

## Penny Pollack: The Diva of Fine Dining is not A Yelp Fan

By: Zola Zhou

The woman by the olive oil station at Eataly poured out olive oil from a thin black bottle into a baby blue plastic spoon, with the hue of the dripping oil echoing her sparkled sage-green nail polish. She handed the spoon to the little girl standing up front.

"I am scared," said the girl, hesitating. Seconds later, she licked the spoon, and her face lit up. The woman, too, grinned—she wants people to enjoy food.

This is Penny Pollack, *Chicago Magazine's* dining editor for 23 years until retiring in 2017. She now works part-time in the olive oil department at Eataly, an Italian dining-cum-marketplace on Michigan Avenue. At 72 years old, with four children and three grandchildren, Pollack is not there because she needs the money, but because she loves interacting with people and talking about food. She arguably knows as much about dining in Chicago as anyone in the city. Her opinions about food are broadcasting in a semi-monthly podcast called [Dining Out loud](#) she cohosts with Michael Nigrant, the former Sun-Times food critic. The two take people to the back scenes as they eat out in Chicago.

But even one-on-one, Pollack is happy to share her opinions—and she sure does have opinions, on everything from pizza, to Italian Beef to French fries.

At Eataly, dressed in a navy-blue crewneck sweater with a simple pearl necklace, Pollack is chatty in a pleasant way. She loves to recommend olive oil tailored to people's tastes. Customers often stop to chat because they could not resist her warm smile.

After years of reviewing some of the best restaurants in Chicago, you would imagine Pollack loves upscale food, but the diva of fine dining has no interest in caviar. Her comfort food is an Italian beef sandwich and French fries combo from Al's on Taylor Street. "Give me an Italian beef with sweet green peppers, dipped in the juice an extra time, and in Al's they double fry the french fries," she said. "My husband Steve would get a hot dog or a chicken breast sandwich. We come home, have dinner with white wine, and think we are the King and Queen of Chicago."

Why not something fancier?

"I am over it," Pollack said. "I don't want to go out for a two-and-a-half-hour meal, I just don't want to do it anymore."

Pollack started her career as a part-time assistant to the *Chicago Magazine's* dining editor in Feb 1987, doing key-lining and clerical jobs. Along with Steve, she was often invited to dine at and review new restaurants with other writers and food critics.

Back then, dining critics dined anonymously so nobody knew who they were, and Pollack would help run the spy operation. She would wait until waiters were not paying attention, and quietly give the order: "Now, switch!" Then everybody would

trade plates. This way, all the critics were able to taste a wide selection of food and make comments onto hidden recorders.

After rising to dining editor in 1994, Pollack dined for years with fake credit cards and a fake name to avoid special treatment. The name was Alex Gold because Alex could be either male or female, and it did not matter who picked up the bill. Once, when Pollack was out dining, the bill came, and she automatically signed Penny Pollack, her *real* name. "I spilled water on the table to ruin the check...so that I could sign with my anonymous name," she giggled.

Pollack used to dine often in Bistronomic, a French family-based restaurant in Streeterville. Martial Noguier, executive chef and owner, said Pollack was always very professional. "She wrote about me in *Chicago Magazine*, but I didn't know who she was at the time. I was very surprised," said Noquier. "I wasn't expecting her to be a food critic, she's always with someone else."

Internet makes it too ludicrous to try to pretend people did not recognize Pollack. Along with a lot of other food critics, she finally decided to abandon anonymity and come out. She still uses her fake name occasionally to make reservations after retirement to avoid taking favors from people. "Penny Pollack is here, so make sure the meat is perfect...I don't like being treated special because it taints the outcome."

During her years as the dining editor in *Chicago Magazine*, Pollack watched as everybody became a food critic through internet sites like Yelp. Today, she admits she also uses Yelp to scout new restaurants, but she is not a fan of it because it's too bad for the dining public. "Food critics are people who get paid to critique food," said Pollack. "They have expertise and experiences to compare food worldwide and make it all alive for the readers."

Pollack says she always goes with the flow, but she is too old to appreciate influencers who lack credentials but talk about food in professional tone. "Sometimes I see comments on Yelp go on and you have to go to the next screen, I think these people have too much time on their hands." Pollack rolled her eyes and the same smile reached her eyes. "Find what you do well, do it well and shine in your own field."

Another trend that disappoints Pollack: fixed menus and fusion restaurants. Be French, be Italian, be Chinese, she clenched her fists and sighed as she squeezed those words out of her mouth. She still goes to a tiny restaurant called Moon Palace in Chinatown and orders the hot and sour soup because the chefs know what they are doing. "You can't be all things to all people, and I think that's what a lot of kitchens are trying to do now."

Earlier in her apartment, as Pollack sipped water from a mug, she offered more of her opinion about Chicago's dining scene. Pollack values authenticity and purity for years. She likes restaurants that do not offer a lot of options and do well in their areas of expertise.

“I like simplicity,” said Pollack, “French fries should just be fairly skinny, soft inside, crunchy in the outside and taste like potato! I don’t want three dipping sauces on top.”

It troubles Pollack that even street foods have become more expensive. The experience of getting a ball-park hotdog is replaced by fancy dining environments and silver tableware. Fast foods like pizzas and hamburgers are repackaged with a gourmet label and sold at a high price.

Pollack does not cook very often. “It’s hard to cook for two people,” said Pollack, “and there are so many new restaurants in our neighborhood.”

Pollack’s all-food-philosophy career gets carried on to her podcast called Dining Out Loud. In each episode, Pollack and Nagrant rate and debate their recent restaurant adventures and let listeners hear the behind-the-scenes out-takes. In the first episode, *“The One Where Nobody Liked The Chicken,”* for example, they dine at Brendan Sodikoff’s new sushi spot, Radio Anago. Nagrant explains to Pollack exactly what a “puffy” taco is while Pollack interviews celebrity chef, Richard Blais—but first, she asks him “who the heck he is.”

Pollack still gets excited when a new place opens, but new fashions don’t interest her as much as they used to be. “Trends are traps,” Pollack said. “All of a sudden everyone has kale on their menu and everyone has lentils. I don’t think everything needs to be gluten free.”

The mug in her right hand is almost empty, but she doesn’t seem to bother to refill it—she can keep taking about food all day without getting tired. She hates pickled food and thinks they are only pickled to be stored in the fridge. She likes crappy ball-park hotdogs. She won’t spend \$200 for one meal—she would rather go away on a weekend. She hates fortune cookies and hates them even more now knowing that they didn’t originate in China. She may be jaded with elevated taste buds, but still thinks Steve makes the best scrambled eggs in the world.

Pollack believes restaurants like WOW BAO and McDonalds that use machines to take orders are missing the human connections in their services. It’s the chefs who stand behind the bar and the owners who hang out with diners that make dining in a restaurant a unique personal experience.

“Personal touch elevates the experience,” said Pollack. “If I don’t want to talk to people, I will go to a vending machine and get a candy bar, or even a salad these days: Farmers Fridge!”