Food critics have been around since the days of the ancient Greeks. Those of the moneyed classes would cruise the Mediterranean looking for, among other things, regional delicacies and cooking techniques. They might find excellent sea bass off what is now the Dalmatian coast or new ways of harvesting sea salt outside Rome. They tasted, they drank, they talked, and they wrote about their culinary adventures (Toussaint-Samat 1992).

In antiquity, restaurants did not exist—the French invented them in the 1700s as a way to “restore” oneself—so the Greeks and their culinary descendants, the Romans, would meet in their homes to dine. They reclined on couches and ate long into the evening, drinking wine and mead in copious amounts. They talked of many things—politics, religion, the economy. And, of course, the food (Barer-Stein 1999; Sokolov 1991). These culinary events were a marker of the quality of life to which they aspired. Luxurious meals showed them to be members of the upper class, wealthy and successful. Without restaurants, of course, there were no restaurant critics, but many writings on culinary technique and dinner conversation survive, such as Athenaeus’s The Deipnosophists (n.d.), a weighty work about dinner table philosophers that comprises fifteen books filled with dinner chat between guests. Had restaurants existed in 200 BC, perhaps Athenaeus would have been a critic.
In contemporary Western culture, restaurant critics are considered to be an exalted breed. They have (one hopes) highly honed palates, a depth of culinary knowledge, and the ability to construct a cogent, lucid, and objective evaluation of a restaurant and the dining experience it offers. It’s something many of us would like to do: eat, for free, the best foods, drink the finest wines, and then gloat about the experience—or trash it—in an opinionated way. The image of a bespectacled, bearded, tweedy gent with a British accent pops to mind as the stereotype of the restaurant critic, scowling over a pot of bouillabaisse, delicately dissecting a meal.

But restaurant writing is, in reality, a profession that few people know much about. Even those of us who have worked in the field for years don’t really understand it and have little awareness of how other writers work. How much are we paid? Can we claim the meal as a business expense? Do we make a reservation under a pseudonym? Do we take notes? Photos? Talk to the chef? Just how do we do it?

These are questions I’ve been asking for thirty-five years. Since 1980, I’ve reviewed restaurants weekly for CBC Radio in Calgary. That would be somewhere around 1,800 restaurants in total. (I never really kept track at the beginning; I thought this might be a year or two gig and then I’d run out of restaurants. How little I knew.) I was writing restaurant reviews for a local magazine (Interface, long gone) when I got the call from CBC. I was only twenty-six and was scared silly by the weight of influence that a CBC review could have on a restaurant. I was fairly well travelled—I’d been to Europe and Asia and across Canada—and I had grown up on a farm, so I felt I had a good grounding in food, but I had nowhere near the knowledge I felt I should have. Nor did I have any credentials.

So I read everything I could read about food. I tasted everything I could find to taste. I cooked different kinds of cuisines from different cookbooks to try to understand how foods come together. I adopted the perspective of a learned customer, never pretending that I was a chef or someone highly knowledgeable in the field but considering myself an interested diner who liked to learn about food and enjoy it. When I came across something unfamiliar to me, I was happy to say so.

So what have I learned and what questions have I answered over the years?
1. Although I have no specific credentials (I’m not a chef, I’m not a journalist), simply being on CBC as the network’s acknowledged restaurant critic bestows automatic credibility. Doing your research and speaking with authority helps, too. There is an assumed objectivity (CBC doesn’t take ads—yet), so there’s little potential of conflict or perceived leverage.

2. Radio is a different beast than the written word. As my first producer told me, “You have five minutes of radio. You have to be entertaining and keep people from changing the station.” Restaurant critics are in the entertainment business.

3. Radio has ruined my sense of punctuation (never that good, truth be told), since it’s all about breathing and vocal pace. Commas and semicolons are irrelevant if you run out of breath. Writing for print requires a much greater focus on correct grammar and punctuation.

4. Reviews are written to size. For radio, it’s five minutes of air; for newspapers, it’s 700 words; for magazines, 450 or 250 or 175, depending on the client. You have to be able to write to size.

5. And write to tone. Each publication has its own style. Some are edgy, some breezy, some formal. The writer’s style must be adapted to the publication.

6. People generally like to hear about new and unique restaurants.

7. A good review can fill a restaurant for at least three weeks. The more unique the cuisine and the more unusual the location, the more business will increase. The initial impact will taper off, but revenue levels will probably always be higher than they were before the review.

8. A bad review may or may not hurt a restaurant. If, for example, a restaurant given a bad review on CBC Radio doesn’t have a strong CBC listener demographic, it probably won’t be affected. If, however, it does skew toward a CBC listener profile (older, well educated, well paid, interested in dining out), it will probably see decreased sales for at least a couple of weeks. It may also see a surge of support from its loyal clientele who disagree with the review.

9. Every restaurant has a story. That story may be about the bathrooms, the way the server takes your order, the soundtrack, or the cutlery. It
may also be about the food, but writing about food becomes boring very quickly. I look for the narrative behind the food to support the review and to give it colour. The narrative is always shaped to the number of words allocated for the piece.

10. Good restaurants are easy to write about. Bad restaurants are even easier. Boring restaurants are the hardest; they tend to make boring reviews.

11. Restaurant reviewers pay for their meals, or at least they should. It helps maintain objectivity when reviewing.

12. I make a reservation under a pseudonym, one I’ve used for decades. When I started reviewing restaurants, I thought it might be fun to make up names as I went along. That was fine until I showed up at a busy restaurant one night and couldn’t remember who I was. Since then, I’ve used one name.

13. I don’t take notes or photos during meals. I do collect menus—now mostly available online—to refresh my memory. But for the most part, I believe that I will easily remember the most interesting points about the event, which will always be enough to fill my column. It’s only five minutes of radio or a 700-word column, after all.

14. The best part of the job is meeting the people who pour their life’s blood into restaurants and those who choose restaurant work as their career, which usually happens after the review. I’ve learned so much about different cultures from sampling the foods, researching the history, and talking to the people. I’ve been invited to an Ethiopian wedding in Addis Ababa, watched rustic bread baking in Paris, dined on the freshest seafood in Rome, and been shown the culinary sights of Bangkok—all because of relationships with Calgary restaurateurs.

15. The biggest change in the Canadian culinary scene is the emergence of the Canadian chef. They’re talented and well trained, and they understand both the local market and the products produced here. They’re creating a true Canadian cuisine that is the equal of any in the world.
So that’s how I’ve always done it and what I’ve learned. But what about the future of restaurant reviewing? In the past few years, I’ve seen many changes in the media. When I started reviewing restaurants, and for many years after, there was a small cadre of Calgary food writers who did this kind of work professionally. That group—various newspaper, magazine, and radio writers—didn’t change much for years. Restaurants, food, and chefs weren’t sexy then; they were relegated to the soft side of media.

After about twenty years on radio, I added a restaurant column in the *Calgary Herald*. It isn’t a review column; it’s a column on the restaurant industry and its people. We debated whether to include my photo in the column—I’d always been incognito on radio. This was about 2000, at the beginning of the digital age, and we decided to include it, figuring that if anyone really wanted to know what I looked like, it was easy enough to find out.

Then came Food Network. People watched television cooking shows with buff chefs in competition. Food became sexy and chefs became rock stars. No longer were they relegated to the back rooms, never to be seen. The kitchen became the focal point of the restaurant; we all wanted to see the chef prepare the food. New shows appeared, ratings went up, and culinary schools filled with students. No longer was cooking a profession that you took up if you couldn’t do anything else; it became a hot commodity.

Around 2008, things began to change in how food-related content was delivered in media. Blogs became popular, and every aspiring food writer had to have one. People wrote about their food experiences—cooking, shopping, travelling, dining—on their blogs. Photos were included and digital conversations ensued. There’s a broad range of quality on food blogs, ranging from barely coherent to witty, engaging, and intelligent. Many blog entries seem to focus on a single dish or specific aspect of service; some are simply complaints with little background. Many sites have fallen by the wayside as bloggers realize they’re a lot of work with little return.

Websites also had (and can still have) a certain cachet. Some writers built their own, but many abandoned them in favour of blogs. Restaurants have taken to websites, however, as places to post their menus and their stories, as well as contact information and reservation connections. Facebook
became a key way to convey more information in a timely manner, but having such a broad focus, it remains a sideline player.

And then came Twitter, allowing us to broadcast real-time comments and photos as we eat, much to the consternation of our dining partners. Some writers love it; others loathe it. It has the advantage of conveying instant information to your followers. (As advantages go, this one is at best questionable. Twitter’s main purpose seems to be to let you know that there’s a great party happening that you haven’t been invited to.) It has the disadvantage of taking you out of the moment.

It didn’t take the restaurant industry long to catch on to the new technology and to the people who use it. The restaurants themselves started blogs, Facebook pages, and Twitter accounts, in addition to their websites. And they created events and invited the more influential bloggers and twitterazzi to attend. They fed them and wined them, in the hope of receiving positive comments in their media. It worked. Whether it actually generates increased paying traffic remains unclear. More research is needed in this area.

In the process, the restaurant industry has co-opted restaurant writing. There has always been an uneasy relationship between the two—we, the food writers, have to speak with them, we get to know them, we may develop biases—but now the process has clearly crossed the line. Who goes to a free event with loads of customized food and fancy wine and says bad things about it? Most of the new breed of writers see little wrong with this. I go to some of the events myself, but I never use any of the experience in a review. It seems, though, that many of the new writers think this is what food writing is all about. They spend little time learning about different food cultures; I’ve had bloggers tell me they don’t write about certain kinds of food because they don’t know about them. They seem content to keep their knowledge narrow and light. Not everyone, of course, should be painted with a negative brush—some of the new writers are very good and quite diligent. But the system has changed, and for many readers, critics like me have become irrelevant. The public can gather so much information from so many sources that a critical review is lost in the digital noise.

At the same time, many media outlets have reduced or eliminated their restaurant and food review sections. It seems antithetical in an era when food has become sexy, but many see it as a cost-cutting measure and are willing to give over the role of food communication to the public. As a result, many of my colleagues across North America have lost their jobs.
My assumption is that when I retire in a few years—if I last that long—I will not be replaced. Or if I am replaced, the new position will be quite different from my current one. But until then, I will stick to the rules I’ve adhered to for over thirty-five years and keep reviewing restaurants in the old-school way.

REFERENCES


