

# A Disturbing Trend in Cincinnati Restaurant / Café Design — “It is too noisy!”



Cincinnati, Ohio

Editorial

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There seems to be no end in the development of trendy restaurants and entertainment venues in Cincinnati. I have recently made a point to visit many of the newcomers. In every case I found the food and service to be superb.

The Banks Project, located between Great American Ballpark and Paul Brown Stadium on the Ohio River, provides several new opportunities for dining and music. The Moerlein Lager House features dozens of types of beer, including several brewed onsite. Its exterior walls are almost entirely glass, providing a great view of the riverfront. Interior surface finishes include laminated hardwood beams, stonework, and drywall with exotic paint. The facility can serve over 1000 patrons, utilizing indoor and outdoor seating areas. Toby Keith’s “I Love This Bar” café and music venue is just a block from the Cincinnati riverfront. The club is a classic country-western honkytonk. With table seating for hundreds of patrons for meal service and plenty of room at the bars, this place is drawing large crowds. The Holy Grail is another new bar / restaurant located near the ballpark, also capable of serving hundreds of patrons. Several more restaurants are also open or are being developed in the area.

Cincinnati’s Central Business District, Over-the-Rhine, Gateway, Hyde Park, and Northside areas, as well as downtown Newport and Covington, KY, have also experienced a boom in new entertainment businesses and restaurants. Many of these businesses have already gained notoriety for great food and music. Most of these establishments are patronized by a capacity crowd, even on weekday evenings.

Regretfully, as a restaurant patron myself, I along with many other patrons are increasingly encountering a common problem while dining out:

**THERE IS SO MUCH NOISE THAT IT IS DIFFICULT – IF NOT IMPOSSIBLE – TO CARRY ON A CONVERSATION WITH OTHERS AT THE SAME TABLE WITHOUT SHOUTING!**

I believe I have typical expectations concerning noise in a dining area. When I go out to eat with friends, I would like to be able to talk to them and hear what they are saying. I want my food and drink servers to understand what I am saying when I place my order. I don’t want to shout, or be exposed to high noise levels. Friends that I dine with share this opinion.

## **Patron Survey: Poor Sound Quality / Noise Reduces Patrons’ Overall Rating of Restaurant**

Noise is the second most common complaint made by restaurant goers.\* Excessive noise levels cause the typical patron to downgrade their overall “satisfaction” rating for a facility. Ranking just behind service, sound quality / noise level is what customers use to determine if they’ll be back or whether they will recommend a restaurant to their friends. **A patron unhappy about the noise level at their table will likely leave quietly without lodging a complaint with management – because it is too difficult to converse!**

\*Zagat.com survey, The Audiology Awareness Campaign

["Pass the Salt . . . and a Megaphone!"](#) Wall Street Journal Business Section article, February 3, 2010

["All that racket a lose-lose situation for restaurants"](#) article in the Tampa Bay Times, September 13, 2007

While dining out recently, I conducted random dB sound tests at my table in various restaurants to determine the actual noise level created by patron and staff conversations, background music (not live music), and normal serving activity. In some facilities, I found that the noise was often so loud that it might exceed OSHA standards for workplace noise exposure, thus requiring personal hearing protection (earplugs, noise-attenuating headsets, etc.) for workers **and the hundreds of guest patrons!** Patrons and restaurant staff react to the high noise levels by talking louder and louder, exponentially compounding the noise problem.

### **ADDITIONAL INFO CONCERNING OSHA NOISE EXPOSURE LIMITS IN RESTAURANTS:**

While any worker can be at risk for possible noise-induced hearing loss, you might never even think that restaurants, nightclubs and bars must comply with hourly and daily noise exposure limitations for workers mandated by OSHA . **Visitors, guests and patrons are also protected by the same OSHA standards for short-duration noise exposure, while in any facility.**

OSHA noise standards consist of a two-stage program:

- A hearing conservation program must be implemented when employees are exposed to 85 dBA or more in an 8-hour day. These programs include annual audiometric testing and require hearing protection, such as earplugs, to be worn during business hours. **FYI: The typical (somewhat quiet) restaurant operates at about an 75-80 dBA level, but the noise level in some “lively” restaurants can reach as much as 95 dBA!**
- Engineering or administrative noise controls are required when noise exposure levels exceeds 90 dBA. Solutions include redesigning the space to reduce noise, enclosing the noise source or enclosing the noise receiver. Administrative controls include mandating the length of time an employee can be exposed to a particular noise level.

Business owners that knowingly violate OSHA regulations, including those relating to noise, can be penalized between \$5,000 and \$70,000 per occurrence.

Visit [OSHA Noise Standards](#) to learn more.

One might assume that the high noise levels are the natural consequence of sharing the space with hundreds of other people. This is not the reason for the high noise levels, however. As an experienced design professional, I can state that in each case, the high noise levels are the direct result of inadequate attention to acoustics and noise control during the facility designs. Attention was given to creating visual appeal during selection of interior finish materials, but nothing was done to control the unseen noise.

To avoid creating visually trendy environments that are acoustically uncomfortable for patrons, an architect, owner, or developer must include consideration for acoustics and noise control during the facility design stage. Although it is possible to address such issues after the facility is open, it can be very expensive to modify the interior finishes, since the facility would have to close for a period of time to accomplish the modifications. It would have been easy to design for noise control early in the project.

If you have a personal opinion regarding this subject, regardless of whether you patronize establishments in Cincinnati or any other city, I would like to hear from you. You can email me – Richard Lemker - at [RJLemker@SpectraTechLtd.com](mailto:RJLemker@SpectraTechLtd.com) or phone me at (513) 419-9169.

If you are someone who currently owns or is about to design or build a restaurant or nightclub, I invite you to contact me concerning acoustical / noise control design services for restaurants and hospitality establishments. My company website is at [Spectra Tech Ltd](#). We can [conduct onsite noise testing, and help your project team to design for noise control](#) while maintaining the aesthetics you desire.