The New York Times

Could You Make It Through Dinner Without Checking Your Phone?

By Claire Ballentine

July 14, 2018

When Marc and Kara Lyons take their family out for a nice dinner, they typically hand their two sons cellphones to play games and watch YouTube videos. Sometimes, the parents grab the devices back to check their own email and text messages.

But on a recent night at Hearth, an Italian-inspired restaurant in the East Village, the boys, 5 and 7, colored on blank white paper with crayons. Their parents discussed the highlights of their trip to New York from their home in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., to celebrate Mr. Lyons's 40th birthday.

The reason for the tech-free dinner? The cellphones were stashed in a small decorative box on their table, an initiative that Marco Canora, Hearth's chef and owner, began in November to help customers disconnect from their devices for a little bit.

Tech addiction, and what staring at smartphones all the time does to cognition, well-being and productivity, have become a top concern in Silicon Valley. Google recently announced a series of "digital well-being" updates. Apple, facing pressure from a couple of large investors, has said its next version of its mobile operating system will provide users statistics about time spent on the devices.

But even companies outside the industry are addressing the issue. FedEx tells employees to leave their personal phones at home, while executives at Brown Parker & DeMarinis Advertising and United Wholesale Mortgage have placed restrictions on their employees' cellphone use to improve productivity.

Some restaurants, partly from irritation when patrons take pictures of the food, place limits on cellphones in their dining rooms. Others, including in Chicago and San Antonio, have banned them entirely.

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Hearth is taking a softer approach — there are no rules, just the containers on each table. A note on top says, "Open me!" Inside is an invitation to stash your phone during the meal.

Mr. Canora started thinking two years ago about how to try to curb his customers' increasingly distracted behavior. At first, he considered asking guests if they wanted to check their phones at the host stand, as they would a coat, but he worried this could create arguments between couples at the front of the restaurant. And he didn't want to be responsible for lost or forgotten phones.

His other idea was asking customers for their phones once they were seated, but he didn't want to add another task for his servers.

Mr. Canora finally decided on the vintage boxes, which the restaurant's general manager and wine director, Christine Wright, bought from Etsy. No two boxes look the same — some are vintage candy boxes, others old cigar cases. They complement the restaurant's whimsical décor, including the mismatched glassware.

Servers ignore the boxes, leaving guests to discover the option themselves.

"I don't think there is anybody who is coming in and feeling like we are condescending to them," said Erik Gullberg, a bartender and server who has worked at Hearth for four years.

A family dinner at Hearth, during which the cellphones were put aside for at least one evening.
Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Few guests make it through their meal without checking their phone, Mr. Canora said. If a diner's companion leaves to go to the restroom, the phone comes out immediately.

"It has really reinforced our belief that it is a true addiction," Mr. Canora said. "You see people succumb to their addiction all night long."

Even if customers don't follow through completely, he said, he figures it's better than nothing. People at least often have a conversation about technology's impact on their lives.

Some customers say they don't need the box to avoid technology during their meal. Janie Quinn and Elissa Epstein, friends who live in Manhattan, noticed the box but didn't put their phones inside.

"My purse is like that. I don't need a box," Ms. Quinn said.

She worried that she might forget about her phone and leave without it.

"Are you kidding?" Mr. Canora said. "They're counting the seconds before they can grab it."

Joy Habian, who lives in TriBeCa, said she wished she could forget her phone in the box, noting the oversize role of technology in her life. Although she tries not to check her phone while eating at restaurants, she said she was only successful about 75 percent of the time.

"It's just an unconscious habit," Ms. Habian said. "It's not rational or meaningful."

At Hearth, she placed her phone in the decorative container and tried to focus more on enjoying her meal.

One way diners frequently use their phones during meals is to post photos of their food on Facebook or Instagram, often tagging the restaurant and providing a source of free publicity. Hearth's boxes have led fewer people to do that.

Some of Hearth's staff members had initially worried that this would hurt the business. Ultimately, Mr. Canora decided the loyal following that Hearth has built in its 14 years meant that it didn't need to depend on Instagram.

That doesn't mean the social media platform is devoid of content about Hearth.

"We do see people Instagramming about the boxes, so I don't know if that's a win or a lose there, but I guess it's still good for us," Ms. Wright joked.

Still, she said most customers hadn't heard about the boxes. The restaurant has yet to receive negative reactions from diners, with most offering enthusiastic feedback.

Mr. Lyons was certainly a fan of Hearth's strategy, noting that he and his wife enjoyed their conversation more without the distraction. Their sons asked for the phones only once, and he quickly dismissed the request. Instead, the boys entertained themselves with tic-tac-toe, and Mr. Lyons taught them how to play hangman.

He's even planning to copy Mr. Canora's idea.

"We said we should get a box at home," Mr. Lyons said.

A version of this article appears in print on July 15, 2018, on Page BU5 of the New York edition with the headline: Pick Up Your Fork, Not Your Cellphone