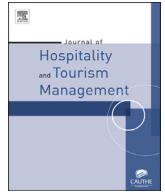




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Journalistic integrity or arbiter of taste? The case study of restaurant critic Peter Calder



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ABSTRACT

In these times of interactive IT it seems that 'almost anyone' has the potential to become a restaurant critic. However, with growing public interest in food and dining out, the opinions of dedicated food critics are important because they sidestep the opinions of friends, advertising and marketing, and can convince potential consumers to either participate voluntarily as customers, or avoid a potentially bad dining experience altogether. In light of this, our paper illuminates the critical perspective of Peter Calder, one of New Zealand's most well-known restaurant reviewers. The discussion reveals the style of review adopted by Calder, as well as his *raison d'être*. Because this paper reflects the views and opinions of a single research participant, its generalizability is limited however the research provides a 'thick description' of Calder's reviewing strategy. Calder's work is fuelled by journalistic integrity rather than a preoccupation with dining out or the hospitality industry. This makes Calder's perspective unique. This paper distils how Calder creates his narratives that have, over time, led to a loyal readership. This insight adds to our understanding of the importance of restaurant critics, and, within this case study, how critics view themselves.

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1. Introduction

'Sir, I am seated in the smallest room in the house. Your review is before me. Shortly it will be behind me.'

German composer Max Reger responding to a critic. (Dukore, 1994)

In choosing dining venues consumers are caught in a bind: do they rely on word of mouth, word of 'mouse' (online reviews), or take the plunge and try an unknown restaurant? This tension is exacerbated by the often negative and sometimes scathing feedback diners present (often anonymously) online. In New Zealand and Australia (Bay of Plenty Times, 2014; Goodfood.com, 2014), online reviews have come under scrutiny. This scrutiny reflects concern from restaurateurs about online review holders'

unwillingness to take responsibility for online feedback and their reluctance to amend incorrect online information.

Typifying the online impasse while adding a note of reality to the situation, one Australian consumer commented: 'I do think that reviews on restaurants should have a shelf life! Menus change, staff change, even owners change, but the mud sticks forever it seems.' (Goodfood.com, 2014, n.p.). Because online reviews are fraught with such difficulties we assert that this situation creates renewed interest in a restaurant review format that was once the 'final word' on restaurant quality: that is, the restaurant reviewer.

The power of the media is such that restaurants can be positively and negatively impacted on by restaurant reviewers. As the current online controversy attests, reviews that are professionally or publically generated have the ability to engender strong emotions in business owners, the media and consumers (Blank, 2007). However, restaurant reviews can be a double-edged sword, holding the potential for both doom or stardom, or the many points inbetween. The potential for restaurant stardom means that awards, recognition and high rankings from restaurant reviews are highly sought after by restaurants to bestow a point of difference in a highly competitive commercial marketplace. For most restaurants, the highest accolade is a Michelin star, with progression potential to three Michelin stars. Conversely, the potential downgrading of a Michelin star can be perceived as catastrophic, as the

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death by suicide of chef Bernard Loiseau of La Côte d'Or, in 2003, attests.

Competition for review and restaurant recognition and customer attention has increased in New Zealand and Australia as restaurant dining has undergone major changes in the past 50 years (Rowland, 2010). Where once dining out was infrequent for the majority of people, it has now become a major form of entertainment (Rowland, 2010; Sietsema, 2010). The marketplace now offers a wide variety of establishments and cuisines where, Sietsema (2010) suggests, dining out has become a fixation for many who regard themselves as 'foodies'.

Food consumerism has been mirrored by the significant growth in food-related media (Sloan, 2004). The growing media attention and public interest in restaurant reviews sits within a paradigm of rapidly escalating cultural attention to all things culinary (Williamson, Tregidga, Harris, & Keen, 2009). In this environment, the opinions of critics are deemed important because they sidestep the opinions of friends, advertising and marketing, and yet can convince potential consumers to either participate voluntarily as customers, or avoid a potentially bad dining experience. To achieve this influence, Blank (2007) suggests that the validity of the restaurant reviewer's opinions is obtained through the building a relationship of credibility with their audience.

However, despite media influence, the sociological study of public food and eating remains a minority interest, with most research being conducted in the domestic and nutritional arenas (Williamson et al., 2009; Wood, 1996). Specifically, research on restaurant reviews appears limited to the criteria that reviewers use to reach their conclusions (Barrows, Attiucia, Bosselman 1989; Clark & Wood, 1998; Schroeder, 1985; Steintrager, 2002; Titz, Lanza-Abbott, & Cruz, 2004; Williamson et al., 2009), and therefore leaves discussion of the social impact of such reviews largely unexamined. Moreover, there appears to be a misconception about, and little academic research on, the structure, function, role and power of restaurant reviews and reviewers.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to discuss the perspective of Peter Calder, one of New Zealand's most well-known restaurant reviewers. The paper also discusses the style of review adopted by Calder and his purpose in reviewing. Accordingly, this research bridges the gap between the restaurant reviewer, who is perceived as the purveyor of aspirant taste, and the realities of journalistic integrity.

2. Background

2.1. New Zealand restaurant reviews

The New Zealand media produces many restaurant reviews, published in magazines and newspapers, as well as on online review sites and blogs. Peter Calder reviews restaurants for New Zealand Sunday newspaper *The Herald on Sunday*, with his reviews published in *Living*, the lifestyle supplement of that paper. Of New Zealand's daily newspapers, only three — *The New Zealand Herald*, *The Christchurch Press*, and *The Dominion Post* — publish restaurant reviews. New Zealand's fourth daily newspaper *The Otago Daily Times* does not feature restaurant reviews. As an explanation, the *Otago Daily Times* wine and arts feature writer noted, 'Dunedin [the main city of the region] is too small to carry serious restaurant reviews and we don't consider the "my wife's chicken was very tasty" school of reviews worthwhile for our readers.' (C. Smith, personal communication, 7 May 2013).

Ewan Sargent of *The Christchurch Press* noted that his paper obtains weekly or fortnightly reviews from five different reporters (E. Sargent, personal communication, 7 May 2013). These reviews are written as 'connoisseurial' narratives. David Burton pens

Wellington's *Dominion Post* reviews for the Saturday edition. Additionally, the *Dominion Post* publishes a café review each Wednesday in its *Life* tabloid supplement. Finally, newspapers published by APN News and Media in Auckland provide restaurant reviews from five different reviewers in three main publications: *Canvas*, a glossy magazine in the weekend *Herald*; *Viva*, a fashion and lifestyle magazine in Wednesday's issue of the *New Zealand Herald*, and *Living*, a magazine in the weekly *Herald on Sunday*. It is within this publishing stable that Peter Calder writes, specifically for the *Herald on Sunday*.

3. Literature review

The purpose of this literature review is not only to provide an overview of the literature relating to restaurant reviews, but also to contextualise the importance of restaurant reviewers and their reviews within contemporary life. To achieve this, we begin by noting the emergence of restaurant reviews, the development of their basic formats (procedural, connoisseurial and consumer-driven internet reviews) and go further to reflect on how restaurant reviews are more than simple narratives. We assert that restaurant reviewers offer a portal through which diners pass in order to gain, reflect and reproduce cultural and culinary capital, all within their wider search for identity. In short, our literature review connects the contemporary dynamics of identity through food. As part of this process, we underline the importance of the journalist/restaurant reviewer over and above the 'almost anyone' who can be a restaurant reviewer on the internet.

Arguably, and within Western constructs of restaurant reviewing, Grimod de la Reynière's (1758–1837) *Almanach des Gourmands* (Cordon Bleu, 2004; Newton, 2004) began the first public discourse establishing what effective food criticism should be. Since then, restaurant reviews have changed to a point whereby, via technology, 'almost anyone' can become a restaurant reviewer. While restaurant reviews are media-fuelled, by the 1970s they were suspected to be little more than self-serving restaurant marketing strategies. Craig Claiborne, the legendary *New York Times* reviewer, addressed this perception by promoting a structured framework for restaurant reviews. Claiborne's framework maintained strict anonymity between the reviewer and their subjects in order to promote reviewer trustworthiness (Sietsema, 2010), an important consideration for their readership. Moreover, Claiborne's trustworthiness as a reviewer was enhanced by his knowledge as a chef. As Blank (2007, p. 50) reminds us, Claiborne's new framework was designed to bring about 'a sense of integrity and advocacy' to the reviewing process.

Enhancing Claiborne's framework, Ruth Reichl, also of the *New York Times*, introduced a playwright's approach to restaurant reviewing (Sietsema, 2010). In doing so Reichl further promoted the use of the connoisseurial review style by adding an 'engagement of being'. Reichl achieved this by including commentary of table dialogue and fellow diners within the review as if she were a travel author. As Blank (2007, p. 32) suggests, the potency of connoisseurial reviews, exemplified by Reichl, is their ability to 'have some sort of impact ... to illuminate and transform our lives' by producing a style of review not dissimilar in style to a novel or descriptive essay. Ever since, and because of their approach, Reichl and Claiborne have greatly influenced restaurant reviewing.

It is on the back of a combination of Claiborne and Reichl's reviewing styles that contemporary restaurant reviewers have become trendsetting. This has encouraged their audience to participate in food blogs and the many other anonymous restaurant review feedback options available via the internet today (Miroshch, 2010). However, the changes Claiborne and Reichl promoted reflected wider socio-cultural trends, especially a growing public

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