

## **Independent scholar**

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## **Food bloggers and the democratisation of taste**

### Abstract:

First there were restaurants, then there were restaurant reviews. The democratisation of taste began with Grimod de la Reynière's *Almanach des Gourmands* and, today, anyone with access to a computer can publish their own opinions of the restaurants they visit to a worldwide audience. This paper considers amateur restaurant reviewers – food bloggers – and the part they play in disseminating and shaping notions of good taste.

### Biographical note:

Alison Vincent is a food historian and scholar with interests in restaurant criticism and food writing.

### Keywords:

Creative writing – Taste – Food writing – Food bloggers – Restaurant criticism

The birth of the restaurant and the birth of food writing as an acceptable form of intellectual expression went hand in hand and restaurant reviews remain one of the more widely read forms of gastronomic literature. Restaurant critics play a significant role in shaping the precepts of fine dining and communicating ideas of what constitutes good taste, both in terms of sensual appreciation and aesthetic judgment, to a broad audience. The Internet has taken this democratisation of taste to another level, making it possible for more and more people to write about their dining experiences and to voice their opinions about what constitutes good food and acceptable dining practice. This paper is an overview of the part that amateur restaurant reviewers – food bloggers – play in disseminating and shaping notions of good taste.

Although the first restaurant opened in Paris in 1766, restaurants in a form more familiar to us today grew out of the social and political turmoil of the French Revolution. In theory, the institution of the restaurant itself began the democratisation of good taste by making good food, in this case the food previously the exclusive preserve of the aristocracy, available to anyone who could afford it. In reality, of course, haute cuisine was only available to those who could afford it, a situation which existed for a good one hundred or more years after the French Revolution while restaurant dining, let alone fine dining, remained an essentially elitist pastime until the middle of the twentieth century.

Alexandre Balthazar Laurent Grimod de la Reynière is popularly credited as the first restaurant critic. His *Almanach des Gourmands* ran to eight editions published between 1803 and 1812. Written with the help of his *Jury Dégustateur*, a group of select gourmets, and addressing a bourgeois clientele, the *Almanach* provided advice on what to eat, where to eat and how to eat along with musings on topics ranging from cutlery and its uses, and indigestion, to the importance of invitations and the distinction between the gourmand and the glutton. Grimod is credited with precipitating the democratisation of taste as his publications ‘instructed the socially mobile how to ape aristocratic tastes, while simultaneously disseminating knowledge that would undermine the formerly exclusive status of that taste’ (Gigante 2005: xxx).

Two hundred years after Grimod’s *Almanach*, restaurants are reviewed, or at least evaluated, by an ever increasing number of individuals and guides using a variety of more or less subjective and often idiosyncratic bases for their judgments and often aimed at particular and distinct audiences. The advent of the Internet made it technically possible for each and every diner to publish his or her own restaurant reviews. Online diaries have in existence since 1994 but the term ‘blog’ – referring to the web-log or online diary – was coined in 1997. Blogging became increasingly popular with the availability of browser-based software and blog-hosting services such as *Blogger* and *Wordpress* which made setting up a blog possible for anyone with only rudimentary computer knowledge (Walker Rettberg 2008). The even more recent birth of crowd-sourced sites such as *Yelp* (2004) and *Urbanspoon* (2006) which invite and encourage reviews of restaurants from all and anyone and which make expressing an opinion as easy as clicking an icon, has created debate about reviewer credentials and an ongoing tension between professional critics and amateurs or ‘self-appointed critics’ (Semenak 2007).

Most amateur critics are foodies, that is people who are ‘very very very interested in food’ (Barr & Levy 1984: 6) and regard their interest in food and eating as a serious and legitimate use of their leisure time (Watson, Morgan & Hemmington 2008 : 290). Since 2009, I have been studying 12 of these amateur critics by reading the reviews they publish on their blogs. These bloggers were selected at random but share important characteristics. They consider themselves distinct from professional restaurant critics in that they are not paid to write their reviews; their reviews are written solely for publication on their blog; they always eat out at their own expense unless they make a disclosure to the contrary and, in the main, they attempt to preserve their anonymity. Consequently their blogs reveal very little concrete personal information. The bloggers in this sample are spread around the world, from Sydney and Melbourne to New York, London and Oslo. In general terms, they are people who eat out often and obviously have the means to do so. They are a mix of genders and come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Some are married with children, and most are probably aged between 25 and 40. Their blogs record their reviews of restaurants and the comments of readers along with photographs and videos which form part of the blog text. Although informed by knowledge of the whole group, the following discussion focuses on just one of these bloggers, Chris Pople, who began his blog called *Cheese and Biscuits* in 2007. Pople is in his mid-thirties and lives in London.

The part that bloggers play in the dissemination of ideals of good taste is relatively easy to demonstrate. Unlike their professional counterparts in the print media whose reviews are confined to a few columns of text, bloggers can publish as many words as they can muster. Rather than confining their comments to those dishes which they particularly liked or disliked, they are able to talk about all the dishes they tried. The blogger’s greatest advantage, however, is that they can also show readers what they ate. Most will post at least one photograph of every course delivered to the table, some also include videos in their blog post and upload further photographs and videos to *Flickr* and *YouTube*. The importance of these visual representations can be seen in relation to the greatest influence on haute cuisine since the 1990s – ‘molecular gastronomy’ – a scientific approach to the culinary arts, and a subsequent emphasis on creativity and originality. The ingredients and techniques used in this new cuisine, as well how these dishes are presented, often defies description using traditional culinary vocabulary and descriptions. Given the difficulty of accurately describing many of the dishes and the initial absence of recipes or other technical data, these images have played, and continue to play, a significant role in explaining and popularising such new ideas with both chefs and diners. More than conveying ideas of what good food should look like and how it is presented these images and videos provide, moreover, important information about the décor and the atmosphere of the restaurant, what people are wearing, how the food is served, the reaction of diners and how they interact with the waiting staff, and a host of other nuances of restaurant protocol that most reviewers would not think to try to describe.

In order to understand what role food bloggers might play in the shaping of taste, we need to consider why foodies write these blogs, what they write about and who reads them. For most of these writers their blog serves three functions. Like a diary, it is a place to chronicle their dining experiences and, at the same time, it is a public

document written to communicate with others and to establish credentials within the foodie community (Watson, Morgan & Hemmington 2008; de Solier 2013). Their reviews are generally that: a review or evaluation of the meals they eat, meant to demonstrate their own ability to discern and discriminate. The basic intention of the blogger is to inform rather than to influence.

The bloggers in this study did not use their blogs as platforms for commentary on dining trends or manners, or to formally articulate any particular philosophy of food and eating – other than perhaps Pople's quest to find London's best burger (Pople 2011). Nor do the comments which readers leave lead to any prolonged discussion. This is at least in part because the format of the blog, that is entries published in reverse chronological order and comments often published as an addendum, does not lend itself to an ongoing back and forth between the blogger and his readers. Broad ranging criticism and in-depth discussion of dining trends and mores is largely confined to professional critics. For example, the *degustation* or tasting menu is almost universal in high-end restaurants, sometimes running to 20 or more courses. The number and the sequence of dishes served are determined by the chef and the meal may take several hours. None of the bloggers in this sample questioned whether the tasting menu was an appropriate or acceptable meal structure despite criticism of the 'tyranny' of fine dining by professional critics (Wells 2012; Kummer 2013; Ting 2013).

Part of the foodie persona involves a broad knowledge of a wide range of both cuisines and dining experiences (Warde, Martens & Olsen 1999; Johnson & Baumann 2010). Pople's reviews cover an eclectic mix of 'ethnic' restaurants, everything from haute cuisine to fish and chips and burgers and he also includes the restaurants and other eateries he visits on his travels both within the United Kingdom and overseas.

Bloggers, then, can be seen as playing a role in broadening the definitions of good taste in that they actively promote the idea that good food need not be confined to high-end restaurants and is not necessarily the exclusive prerogative of a pretentious elite. Most bloggers, however, tend to concentrate on restaurants that are already known to the foodie community, that is, they have already been reviewed by professional critics or rated or ranked by one or other well-known restaurant guide. Thanks to what Davis calls the 'overt power of consecration' (2009: 17) wielded by professional critics, a foodie's choice of where to dine is determined to a large extent by their need to have the experience of restaurants which have been thus consecrated and that will, in this way, confirm their foodie status and establish their credibility within that community.

It is difficult to determine the readership of a particular blog and the relationship between the blogger and their readers is complex (Baumer, Sueyoshi & Tomlinson 2008). Measurements of the number of readers based on page views per month, visits per day or number of subscribers give confusing, misleading and often conflicting results. Simply accessing a page on a blog does not equate to reading the content, much less acting upon it. Most blogs allow for comments on posts but clearly not everyone who reads the blog leaves a comment, many of those who do prefer to remain anonymous and bloggers can choose not to publish all the comments they

receive. Some bloggers publish three or four comments on each review, occasionally more but often none at all. If the number of comments is a gauge then some blogs are much more widely read than others. Pople, for example, usually publishes ten or more comments per review. Although the numbers are small it is possible to draw some tentative conclusions about blog readers using two examples from Pople's blog which generated a larger than usual response.

Pople tried for six years before he secured a reservation at elBulli. Now closed, elBulli was the home of molecular gastronomy and a mecca for foodies, lauded by reviewers and restaurant guides the world over. In his review, Pople used terms including 'repellent', 'unsettling', 'weird' and 'pointlessly experimental' to describe some of the dishes he encountered. He rated the meal as only 5 out of 10. This review elicited 30 comments, at least 26 of which were from other food bloggers. Rather than his dislike of the food diminishing his credibility, the readers of his blog praised his objectivity and honesty in saying exactly what he thought, but his opinion had little influence on them. 'Boo' was still going to try to make a reservation because 'it still needs to be experienced by the looks of things', 'Gourmet chick' and 'eatmynels' both still had the urge to go and 'Jennifer', who was due to dine there in a couple of weeks, thought that maybe she would enjoy it more now that Pople had lowered her expectations. For foodies, a meal at elBulli was an essential goal whether the food was likely to be to their taste or not.

At the other end of the dining spectrum, Pople reviewed the Aberdeen Angus Steakhouse, one of a chain of restaurants in London catering predominantly for tourists. He went there knowing that, as a foodie, he was not likely to enjoy the meal but interested to know why these restaurants were so popular. He described the food as 'some of the worst I've ever paid for' and gave the restaurant a rating of 0 out of 10. This review garnered comments from 57 individuals, at least 25 of whom were other food bloggers. On this occasion, his audience found his experience highly amusing. They again congratulated him on his bravery and thanked him for performing a public service by subjecting himself to an experience that served to confirm their own prejudice that this was not the sort of restaurant where foodies would eat. Only one comment from an anonymous respondent who had actually eaten at one of the steakhouses in the chain defended the restaurant.

Whilst these are extreme examples, they align with the general findings from all the blogs considered, which is, in the main, that readers of review blogs read to keep themselves informed about the food scene. Many comments come from people who have already eaten at the restaurant being reviewed and were simply reliving their experiences and updating their knowledge. With their insistence on their amateur status, bloggers position themselves as ordinary diners who bring nothing to the table other than their taste buds. But, it seems, they are already confirmed in their own tastes, tastes which they share with their readers.

Restaurant reviews, whether written by professionals or amateurs, are largely only read by those who are already seriously interested in food. Written by foodies for foodies, it should be not surprising that the audience for blogs concentrating on restaurant reviews consists largely of those foodies. Watson, Morgan and Hemmington

cite research which claims that 67 per cent of blog readers link to new blogs from blogs they are already reading (2008: 292). For foodie bloggers, leaving comments (which links back to their own blogs) on other reviews is a way of advertising their own sites as well as a way of confirming their membership of the foodie community. Within the group of blogs in this study, there was an obvious network of interaction between bloggers but little indication that their reviews, and the comments on them, were read by anyone outside a narrow foodie elite.

To hope to be influential, a blogger needs to expand their readership. Pople writes well and publishes regularly, usually making five or six posts per month. Over the life of *Cheese and Biscuits*, he has earned a loyal following who comment regularly, some of whom appear to be personal friends or at least known to him. He also often provides links to other blogs as part of his reviews, which has helped cement his place within the London food scene. This interaction alone does not, however, explain why he has been described as one of the top five bloggers restaurants should fear and has been ranked as one of London's most influential people (Harrod 2012). Pople actively promotes himself in a number of ways, he links his reviews to *Urbanspoon* and he promotes his blog through his *Facebook* page and on *Twitter*, but his success and any influence he wields must be due in large part to the fact that his blog has itself been consecrated.

Jay Rayner, the internationally respected restaurant critic for the London newspaper *The Observer*, gave *Cheese and Biscuits* his imprimatur, describing it as well written by someone who knew what they are talking about, only months after Pople began his blog. Not insignificantly, Rayner's comments were published online in the context of the debate around professional critics versus amateurs. Although Pople still insists on his amateur status, he is certainly no longer anonymous. He is invited by restaurateurs to review their restaurants, he attends book launches and special events arranged for food bloggers and even enjoys free overseas trips, all of which he reviews on his blog. He also writes articles published in other online media, for example the *Social Voices* blog at MSN Food UK. Pople has become what might be termed 'a professional amateur'. How successful his blog would have been without Rayner's recognition cannot be known. Nor can it be ascertained just how many food blogs *Cheese and Biscuits* competes with in London or further afield. The Internet search engine *Technorati* lists more than 21,000 food related blogs worldwide, and other assessments are much higher. Clearly, without some considerable determination or some form of publicity or endorsement, the voice of any one individual food blogger must struggle to be heard.

Restaurant reviewers, professional or amateur, are by no means the only contributors to the democratisation of taste. Food bloggers play a role if only because they have democratised criticism, but who holds the balance of power in the determination of the standards of good taste? *Hot Diners* is a web site concerned with 'restaurants that are worth going to and are creating the biggest buzz' (Hanley 2013). It publishes reviews (including those of Pople and Rayner), the latest restaurant news and distributes a newsletter to 18,000 food lovers. The results of a recent survey completed by 1,672 of its readers indicated that the 'critics who counted' were all professionals with the exception of Pople who was ranked eighth on the list of ten. Rayner was first on the

list. When it came to choosing a restaurant, 70 per cent of respondents said they were influenced by what restaurant critics thought but the biggest influence on dining decisions were recommendations from friends. Altogether, moreover, 83 per cent of these foodies took into account the opinions of their friends when deciding where to eat (Hanley 2013). In the end, diners, be they foodies or not, it seems, decide for themselves what they will eat and where they will eat it. If the greatest influence on our dining choices is members of our own community, then perhaps the greatest contribution amateur reviewers make to the shaping of taste is that they give other amateurs confidence in the validity of their own personal judgment.

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