



## Quiet Is The New Loud

AT SOME POINT, the volume got turned up high, to full blast, in American restaurants. I can personally date it to a decade ago, when I dined at Graham Elliot's eponymous Chicago restaurant and realized that the old notion of table talk was dead and that no one was ever going to pass the salt—who could hear me ask for it? Instead there was only the deafening din of hard rock and the recognition that we would suffer in enforced silence because the chef had rediscovered his teen spirit.

And the same story was true everywhere, from New York's raucous Babbo to San Francisco's Nopa.

It wasn't just the blasting soundtracks. Contributing to the din were a range of issues, starting with shifting fashions and a recession that demanded economy. Out went the cosseted dining room bowers, wrapped up in soft upholstery, thick drapes and white linens, which cushioned noise. In came cavernous industrial spaces, all hard edges, crowned by high exposed ceilings and tricked out with slate, cement and wood, which only worked to amplify the roar. Open kitchens, a chorus of clanging steel, added to the noise.

But the real leaders of the cut-the-noise counter-revolution became the restaurants themselves. When Monteverde opened in 2015, in Chicago's restaurant-dense West Loop, it started playing with ways to calibrate sound.

"We use a variety of noise dampening methods and materials," says owner Meg Sahs, "including heavy fabric draperies, fabric banquette seating and panels adhered to the underside of some table tops. The most effective method, though, has been the addition of sound absorbing acoustical panels to the dining room's ceiling. They go unnoticed visually, but once installed the echo of sound declined markedly."

Monteverde, crowded every night, is now one of Chicago's success stories. Its efforts to lower the din have become the growing template. **Raphael Kadushin**

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## PLAYING IT BY EAR

While dating in New York City, Gregory Scott noticed he had difficulty connecting with potential partners in loud restaurants.

"There'd be no chance for a good conversation to develop," he recalls, adding that dating experiences at quieter restaurants were "100 percent better." So he launched a business: Scott's SoundPrint app has a built-in decibel reader, which crowdsources noise-level ratings at restaurants and bars and serves up "quiet lists" based on those readings.

"There's a connection between noise and stress which impacts your whole experience," says Catherine Palmer, director of audiology and hearing aids at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. "You think you're going out for a relaxing meal, but it's not relaxing at all. You're feeling hurried because noise tends to make you move along. That's not an accident—it does turn tables over faster."

And more restaurants are coming around to the importance of acoustics, says David Schwartz, a New York acoustic consultant. The problem is that changing the noise level requires a series of treatments that are often more successful when a restaurant is being built, rather than quick fixes after the fact. But innovations like noise-absorbing plaster and acoustic panels disguised as wall art are helping restaurants quiet down.

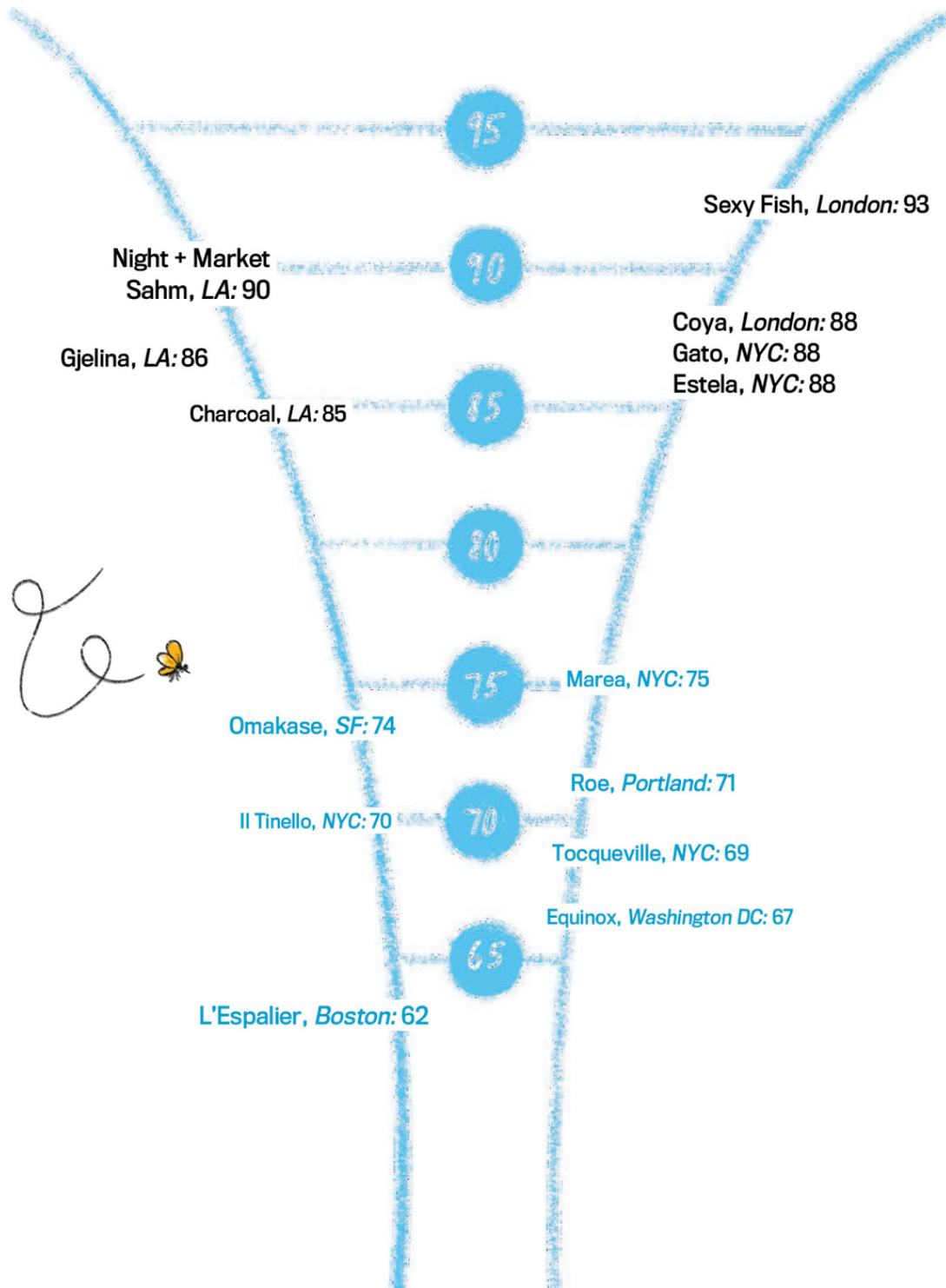
So what's too loud? The decibel scale is logarithmic, meaning that 75 decibels is exponentially louder than, say, 70 decibels. After analyzing data from over 31,000 restaurants, Scott says New York City, San Francisco, Toronto and Dallas have the loudest eateries, while the average American restaurant clocks in at 78 to 79 decibels.

**Vidya Rao**



## PASS THE WHAT?

We took decibel meters and apps to test the volume of restaurants in LA, London and New York. So here are our readings. We said, "HERE ARE OUR READINGS."



## A Quiet Place

If you're looking to enjoy a date-night dinner or win a power-lunch negotiation, Scott shared his favorite whisper-quiet restaurants and their average decibel ratings.