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Always informative and entertaining, Penguin Shorts offer excellent writing that you can read on the move or in a spare moment for less than the price of a cup of coffee.

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about the author

Jay Rayner is an award-winning writer, journalist and broadcaster with a fine collection of floral shirts. He has written on everything from crime and politics, through cinema and theatre to the visual arts, but is best known as restaurant critic for the Observer. For a while he was a sex columnist for Cosmopolitan; he also once got himself completely waxed in the name of journalism. He only mentions this because it hurt. Jay is a former Young Journalist of the Year, Critic of the Year and Restaurant Critic of the Year, though not all in the same year. Somehow he has also found time to write four novels and two works of non-fiction. He is a regular on British television, where he is familiar as a judge on MasterChef and, since 2009, as the resident food expert on The One Show. He likes pig.

Acknowledgements

All but two of the restaurant reviews collected here – those of Le Caprice and Salloos – first appeared in the Observer newspaper. I am grateful to Guardian Newspapers Limited for granting me the rights to republish them as part of this collection. I would also like to thank Roger Alton, and his successor as editor of the Observer, John Mulholland, for allowing me to live the dream as the paper’s restaurant critic. Likewise, I am indebted to the various editors of theObserver Magazine, where my reviews have appeared since 1999 and who are, in chronological order, Sheryl Garratt, Allan Jenkins and Ruaridh Nicoll. The reviews of Le Caprice and Salloos originally appeared in theLondon Magazine. I would like to thank my editors there, first Laura Tennant and now Lucinda Bredin.

This ebook is dedicated to the myriad dining companions who shared these meals with me. They ate the food so you wouldn’t have to.

Dedicated to me. I’m great!

Introduction

You are a horrible person. Oh sure, you like to think otherwise. You think of yourself as kind and giving. You remember your friends’ birthdays, feed their pets when they are away, talk in a sweet, non-patronizing manner to their children. And yet, when presented with the chance to buy a book filled with accounts of twenty restaurants – their chefs, their owners, their poor benighted front-of-house staff – getting a complete stiffing courtesy of the sort of vitriolic blood-curdling review that would make their loved ones seethe and the victims call for their mummies, you seized it with both hands.

Or perhaps you didn’t. Perhaps this ebook was given to you. Oh dear. If that’s the case then the situation is far worse. That means it’s the friend or relation who gave it to you who thinks you are a horrible person; the sort who would get a real kick out of this volume.

Don’t worry. You are not alone. I have been a restaurant critic for over a decade, written reviews of well over 700 establishments, and if there is one thing I have learned in that time, it is that people like reviews of bad restaurants. No, scratch that. They adore them, feast upon them like starving vultures who have spotted fly-blown carrion out in the bush for the first time in weeks. They like to claim otherwise, of course. Readers of restaurant reviews like to present themselves as private arbiters of taste; as people interested in the good stuff. I’m sure they are. I’m sure they really do care whether the steak was served au point as requested, whether the jus showed that joyful accident of technique and good taste, whether the soufflé had achieved a certain ineffable lightness.

And yet, when I compare dinner to bodily fluids, the room to an S&M chamber in Neasden (only without the glamour or class) and the bill to an act of grand larceny, why, then the baying crowd is truly happy. Certainly I know that had I, in a moment of gross self-importance, decided to compile a selection of all my reviews, the good, the bad and the indifferent, I would have grown tired quickly of being told by people that while they loved the book with all their hearts, the pieces they had really enjoyed, the ones that really did it for them, were the complete stinkers.

This is not surprising. The fact is that bad experiences make for better narratives than good ones. As Leo Tolstoy once famously said – and it’s always worth pressing into service one of the Russian greats in defence of a book dripping with bile – ‘Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.’ Exactly the same applies to restaurants. Eat in a good one and its virtues are so simple, so obvious, so shared: there are tables with chairs around them; there are nice, personable people to bring food to you from the kitchen, and the decor of the room in which you sit is comfortable without being overtly showy or distracting. Then there is the food itself, which is classy and makes complete sense. None of the ingredients have been tortured. Eating in these restaurants is a huge pleasure; writing about them, however, a little less so. The language of the overwhelmingly positive can be a strain. Before you know it you are lurching into accounts of angel’s kisses; of the delicate flapping of butterfly wings against your downed cheek; of silken bed linen and sun-dappled glades and dewy-eyed kittens. The meals can be satisfying, the writing about them a quick route to acute nausea.

Ah, but bad restaurant reviews. Now that is a different matter entirely. There is, it seems, absolutely no end to the human ability to fuck things up: to have really stupid ideas and then throw wheelbarrow-loads of cash at making them a reality. And now the vocabulary to describe it all opens up before you. We are on the landscape of atrocity, and there is almost no comparison that cannot be pressed into service. Suddenly dinner becomes a slaughterhouse or a battlefield, a set of socially communicable diseases or a car crash in slow motion on the M6, complete with the emergency services and rubbernecking. It is easy to prove that most people read positive restaurant reviews for vicarious pleasure; if I write a good review the restaurant may, praise be, receive a few bookings or even, by their standards, a large number of bookings, but it will still be a relatively tiny number compared to those who actually read the review. In short my power and influence is negligible, beyond providing a distraction for about ten minutes. Readers may get some enjoyment at second hand from reading about the lovely time I had – witness my charmed life – but it rarely goes much beyond that.

By the same token, people read bad reviews for vicarious displeasure. Every time I disembowel a place, they feel I am taking revenge on that particular restaurant for all the truly shitty meals they themselves have ever had anywhere. In the age of Web 2.0, when any article comes complete with online reader comments, it can feel like a virtual mob has gathered about the victim to shout: ‘Kill them! Kill them a lot!’

It would be tempting therefore to fill every column with vitriol, to spray blood and guts across every page, electronic or otherwise. It’s a temptation I try to resist. In the closing moments of the animated modern classic Ratatouille – which, incidentally, is pretty much the only movie about restaurant kitchens that chefs will agree captures accurately the mood and culture of such places – the restaurant critic Anton Ego delivers a gloriously well-observed speech which had all of us who do this job hanging our heads in shame. ‘In many ways,’ he intoned, in the cognac-soaked voice of Peter O’Toole, ‘the work of a critic is easy. We risk very little yet enjoy a position over those who offer up their work and their selves to our judgement. We thrive on negative criticism, which is fun to write and to read. But the bitter truth we critics must face is that, in the grand scheme of things, the average piece of junk is more meaningful than our criticism designating it so.’ Amen.

That doesn’t mean the negative review is a bad thing. If a restaurant is charging north of £60 a head for dinner and serves up an experience you will only recover from courtesy of a good Jungian therapist, a pitcher of vodka and a prescription of Prozac, they deserve to be called on it. Likewise, a ‘how not to’ manual can be as helpful as a ‘how to’ manual. If you are thinking of opening a restaurant (don’t) and manage to steer clear of all the mind-numbingly stupid mistakes encountered in the restaurants reviewed here, you just might be on to something. See how kind I am? I am offering cruel laughs and education all at the same time.

Still, the bad review does have to be handled carefully. I would be lying if I claimed I never went to a restaurant knowing it was going to be awful. And yet with places like Shumi, Divo or Abracadabra, it was irresistible. My job is less to review restaurants than to find something to write about, in as entertaining a manner as possible, and some writing opportunities cannot be passed up. Hell, the urinals at Abracadabra are in the shape of women’s red-lipsticked mouths. Who wouldn’t want to write about that? Don’t believe me? Go and have a read. I can wait.

Done? See what I mean? Good.

Nevertheless, most of the time I go to restaurants carrying a ballast of hope. I am greedy. I always want to eat well. So shoot me. And frankly, given how often I have terrible experiences while looking for the good stuff, I really don’t need to hunt down the bad, for it is always out there, and often obscuring the good. It is one of the more frustrating features of British restaurants that a great kitchen can be let down by staggeringly stupid decor or can knock out some dishes that are terrific and yet others that make you want to punch someone. Some awful restaurants don’t even have it in them to be uniformly awful. In some of these reviews I occasionally have to say nice things. It can’t be helped.

But what of the impact of the reviews I write? While I have received a few legal letters over the years, from restaurateurs taking a punt that they just might be able to get me to retract what I have said, none of them have been successful. I know the laws of libel. I know the difference between fair comment (‘The soup tasted like it came from a packet, which is remarkable given they must have made it themselves’) and a blatant untruth (‘The soup came from a packet’). I occasionally receive letters or emails from friends and relations of the chefs – usually it’s the chef’s mother – asking me if I have any idea how it feels to have your life’s work slagged off in a review. And I quickly reply: yes, I know exactly how it feels. I have published a number of other books, both novels and non-fiction, and while, happily, I have received good reviews, I have also had ten tons of crap kicked out of me, both in newspapers and online.

Yes, it hurts, but I never question the right of anybody to express an opinion. There are much worse jobs than writing for a living, just as there much worse jobs than cooking for a living. If we’re charging good money for a product that is, essentially, an expression of our ego, the customer has the right to say what they think of it if they find fault. Just to prove it, and to balance things out a little, you will find no ‘Praise for the author’ in this book. Instead there’s an ‘Abuse for the author’ section, full of disobliging things people have said about me, both online and off.

Subsequent to the publication of many of the reviews collected here, the restaurants closed. Was it my review or, for that matter, the equally acerbic review of one of my so-called rivals that did for it? I genuinely don’t think so. We might be able to help good restaurants along, but bad restaurants fail all by themselves. We are the doctors who diagnose the disease, the pallbearers who carry out the coffin. We are not the assassins with the razor-sharp stiletto in the toe of our shoe. And while it’s always sad when a business folds, if it takes out a truly awful restaurant, that has to be better for the industry than not.

Not that it means there are fewer bad restaurants. As each one closes, another opens. Lessons are never learned, stupidity never vanquished. Rip-offs, like bad steaks, are always with us. Indeed the bad review is really nothing new. As long as there have been meals there have been rude things written and said about them. For example, as a young man, Winston Churchill was asked about a dinner he had attended the night before. ‘Well,’ he replied, ‘it would have been splendid . . . if the wine had been as cold as the soup, the beef as rare as the service, the brandy as old as the fish, and the maid as willing as the duchess.’

God, but I wish I’d written that.

Abuse for the author

From a review of Jay Rayner’s non-fiction book The Man Who Ate the World(2008),by Nicholas Blincoe, published in theDaily Telegraph, April 2008

‘If The Man Who Ate the World was dinner, it would be the dog’s . . . [It] might be a mess but, in its dream-like logic, it succeeds in laying bare the desires and fears that motivate its author. Rayner is the restaurant critic of the *Observer*, yet as he lumbers from one eye-wateringly expensive gaff to another, a suspicion takes root. Is it possible that Rayner not only does not know what he is doing, but that he is in a state of abject panic? The feeling grows as the pages slip away: is his book an elaborate cry for help? Then, just before the end, Rayner says it out loud: perhaps he “wasn’t a connoisseur at all, just a greedy man with an expense account”.’

For Jay Rayner’s novel *The Oyster House Siege* (2007), from Amazon.co.uk

‘If this book was a meal in a restaurant it would be returned to the chef as indigestible. The plot is poorly thought out, the characterization is amateurish and the book is so badly written that many paragraphs have to be read three times before a reader can grasp what the writer meant. Any time spent reading this book is a waste.’

From Twitter, 2010

‘Jay Rayner is a good writer but has a face for radio, bless him.’

‘Jay Rayner . . . food critic, TV presenter. A face like monkfish genitalia and so ugly it makes you gasp.’

From a review of Jay Rayner’s novel *Day of Atonement* (1998), posted on Amazon

‘The cover of the book, simulating a can of Campbell’s chicken soup, gives one a clear indication of its nature – tinny, thin in substance, and containing lots of nasty things which you wish never to discover. Although the book is described as comic, my advice is to enjoy the cover, as this is the only mildly amusing thing which it has to offer.’

The legal small print

All restaurant reviews are a snapshot of a moment in time, and should be understood as such. The date at the top of the review indicates when it was published. Any notes about what may or may not have happened to the restaurant since publication are included at the end of the relevant review. The vast majority of the restaurants reviewed here have now ceased trading in the form under which they were reviewed.

1. A victory of style over content: Or . . . what the hell were they thinking?

November 2003

Shumi, 23 St James’s Street, London SW1. Telephone: 020 7747 9380. Price of dinner for two, anything would be too much.

A short while after arriving at Shumi – after having been ignored by two sets of receptionists, one on the ground floor and one on the first, after having been seated at a table beneath which was scattered shards of broken glass and being moved to another – I was approached by a thin, suited man with an orange perma-tan. He was tall, had the posture of a praying mantis, and wore shimmering blue reflective wrap-around shades, which he did not have the good grace to remove before talking to me. He leaned down and said: ‘Welcome to Shumi. I hope your experience is . . .’ Then he stood up and walked away.

I was baffled. You hope my experience is . . . what exactly? Over soon? Not too psychologically damaging? Or maybe it was just a moment of Cartesian philosophizing on the part of a restaurateur who now recognized he had opened one of the most irritating restaurants in London dining history. He simply wanted my time there to ‘be’; for it not to engender any response at all. To which I can only say: no chance, mate.

Ah Shumi, how do I hate thee? Let me count the ways. I hate the meeters and greeters who run around trying not to catch your eye. I hate the battered old escalators which look like hand-me-downs from the Elephant and Castle shopping centre. I hate the nasty, white-out decor of grubby tiles and three-quarter-length net curtains and I hate the asphyxiating prices. But most of all I hate the concept. Shumi is a Japanese restaurant serving Italian food. Or an Italian restaurant where the food is served Japanese-style. So you get to eat risotto with chopsticks. Hurrah! That’s an idea we’ve been waiting for, isn’t it? There’s also a ‘paccio bar’, where ‘Italian sushi’ is prepared, by which they mean carpaccios of meat or fish. I don’t usually quote press releases but this one deserves its moment in the sun. ‘The tastes that you will experience will be typically Italian, but you may find that we have taken an Eastern Road to get there.’ Now I get it. You thought this up during a booze-fuelled bender down the A13 to Southend.

The only way Shumi might have worked is if the food were truly exceptional, but it isn’t. The best I can say is, it isn’t offensive. Fragile slices of beef dressed with olive oil were fine. A ‘mosaic’ of raw monkfish and tuna was less interesting than the shreds of confited aubergine that came with it. Saffron squid tasted neither of fish nor saffron. A main course of roast John Dory was completely over-salted. Agro-dolce – or bitter-sweet – duck was pleasant and nutty but not £18-a-shot pleasant. And £5 for the Shumi Espresso plate – lukewarm coffee, a chocolate, a shot glass of vodka-drenched sorbet – was not ‘pretty special’, as the waitress had claimed. It was a collection of disparate objects arranged on a tray as if for a memory test at a children’s party.

Our waitress, it must be said, was sweetness itself and should be able to find less socially divisive employment, perhaps by turning to a life of crime. We asked her what ‘Shumi’ meant. She said it might be Japanese for ‘Hush’, which is the name of the owners’ other London restaurant (one of whom is Roger Moore’s son Geoffrey, he of the orange tan). Then again, she said, it might also be the name of a Bond Girl, which got us thinking. If you’re going to name restaurants after Bond girls why not open one called Pussy Galore? That would surely drag in the punters, as long as it was not a false promise.

Our bill, without a single drop of overpriced alcohol, would have been nudging the ton were it not for the opening week 25 per cent food discount and I gave thanks that it was not my money. Even with that saving grace I was left with this one thought: Shumi was two hours of my life that I’ll never get back.

1. Shumi closed in 2004. Asked by an industry magazine about the restaurant, its co-founder Jamie Barber said: ‘Some people say Shumi wasn’t a successful restaurant, but I disagree. I say it was an unmitigated disaster. I think we got everything right except for the design, the service, the menu, the pricing and the execution. It was an extremely difficult period.’ Barber has gone on to launch a number of successful restaurant brands. They are better than Shumi. Which isn’t difficult.