

Article Published: Tuesday, June 07, 2005 - 12:00:00 AM PST



Tunes to chew by

Digital music system lends to eatery ambience

By Evan Pondel, Staff Writer

WESTLAKE VILLAGE - Jill Espinoza likes to eat her shrimp scampi with a hint of Italian music in the background.

Laura Chaillie, a bartender at Alessio Restorante Italiano in Westlake Village, is shown how to operate the new music system by qsonix VP of Marketing and Sales Mike Weaver. (John Lazar / LA Daily News)

So her stomach and ears were both satisfied Monday afternoon following a meal with her colleagues at Alessio Ristorante Italiano in Westlake Village.

"Oh, that music was good. Glad they weren't playing classical music. It puts me to sleep," said Espinoza, 44, who barbecues to AC/DC on the weekends.

The question is whether it's the food or the music that keeps customers happy at Alessio. Tony Amini, the restaurant's owner, is convinced it's a combination of the two, especially after he invested several thousand dollars in a digital music player that holds 30,000 songs.

Think of it as an iPod on steroids.

That's how designers of the Q100 Digital Music System describe the technology. Sitting upright like a touch-screen cash register, the device retails for about \$5,000, and serenades nearly a dozen restaurants and bars since its March debut.

The brainchild of Agoura Hills-based qsonix might not be the next jukebox, but Mike Weaver, vice president of sales and marketing, is marketing the device as a must-have for restaurants and even consumers who want more control of their music. "Nobody likes to sit there with a scroll wheel," said Weaver, 38, who considers himself an "'80s biscuit" when it comes to musical taste. "And the Q100 is an inexpensive solution to help restaurants and consumers play the music they want to hear."

A soft accordion was bubbling through the speakers for the lunchtime crowd at Alessio on Monday. Bar manager Eric Cearly said the music changes throughout the day, with the staff preferring to clean up to Jimi Hendrix and Metallica. "We have our own playlists, too."

Gone are the days of elevator music. No more falling asleep at the meal. Richard Martin, managing editor of the Nation's Restaurant News, said more establishments are trying to appeal to their customers' musical preferences. But that also has its drawbacks.

"Some restaurants use music as a device to speed up turnover," said Martin, noting that loud rock 'n' roll can get people to eat faster.

There are also issues of licensing. When a Q100 is playing overhead at a bar or restaurant, the establishment's owner is responsible for paying the rights to play the music. Jim Alexander, chief executive officer of qsonix, said the rights cost about \$300 a year.

That doesn't bother Alessio owner Amini.

He already has uploaded several hundred songs and plans on installing the device at his restaurant in West Hills. Amini said he is also open to burning customers' CDs onto the device. A slot at the bottom of the Q100 essentially eats a CD, copies it onto a hard drive and then spits it back out. Copy time per CD: three minutes to four minutes.

Amini said he bought the device because the satellite stations "didn't offer enough variety."

Carmen Potrino, 50, is certainly thankful. "The Italian music was nice today," said Potrino after finishing off his osso bucco (Italian for veal shank). "Now, if they were playing hip-hop or rap or something like that, I would just get up and leave. I wouldn't come back. I'd lose my appetite."

Evan Pondel, (818) 713-3662 evan.pondel@dailynews.com