

# The New York Times

## When Out to Dinner, Don't Count the Watts

By DIANE CARDWELL  
Published: June 7, 2010



Joshua Bright for The New York Times

Filament bulbs are an important part of the décor at Maialino on Lexington Avenue.



Joshua Bright for The New York Times

At Craft, on East 19th Street. The bulbs' glow flatters, but they use much more energy than standard incandescent bulbs.

bit comforting, but still with your own take on it."

The bulbs are now popular all over the world, in Germany, England, Australia and even Hong Kong Disneyland, Mr. Rosenzweig said. The only place he cannot seem to find a market is Miami Beach, where the prevailing look is modern. In countries with bans on incandescent lights in homes, he markets the product as a novelty bulb.

"Everybody's going green, but we're still hot and red," he said. "My bulbs use a lot of energy and make the air conditioning work overtime."

In the United States, the craze has spilled over into home décor, with demand high enough that even mainstream retailers like Pottery Barn, Restoration Hardware and Anthropologie sell the lights for \$9 to \$20 each.

It remains to be seen how all this will play out in a city where Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg has championed the compact fluorescent and restaurants crow about their connections to the earth.

Mr. Bloomberg and his chief environmental aide declined to comment on the proliferation of the filament bulbs, some of which do not produce enough light to be included in the higher federal efficiency standards that begin taking effect in 2012, but can use roughly three times the energy of a standard incandescent.

Although some Congressional aides say the new restrictions would not apply to the reproduction bulbs because they are not intended for general use, the Natural Resources Defense Council, which helped write the law, said it would challenge that interpretation.

"It boggles the mind that in these times of economic hardship and interest in environmental sustainability that restaurant owners would choose the light bulb that uses 5 to 10 times more power than the other bulbs on the market," Noah Horowitz, a senior scientist at the environmental group, wrote in an e-mail message. "You can't on the one hand brag how green you are by serving organic beer and locally grown produce while you are lighting your business with the least efficient light bulbs available in the world."

Lighting designers, who tend to think in terms of overall watts used in a space as opposed to the environmental burden of a single fixture, say that most of the real illumination in restaurants can be handled by more efficient sources, with the vintage lights used as accents.

For Mr. Friedman of the Spotted Pig, who said he was in a good-natured fight trying to restrain his designers from hanging hundreds of lights from the ceiling of his next restaurant, the eco-friendly and aesthetically pleasing solution is a simple one. If you want to conjure up an old-time feel, he said, "just light real candles, you know?"

"They're really cheap, they use way less of New York's energy than a light bulb. A little candle on a table — there's nothing more old school than that."

At Maialino, the Roman-style trattoria on Gramercy Park, they hover in groups of two and three. At the Standard Grill in the meatpacking district, they snake through the cafe, restaurant and patio. And at Recipe, a rustic spot on the Upper West Side, they cluster near the entrance as an enticement.

They are not the latest cliques of beautiful people, but something quite old and plain: exposed-filament bulbs, energy-guzzling reproductions of Thomas Alva Edison's first light bulb. And despite the escalating push to go green and switch to compact fluorescents — or perhaps because of it — their antique glow has spread like a power surge.

Whether in hip hangouts tapping into the popular Victorian industrial look or elegant rooms seeking to warm up their atmosphere, the bulb has become a staple for restaurant designers, in part because it emulates candlelight and flatters both dinner and diner.

The filament light is now so ubiquitous that it has prompted a backlash among those who deem it overexposed — a badge of retro cool that is fast becoming the restaurant-design equivalent of the Converse All Star.

Ken Friedman, an owner of nostalgic spots like the Spotted Pig and the Rusty Knot, called the look "played out." In a planning session last year for the Breslin, his latest take on the British gastropub, he declared, "No exposed bulbs!"

And Charlie Palmer, the creator of a national hospitality empire who featured the lights in 1994 at his Flatiron district restaurant Alva said he recently dissuaded a designer from using them in a new space. "That happened 20 years ago," he recalled saying. "It's been done."

And yet, given all those burning amber threads dangling from cords in New York and the rest of the country, they would appear to be far from done. They remain a go-to design element, like wheatgrass in a box some years ago, for their casual air and winks at history.

A lot of thought and expense go into restaurant lighting — upscale budgets easily reach six figures — because it can shape a diner's experience almost as much as the food. Some lights favor certain colors and make others look unappetizing. But the old-fashioned bulb, though less efficient than fluorescent or L.E.D. lamps, can build an ambience at a relatively low cost.

"It creates a very warm glow, through a broad spectrum with many colors," said Paul Bentel, whose firm Bentel & Bentel hung cascades of reproduction Tesla bulbs, similar to the original Edison, throughout Craft restaurant near Gramercy Park in 2001. "A red apple will look as good as a green pear."

The Craft connection may have been the start of the boom. The bulbs became a signature there as the owner, Tom Colicchio, spread his restaurants across the country and appeared to spawn a thousand imitators.

But that might not have happened without Bob Rosenzweig, who started selling the reproductions in the 1980s out of a storefront in Flushing, Queens, inspired by a fascination with the old bulbs he bought from a salvage operation on Canal Street.

Priced out of Flushing, then Long Island City and Jersey City, he moved his company, Aamsco, to Summerville, S.C., a suburb of Charleston. There, he manufactures and distributes his own bulbs, as well as lights from other companies, including Kyp-Go, which has been replicating Edison's original carbon filament bulb for nearly 50 years.

"My neighbors think I'm in the witness protection program," he said, with the brisk cadence of his Astoria upbringing. "They say, 'Why in your right mind would you come down here to live on a dirt road in a small town? You've got to be hiding from somebody.'"

He started selling the lights to collectors, theatrical prop houses and the Edison national park site in New Jersey, for its gift shop. Demand grew but did not really take off, Mr. Rosenzweig said, until shortly after the turn of the century, as consumers were being pushed to use compact fluorescents.

Customers, particularly in San Francisco, complained that they hated how those squiggly bulbs looked in their vintage fixtures, casting an odd green tinge inside their restored Victorians. Around the same time came a boomlet of nostalgia-infused restaurants in New York, like Public, which opened in 2003 in a former Edison laboratory in NoLIta.

"You were going to do a space that was low cost — you weren't going to throw a ton of money at it — you wanted it as honest as possible," Kristina O'Neal, a founder of Avroko, which designed and operates Public, said of the raw, industrial look. "But you wanted something a little bit nostalgic, a little bit about old New York, a little



Kate Thornton for The New York Times

Bob Rosenzweig, the owner of Aamsco, in Summerville, S.C., checks a shipment of bulbs with Linda Lambert's help.



Kate Thornton for The New York Times

A workstation at Aamsco, which makes and sells old-style light bulbs and fixtures and distributes vintage bulbs for others.