

Hard facts on noise-trap restaurants



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LA MAR
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The fir
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wood tablet base. It has an open kitchen and a large bar. A wall of windows overlooks the bay.

The result: It is the ultimate noise trap.

Many of the most cutting-edge, design-conscious restaurants are introducing a new level of noise to today's already vibrant restaurant scene. The new noise-makers: restaurants housed in cavernous spaces with wood floors, linen-free tables, high ceilings and lots of windows—all of which cause sound to ricochet around what are essentially hard-surfaced echo chambers.

Upmarket restaurants have gradually done away with carpeting, heavy curtains, tablecloths, and plush banquettes over the decade, and then at a faster pace during the recession, saying such touches telegraph a fine-dining message out of sync with today's cost-conscious, informal diner. Those features, though, were also sound absorbing.

Even as restaurants are ditching style elements that squelch sound, they are bringing in more sources of noise: open kitchens, lively bar scenes and disc jockeys and iPods programmed with the latest rock music.

Live music can make diners talk louder— which up the volume even more.

Before designing L20 in

to work. He laid down carpeting—and convinced Gras and others to accept it—and put a porous, acoustical plaster on some parts of the ceiling. The DJ music stayed, but it was carefully designed to exclude lyrics, which can interfere with conversation, and all tracks contain fewer than 100 beats per minute, so it isn't too energetic. The restaurant now feels lively but not noisy, Denison says.

The best way to absorb reverberant noise is to cover at least two perpendicular surfaces with sound-absorbing material. If, for example, both the ceiling and one wall are treated with acoustical tiling, sound waves cannot bounce back and forth both horizontally and vertically.

A good acoustical engineer

Defensive manoeuvres in the dark

Audiologists offer advice for finding a quieter dining experience:

- Sit in tables in alcoves, which provide a barricade against sound waves.
- Avoid sitting by the bar or kitchen.
- Avoid sitting near large

parties, who tend to talk louder.

that he had used at his old place, and left the new 6.7m, gold-leaf adorned ceiling untreated. The restaurant is louder, May says.

"I don't think of it as noise. It's excitement. The new consumer is looking for energy, a good vibe," May says.

David Myers, chef and owner of Comma Co in Los Angeles, recently hired a company to install acoustical panels on the ceiling to quiet a restaurant that was so noisy that "I had friends who didn't want to come back because it was so loud," Myers says.

"When the restaurant was designed in 2007, Myers didn't have a budget for acoustical treatments. He also didn't want carpet because "it depicts a fine-dining experience, and this is a brasserie".

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- Ask for additional light and look at your dining companion. Without realizing it, we read lips.
- Ask management to turn the music down, even if you get dirty looks. Not only does this reduce noise, but people will then talk more softly.
- Look at photos of the restaurant ahead of time. No carpet or tablecloths and boxy dimensions should raise red flags.

ground of a loud bass stereo, tend to be trying, says Chicago-based and acoustical consultant Thunder. The evolutionary explanation is that many of primitive man's biggest worries—a lion's roar, thunderstorms, or the rumbling of a volcano—transmit low-frequency sounds, Thunder says.

But even some younger diners are irked. Danielle Stillman, 23, says she spent \$US70 on a graduation dinner for a friend at The Grove in Houston about six months ago. The goal of the meal was to catch up after not seeing each other for a while, but Stillman could barely hear her friend speak, she says.

"I want to have a conversation without having to scream 'what?' at the top of my lungs," says Stillman, an energy analyst.

The Grove, in a new building with glass walls and hardwood floors, has acoustical bunting layered behind boards in the wood ceiling, says partner Robert Del Grande. There is also a quieter room with carpeting. Nevertheless, when the restaurant is full, it can get loud, he says.

In recent years, rock music—even loud rock music—has made inroads into upscale restaurants. Celebrity chef Mario Batali famously hires Radiohead and Guns N' Roses at his flagship Babbo in New York City. Wolfgang Puck, the celebrity chef behind Spago in Beverly Hills, ditched light jazz and began play-

ing a noisy restaurant may want to play defence with a few strategies. Googling pictures of the restaurant can be helpful: walls of windows, high ceilings, boxy dimensions, a surfeit of hard lines and a dearth of soft materials should raise red flags. Call the restaurant and ask if it has acoustical paneling or other sound-reducing materials. Take note if they say they have carpeting, that's often not enough, says Marshall Long, an acoustical engineer in Sherman Oaks, California. Restaurants rarely lay down carpet more than 2.5cm thick, the minimum for effective noise control, he says.

Once in a noisy restaurant, seek out tables in alcoves or side rooms, which can barricade or at least deflect noise, Thunder says. Convincing management to turn down the music is a double boon: the music itself gets softer, and then other diners lower their voices because they are no longer competing with the music.

The staff of La Mar in San Francisco realized noise was a problem immediately after opening, says general manager Andrew Generalao. It was a "low priority," Generalao says, until a local reviewer printed that the decibel level was 80—just under the level audiologists consider damaging to hearing after long-term exposure.

In March, La Mar spent \$US30,000 tiling the ceiling with acoustical tiles, which effectively dulled the roar, Generalao says.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL