

DASTARDLY DECIBELS

We eat out a lot in good Manhattan restaurants. The food is generally first-rate, and the service (with occasional exceptions) serviceable. What's unforgivable, though, in so many of these otherwise worthy eateries, is the egregious noise level.

My hearing is fine, but when four or six of us are sitting around a table in one of these places, it's hard for me to pick up what my companions are saying – and, of course, the problem is even tougher for seniors whose hearing has deteriorated. The insistent loud buzz of a hundred voices, bouncing off scarcely dampened floors, ceilings and walls – and often juxtaposed on top of amped-up music – frustrates our attempts to carry a conversation.

(Truth be told, though, there's one situation where the buzz effect isn't so terrible. That's when the folks you're with are incredibly boring, long-winded monologists. The background noise provides an excuse for you to nod off from time to time – perhaps employing a periodic hand-to-ear gesture to indicate your difficulty in absorbing all the choice tidbits being offered.)

Of course, this noise problem isn't limited to restaurants, although it's most noticeable there because you're sitting in one place for an extended time. I've been known to walk out of weddings and Bar Mitzvahs when the dancing starts to the beat of amped-up live instruments or disc jockey offerings. Jackhammers on the street may get to you, but you're free to walk on. The noise level in Madison Square Garden at a basketball game can be deafening (although less so last year, given the sad state of the 2014-2015 Knicks). And as for seven howling dogs at mealtime in Connecticut – well, I think I'll pass on that one for now.

I realize, of course, that I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. Most of my no-longer-spring-chicken acquaintances are in accord with these sentiments. I have friends who empathize with my reluctance to eat at certain boisterous restaurants, regardless of the fine food, and who join my search for dining establishments that have made an attempt to control the noise. And we find ourselves swapping

information about prize tables in loud joints – little nooks where the sound is less overwhelming than elsewhere on the floor.

Anyway, my purpose here is not to preach to the choir. Rather, I want to see how you come out on an agonizing question I've formulated. I'm putting to you two dire restaurant situations and asking which you consider *worse* to have to endure.

- First, the deafening hubbub of indistinguishable voices amped up by loud music (the plight I've been discussing).

or

- Second, a restaurant that's not so noisy and is music-free, but features at a table near to yours several individuals (or sometimes just one), usually alcohol-fueled, who relentlessly bellow their views on subjects of zero interest to you, ensuring you can hear with crystal clarity their every word.

I imagine that some of you brave souls might swallow hard and choose to endure the second scene – reckoning that the few blowhard voices can't drown out the conversation at your own table. But I have to cast my "even worse" vote for number two. As irritating as I find overwhelming sound, it's still just noise, while the windbag's voice has an annoying way of penetrating your head – it gets on your nerves, forces you to listen to the blabber, and you can't put it out of your mind.

(By the way, it may be even worse when the bellowing voice is sitting at *your* table, and you begin to see faces at other tables turning toward you with an unmistakable gaze that translates as can't-you-control-your-blowhard)

I can think of two circumstances, however, where I'd come out the other way on this. One is if there's someone at your table who's brave enough to tell the offenders to keep it down – as was the case recently with a fearless five foot two woman of our long acquaintance, who marched over to six tough-looking guys and told them politely to shut the hell up. To be sure, they still flared up on occasion – as if to prove

they hadn't been intimidated – but the overall problem became much more bearable.

The other case is something I remember first experiencing many years ago in an otherwise not-so-noisy restaurant in Florence, Italy. The denizens of a nearby table were chattering quite loudly – at a decibel level that would ordinarily cause me real irritation – except for the fact that their chatter was all in *ITALIAN*! And since I had no idea what they were saying, I realized that it wasn't getting into my head – so it didn't bother me that much. Unfortunately, however, you can't count on this easing the strain in Manhattan, even at Parma or Nicola's.

So, I'm wondering how you come out on this woeful choice, or what other variants might affect your selection. I'll even accept stronger peeves of another nature. Let me know.