disorders is still an open question.[8] I can attest that excess noise can precipitate tinnitus.[9]

Considering how often people eat in noisy environments, it is remarkable that we know so little about the effects of noise on human digestion. Unfortunately, research on the subject has been scant. There is some evidence that noise might affect the movement of food through the digestive system, although the implications for human health here are unclear.[10] A Soviet study reported that people exposed to prolonged high-level noise complained of a variety of gastric disorders.[11] One of the most recent studies on the subject showed that mice exposed to varying levels of noise from 80 db to 110 db increased their food intake.[12] Is this a factor in obesity? Since the trend in America and elsewhere is toward "dining out," it would seem relevant to establish whether there is a conclusive link between exposure to noise and digestive irregularities.

In order to be more objective about what is a subjective problem, I decided to find out how loud restaurants really are. What follows is by no means a comprehensive scientific study. But hopefully, *Current Contents*® readers will make their own investigations to check what I have found.

Although the perception of noise is subjective, the *intensity* of sound can be objectively measured with a noise meter. Hand-held noise meters are available for less than a hundred dollars. We bought one from Edmund Scientific Company of Barrington, NJ.

Measurements of sound are expressed in decibels. Decibel scales are logarithmic, so that a sound of 70 db is ten times as intense as a sound of 60 db. The most commonly used decibel scale is the A scale, which covers a frequency range that is most sensitive to human hearing. Leaves on a tree rustle at 20 dbA. A child screams at 90 dbA. At this level, sound becomes detrimental to human hearing. Exposure to 90 dbA for eight hours a day can result in hearing loss over time. A subway rider is exposed to about 100 dbA. Two hours a day of this racket are all that's needed to produce progressive hearing loss.

Recently, a few members of the ISI staff dined in five restaurants in the Philadelphia area. Each of these restaurants is highly recommended for food quality. To determine if the aural quality could be equally recommended, the

ISI group brought along a portable noise meter. It is interesting that no one in any of the restaurants commented on the small grey box sitting on the table.

As expected, the noise levels at each restaurant varied considerably. The five restaurants are identified here according to their relative noisiness. The restaurant judged to be the quietest by the ISI group, Restaurant A, is located on the ground floor of a hotel and offers an international cuisine. Restaurant B, which occupies the first floor of a converted townhouse and serves continental entrees, was judged "generally quiet." Restaurant C, a contemporary French restaurant, was "generally noisy." Restaurant D, which features a wide selection of gourmet entrees, was "noisy." Restaurant E, a "country French" restaurant known for its exotic drinks, was judged to be the noisiest of the five.

The sources of the most offending sounds also varied. In Restaurant D, the recorded background music was very noticeable. A few notes from a flute, coupled with other noises in the restaurant, produced peak readings of 86 dbA. On the other hand, there was no music in Restaurant C, and the music in restaurant B (light classical) was unobtrusive. The loudest noises in those two restaurants (86 dbA) came from customer chatter. In Restaurant B, the chatter did not exceed 79 dbA until after the meal, while at Restaurant C, it was more or less continuous. The tables in both places were very close together. In Restaurant E, a frequently used ice-crusher at the bar caused the most offensive noise. Surprisingly, noises from the kitchen were not a factor at any of the five restaurants.

To provide a sense of scale, here are some db levels generated at ISI's own table in the "generally quiet" Restaurant B. Bear in mind that these readings are additive and include the background noise. At the time they were recorded, the restaurant was nearly empty, and only the light classical music at low volume could be heard: the breaking of French bread, 64 dbA; the waiter speaking to our staff members, 68 dbA; our staff members conversing with each other, 70 dbA. On the basis of these readings, the ISI group decided that a restaurant can be a reasonably quiet place to eat if noise level *peaks* do not often exceed the low 70s.

In Restaurant E, the constant sound level ranged from about 75 dbA to 81 dbA most of the time. (Remember that 80 db is ten times greater than 70 db.) As mentioned, the loudest noises came from the bar, which was fairly crowded. Additional noise was caused by the ringing of a cash register. This was the only restaurant of the five where a cash register could be heard in the dining room. The wood and brick floor was not fully carpeted, so the room tended to reverberate noise.

Apart from the intensity of sound, one must also take into account the frequency. A high-pitched noise can be more grating than a lower pitched sound of similar intensity. The highest peaks for any of the five restaurants—90 dbA—were recorded in Restaurant E when the ice-crusher was in use. Like a screaming child, a high-pitched ice-crusher is much harder to take than, say, a piano playing at the same intensity.

In Restaurant A, quietest of the five, the reading on the noise meter was fairly constant at about 68 dbA. The restaurant had what appeared to be an acoustical ceiling. Sound did not carry in the dining room. The ISI group could barely hear the many people who stood conversing at the bar just a few feet away. Popular music was piped in, but quietly. Even the waiters and waitresses spoke in whispers. The highest peaks on the noise meter, 76 dbA, were caused by our own staff members' conversation.

To review some of our findings, noise levels in three of the restaurants reached a high of 86 dbA. The noise level in one reached a high of 90 dbA. To provide a comparison, 86 dbA is equivalent to the sound of a diesel truck 50 feet away traveling at 40 miles an hour! Whether or not restaurant noise is permanently unhealthful, it is certainly

temporarily irritating. Whenever the noise level approaches 80 dbA, you must raise your voice to be heard by someone at your own table. That means there is too much noise, whatever the combination of causes.

What can a restaurant do to reduce noise? We talked to acoustical specialist Paul B. Ostergaard. His consulting firm, Ostergaard Associates, worked on ISI's new headquarters in the University City Science Center. Ostergaard says that a proper acoustical ceiling is one of the most essential and most neglected tools for noise abatement in restaurants.[13] He notes that even where acoustically designed ceilings are present, some restaurateurs will render them useless by applying numerous coats of paint over the porous tile material. Ostergaard says that installing an acoustical ceiling is no great trouble or expense. A similar effect is obtained in Indian and other restaurants by hanging soft fabrics from the ceiling.

To learn more about what can be done to control noise, we spoke to Jeff Hinkle of the Restaurant School in Philadelphia. Hinkle agrees that an acoustical ceiling can work wonders for noise abatement in restaurants. But he observes that many restaurants in Philadelphia are located in older buildings with molded ceilings that are too beautiful to cover with tiles.[14] In such a case, says Hinkle, upholstered seats, padded tables, canvas paintings, tapestries, wall rugs, drapes on windows, carpeting, and leafy plants will all help to muffle sound, although no one of these measures is sufficient in itself.

Hinkle asserts, however, that noise control in a restaurant can be carried to extremes. "I once worked in a restaurant that was too quiet," he says. "It had a very formal dining room to begin with, and when people were seated, they talked in whispers. They felt very stiff, very intimidated by the lack of sound."[14] Personally, I'd like to try that place out. I have never felt intimidated by silence.

When there is the right motivation, even miracles can be performed. There is a disco restaurant in Oslo, Norway, that has the best of both worlds. They have learned to bridge the two cultures of noisy disco and quiet eating. In the restaurant section, you can eat a delightful meal in peace and quiet. When you are finished, you can go to the disco area to dance off all those calories. Don't forget to bring a little cotton for your ears. Unlike the dinner table, the disco is not the place for conversation. Like so much else in life, there is a time and a place for noise.

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