

DON'T LET THE REVIEWS GET YOU DOWN

THE FOOD CRITIC HAS BEEN AROUND AS LONG AS THE RESTAURANT, BUT HOW MUCH DOES A REVIEW INFLUENCE THE SUCCESS OF AN EATERY? FOOD WRITER BRIAN STEEL DELVES INTO THE ISSUE.

EXACTLY how powerful is a restaurant review? How long does the influence last, and what can you do to maximise the effect? The answers can be found first by looking at history, and then by understanding the personality of your city and the dining value-set of its population compared to the global context. More importantly, the answer is tethered to the myriad of facets of the dining experience, only one of which is the fact that the customer happens to be eating in your establishment.

In the history of eating out, 'the restaurant', is an extremely new concept. That said, the simple ability to purchase a meal dates back to the Bronze Age. In Mesopotamian Sumer (Iraq), the stalls in the streets sold fried fish to travellers and locals. The ruins of Pompeii contain evidence of taverns that served food and wine.

As recently as 18th-century Paris, the *traiteurs* and food halls served food to the masses. (Interestingly, travellers in the early 18th-century

cuisine became available to the public as these newly unemployed chefs looked for work. More than that, this new concept of eating out was embraced because it had facets that reached beyond the food – it became a tool for demonstrating social status and conspicuous consumption. The restaurant was a place with meaning and symbolism: somewhere to see and be seen. Oh yes, and you could also eat there.

This new movement inspired the first gastronomic writing, driven by the desire to be considered a sophisticated gourmand rather than glutton. Writers such as Grimod de la Reynière and Brillat-Savarin taught the new social class how to emulate the aristocracy, giving them the knowledge to improve their social position, irrespective of breeding or background.

This marked a seminal change in the dining experience: by expanding the act of eating to include thought and conversation, it extended the art of eating beyond the table, effectively shaping values and ideals. Grimod invented restaurant criticism as others were establishing criticism of art and literature. As the first restaurant reviewer, he set the methodology that still exists to this day: the blend of description and prescription, balancing the prose to elicit a holistic experience.

Today's food media source their influence and power in the same way as Grimod and Brillat-Savarin did, by their effect on the readers and thus on public opinion and behaviour. The restaurant review is different to other genres of criticism in that it combines a quantitative score with a qualitative narrative, aiming to

objectively evoke a subjective experience involving all the senses, albeit to an unknown audience with unknown tastes and unknown appetite. However, like other forms of criticism, effective restaurant reviews need to be evocative and descriptive, where the critics are the medium through which the best is promoted and the worst is exposed.

The debate is global on the method and efficacy of the review: impartiality, objectivity, and anonymity are regularly cited as goals and just as quickly declared untenable. As for the content, some focus purely on food, irrespective of location and atmosphere, where other reviewers describe the entire experience of which food is merely one part. Today, the more educated customer is looking for reviews with more substance, offering detailed description of the whole experience.

The issue of scores, stars, and hats is another source of contention. The congruency, or not, between narrative and score is an ongoing argument. In such a subjective arena, numerical scores are inherently abstract, alluding to a baseline or objective constant of which there are none in the realms of food. Any score, no matter how well considered, is still the construct of a subjective assessment made by one person.

The perception of the media influence on the restaurant industry ranges from the belief that it is negligible to the belief that it secures the success or failure of an establishment. In fact, it's a little of both.

In broad terms, a restaurant review is actually one of the smallest influences on restaurant choice, with the recommendation of a friend topping the list, closely followed by reputation, menu and price. Indeed, it is the publication

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regarded Paris as one of the worst places to eat in Europe, citing the food and conditions as so bad they would drive most English people to suicide.) However, what you could not do in all of these examples was choose a table, a time, your dining companions or a menu.

The French revolution of 1789 marked the rather violent end to the country's aristocracy. By decapitating the people who employed chefs, haute

containing the review that is often more influential than the critic.

That said, a positive review in any of the main publications will have a tangible, albeit short-lived, effect on custom. The important thing is to maximise the opportunity for what comes after the magpies have moved on.

Remember that the media are looking for either exciting, or new, but re-invent at your peril. Restaurants that do well and last longer than others are the ones that have a belief in what they do. They have a passion and a central driving force. Critics disseminate ideas, they don't create movements (that would be the chefs).

The morass of social media warrants a stand-alone study, but the basic strategies are the same, with the understanding that this medium is largely unregulated, often unedited, and can be emotive. Irrespective of the delivery method, take the emotion out of your reaction to the review and fix what is in your power. ■■■

REMEMBER:

- Word of mouth is more powerful than any review.
- Cultivate your repeat customers.
- Service is the grand decider.
- The review gets people through the door, the rest is up to you.
- Listen to the customer, not the critic, when deciding on a change in direction.
- You can thrive and profit without ever being reviewed.
- It's the customer that actually has the most power – focus on them.
- Don't chase that extra hat/star. Expectation management and over-delivery are more important.
- If you have a consistent, solid and loyal customer base, a good

review could harm your business (good will is delicate).

- Reviews don't kill restaurants – there was something inherently wrong with your business if that happens.
- Social media is changing the rules of the game – embrace them.

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