

# MAKING NOISE

*Dining out? Conversational  
or buzzy, you decide. /* BY JAN GREENBERG

**A**ccording to the Audiology Awareness Campaign, Columbia, South Carolina, the noise level of most restaurants is so high that it interferes with normal conversation. Zagat, which reviews restaurants across the nation, reports that a high level of noise is the second most-common complaint among restaurant customers (poor service is first).

Restaurant reviewers are devoting an increasing amount of editorial space to noise. In a Sept. 30, 2014, review in *The New York Times*, Pete Wells wrote, “The restaurateur Keith McNally opened Cherche Midi in June on the corner of Houston Street and the Bowery, in a neighborhood where you don’t go out to dinner unless you are prepared to shout over some Pavement song the chef loved in college. But we were talking, with no recorded soundtrack, as if we were in some Continental restaurant off Sutton Place in 1964 eating Veal Orloff by candlelight.”

Adam Platt said in a July 22, 2013, *New York Magazine* article on restaurant noise, “But ask any weary gastronome about the single most disruptive restaurant trend over the past decade or so, and they’ll give you a succinct, one-sentence answer. It’s the noise, stupid.”

Clearly, noise is an issue, and it is compounded by current design trends. Open spaces, industrial high ceilings and big windows are in. Noise-absorbing tablecloths and carpeting are out. And, although rarely acknowledged publicly, noise means more business.

“Music and sound level certainly has a significant impact on the overall experience related to restaurant ‘ambiance,’” says Alex Stratta, former executive chef/owner of Alex in Las Vegas, with Tapas by Alex Stratta scheduled to open there in the near future. “There have been documented studies relating to the frequency of table turns and music volume. As the volume increases, the actual time guests stay seated decreases.”



## WHAT TO DO?

Michael Schlow, who opened his flagship restaurant Radius in 1999 and garnered accolades in 2000 that included Best Chef Northeast from the James Beard Foundation and Best Chef in the Country from *Santé*, opened a second outpost of the Latin American influenced Tico in Washington, D.C., in spring 2014. *The Washington Post*'s Tom Sietsema wrote in the June 24 issue: "For all those diners weary of having to shout through a meal, some relief on 14th Street NW: Tico." In the article, Schlow is quoted as saying, "Hearing is as important as tasting."

Schlow says he's always been aware of how noise affects a meal. "I think the question isn't necessarily about being quieter, but, rather, does the noise level match the concept. Some restaurants are meant to be hushed, serious affairs, while others want to be high-energy and fun. The trick is making sure you are designing the restaurant and the acoustic with the concept in mind, but always making sure that the guest can carry on a conversation and doesn't go home with a headache. You shouldn't have to yell just because you are in a high-energy, fun atmosphere."

At Tico, the tin ceiling was constructed with tiny perforations filled with sound-absorbing material. A decorative ceiling above

the bar made by Decoustics, based in Woodbridge, Ontario, deadens sound. There are extra speakers for the state-of-the-art sound system so that customers can hear music without pushing up the volume.

"The reality is, no matter what you do, if you put 200 people in a room, there's going to be a lot of noise," says Schlow. "We hope that the steps and measures we have taken will give our guests a highly energetic environment where they will enjoy the ambient sound but won't have to scream or strain to hear their friends."

## SET THE STAGE

As president of San Francisco-based Mina Group, Patric Yumul oversees the opening and operations of chef Michael Mina's 21 restaurants located in cities such as Las Vegas, Miami, San Francisco and Washington, D.C. "It is important always to be conscious about how people feel while they are in one of our restaurants," Yumul says. "We want to make sure that whatever our goal is for a place, everything marches toward that direction, from the appointments to the room to music."

"We obsess over the sound and music environment, and make sure it contributes to how we want people to feel. It sets

the stage in many ways for our customers' experiences. We never want there to be noise. It is a distraction. But sound and atmosphere is not."

At Bourbon Steak in the Four Seasons Hotel, Washington, D.C., the goal was to create a conservative but lively restaurant scene with a modern, sleek design even though the restaurant is located in a traditional hotel. There is an active bar scene that becomes more energized as the evening progresses. The music reflects that, ranging from the Eagles and modern jazz to The Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin as the hour gets later. The noise level, pretty steady at 79 decibels, is high, but doesn't preclude conversation. (According to Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota, 79 decibels equals heavy traffic, but still remains at a safe range.)

At the Los Angeles branch of Bourbon Steak, the upholstery is soft and rich, and the music, a range of modern blend classics such as Nat King Cole and the Great American Songbook, sets the stage for the feeling of the room. "The sound is always there, but it is never going to take center stage," says Yumul. "The sound is conversation. We are conscious when we design that the materials we use support the ambient sound. We never want it to come crashing down on you."

## ENJOY THE NOISE

In Dallas, two-time James Beard Best Chef Southwest semifinalist and "Top Chef" contestant John Tesar opened Spoon Bar & Kitchen in 2012, specializing in sustainable seafood. In 2013, Spoon Bar was named to *Condé Nast Traveler's* list of Best New Restaurants in the World and *Bon Appétit's* Best New Restaurants in America.

Spoon Bar is loud, with reviews suggesting that patrons with noise sensitivity eat at the quieter counter. However, unlike many chefs, Tesar is clear and unapologetic about sound. "I hate quiet restaurants," he says. "Energy and great music make a dining experience even better. The venue definitely determines what kind of music and at what level it's played. You need the right energy. If a restaurant has a bar scene and is geared toward a more social environment, it needs to be raucous."

## CONVERSATION OR BUZZ?

In 2012, a sound system from Meyer Sound, Berkeley, California, debuted at Comal, a Mexican restaurant in Berkeley owned by John Paluska, former manager of rock band Phish. The system is not inexpensive, costing about \$10,000. There are speakers, subwoofers and microphones placed through the restaurant, along with sound-absorbing fabrics. The microphones record sound that is then sent to a processor, which allows whoever is in charge of sound to tweak it for various sections of the restaurant.

"What we wanted to achieve is often mutually exclusive," says Paluska. "Either you have conversational ambience or a buzzy ambience. What we're excited about is that we are achieving both."

More typical is Boston's Shojo Asian Bar & Bistro, a two-time *Boston* magazine Best of Boston award recipient. Cousins/owners Brian and Brendan Moy are conscious of creating the balance between comfortable dining and happy.

"Music is a big part of our restaurant, and there is a certain vibe we try to keep," says Brian Moy. "For the most part, we really get a great response to it. We aren't here to be soft. We are meant to be loud, and the rare times we get a complaint is clearly when someone comes in not knowing what to expect, not knowing what kind of place we are.

"We like it to be loud enough to feel the vibe, but low enough so you aren't screaming for a conversation. Our managers constantly monitor the music by walking around and speaking to customers. If they aren't able to converse with customers, then the music is way too loud. Nobody wants to go out for a meal with someone and not be able to talk to each other. It is a fine line. But, basically, as the sky gets darker, the music gets louder." ■