

The Virtual Roundtable: Food Blogging as Citizen Journalism

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RIGHT A tribute to the many cakes featured on Cake Wrecks, a blog that discusses what happens "when professional cakes go horribly, hilariously wrong." Visit cakewrecks.blogspot.com for more dessert disasters in categories like "Literal LOLs" and "Mithspellings."



The Virtual Roundtable

Food Blogging as Citizen Journalism

Denveater

Where once we clipped recipes from the newspaper, now we watch how-to videos on our favorite cooking websites; where once a professional restaurant critic's review was the last word, now online communities continually spread the latest on this up-and-coming chef or that hidden gem. It's a blogger's virtual world—and we live just on the edge of it.

Ask a foodie (*see below*) what's on his or her

reading list these days, and more likely than not the answers are going to end in dot-com. Or else they'll have started out that way—as online sensations turned print best-sellers. In less than a decade, with the wellsprings of traditional media sputtering, food blogs have begun to spout with restaurant news and reviews, recipes, and mouthwatering photos (literal cheesecake shots, you might say) to the point of becoming an integral part of the food media.

Some more than others, granted. Like the five-year-old *Chocolate & Zucchini*—whose creator, a twenty-something Parisian named Clotilde Dusoulier, now has two tomes under her *assez chic* belt and thousands upon thousands of readers in two languages. Like the Julie/Julia Project—one of the first and best “cook-through blogs,” in which Julie Powell details the triumphs and travails of preparing one recipe from Julia Child’s *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* daily over the course of a year (a movie adaptation will be coming to a theater near you in 2009, directed by Nora Ephron and starring Meryl Streep). Like Waiter Rant, Steve Dublanica’s account of life on the dinner shift—now snarky, now philosophical, and now a smash memoir.¹

And unlike, say, me. I’m the author of a rather modestly trafficked blog about the Denver dining scene, which I launched to jumpstart a freelance food-writing career that came to a shuddering halt when I moved west from Boston at the onset of the recession last year. I call it *Denveater*—a somewhat precious portmanteau, to be sure (all the more in my dreams, where I turn “www” upside down to spell “mmm!”), but I’m stuck with it now.

In most other respects, however, I’m freer than I’ve ever been, and not just because I don’t have editors peering over my shoulder. Mind you, that’s a key perk. As Lauren Clark of Drinkboston.com puts it, “I don’t have to tailor my ideas to appeal to [their] caprices”; concurs Leena Trivedi-Grenier—the Chicago-based author of both *Leenaeats.com* and a thesis on food-blog usage in the U.S., for which she received an M.A. in Gastronomy at the University of Adelaide—“No one’s there to change the title of my post to some silly, cheesy, catchy thing that has nothing at all to do with the writing; no one is telling me, ‘This is too provocative’ or ‘That doesn’t follow the style of the publication.’” But our sense of freedom has arguably more to do with the nature of the Internet itself: as the blogosphere is infinite, so the prescribed limits of the food-writing genre are expanding to the vanishing point in all sorts of ways—some inspirational, others controversial, not only for me and my cohorts but also for the established food media and even for chefs, restaurateurs, and other industry pros.

For one thing, in cyberspace, no one yet everyone can hear you scream. Much as blogs have evolved in the past ten years (*Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary* dates the coinage of the word to 1999), most remain fundamentally true to their etymological roots as weblogs—personal journals that, though public, are not so much actively circulated as free-floating. While the *X-ville Daily* exists above all for X-villeans, landing on their doorsteps and stacked at nearby kiosks, *vittlesinxville.typepad.com* may or may not reach them—any more than it may or may not appeal to someone in Y-town. Readership is incidental if not accidental, dependent on the luck of the draw that is Googling—just as authorship per se ranges from professional to ambivalent to downright oblivious. In researching this piece, I created a thread on my favorite discussion board, *Chowhound.com*, titled “Calling All Bloggers: Why Do You Do It?”² One respondent,

“Foodie” is a vexed term in the world of online food lovers, as *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reviewer John Kessler detailed in a recent column: “At first, Ms. Foodie seemed a pleasant enough rejoinder to the dour, effete Mr. Gourmet . . . chirping merrily about anything . . . [from] pad thai [to] Pétrus. . . . [But] anyone who participates in today’s overcharged, politicized, locavoracious, media-co-opted and otherwise wonderful food scene has to take it all with a grain of salt” (24 January 2008, www.ajc.com).

Meanwhile, *Chowhound.com*—the once-underground food-discussion forum professional food writers are now mostly like to lurk around for scoops—has long distinguished between Chowhounds, who “won’t hesitate to go far, far out of their way” to avoid “ingesting anything undelicious,” and foodies—who “lap up hype” and “eat what they’re told” (chowhound.chow.com/faq).

Still, even die-hards agree the term is convenient as a familiar catchall.

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EatingLA's journalist-by-day author, explains simply that she "had recently started inviting friends to eat at Chinese restaurants and wanted a way to remember what we ate," adding by e-mail that "it's been really interesting to start this blog with no real plan in mind and have it turn into a fairly established community resource." *Community resource*, note, not *news source*—a difference one of her early posts reveals in all its comic nonchalance: "I was glad Thi arrived just in time to insist we get the winter melon with crab roe. Not only was it an alien-colored dish of celadon and coral, it had a pleasant mild fishiness amid two textures of slimy." Said difference for the author of Mama-liciousseats amounts to "the view into someone's private life"; she notes her own fascination when a "fairly popular" blogger delved into "a bout of depression [she was] suffering, all the while writing about what interesting food she was cooking up." Established food journalists tend to omit the tears from their recipes.³

For another, related thing, infinite space has a way of altering word count. Or, to put it less glibly, beyond the spatial dimensions of the printed page, there's no length requirement, hence no need to privilege the main topic as such. For that matter, beyond the time-space continuum of the printed page—from the process by which it is produced to its shifting place in the material world, first as a source of information and then as waste—where publication is both instantaneous and forever within virtual reach, timeliness itself is less timely. Relevance itself becomes less relevant. Subject matter itself matters . . . not less, perhaps, but differently.

Thus we digress, or transgress. What starts out as a straightforward critique of the new boulangerie down the block yields to a lament for the grandmother whose kitchen glowed in Kansas sunlight and smelled of bread baking. In short, the Internet has only strengthened the naturally memoiristic tendencies of food writers from Elizabeth David and MFK Fisher to Michael Pollan. After all, the connection between food and memory has gone without saying since Proust ate that madeleine (although modern-day neurobiologists have gone ahead and said so, explicitly). Just as his crumbs proved seeds for reflection, so any bite or sip stimulates neurons as much as taste buds. Meanwhile, as my friend and Boston-based colleague MC Slim JB once observed in yet another Chowhound thread, "It's an endless challenge coming up with fresh ways to describe food

experiences week in and week out; I catch myself reusing certain stock adjectives, and it's painful" ("Cringe-worthy Words in Restaurant Reviews"). Given the room as a blogger I don't have as a freelance writer not merely to describe flavors but to invoke them, not just to examine the dining experience but to deconstruct the process of describing it, I've come to believe that food writing inheres in poetic as much as literal truth—that it may be as accurate and illuminating to, in Dickinson's words, tell it slant.

Thus, in attempting to, for instance, express the joys in a bottle of Amarone—a lush red wine from the Veneto produced from semi-dried grapes (that's right, borderline raisins)—I can start with a cheerful disclaimer about my shaky grasp on oenology: "Despite tasting class after tasting class, I've yet to grasp the finer points of wine description. References to other fruits in particular have always struck me as odd—by *fresh-cut pineapple* or *full-on durian* or *wild cherry just plucked from the navel of an island virgin*, did you maybe just mean *grape*?"

Something's happening, though. Maybe it's a result of this very project, approaching wine through the back door of poetry. Maybe it's just a result of heavy drinking. Either way, all of a sudden, I'm detecting things I never detected before. I can then throw in a poem inspired by my first sip of Amarone—in a different font, perhaps, to set it off.

The pearl is merciless and fast-acting
when dropped into the goblet of my
exilarch. . . .
It could as lief be aphrodisiac as poison.
Once was my prophecy fair
when my object was dark. But he was
born with a rare form
of profil perdu that lately obscures my
success. . . .

I can circumvent the bouquet and the finish to arrive nonetheless at a portrayal of Amarone that may just strike someone, somewhere, someday as useful or somehow true, if not precisely authoritative.

And then I can provide links to webpages that supplement, confirm, comment upon, or even subvert my own take on wine-tasting notes. These are not merely appended suggestions for further web reading, but composition on a metadimensional plane, whereby I can stress the richness of



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Amarone via not more/mere words but a weblink that will lead readers who click on the word “rich” to, say, a *Forbes.com* photo of Bill Gates stepping out of a block-long limo in a coat made from the only known crossbreed of sable and chinchilla. It’s the act of writing by electronic reference—the emergence of hypertext—that makes blogging such a compelling form in the post-postmodern era, when the deferral of signification has long since proven endless, authority has long since been decentered, voice has long since registered as polyglottal.

Likewise, reader comments make letters to the editor look like calligraphy on parchment—partly but not only because of the immediacy with which they can generate dialogue. Though the online editions of many magazines and newspapers also enable comments, the latter remain a matter of formally speaking truth to power—of banging on the reputed gates of fact—while the comments on blogs, like the blogs themselves, are often personal and conversational, potentially making all the difference between what is merely public and what is truly communal.

Of course, this paradigm shift in the meaning of authority bears especially on the topic of food. After all, on the one hand, everybody knows how to eat; what’s more, the vast majority of households contain at least one person who could boil an egg in an emergency. On the other hand, the very

word *taste* is synonymous with subjectivity—just as the word *blog* presupposes individuality. Combined, these facts suggest precisely what Trivedi-Grenier discovered in her survey. Whereas

69% of respondents consulted print food journalism monthly[,] 37% consulted print food journalism websites weekly. But 79% of respondents consulted U.S. food blogs at least daily, if not multiple times a day, crediting their increased usage to a food blogger’s candid writing style, diverse voice and range of topics, as well as their approachable personalities.⁴

Far more than a professional chef or cookbook author to whom we turn for experience, a blogger—to whom we turn for *an* experience, for *experiences* plural—has the leeway to tell the story of the recipe not as it should be but as it is, as it lives and breathes in home kitchens.⁵ As Mama-licious’s author notes, “the only way we become better cooks is by trial and error”; hence, chowfun (the name of one thread respondent who “keeps my blog [address] on the down-low”) asserts, “If I’m experimenting with a recipe and it flops, it’s on the blog. . . . I detail what I would do [differently] next time.” At the comico-logical extreme is *Cake Wrecks: When Professional Cakes Go Horribly, Hilariously Wrong*, whose compiled photos

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of endearingly grotesque desserts has garnered national attention in a few short months.⁶

Of course, there's a flip side to the freedom of citizen journalism (in dreams begin responsibilities). Refreshing as the offhand, warts-and-all approach can be compared to the more explicitly informational orientation of traditional media, the temptation in the absence of editors and fact-checkers to equate one's own stream of consciousness with honesty—and to assume in turn that what's honest is fair—is as strong as it is treacherous. For instance, now that a formerly chi-chi local spot called Swimclub has undergone a complete overhaul to become a pizza joint, I feel slightly chastened for once having dubbed it "Sinkhole" in a negative review—even as I stand by my assessment, even as I believe that biting humor has its place, and even, for that matter, as I would never presume that I, toiling away in near-total darkness, have the least bit of influence over anyone's business decisions. Obscurity doesn't nullify accountability. (Of course, I could revise the post in question and delete the pejorative at any time. The ongoing opportunity the Internet affords to self-edit, to erase all trace of error or controversy as either comes to light, obviously has yet more disturbing implications for historical integrity.)

Some bloggers do presume, however, plausibly or not, and therein can lie the rub. As a restaurateur who posts on Chowhound by the name soupkitten points out,

Restaurateurs do love the free publicity, . . . [the] instant feedback. Little places with no advertising budget have a chance of getting noticed by an astute blogger and getting a little local buzz. That doesn't mean it would necessarily be appropriate for a restaurant to treat an unaffiliated blogger the same as the regular press and grant interviews/access. . . . Who is to say the blogger's intentions are pure, or that a year down the line they won't decide to use their blog as a platform for unsavory politics or other objectionable content . . . [or to] demand freebees and unreasonable amounts of resources?

That such concerns are legitimate is clear from recent reports that participants in a nationally trafficked online forum called Yelp are increas-

ingly engaging in blackmail, demanding comps in exchange for favorable online reviews—or else.⁷ The same sense of community that has energized food lovers in the online era can morph into a mob mentality with the click of a mouse. Among bloggers, it can also lead to the equivalent of grade-school popularity contests; to quote Trivedi-Grenier, "If I write a post about tacos, and I find a comment from foodlover23 about how my taco post reminds them of a post they did on homeless people eating spaghetti [that includes] a link, I will most likely erase it. I like to think of a blog as a forum to discuss food topics, not an ad agency." That said, many food blogs can and do generate ad revenue; thus, the extent to which their integrity could be compromised in all the old ways as well as all the new ones says a lot (however cynically) about their arrival on the media scene.

Then again, "could be" is not a euphemism for "will be." The passion that so many bloggers exhibit—for their good-old-fashioned commitment to cooking from scratch (one that in fact truly mirrors the progressiveness of today's locavore movement), for the gathering places that restaurants are (and that their own blogs in a sense mimic), and/or for pure grassroots reportage—is not to be denied. As the author of *Richmond, Food for Thought* puts it: "My hope is to give my perspective on restaurants and life in my hometown and perhaps give unsung heroes some well-deserved praise—while [injecting] some reality into places that are more reputation than execution. I've discovered my hometown has a nice community. And I feel heard."⁸

Denver, Colorado

¹ See chocolateandzucchini.com, juliepowell.blogspot.com, and waiterrant.net.

² See chowhound.chow.com/topics/552302.

³ See eatingla.blogspot.com, www.mamaliciouseats.wordpress.com.

⁴ "New Online Survey Investigates U.S. Food Blog Usage," 20 June 2008, www.leenaeats.com.

⁵ There's a fine exception in *Cook's Illustrated*, the long-standing publication devoted to the ins and outs of recipe testing.

⁶ See cakewrecks.blogspot.com.

⁷ See *San Francisco Chronicle* restaurant critic Michael Bauer's recent column "Yelping for Free Food," 10 July 2008, www.sfgate.com.

⁸ See richmondfoodforthought.blogspot.com.