

Bars, cafes and restaurants

Included in our expectations on noise is that bars are noisier than cafes and cafes are noisier than restaurants. Who wants to have a good meal and a social evening in a restaurant that's as noisy as a bar? Perhaps a few noise-warped youngsters do, but maybe they shouldn't be there. The rest of us are for "acoustic comfort", in order to enjoy our space with our friends.

However, restaurant noise levels can average out at over 80dBA, with peaks a lot higher than that. This makes for difficult communication across a table, raised voices and surging noise as reverberant competition ensues. Not all restaurants are noisy – much depends on the hardness of the décor and the space per person, but a combination of modern minimalist décor and crowding in the tables puts too much noise on the menu. This is a special problem for those with some hearing loss, who find it difficult to deal with background noise. Baby boomers beware.

Cafes are relatively quiet. Possibly because we are in them for a shorter time and not as much alcohol is taken as in bars and restaurants, although some cafes do have the disadvantage of a noisy kitchen close to the dining area.

In order to get a feel for noise in eating places, the New Zealand Acoustical Society has proposed a Café and Restaurant Acoustic Index Rating, based on an individual's preferences and experiences during the meal. Assessments are given for effects of noise on enjoyment, difficulties in conversing and likelihood of returning for another meal, leading to the end result of a star rating for comfortable acoustics, interpreted as

- * Lip-reading would be an advantage
- ** Take earplugs at the very least
- *** Not too bad, particularly mid-week
- **** A nice quiet evening
- ***** The place to be and be heard

Only about half of the places assessed so far are in the four and five star category.

The idea could catch on -- a popular movement to identify noisy places.

Power for the Quiet People.

We could rate shops, malls, transport, home appliances and anything which assaults our ears, leading to a popular campaign to expose noise where it hits us. Who will join the Party!

¹For more information see: www.acoustics.ac.nz

NOVA SCOTIA WIND FARM

A Nova Scotia man who abandoned his home, claiming noise from a nearby wind farm made his family sick, says a study by an audio expert proves his case, even though a new federal government report concludes the exact opposite. Daniel d'Entremont and his family left their home in the southwestern Nova Scotia community of Lower West Pubnico last February. D'Entremont says the 17 wind turbines that tower over the community – the closest just 400 metres away – were sending low-frequency vibrations into the house. This inaudible noise, he claims, deprived his family of sleep, gave his children and wife headaches and made it impossible for them to concentrate. But a study released this month by the federal Natural Resources Department, which oversees funding for wind farm projects, found no problems with low-frequency noise. The report notes high levels of infrasound cannot be detected from the d'Entremont home and concludes it is not a concern. There is no consensus about whether low-frequency vibrations from spinning wind turbines can affect the health of nearby residents. Some experts deny the link outright while others urge further research. Gordon Whitehead, a retired audiologist with 20 years of experience at Dalhousie University in Halifax, conducted tests at d'Entremont's home. Whitehead says he actually recorded the similar levels of low-frequency sounds in and around the home as listed in the federal report. The difference, he says, is in his interpretation. "They're viewing it from the standpoint of an engineer; I'm viewing it from the standpoint of an audiologist who works with ears," says Whitehead, who wrote the report on his own time and paid his own expenses. "The report should read that (the sound) is well below the auditory threshold for perception. In other words, it's quiet enough that people would not be able to hear it. But that doesn't mean that people would not be able to perceive it. It's not perceptible to the ear, but it is perceptible," he says. "It's perceptible to people with very sensitive balance mechanisms and that's generally people who get very easily seasick."

ISRAELI REGULATIONS

In Israel, regulations on restricting noise from banquet halls and gardens went into effect on November 9, 2006. The regulations determine that the maximum noise level the seating area of the guests during events will not exceed 85 decibels (to date there were no limits on noise levels). The regulations also determine the physical means to be used to assure compliance with the provisions of the regulation. If noise levels exceed 85 decibels, a warning light, installed in the hall, will flicker for thirty seconds, followed by a cut in electricity supply to the amplifier system in the hall. The noise restrictions do not apply to the dance floor. The Director of the Noise Abatement and Radiation Safety Division of the Ministry of Environmental Protection, Dr. Stelian Ghelberg, noted that the ministry has worked on the regulations for the past three years in cooperation with the Ministries of Interior, Tourism, Health and Interior, the Union of Local Authorities the Association of Owners of Banquet Halls and Gardens and the Association of Disk Jockeys. Dr. Ghelberg added that implementation of the regulations constitutes a breakthrough in protecting the health of the public, which is considered to be a "captive audience" exposed to excessively high noise levels, and in protecting sensitive populations such as the elderly and children. There are about 718 banquet halls and gardens in Israel, of which only 16 have a "noise monitor" which was previously required to prevent unreasonable noise to the environment. Banquet halls and gardens will now be obligated to install a "noise monitor," as a precondition to obtaining or extending their annual business license. Therefore, it is anticipated that within a year of the coming into force of the regulations, all halls will be equipped with a noise restriction system.