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

M ichele 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 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 huddled around the different establishments until they found one conducive to a “girlie” chat. “People will show up with their feet, or your body, or your brain, or your ears, but 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 soft furnishing. As well as creating a warm and inviting atmosphere, it helped to absorb sound, aided by soft furnishings like curtains, upholstered chairs, and adaptable carpets.

Modern decor, on the other hand, is all about hard surfaces that look smart and are easy to clean. But they don’t do such a good job when you add in the racket caused by coffee machines and grinders, open kitchens, background music, passing traffic, televisions, TVs, and patrons shouting loudly to be heard.

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

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 understand what you say when you can’t hear. The horror on his face was just awful.”

Jim McDonald, a 47-year-old sound engineer who recently worked on the noise survey, says that for most people over the age of 40 it’s becoming a noticeable problem. “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.”

McDonald worries about bars, clubs and fat cafes, but more specifically about 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.”

Across the country the problem is growing, with increased noise levels from patron clatter, bar noise, music and socialising. There are problems with patrons and bar staff, the latter running around to buy milk froth, and that’s a worry. Under health and safety laws noise levels in the workplace should not exceed an average of 85 decibels over an eight-hour period.

But it’s not just the diners who are suffering at 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 understand what you say when you can’t hear. The horror on his face was just awful.”

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In a bid to get the cafe owner to act on the noise problem he temporarily turned down the volume, and thought that if he wasn’t serving people, he’d be wearing ear muffs.”

For her Masters degree in 2000 Doherty looked at noise interference and the mental impact it has on young workers. “It was in an Italian restaurant and the noise was diabolical. [My friend] Lisa turned to us and said ‘Why aren’t you guys doing something about this, it’s just awful. To be in this business, why aren’t you doing it?”

Underneath the surface the issue is getting much more serious, especially in places where young people go to socialise, why do it?”

ACW director Jonine Doherty certainly thinks it’s time the hospitality industry got its act together over noise levels because it’s estimated more than 400,000 New Zealanders have some form of hearing impairment, and 20 percent have problems hearing speech in loud places.

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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 other complaints about noisy eating places.

“In New Zealand we don’t have that – it’s just a review of the coffee in the Cafe and Restaurant Acoustic Index (CRAI), which produces ratings based on public feedback.”

Marshall Dry acoustic consultant Stuart Camp started the index after attending a 40th birthday party for a friend who works in the acoustics industry. “It’s an Italian restaurant and the noise was diabolical. My friend’s mother turned to us and said ‘Why aren’t you guys doing something about this, it’s just awful. To be in this business, why aren’t you doing it?”

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

STUART CAMP, acoustics consultant, in Alchemy Cafe, in the Christchurch Art Gallery.

Photo: John Kirk-Anderson

MICHIELLE HOLLAND recalls some cringe-worthy moments in noisy bars at the much quieter New Yorker Steak House.

Photo: Iain McGregor

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.

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 McCaenerney, abandoned his favourite Christchurch restaurant, Saggio di Vino, because of the noise levels, but resumed
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.”

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ABOVE Architect Richard Dalman incorporates sound-inhibiting measures into his designs.

Photo: Kirk Hargreaves