Hear hear

HOW WAS YOUR LAST NIGHT OUT? A RELAXING TIME CHATTING WITH FRIENDS, OR AN EXHAUSTING SHOUT-FEST COMPETING WITH AN AVALANCHE OF BACKGROUND NOISE? **AMANDA CROPP** REPORTS ON A CALL FOR DESIGNERS TO CONSIDER ACOUSTICS AS WELL AS AESTHETICS WHEN FITTING OUT CAFES, BARS AND RESTAURANTS

Michelle Holland still cringes with embarrassment when she recalls the time a man she was talking to in a noisy bar told her his mother had died. "I said 'That's nice', because that's what you say when you can't hear. The horror on his face was just awful."

That experience four years ago persuaded the 42-year-old Christchurch business woman to finally do something about her growing deafness, but she says plenty of her hearing friends are equally handicapped when it comes to conversing in places with a lot of background noise.

Not long ago a group of them bar-hopped around five different establishments until they found one conducive to a "girlie chat" session. "People will vote with their feet. You don't bother to buy a drink, or you buy one then get up and leave. If you go into an environment where you can't hear, you won't go back."

Historically pubs, tearooms and restaurants were carpeted with acres of Axminster. As well as conveniently soaking up spilt beer, it did a fine job of absorbing sound, aided by soft furnishings like curtains, upholstered chairs, and tablecloths.

Modern decor, on the other hand, is all about hard surfaces that look smart and are easy to clean. But they're not so easy on the ears when you add in the racket caused by coffee machines and grinders, open kitchens, background music, passing traffic, widescreen TVs, and patrons talking loudly to be heard.

Acoustics experts refer to that as "noise breeding noise" or "the cafe effect," and it can spell conversational hell, especially for anyone 40-plus or hard of hearing.

Most people start to talk more loudly once background noise levels reach 48 decibels (dBA), but research shows that the average noise level in restaurants and cafes is around 80 dBA, and can reach up to 110 dBA (the equivalent of a road drill).

Alcohol also plays a part because, like many common drugs, it impairs hearing which is why drinkers often find they need to shout to be heard. Unlike patrons enduring an occasional ear-bashing in a rowdy bar, hospitality staff regularly working long hours in extremely noisy conditions are at risk of permanent hearing damage.

In the year to June 2008, ACC accepted 803 new noise-induced hearing loss claims from people employed in accommodation, cafes and restaurants, at a cost of more than $10 million.

ACC programme manager Dr John Wallaart says employers are becoming more aware of the problem and in cafes noise from coffee machines is of concern. "It's very high frequency as the air is forced out of that little vent to generate milk froth, and that's a worry." Under health and safety legislation noise levels in the workplace should not exceed an average of 85 decibels over an eight-hour period.

The Department of Labour says the hospitality trade has a lower understanding of noise hazards, so it has been targeted with a "drop the volume" campaign that recommends sound reduction measures such as acoustic screens to prevent bar staff being blasted by music from speakers or bands.

When Your Weekend approached Hospitality Industry Association chief executive Bruce Robertson for comment, he said noise levels in cafes, bars and restaurants was not perceived to be an issue.

Christchurch cafe manager Paul* believes that's partly because of the transient nature of the workforce. "It's a high staff turnover industry so you don't get people staying very long or analysing what's happening."

In the bustling cafe he has managed for more than a decade, customers' voices reverberate around the long narrow high-ceilinged premises, and by the end of a busy day he's shattered. "I'm wiped out mentally and physically, but the mental part is most affected by the noise because you're constantly trying to catch things in conversation, and you have to concentrate to do that."

In a bid to get the cafe owner to act on the noise problem he temporarily installed a noise meter that regularly hit 80 or 90 decibels over the course of an hour, but remedial work was deemed too costly. "There are times I've thought that if I wasn't serving people, I'd be wearing ear muffs."

Mis-heard orders create chaos in the kitchen and Paul worries about the impact on customers, who frequently comment on the noise. "For 80 percent of people, drinking coffee is a social thing, so if you're not able to socialise, why do it?"

Audiologist Jeanine Doherty certainly thinks it's time the hospitality industry got its act together over noise levels because it's estimated more than 450,000 New Zealanders have some form of hearing impairment, and with an ageing population that figure is set to grow markedly.

Over the last couple of years the number of her clients complaining they can't hear in cafes and restaurants because of increased noise levels has more than doubled.

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Doherty says people struggling to communicate in those social situations often suffer hearing loss at a neural processing level rather than at ear level. Put simply, once we head into middle-age our brains find it harder decipher speech amid background noise. "From the age of 20 our neural hearing starts to go off slowly. By 40 it's becoming a noticeable thing, like not being able to talk on the phone with the TV on.

"What I'm really concerned about is that as we baby boomers go through, this is going to become more of an issue. Cafes need to think about that because they're going to start losing huge chunks of their clientele who have money to spend if they don't make things acoustically comfortable."

For her Masters degree in 2000 Doherty looked at noise interference in shopping mall food courts. Customers surveyed were mostly in their 40s, and while they reported no hearing difficulty normally, 60 percent had problems hearing speech in food courts, and almost half reported not going to places because they thought they might find the noise there annoying.

Doherty says it's telling that clients who stopped patronising the food court at Christchurch's Eastgate Mall went back when the court was temporarily extended into an empty carpeted shop that was much quieter.

Her worry is that those unable to cope with background din can become socially isolated. "Their partners are saying 'You're terrible, you just sit there and smile and nod; you're not taking part – what's wrong with you?'"

Doherty strongly favours including a noise level rating in all restaurant reviews, a policy adopted by the San Francisco Chronicle 13 years ago as a result of diner complaints about noisy eating places.

In New Zealand the closest we have to that is the Cafe and Restaurant Acoustic Index (CRAI), which produces ratings based on public feedback forms.

Marshall Day acoustic consultant Stuart Camp started the index after attending a 40th birthday party for a friend who also worked in the acoustics industry. "It was in an Italian restaurant and the noise was diabolical. [My friend's] sister turned to us and said 'Why aren't you guys doing something about this, it's just awful. You're in the business, why aren't you fixing it?'

"My response is that people won't fix it until they recognise it's affecting their bottom line, and when it starts hitting them in the pocket they do something about it, so let's start giving the public the chance to have their say."

Since the CRAI was launched seven years ago only 300 eating establishments have been rated nationally, but Camp hopes it will take

ABOVE
Teresa Cowie at one of her preferred "conversation friendly" bars, Wellington's Hawthorne Lounge, with owner Jonny McKenzie.
Photo: Craig Simcox

“One of my frustrations is that designers often don’t do anything because they’re worried about the look or the cost”

ABOVE
Stuart Camp, acoustics consultant, in Alchemy Cafe, in the Christchurch Art Gallery.
Photo: John Kirk-Anderson

RIGHT
Michelle Holland recalls some cringe-worthy moments in noisy bars at the much quieter New Yorker Steak House.
Photo: Iain McGregor

off now ratings can be done online through the New Zealand Acoustics Society website (acoustics.ac.nz). At a one-star venue, lip-reading is an advantage; two stars you need earplugs; right up to five stars, where conversation is a doddle. Camp says the aim is to give people choice, rather than labelling a noisy venue as bad and a quiet one as good. “If you’re going out with a couple of mates for a few beers you might want a one-star venue, but if you’re going out for a 20th wedding anniversary with your wife, you probably want a romantic candlelit fine dining establishment, and a nice quiet venue is consistent with that.”

There’s a fine balance between too much noise and too little. “I don’t want it to be deathly quiet, I want to feel there’s some atmosphere, but I also don’t want it to annoy me or detract from my ability to have a conversation.”

Moreover, Camp has evidence that good acoustics can boost turnover. He says a particularly “loud” pub that installed a new sound system directly over the dance floor found that the drop in noise levels in other areas of the venue resulted in a doubling of alcohol sales and a four-fold increase in food sales. “As far as [the manager] could tell, people weren’t ordering another beer because it was too hard to communicate with the bartender, and people tended not to stay and eat because it was too noisy.”

Our interview takes place in the Alchemy Cafe at the Christchurch Art Gallery. It’s a chic glass and tile space with excellent acoustics, and Camp points out the compressed fibreglass ceiling panels that fit right in with the minimalist decor but absorb excess noise.

He says acoustic treatments can be hidden away behind slatted wooden bar fronts or ceilings, or inside perforated metal grills in pillars, but there’s still a perception that sound-absorbing material consists of ugly egg carton-style panels of the type seen in recording studios. “One of my frustrations is that designers often don’t do anything because they’re worried about the look or the cost. I go in and say ‘You could do something there, and there, and there; you won’t notice it and it will cost next to nothing.’”

Architect Richard Dalman has incorporated sound-absorbing measures in several restaurants and bars and he estimates that it might add 5 percent to the cost of outfitting new premises, an amount quickly recouped if the ambience attracts more punters.

Dalman’s personal pet hate is the proliferation of widescreen TVs that add to background noise levels.

“Clients want to stick TVs everywhere because their attitude is that people can’t have a drink without watching sport or being entertained in some way. Is it part of our culture now that people expect to be entertained when they are sitting down and having a one-on-one drink with a partner? I don’t think it is but a lot of decision-makers seem to think so.”

Dalman has worked closely with developer Antony Gough, who reckons the tide of public opinion is beginning to turn as far as noise is concerned, particularly in the 30-plus age group. “Under 30 they want as much noise as possible so they don’t have to make conversation, or they text each other.”

Gough owns six restaurants and bars along a section of Christchurch’s Oxford Terrace previously known as The Strip, recently renamed The Terrace in an effort to attract an older clientele, and he operates two food outlets nearby, both of which had acoustic treatment to reduce reverberation.

“It’s all too easy to build a shell that’s a concrete bunker, find it’s really noisy and then it’s possibly a bit too late. You should do [acoustic treatment] during your set-up and incorporate it as part of the fit-out.

“People are getting more demanding and are saying I’m not going to spend my money where somebody hasn’t bothered to spend the dollars getting the environment right.”

Christchurch International Airport Ltd’s planning manager and self-confessed foodie, Ken McAnergney, abandoned his favourite Christchurch restaurant, Saggio di Vino, because of the noise levels, but resumed

SO YOU WANT TO TALK…

- Ask for a quiet table when you book, and if the staff member who takes your call has trouble hearing over background noise in the restaurant, it might be a sign of what to expect when you dine.
- Request a table in a corner, around the edges of a room, or outside if the weather permits.
- Booths are generally quieter than table seating.
- If you have a hearing problem, try to find a venue with carpet (more common in some tourist hotel bars and restaurants) or eat at a time when the restaurant is not so busy.
- If you are part of a large group, choose a venue with a private dining room or function room.
- As a simple rule of thumb, if you have to shout to be heard by someone within an arm’s length, the noise level is too high.
- If you end up next to a loudspeaker or a rowdy table that looks set to ruin your evening, ask to be moved. Consumer magazine advises that if you specifically asked for seating in a quiet area and the restaurant accepted this condition, it must keep the noise down. If you choose to leave, pay for what you have received.

Dalman's pet hate is the proliferation of widescreen TVs that add to background noise

ABOVE Architect Richard Dalman incorporates sound-inhibiting measures into his designs.
Photo: Kirk Hargreaves

dining there when the problem was addressed during a refit (earning it a four-and-a-half star CRAI rating).

McAnergney, who wears a hearing aid, says the change was amazing. "We were there with a party of eight, I was at the foot of the table and I could hear my friend sitting at the head of the table."

The 70-year-old says noise ambience is crucial when he's eating out. "The food and wine are very important but I won't go to a place where I'm going to suffer the next day because my ears are sore."

And noise is also an issue for the younger set. Wellingtonian Teresa Cowie, 31, says she and her husband are typical DINKs (double-income-no-kids) who go out a lot, but they are beginning to avoid "stand-and-shout bars" where they strain to hear.

"We're just at the stage where we are beginning to moan about the noise. My cynical view is that it's deliberately loud so you'll drink more – it's not the way to relax when you go out for a drink, is it?"

Cowie says a recent incident where she ordered a soy flat white and received a hot chocolate instead is typical of ordering errors caused by trying to communicate with waiters over high-volume background music.

Her favourite "conversation-friendly" hangout is the Hawthorne Lounge in Tory Street, which owner Jonny McKenzie has modelled on the old American prohibition-era speakeasys of the 1920s and 1930s. "They weren't allowed to be too loud or the police would close them down."

Heavy curtains help keep the noise down and live music is deliberately pitched at a level that doesn't hinder conversation. McKenzie says since it opened three-and-a-half years ago, the Hawthorne has earned a reputation as one of the few Wellington bars where you can turn up at 2am and guarantee you can hear the person across the table from you. "It brings back the romance of actually talking to people. These days we seem to be more reliant on tapping each other and shouting."

Christchurch chef and restaurant owner Johnny Schwass says it's not hard to find discrete ways of reducing noise, such as making sure his waiters wear soft-soled shoes on the polished wooden floors.

ALTHOUGH TABLECLOTHS absorb noise and reduce plate clatter, they are costly. "I know of restaurants that spend upwards of $45,000 to $50,000 a year on laundry, that's the equivalent of a good maitre d' or sous chef, and you need a maitre d' more than you need some linen."

The menu at Restaurant Schwass also states that the use of cellphones in the dining room will cause the ovens to stop. "As a rule, when people talk on cellphones they seem to feel as if they have to yell."

However, controlling noise emissions from well-oiled diners can prove challenging, and Schwass sympathises when I relate one of my own worst-ever restaurant experiences. Our party of four was seated next to a table of 16 intoxicated birthday celebrants who drowned out any attempt at conversation.

Singer Janice Gray was on the staff and marched out of the kitchen banging on a saucepan with a wooden spoon and singing Eskimo Nell at the top of her voice in an effort to quieten things down. After a second or two of shocked silence the cacophony returned, so we finished our meals pronto and departed.

Schwass doesn't hesitate when the obnoxious behaviour upsets other diners. "We've had a group of four people make as much noise as a group of 20 to the extent that we had to move three tables into another dining room."

It's becoming more common for restaurants to offer separate function rooms, and Schwass seats large groups in a private dining room where they won't disturb romantic twosomes. But at the same time he's careful to avoid a "stagey, old-style" hushed dining environment where patrons are scared to talk above a whisper.

Michelle Holland would say "hear, hear" to that. "No-one wants perfect silence unless they're trying to sleep."

She says even in a busy restaurant there are a few tricks to choosing a quiet table, and customers shouldn't feel shy about politely requesting staff to turn down background music if it's too loud. "A lot of people are too scared to ask because they don't want to make waves, but it's no more making waves than asking for a drink." YW