

Case 1

Jillian, a food blogger, had more than 100,000 followers when she received the invitation. She was asked to dine at a new underground restaurant, yet to open, apparently run by a high-profile celebrity chef. The evening was to include a multi-course meal and the opportunity to learn about food trends from a noted food industry analyst. After confirming, Jillian was to receive vouchers for dinner, at any of the chef's restaurants, with which to reward her readers. Finally, the invitation read, the evening would include a big surprise.

Jillian enjoyed the evening immensely. It started with a wine tasting and lively discussion with other food bloggers and Claude Clarke, who follows the organic food industry for a national brokerage house. The conversation covered many topics, but centered on the dearth of fresh ingredients in up-scale restaurants and the use of artificial coloring and preservatives in many foods. Jillian, like others, described the lengths to which she goes to avoid ingredients like disodium inosinate and disodium guanylate. Jillian hoped Clarke, charming and seemingly well informed, would be a new inside source for her commentaries on food.

Jillian and her colleagues were later served a tasty lasagna entrée and a delicious key lime pie.

The following day, Jillian received a telephone call from Jack Hill, a spokesperson for the public relations firm representing Blackstone Foods. Hill told her that the lasagna and pie she enjoyed the previous evening were, in fact, a well-known brand of frozen food sold by Blackstone. He also asked for permission to use the hidden camera footage taken of Jillian in their upcoming ad campaign.

Jillian, who sees herself as a truth-seeking journalist, was stunned. Although she recognized that surreptitious taste tests have long been a staple of food advertising, she felt foolish and annoyed for being duped. She was particularly incensed to learn that Blackstone had served her food that contained the very chemicals she so scrupulously eschews. Her only solace was that the telephone call came early, before she had posted her praise for the new restaurant.

“Betrayed” and “violated” were a few of the adjectives Jillian used on her blog to describe the experience.

It turns out that Jillian was not alone in her outrage. In subsequent days the blogosphere erupted with invective directed at Blackstone over the stunt.