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BY BETH TEITELL | GLOBE STAFF

# The restaurant patron's prayer: Let there be light.



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**Besito in Chestnut Hill offers guests mini flashlights to help them read the menu.**

By **Beth Teitell** | GLOBE STAFF FEBRUARY 22, 2016

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It isn't meant as a challenge — the waiter wants to be liked. But to diners of a certain age, the server's question sounds like a taunt.

*“Would you like to see a menu?”*

Uh, yes, I'd love to! Except that it's so dark in here that unless I turn on my headlamp, all that text about your locally sourced, organic, hand-pickled, house-crafted offerings will remain a mystery to me.

I'll be reduced to ordering whatever my companion does — assuming he or she can see — or broadcasting my presbyopia by pulling out my menu-assistive device, or, as it's also known, the iPhone.

We get the challenge: Restaurants need ambience. Like movie theaters and sports stadiums — which are battling Netflix and Amazon Prime and TVs so large that Gronk is nearly full-size — restaurants need to give people a reason to leave their homes.

Their competition for in-person consumers comes from DoorDash and Fodler and Caviar and other meal-delivery services that allow people to enjoy cuisines beyond pizza and Chinese without having to get dressed, find parking — or shout to be heard over the din.

Given the allure of staying home, is it any wonder that, according to the NPD Group research firm, non-pizza restaurant delivery traffic is up 33 percent since 2012?

Here's the challenge restaurants face: The population is aging, and growing increasingly cranky about menu blindness. But at the same time, sophisticated lighting is pricey, and, in 2016, it's already very expensive to open a restaurant in Boston, where rent, food prices, and labor costs are all rising.

“Savvy [restaurateurs] realize that lighting is one of the best places to spend money because it sets the tone and mood,” said Jef Leon, lead designer for restaurants and hospitality at Bergmeyer, a Boston architecture and interior design firm, who has done lighting for The Maiden, recently opened in South Boston, and is working on the new Lolita Cocina & Tequila Bar in Fort Point, among other jobs.

Despite its value, lighting is one of the first things to go when the budget is tight, he said. High-end lighting can run well over \$20 per square foot, he noted, compared with a few dollars per square foot for a very basic system.

But, he said, skimping is “penny wise and pound foolish.”

A good lighting system lets the dining room stay dim and nicely atmospheric, while warmly illuminating the tables. “Often the best lighting design is when you don’t see where the lighting is coming from at all,” he said. “It makes a statement without [diners] staring at a bright light bulb.”

Like so many other things in life, when lighting works people typically don’t think about it. But when it’s wrong, Todd Winer, chef-owner of Pastoral, an artisan pizza restaurant in Fort Point, saw what happens.

“When we opened [in March of 2013] we put in these super fluorescent lights in the middle of the room and wrapped them in [diffusion material] to dim them, like they used to on film sets. It was awful, and everyone knew it except for me.

“I was like, ‘It’s so cool, it gives it this old garage look,’ but my wife hated it and my old chef Todd English came in and he was like, ‘These lights suck.’

“But I was like, ‘I don’t want it to be dark.’ ”

While it was true that darkness was not a problem, the lights cast a yellowish-greenish hue that repelled people from the middle of the dining room, he said.

“I think I spent \$1,400 putting dimmers in thinking that would help.”

It didn’t, but even so, Winer stuck with his lights until a couple who had bought out the whole restaurant for their wedding party strung up outdoor patio lights, and Winer thought, “Oh my God, what a difference this makes.”

In Belmont, lighting designer Doreen Le May Madden said her “pet peeve” is when diners are forced to resort to iPhones for illumination.

“You know there was no lighting designer on the project,” said Le May Madden, who works with HGTV star Taniya Nayak on restaurant projects, and did lighting for Abby Lane and the Met Back Bay, among others.

Le May Madden detailed the factors that must be considered, including: the reflective properties of a restaurant’s walls, floors, and tables; and the wattage and light distribution of the fixtures — do they cast a wide spread of light or a narrow beam?

“You don’t want people sitting under a spotlight,” she said.

What about a table lamp? It’s not as easy as you’d imagine. With restaurants regularly reconfiguring tables to accommodate groups of different sizes, electric lights are hard for outlet-related reasons, and portable lamps can run out of batteries. “It’s a maintenance issue,” she said.

In today's world, bright lights typically correlate with inexpensive restaurants, but that wasn't always the case, said Jan Whitaker, a Northampton-based author who writes on consumer history.

"Electricity didn't come into restaurants until the 1880s," she said, "but even then it was unreliable and people usually supplemented it with gas lighting, but only the more capital-intensive places could really afford it.

"But once it became common to have light, and it was inexpensive, it became a way for restaurants on the lower end of the scale to demonstrate how clean they were. People were very distrustful of eating places in the early 20th century, and bright lights built confidence."

At the same time, she said, early night clubs that catered to a raucous clientele were brightly lit, and restaurateurs seeking upscale customers distinguished themselves with dim lights.

There are many diners, of course, who are not bothered by the dark, who in fact like the night. Let's call them Millennials and some of the younger Gen-Xers.

And for the rest of the adults, amid the squinting there are signs of light. Besito, a Mexican restaurant in Chestnut Hill, slips cute little flashlights to diners who appear to be struggling, and because kids want them, too, they don't scream "baby boomer." (The same can't be said of the reading glasses offered to those in need from a discreet case at Bistro du Midi in Back Bay.) The back-lit menus at Da Vinci, in the South End, are also equalizers. And

the under-bar illumination at SRV, a new Italian restaurant in the South End, was intended as a design element, not a vision aid, but diners aren't complaining.

The bottom line? Let there be dark. But also light.

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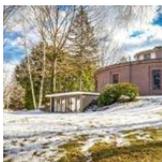


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