



Dining Survey Taps Likes, Dislikes

San Francisco Chronicle

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Listening to someone gab on a cell phone while you're dining out may not be quite as bad as finding a cockroach in your creme brulee, but most diners in the Bay Area and around the nation find it really irritating, according to a new survey of people who eat out regularly.

Here and nationally, about 85 percent of those surveyed say cell phones have no place in fine-dining establishments, defined in the survey as full-service restaurants that accept reservations.

Kids are more welcome than cell phones, but about half of all diners don't want them around, either. But when it comes to eavesdropping on intimacies at other tables, almost a third of the diners surveyed can't resist - and that's just the people who were willing to admit it.

These are the highlights of a survey made public today by San Francisco-based Open Table, the online reservation service. OpenTable surveyed 3,200 of its 1.8 million users, 400 each from the Bay Area and seven other cities, including New York and Los Angeles.

The survey plumbed attitudes about dining out. OpenTable currently counts 3,000 restaurants in its system, 422 of them in the Bay Area.

More eating out

Generally, people in all eight cities say they are eating out more often, and spending the same amount, or more, than a year ago.

The average dinner in the Bay Area will set you back about \$47.30 per person, including tax, tip and drinks, roughly the same amount as in the other cities. The per-dinner average edged just over \$50 in Boston, and is up to \$56 in New York.

Americans love to eat Italian - it's the most popular cuisine nationally and in each city except Atlanta, where seafood is king. Seafood and steakhouses were second nationwide.

Bay Area diners are wild for Italian too, but like French and California cuisine next best.

A few other things about the Bay Area's dining profile stand out.

We bring our own wine to a restaurant far less frequently than people in Philadelphia, but more often than the national average. The reasons we don't bring wine more often? We like picking from the restaurant's list, and we don't like paying corkage.

Transportation and parking discourage one-fourth of people surveyed here from eating out more often, the biggest impediment

besides money. Only in Boston was the number higher. In New York, it's a minor issue.

When it comes to cell phones, however, the loathing is universal.

"If I go someplace like Aqua, I can't stand it if I'm sitting next to someone who's on the phone. It's like, they better be dying in a car accident or something important," says Daphne Dahmen, an Alameda travel agent who was one of the diners surveyed. She agreed to a follow-up interview.

Recently, Dahmen was relaxing in Aqua's bar, waiting for a table, when her good time was disrupted by a woman's cell phone account of sex she'd had the night before.

"I gave her the stare," says Dahmen - to no avail.

When it comes to listening in on conversations at other tables, though, Dahmen's all for it.

"I find it fascinating," she says. She's attracted to people who are being loud and rude to their dining companion, people who drop their voices trying to keep a secret, and people who have nothing to say but, "How was your day?" and "How was yours?"

"I find it fascinating that they're spending \$200 on dinner and that's all they can come up with," she says.

Another surveyed diner, Mark Barbeau of San Francisco, says his ears perk up when people at neighboring tables start chatting.

"I'm a writer. I'm always eavesdropping," he says, and when he hears a snippet of brilliant dialogue he files it away for future use.

When it comes to children in restaurants, both Dahmen and Barbeau say it's noisy, untended ones they object to. They were among the 48 percent of diners surveyed nationally who said they didn't approve of people bringing children to fine restaurants; in the Bay Area, 44 percent agreed.

Kid reservations

"It's not that I don't like children," Dahmen says. "I take my 4-year-old niece to family-style restaurants. But I wouldn't necessarily take her to Aqua. "

She's experienced "screaming children, children who throw stuff . . . or they just want to run around."

But just over half the people surveyed are fine with kids in restaurants. Dahmen says the issue causes contention.

Recently, she "disinvited" her niece when she was helping organize a surprise dinner at a French restaurant for her 70-year-old mother-in-law.

"It caused a big fight," she says.