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PULSE

Meatball Shop doesn't time its customers, but tries to keep them from lingering by using less-than-comfortable chairs and small tables.

By CARRIE SEIM

WHAT'S that sound you keep hearing in NYC restaurants? Is it the thud of the check hitting your table precisely 90 minutes into a meal?

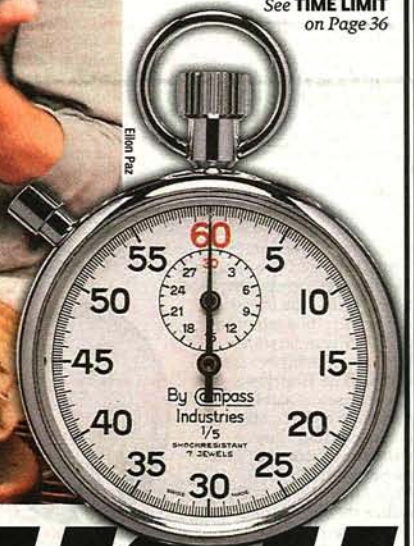
Or perhaps the clatter of plates being pulled away the second you set down your fork?

Table time limits — whether openly acknowledged or gingerly hinted at — are becoming de rigueur for popular eateries packed with voracious eaters vying for seats. But what's shocking foodies all over town is that 60 percent of diners now support such time limits during peak hours, according to a nationwide poll by Zagat.

"It was surprising to me," Zagat Survey co-founder and CEO Tim Zagat tells *The Post*. "But it really shows people understand that when there's a line of people backed up against the door, at the very least you ought to be aware and thoughtful of them, because you may be in line the next time."

Still, the creeping acceptance of two or even three table turnovers per night at American restaurants — which may be ideal for certain on-the-go New Yorkers but are absolutely unheard of in Europe — is

See **TIME LIMIT** on Page 36



Restaurant time limits spark citywide food fight!

DINNER RUSH

Diners: Don't stay with your food



Diners at Harlem's Red Rooster are split on whether restaurants should stick to a time frame for turning over tables.



At the Rock Center Cafe, diners have a time limit during the holidays.

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hard for some gourmands to swallow. "The two-seating thing makes me crazy," admits Zagat. "I want to come in at the time I want to come, not when the restaurant wants me to come."

The idea of restaurants clocking diners with a stopwatch was stuffied at as unavory just a few years ago. When Gordon Ramsay unveiled his New York dining room, the London, in 2006 with a reported two-hour rule on tables, the grumbling heard 'round the city was enough for the restaurant to cry "misunderstanding" and quickly reverse course. The Hourglass Tavern uses actual hourglasses to enforce 60-minute meals, but "they are money for the theme," says owner Beth Sheinin. That said, "We do still utilize them as timers as needed, as [that way] we can guarantee we can get you to the theater on time."

These days, dining and dishing is being hailed as good etiquette. "Don't overstay your welcome at a busy restaurant" is the eighth commandment in Zagat's 10 New Rules of Dining Etiquette, posted a few weeks ago. He insists time limits are a plus for both customers and restaurateurs, as they

allow more hungry diners a taste of coveted hot spots.

Indeed, Shelby Torbett, general manager of Socarrat Paella Bar in Chelsea, says two-hour time limits are the only way her eatery can function.

"At a place that's this busy, with a communal table setting and this fast-paced atmosphere, time limits are definitely something we do intentionally," she says, over the din of hungry couples circling the hostess stand. And, she notes, most diners "get it" without any

table dawdling over flan.

At buzzing Red Rooster in Harlem, the smartly dressed crowd (biding time beside before dinner) is divided on time limits.

"I get restaurant amnesia," laughs Denise Johnson, 58, of Queens. "I don't remember what I went through to get a table — as soon as I'm seated, I'm like, 'I waited, they can wait!'"

Her friend Karen Lilly, 42, who lives in Harlem, says she's more conscious of others sweating it out for a seat. "I'm aware because

Harlem, emphatically blasts any sort of limits. "If I order the most expensive bottle of scotch, should I be rushed? Absolutely not."

Downtown at the Meatball Shop, co-owner and general manager Michael Chernow says rowdy diners often handle much of the dirty work at his no-reservations joint.

"They hover over the tables and kind of stare with glassy eyes," he says, noting that guests regularly wait 2½ hours for a seat at his popular LES location. "I've literally had to break up fights between people sliding into a barstool — there's two burnt cheeks, but they're not from the same person."

To prevent such scuffles, Chernow has a policy of "doing a little research" on tables that reach the two-hour mark, offering them a cab home or a drink at the bar. He also uses design strategies to keep foodies flowing.

"To be totally honest, I don't get the most comfortable seats. Our tables are a bit smaller, we have relatively loud music and we are pretty quick to pull a plate off the table if it's empty," he acknowledges. "We've never kicked anyone out, and we're not asking you to shove your meatball down your throat, but let's not

In 2006, celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay was forced to deny rumors that NYC restaurant the London would impose a two-hour time limit on customers.

have an 11-course meal."

At Azuki Sushi in the Flatiron District, diners can sip all-you-can-drink sake specials with dinner, but the bottoms-upping must be done within the restaurant's hour-and-45-minute table limit.

Both the Sea Grill and Rock Center Cafe, at Rockefeller Center, keep reservation times limited to 90 minutes or two hours during the bustling holiday season, when the cafes are mobbed by visitors hoping for rink-side seats.

"When I see a table that has paid the check and is nursing a water glass for 10 minutes, and there is a line at the door I offer complimentary after-dinner drinks to all at the front bar," explains Ken Gordon, who oversees both spots. "Most take the hint and become apologetic; a few accept the offer and enjoy the extra hospitality."



It shows people understand... you ought to be aware and thoughtful, because you may be in line next time.

— Tim Zagat, on a poll showing support for time limits

liars. "They see people waiting and take pride in finishing in time for the next reservation."

Socarrat's time limits are deemed "absolutely fair" by Debra Purdy of Windsor, Ontario, waiting for a table with three friends on her 33rd birthday. "Two hours is plenty of time for paella," Purdy says diplomatically, glancing at a

I know what it feels like to be next in line," she says.

And Ching Mizuki, a 30-year-old from Jersey City, also agrees with the pro-time-limit majority: "I do feel bad for people waiting when I'm eating, and try to hurry — but then I think I'm too nice of a person in general."

Meanwhile, Jose Perez, 50, of

but not every restaurateur is thrilled with a new dining culture that embraces time limits.

"I can't believe it — we are able to train our customers so well," jokes Julian Niccolini, co-owner of the Four Seasons restaurant. "Your time is up — ooo!"

He criticizes time limits as a form of diner "mistreatment" that also happens to be terrible for business. "I don't think the customer's going to come back if you make them feel like they have to leave. We're supposed to be in the hospitality business — this is not McDonald's."

Will Guidara, general manager of Eleven Madison Park, also encourages languorous meals, giving guests a bottle of cognac at the end of dinner and inviting them to stay as long as they like. Yet he acknowledges the distinction between four-star environments and bistro dining where "it could seem egregious to sit for hours after the meal was complete while hungry onlookers wait endlessly."

Although Union Square Cafe estimates two hours per table in its reservation books, general manager Sam Lipp says groups that linger longer are usually balanced by those that have to rush out for a show or to relieve the

baby sitter. He sees time limits — explicit or even hinted at — as "offputting," and out of step with gracious hospitality. "Sometimes we have to get crafty to accommodate," he says. "But people who linger are, in a way, saying 'thank you' and 'job well done.'"

Diner Alex Johnson, 32, from Hell's Kitchen, sums up the city's seemingly schizophrenic attitude toward table time limits this way: "I understand the need for turnover from a business perspective. But if anyone ever asked me to leave the table, I'd be furious."

Which leads to Zagat's unwritten rule of dining etiquette. "It's not permissible for the restaurant to shoot you while you're at the table and shove your body," he says dryly.

"That's rule number 11."



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— Four Seasons co-owner Julian Niccolini