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Food

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Music to make the food go down

What makes a restaurant? The food? The staff? The atmosphere? For the former DJ Rob Wood, it's all of the above – and music is an essential part of the process.



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Music is an essential part of eating out

"Entertainment. Stimulation. Relaxation." Rob Wood is listing some of the things that music can do to the listener, and if anyone should know, it's Rob. A former DJ and music journalist, Rob is the founder of [Music Concierge](#), a company that can provide the perfect soundtrack to businesses such as hotels, shops and – particularly – restaurants.

"Music can make us change the way we feel about a space, a building," Rob explains. "A restaurant has to have the right atmosphere and that depends on so many factors, like the lighting, the staff, the furniture, the decor... You could have the greatest chef in the world in the kitchen but if the restaurant is drab or too brightly lit, people won't go. Music is a major part of the experience."

"In a busy restaurant, there's hustle and bustle, the clinking of glasses. Think of those places you visit out of peak times. As the only customer, you could feel lonely or exposed if it's too quiet, but the right music can bring the place to life."

Rob describes creating the perfect atmosphere as "a sensory jigsaw" and "joining the musical dots". The irony is that if he gets it right, many people won't notice. Get it wrong though – Rob remembers a holiday hotel where the breakfast soundtrack was "the waiter's techno CD" – and it's jarring, which is why Rob and his colleagues spend a lot of time in the relevant spaces.

"We go throughout at many different times, to different areas, analysing, understanding the trading pattern, the audience, and talking to the chef, the owners, the staff," Rob explains, after which they put together a detailed playlist – which is updated every few months – with tracks scheduled for different times of day and potentially different parts of the building.

"In a hotel lobby we're trying to relax guests, in the bar we're perhaps trying to create a sense of occasion... We have one client where there's a laid-back soundtrack to the dining room, but a vintage R&B in the ladies and Bond soundtracks in the gents!"



Rob Wood: dining is "a sensory jigsaw" of which music is a part

"For some places, it's very background that might develop into something with more energy in the evening. For other clients, there's more theatre involved, and music is a key part to the whole experience, not just a background detail." Rob cites two examples, London's Bombay cafe-inspired Dishoom restaurants – "we fused old-time Bombay with Indo-funk and 60s Indian rock and roll: we call it 'Austin Powers Goes To Bollywood'" – and Heston Blumenthal's latest venture, The Perfectionist Café at Heathrow's Terminal Two. "Heston has never used music before, but he's a huge fan," reveals Rob, explaining that the instructions were to relax the customer – "airports are stressful, they want to take that feeling away" – although Heston's tastes came into the final choice, so there are quirky unexpected tracks too, to reflect the chef's sometimes eccentric take on food.

Some places obviously try to do it themselves. As Rob admits some get it right but, as he points out, knowledge is a valuable thing.

"We can all switch a light on or off, but to light somewhere properly is a skill. We all love food, but we leave it to the chef to put the menu together.

"Lots of places think they can just use an iPod, but while one track might work, the next doesn't, plus the sound levels are different, there are gaps, the playlist isn't updated regularly. Many people now realise they need help selecting music and that music can be an important part of the brand." Rob's research has also shown just how much music can change mood, often unexpectedly.

"The predominant theory of Oxford Street shops was it's a young female audience, so we should play loud poppy Top 40 music. Research has shown though that if you play fast music, people move faster and leave shops quicker. Play more relaxed music and they stay longer and potentially buy more.

"You can also use fast music to turn restaurant tables or play slower, more relaxed music for longer meals or tasting menus."

Rob and his colleagues are constantly looking for new music. "It's a military operation," he says, "and I make sure that people are record shopping, not just going onto iTunes. We go to car boot sales, the independent record shops in Bangkok or the backstreets of New York. A few weeks ago, I went to a record stall that had been recommended to me in New Delhi. He had 40 records and I bought 37 of them. I had to go to another meeting and was worried they'd melt and warp in the heat so I had to ask a cafe to put them in the fridge."

It's a never-ending task but one that Rob still enjoys. "If you love something you want to discover more and more of it," he says. "Music is like a language that you can never fully learn."