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## The Sound of Great Food \_ Curated Restaurant Music

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS  
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WASHINGTON (AP) — Walk into any Sweetgreen restaurant and alongside your locally grown mesclun topped with organic dressing you're likely to get a helping of Hot Chip — the band, not the food.

"Music for us is part of our DNA," says Jonathan Neman, the 27-year-old co-founder of the Washington restaurant chain. In fact, he and his two partners care so much about the music that plays in their dozen locations, they personally crafted the playlists, creating eclectic blends that run from The Cure to today's British indie Blood Orange.

"When you're dining the food is important, the smell is important, the way it looks is important. And what you're listening to is important," he said.

Until recently, many restaurants were content to turn on the radio or let the manager fire up his iPod. But for a growing number of foodies and restaurateurs, what's on the playlist is almost as important as what's on the menu.

Custom playlists that pair tunes to tastes — created by the restaurateurs themselves or by companies devoted to the task — are becoming de rigueur in the food industry as more chefs and their customers seek dining experiences that are harmonious and hip at every turn.

Less than a decade ago, only luxury restaurants paid special attention to the music that accompanied their foams and gelees, says Michael Smith, chief executive officer of The Playlist Generation, a Los Angeles-based creator of custom playlists. At New York's three Michelin star Le Bernardin, a light waft of Brazilian artist Antonio Carlos Jobim or down tempo jazz creates an atmosphere as sophisticated as the wasabi risotto and peekytoe crab. At Alinea, the Chicago temple of theatrical molecular gastronomy, chef Grant Achatz has contemplated having servers choreograph their motions to the music of a live cellist.

But as the need to be noticed in a crowded culinary landscape has increased, those in the playlist industry say the trend has filtered down to casual dining establishments and even to national chains.

"It's trickling down now to being more of an expectation than a luxury," says Smith, who works with restaurants from Le Bernardin and Jose Andres' whimsical Las Vegas venue China Poblano to the Chinese food chain P.F. Chang's. "It's vital for a restaurant, the smells and the service and the creativity that goes into the menu. But the music can anchor it and give it all a heartbeat."

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Smith cites studies showing that slow tempo music during dinner increases bar sales by more than 40 percent, and that faster music increases lunch hour sales. Such concepts are gospel for playlist creators, who carefully choreograph the music to match time of day and customer behavior. Many of the restaurateurs creating their own lists are similarly savvy, taking stock of their audience and their habits.

"In some of our suburban stores we tone it down a little bit," Sweetgreen's Neman says. "We used to play some of the electronic music and it was a little bit much for them."

But for many restaurants, integrating their menus, motifs and music is not a specific effort to drive sales or influence customer behavior, but to help create a larger brand identity.

The Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf, a California-based specialty coffee and tea retailer, began using custom playlists last year as way to differentiate itself in a national expansion. Its music — which speeds up for the morning rush, and slows down for afternoon dawdlers — features a calculated jumble of everything from classic Talking Heads to jazz-blues artist Dr. John and the slightly groovy sound of up-and-coming singer-songwriter Mayer Hawthorne.

"It's always been part of our strategy to make the brand unique," says Diane Kuyoomjian, the company's vice president of marketing. "As we are expanding nationally it makes sense to be as distinct as possible. It's a combination of product and environment that our customers are responding to, so it enhances that."

Converging social and marketing forces also have driven the trend. People formerly used to buying and listening to albums in their entirety now purchase unrelated, individual songs digitally, says Jeremy Abrams, whose New York-based company Audiostiles works with clients including chef and restaurateur Thomas Keller. Easy access to more varied music online has also opened people's minds, he says, and made them more willing to experiment. Combine these forces with the casualization of fine dining, and restaurant patrons are more open to hearing eclectic music while debating the virtues of pinot versus cabernet grapes.






"The boundaries of fine dining are expanding and the music is expanding with it," Abrams says. "Just because you're an Italian restaurant doesn't mean you have to play opera."

But if music can make the experience, it also can break it. Acid guitar or an anvil-shattering volume will certainly interfere with dinner. In reviewing a restaurant a few months ago, Washington Post food critic Tom Sietsema took time from an overall favorable review to note that "the gawdawful music summons bad '80s porn."

"It's like anything else, you want to infuse your restaurant with your personality as an owner," Sietsema said in a telephone interview. "I like it when it works and I hate it when it doesn't."

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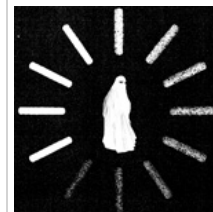
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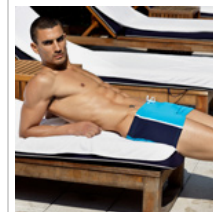
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