

# Hang up and eat, please

There's no need for further debate over the health risks of cell phones. I can report unequivocally that they cause brain damage, because an alarming number of people can't pick one up without turning stupid.

When did it become OK to have a phone at the dinner table? I have not had a restaurant lunch in two years in which another diner didn't allow his phone to ring some insufferable electronic version of "The William Tell Overture," answer it, and then proceed to have a really urgent conversation about something terribly important, like what kind of food he is eating. I've heard of "indoor voices" and "outdoor voices," but people on wireless phones use their "helicopter barn" voices.

Hearing other people's phone conversations is like listening to them blow their noses for five minutes — too much forced intimacy. The mere fact that a technology exists doesn't make it right to use it everywhere. We also have things called paintball guns, yet firing them in restaurants is considered discourteous.

It's rude enough to annoy your neighbors, but imagine how your own table companions feel when you cut them off midsentence to chat up someone who isn't even in the room. How they must enjoy



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being shown the precise value you place on the pleasure of their company.

I am a stand-up comic, and I have a rule that if a cell phone rings during a show, it must be handed over to me for the duration. Seems fair, since its owner was dumb enough to bring a live performance to a screeching halt.

Well, a few months ago I was onstage and a phone loudly chimed right in the middle of a joke. The guy didn't even have the grace to act embarrassed — he proceeded to take the call right there at the table. I exercised my absolute power as the comedian and tried to take the offending phone away from him. He got belligerent, saying, "We've got a

sick baby at home." With astonishment, I asked, "Then what are you doing in a bar?"

This jerk is the rule rather than the exception, I'm sorry to say. Everyone has a Very Good Reason for using their mobile phones in inappropriate circumstances, almost none of which stand up. For example, nobody would begrudge your taking the call for a medical emergency, but how dire could the situation be if you're ordering an appetizer?

My brother related an incident in which a cell phone went off during Sunday Mass, and the man who answered it didn't even leave the sanctuary to take the call (which was not an emergency, medical or otherwise). Some advice to this genius, and others like him: There is only one correct way to answer your phone in church, and that is, "So you have a donor kidney? We'll be right there."

Let's be honest; this whole thing started out as a way to be cool — having a cell phone go off where others could hear it made us feel important. Now we are just plain addicted to the cussed things, and we've allowed technology to overstep its bounds. Come on, America. We're better than this. We have opposable thumbs. We don't have to base our everyday manners on

MTV.

I know what some of you are thinking: "Well, Smarty Pants, where AM I supposed to use my phone then?" The answer is, "Someplace else, Einstein." Your car, the parking lot, the lobby, the Great Outdoors. Someplace where you can have, dare I suggest, a little privacy. If the call really is important, chances are it is also personal. And if you really are "on call" and absolutely must keep the phone turned on, you can ask to sit near the door and step outside if it rings.

If there is no emergency, here's an option you may not have considered: Don't answer it. You will impress both the caller and those around you a lot more by demonstrating that you, and not the phone, are in charge. Turn it off, smile, and say, "Sorry about that. Now, you were saying?"

I don't want to tread on personal liberty. I'm not advocating legislation banning cell phones from restaurants. Perhaps, though, just to level the playing field, we should encourage people to bring their paintball guns to lunch. Imagine how many of those phones might stay turned off if the diners being disturbed by them were armed.

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