

HOW TO DINE: GETTING THE MOST FROM RESTAURANTS

Instructor: Steven A. Shaw (aka Fat Guy)

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HOW TO DINE

Introduction

When people ask me what I do, and if I'm inclined to say anything beyond "I'm unemployed," I tell them I'm a food writer. The first thing they say (after "Really? I've never heard of you.") is usually something along the lines of, "Oh, you're a restaurant reviewer."

Most food writers are not restaurant reviewers, just as most lawyers never set foot in a courtroom -- we're talking like 90+ percent. But restaurant reviewing occupies the public consciousness about food writing, just as courtrooms occupy the public consciousness about the practice of law. Never mind that there are a thousand cookbooks on the bookstore shelves for every one book of restaurant reviews, that the major food magazines today publish virtually no restaurant reviews and that a newspaper food section with ten contributing writers might have one restaurant reviewer. Restaurant reviews are in the limelight.

I used to be a restaurant reviewer. It's a great job: you eat a tremendous amount of food at the best restaurants, and once in awhile you write something about it. It doesn't pay very well, but you eat like a billionaire. I wrote several hundred restaurant reviews over a period of years. But over time I grew weary of the monotony of the form. There's plenty you can try to do to keep your reviews interesting for yourself and for your readers, but in the end you're always writing the same thing: a summary of food, decor, service, maybe something about the chef, and the occasional witty observation.

Restaurant reviews have a more fundamental deficiency, though: restaurant reviews tell you where to eat, but they don't tell you how to dine. Moreover, most restaurant reviewers are obsessed with the experience of the average customer – they use assumed names, vigorously guard their identities and even wear disguises – but all of that misses the point: you don't have to be the average customer. In any given restaurant on any given day, some people are having better meal experiences than others. The valuable information isn't "What restaurant gives a good experience to the average customer?" but is, rather, "How do I get the best experience at every restaurant?" After all, the average meal at the best restaurant in town probably isn't going to be as good as the best meal at a good but not top-ranked restaurant.

Most of us know at least one person who has great restaurant karma. You know, the person who always picks the right place, always orders the right thing and has a great rapport with waitstaff. Restaurant karma, however, is not some mystical force that some are predestined to control while others are out of luck. It's certainly the case that some folks are great intuitive diners, but most of us have to learn.

It was with that in mind that, a few years back, I started writing a series of articles targeted at young professionals (they were published in New York Lawyer magazine) with the theme "Guerilla Dining Tactics." The response was tremendous -- a lot of people were really grateful for the advice -- so eventually I set out to write a book that, at the time, had a working title of How to Dine. Through several proposals and draft manuscripts the concept developed into the book **Turning the Tables: The Insider's Guide to Eating Out**, which was published last year by HarperCollins and has now just been released in paperback. If you'd like to read some excerpts from the book, there were five published in the Daily Gullet last year (additional excerpts are included as part of this presentation).

Ever since *Turning the Tables* came out, I've been speaking to audiences -- both in-person (at the 92nd Street Y, the Smithsonian, various culinary schools and bookstores) and via different forms of broadcast media (television, radio call-in shows, live online chat) -- and have learned a bit more about people's expectations when they dine out. A year later, the good people at the eGCI suggested it might be fun to do a "How to Dine" presentation and discussion, drawing on some of that post-publication experience.

Before I go on to some basic advice for getting the most out of restaurant dining, let me try to clear up a few common misconceptions that I've encountered on the road:

First, knowing how to get the most out of the dining experience is not some rarified skill that's useful only in super-expensive, fine-dining restaurants. You can take control of your dining experience at all restaurants above the level of McDonald's. Restaurants are all fundamentally members of the same species. The differences between the corner diner and the four-star temple of haute cuisine mostly have to do with scale, style, training; in other words, they aren't different species -- the difference is the equivalent of a gene here and there. You also don't have to live in New York or San Francisco. Restaurants may be better or worse according to geography, but they're still restaurants. During the years I spent doing the research for *Turning the Tables*, I spent time in restaurants from New York to Vancouver, and at every level from highly regarded fancy places to pizzerias, hot dog stands and barbecue joints. The similarities by far outweigh the differences. Indeed, some of the most rewarding special dining experiences I've had have been not at fine-dining restaurants but at smaller, family-run, casual places.

Second, you have to be willing to expend some effort. People often bristle when confronted with the reality that they have to work in order to get a good meal. They want to be served. But it doesn't work that way. Just as with any kind of human relationship from a marriage to a business partnership, you get more out of dining when you put more into it. It's like when you decide to buy a new TV. You have two choices: walk in to the store and buy whatever the salesperson convinces you to buy (or, in the case of a low-service store like Costco, pick something at random), or take control of the situation by doing some research: go to Consumer Reports online, read product reviews on CNet, check message boards and Amazon feedback, compare prices. You'd put an hour into it, wouldn't you? Well, guess what? Dinner for two at the top restaurants in the Western industrialized nations now costs as much as a new TV. And the value of participation remains high once you get to the restaurant. If you want to get the best possible meal out of a restaurant, you've only got two choices: resent being an active participant in your dining experience, or learn to enjoy it. Either way, don't blame me. I didn't create the system; I'm just trying to help folks get the most out of it.

Third, don't expect any earth-shattering revelations here. Good restaurant karma lies at the confluence of many small, unremarkable actions. A good example is when I advise restaurant consumers to say "please" and "thank you" -- in other words, to be polite to waitstaff. Plenty of people have responded, "I had to buy your stupid book/come to your stupid talk/read your stupid eGCI presentation for such trivial advice?" Yet, being

kind to waitstaff is one of the most powerful tools in the successful customer's toolkit. After all, the tip doesn't come until after the meal. Kindness is immediate. If it's genuine, that's even better.

Finally, accept that sometimes you're going to have bad restaurant experiences. Even though I'm arguably the world's leading (only?) authority on getting the most out of restaurant dining, I just had a really crummy restaurant misadventure the other day. We were in (on?) Cape Cod and went to one of those places that does three months of seasonal business a year, utilizing mostly untrained college students for waitstaff, and doesn't take reservations. We did everything wrong. We were herding several kids and the time got away from us, so we finally showed up with seven people at 6:30pm. We believed them when they said it would be a 20-minute wait, and when we'd waited 40 minutes we believed them when they said it would only be 20 minutes more. We tried to complain and were verbally abused by a snotty college kid. The kids were freaking out. Once seated, service was slow. They put olives in a vodka gimlet. You get the idea. It happens. But with a little effort, you can make that sort of experience a once-a-year war story rather than a chronic condition of dining out.

The way I'd like to run this eGCI class is as a dialog. I'll start by making a short presentation, based largely on material from *Turning the Tables*. But then I'd like to hear from all of you: please feel free to share not only your questions but also your advice and experiences in terms of how to get more out of dining out. The dialog we'll be having here is not, however, the same as the open multi-directional conversations we have on regular eG Forums topics. So, please don't address other members' remarks and questions; if you disagree with something I say feel free to mention it, but just once; and if you feel the need to have a discussion that doesn't fit with the structure of this class, please feel free to start an eG Forums topic at the conclusion of the class discussion period (Friday).

Reservations

Let's start with reservations. People are continuously asking me "How do I get in to popular restaurants?" Really, it's not that hard. You just need to understand a few things about how restaurants handle their bookings.

Every night at a popular restaurant is like an overbooked airline flight. And restaurants, like airlines, operate on razor-thin profit margins; a couple of empty seats can mean the difference between profit and loss for the evening. Most restaurants that accept reservations therefore overbook their dining rooms, because they know that a certain percentage of the reservations will either cancel late in the game or be no-shows at the

moment of truth. And in the end, after all the cancellations and no-shows have been tallied, there is almost always an empty table. Your mission, should you choose to accept it? Get that empty table.

Whether you really want or need that table is, however, an open question. Too many people, I think, place too much emphasis on visiting restaurants that are new, hot, staffed by a celebrity chef, featured on Food TV, or otherwise in demand, rather than restaurants that are simply good. Although my work as a food writer often requires that I visit hard-to-book restaurants -- and thus I've become extremely facile when it comes to getting in -- when spending my own money I prefer to go to restaurants that are tried and true.

Should you wish to get into an in-demand restaurant, however, the first step is to acquire a basic understanding of restaurant demographics, which includes a good working knowledge of local news, weather, and even sports. The most painless way to get a reservation is to take a cue from the judo masters: never fight strength with strength. Instead, be a contrarian. If the restaurant does mostly dinner business, go for lunch (the food will be the same, and often cheaper). If it serves a mostly pre-theater crowd, go at 8 P.M. If it's a business-oriented place, go on the weekend. Even the most popular restaurants tend to be empty during blizzards, the Superbowl, and Monica Lewinsky's Barbara Walters interview.

But sometimes you don't want to eat at 5:30 P.M. on a Tuesday, or in a snowstorm. What then? The lesson I've learned from observing and interacting with scores of reservationists (yes, it's a word) over the years is that, when attempting to secure a reservation for the busiest times, the key is polite but confident persistence. Remember the pathetic guy in high school who asked every girl out on a date and never gave up in the face of repeated rejection? Remember your astonishment at his lack of self-respect? Remember how, one day, he scored? When it comes to reservations, you want to be like that guy. It's that careful balance between genuine enthusiasm, flattery, and exhaustion that makes extra seats magically open up.

Most people, when told a restaurant is "fully committed," will give up. But if you're fully committed to getting a reservation, the first phone call is only the beginning. Everybody wants to be wanted, so you need to communicate your desire to the reservationist, sometimes repeatedly. Let that person know you care enough about dining at the restaurant that you're not going to give up until you get a table -- maybe not at that time or even on that day, but you're going to get one. If your first attempt is rejected, start asking questions. Is there a waiting list? When does the restaurant require confirmations? When does the restaurant get most of its cancellations? (Usually right

around the time confirmations are required, and also during the afternoon the day of.) What are the reservationist's hopes, dreams, and favorite kind of dog?

There are few restaurants in the world where you won't be able to get in by using the aforementioned techniques. Still, every good strategy must have several contingency plans, and in some extreme cases -- such as at the most popular places in large cities on weekend nights -- you may very well fail at getting an advance reservation. But hope is not lost. Given how many people cancel their reservations at the last minute or fail to confirm them, an ironic situation arises: it's often easier to get a reservation the day of than it is to get one a month in advance. So find out from the reservationist when the restaurant requires confirmations, and call one minute after the deadline. Ask when the bulk of day-of cancellations typically come in -- depending on the restaurant this could be anywhere from noon to right before the dinner service -- and call around that time. And make sure the reservationist remembers that you're the nice couple from Arizona, or the woman who just loves the chef's sweetbreads, or in my case the guy with the English bulldog named Momo.

Even if you can't get a last-minute reservation, if you simply must dine at a particular restaurant I recommend you just show up. Once you're on the inside, don't give up until the last cook goes home for the night. It is almost inconceivable that a neatly dressed, polite potential customer, sitting at a restaurant's bar and exhibiting a willingness to wait and a desire to experience and pay for a restaurant's cuisine, will not eventually be given a table. So far I have never failed with this strategy, though I've endured some long evenings. (Those long evenings are great times to collect gossip from bartenders, though.)

In the door

Getting into a restaurant is nice, and for many consumers it's victory enough, but it's only the beginning. It's what happens to you in the restaurant that really counts. Most every restaurant is really two: the one the public eats at, and the one where the regulars dine. Being a regular affects every aspect of the dining experience, from getting that tough-to-book table on a busy Saturday night, to getting the waitstaff's best service, to getting special off-menu dishes and off-list wines. The best restaurant isn't the one with the highest Zagat rating, the most stars from the local paper, or that cute celebrity chef. It's the one where you're a regular.

This news can be discouraging to some, but it needn't be to you: by being a proactive and knowledgeable customer, you can start getting treated like a regular on your very first visit. A special relationship with a restaurant is one of life's great pleasures, and

such a relationship can be far easier and quicker to establish than many people think. You don't need to be wealthy, a celebrity, or great-looking to be a regular. I'm none of the three, and I do pretty well in restaurants. And while you can't exactly become a regular in a single visit, you can make a lot of progress in that direction.

The benefits of being a regular will, of course, increase with each visit to a restaurant. Although each individual meal at a top restaurant should be excellent, most seasoned veteran diners take the long view. To them, eating a first meal at a restaurant is like a first date: it's a preview that helps you decide if you're going to want a second date. Most every restaurant, like every dating partner, keeps a little something in reserve for subsequent encounters. The first meal won't expose you to the full range of an establishment's capabilities, but it will give you a taste. On the later visits, things can get even more interesting.

But you can't make those repeat visits if you're constantly eating at the latest trendy place. Becoming a regular requires focus, whereas the relentless pursuit of the new and the different cuts directly against depth of enjoyment at just a few well-chosen places. There are more than six thousand restaurants in Chicago, and New York has something in the neighborhood of twenty-thousand; given how many close and open each week, any large city has too many to visit in a lifetime. Since you'll never visit them all, don't try. Instead, zero in on a handful of restaurants to satisfy your various dining needs -- the special-occasion place, the business-lunch place, the neighborhood place where you go for a quick bite -- and cultivate the heck out of your relationship with the staff at each one. You'll soon find you don't often get the urge to eat anywhere else, and that new restaurants have to fight to get onto your schedule instead of vice versa.

Before and during your first visit, do a little research. Every level of restaurant in every city has both an official and an unofficial dress code. The official dress code tells you the minimum ("no jeans, no sneakers" or "jackets required for gentlemen"), but what you want to know is the unofficial code: what are people really going to be wearing? The way to find out is to call ahead and ask. Other questions -- there are no stupid ones -- should be asked on the spot, while dining. Those in the service profession usually love to share their knowledge with newcomers to their restaurant or to fine dining in general. Whether you want to know what a funny-shaped utensil is for or what the best dish on the menu is, just look your server in the eye and ask, "Can you tell me about this?" The first time my wife (then-girlfriend) and I dined at Bouley in New York City, we didn't know what a sauce spoon was. When we asked, the waiter took us under his wing -- and that's exactly where you want to be.

Most good restaurants' waitstaffs will recognize you after two or three visits (and certainly the restaurant's reservations computer will, assuming you use the same name and phone number each time). In that sense, anybody who visits a restaurant often enough eventually becomes a regular by default. But there are levels of regulars, and if you're going to visit the restaurant anyway, you may as well attain the highest, super-VIP level by being proactive. Learn the name of your waiter and the maitre d' or manager, and, more importantly, make certain they learn yours. The easiest way to accomplish this: "I really enjoyed my meal today. My name is Steven Shaw." If you aren't answered with, "Thank you, Mr. Shaw, my name is François, please let me know if there's anything I can do for you in the future," then there's something wrong with you, or with the restaurant. (Of course you should use your name, not mine. There are still a few places out there that are annoyed with me for giving them bad reviews.)

A restaurant is a business, but a relationship with a restaurant is not just about money. Especially when dealing with waitstaff, the human element can often eclipse financial concerns. Sure, money is important to people in the restaurant business, just as it's important to lawyers. But like the law, the restaurant business is a service business, and all lawyers know that there are good clients and bad clients, and that you can have bad billionaire clients and great penniless clients. When cultivating a relationship with a restaurant's service staff, being nice often counts at least as much as callously throwing money around. The use of "please" and "thank you," and general acknowledgment of your waiter as a fellow human being, will immeasurably improve your stock.

And there's something that counts as much as or more than being nice: being interested. Any chef or waiter can tell you how disheartening it is to work so hard to create the best possible food and service experience, and then to dish it out to a mostly uncaring clientele that chose the restaurant for the scene, not the food. If you can distinguish yourself as someone who really cares about the restaurant's work, you will be everybody's favorite customer. The quickest approach? Again, ask questions, which indicates interest. Interest is one of the highest compliments you can pay. Of course, if you do choose to distribute a little extra cash, a twenty-dollar bill and a discreet "thank you" never hurts.

Do not, however, make the egregious mistake of faking it. Don't try to be someone you're not in order to impress a restaurant's staff. Aside from being undignified, this is doomed to failure. Every experienced waiter is a part-time amateur psychoanalyst and can spot a poseur clear across a crowded dining room. It's not necessary to try to appear learned about wine and food, or to appear absurdly enthusiastic. You'll get a lot further by deferring to the staff's expertise than you will by showing off your own. You may learn something, too.

The Meal

Choosing and ordering food and, especially, wine is another area of dining out that many find troublesome. Today there are places where you're presented with so much paperwork you'd be forgiven for thinking you're at a real estate closing. There may be a regular dinner menu, a preset chef's multi-course tasting menu or two, a specials list either spoken or written, a wine list, a dessert menu, and perhaps even a dessert wine and liqueur list. How is one to make sense of all these documents?

There's no way to become a food or wine expert overnight, or even in a year. But you don't need expertise. All you need is enough confidence to ask questions. The rest is up to the restaurant. In hiring staff, training them, and holding staff meetings every day, a top restaurant has taken on the burden of providing expertise. If you provide an opening by asking a question, any good restaurant's staff should be more than happy to share that expertise with you. One of the most basic lines of inquiry, which can lead to a highly productive dialogue, is asking servers what their favorite dishes are, and what dishes the chef considers specialties of the house. While your tastes may vary from the norm, and while you shouldn't order bass if you hate bass, the recommendations of waitstaff at good restaurants are valuable indicators of what the chef, staff, and customers tend to enjoy. And you'll get even more out of asking questions if you can be as specific as possible. "I love bitter chocolate; which dessert would you recommend?" is better than just "Which dessert would you recommend?"

One of the most daunting parts of ordering, especially for those who are new to fine dining but even for many seasoned veterans, is the selection of wine. A significant restaurant with an ambitious wine program might have more than a thousand wine choices on its list. Even a casual brasserie or bistro is likely to have more choices than you could possibly read through without freezing out everybody else at your table and winning yourself a "wine geek" label or worse. In better restaurants, then, it always pays to seek assistance from the sommelier, or wine steward. The sommelier's role is to know the restaurant's wine and food offerings better than any customer possibly could. Even other professional sommeliers seek the advice of the sommelier when dining out.

A sommelier will most likely make a sensible wine recommendation, provided you participate in the decision. Your part of the bargain, then, is to make your needs and preferences known. If you haven't yet ordered, you'll benefit from telling the sommelier what you plan to eat. Any preferences you can articulate, from the most basic "I like my wines on the sweeter side" to more technical statements of regional and stylistic preference, will help the sommelier narrow the field.

Most importantly, there is the matter of price. Once you've decided how much your budget is for a bottle of wine, the best way to communicate this to the sommelier is to point to any bottle on the list at your comfortable price and say, "Something in this range, please."

The wine service ritual is romantic and entertaining, but it's mostly pragmatic. The main goal is to determine whether or not the wine is "corked." It's a reality of the wine world that as many as one in ten bottles will be corked, meaning they will be tainted by a foul-smelling and -tasting mold that grows in corks. (It has nothing to do, as some mistakenly think, with bits of cork in the bottle, which would be harmless.) To me and many others, it smells like feet. If your nose detects such an off aroma when you smell or taste the wine the sommelier or server has poured, send the bottle back. If you're not sure, ask the sommelier for confirmation -- restaurants usually get credit from their distributors for corked bottles, so they tend not to mind taking them back, and even if they did mind, it wouldn't be your problem.

The wine service ritual is not, however, intended for you to see if you like the wine. If the wine is damaged, send it back. If it's simply not the exact wine you wished you'd ordered, mention this to the sommelier, but be prepared to drink it and chalk it up to experience unless the sommelier offers a replacement (it may happen).

It's not always necessary to order bottles of wine, however. Sometimes, if you're a couple and don't drink very much, or you're ordering very different dishes, you may want to inquire about wines by the glass, or at some restaurant, by the quartino (a 250 ml mini-carafe that's enough for two small glasses) or half-bottle (375 ml).

Plenty of restaurants, unfortunately, don't have a sommelier or even any server or manager who knows much about wine. This is your cue that you shouldn't be spending much money on wine at the restaurant. Instead, order something inexpensive and safe, if anything at all. Know the names of a few of the major producers of reliable red and white wines -- information you can get by reading a couple of issues of Wine Spectator (which includes a pullout reference card with every issue) or surfing the web -- for such contingencies. Or do without, and use the money for a better bottle of wine later on, at a better restaurant.

Under no circumstances, however, should you ever feel compelled to order wine in any restaurant. Aside from whatever fixed price menu or per-customer minimum a restaurant reveals in writing on the menu, everything else is optional. You are entirely within your rights and the scope of appropriate conduct as a customer to drink tap water, order food only, and skip coffee. A server should always ask if you want these

things (at most restaurants it's a requirement of the job and servers will get in trouble if they don't do it), but should never aggressively try to upsell you on anything. If that happens, just smile knowingly and say, "No, thank you."

Dealing with Problems

Finally, let's spend a few moments on the subject of what to do if something goes wrong in a restaurant.

Servers, managers, and chefs are human. They make mistakes, they get distracted, they have personal problems and are besieged by all the other little difficulties of the human condition. Most of the time, though, when their mistakes are pointed out to them, they want to make things right. And if they don't, there's always a manager or an owner above them who will. What a restaurant's staff can't do is read your mind. That's why, if something goes wrong in a restaurant, it's important to speak up.

I know many people are uncomfortable speaking up in restaurants, either because they're intimidated by the staff or because they don't want to put on a big scene in front of the other people at the table. Some of us have families that raised us not to complain, but the restaurant context isn't the place to live that way. In restaurants, it's best for everybody if you make your complaint known as soon as you become aware of a problem. If you prefer to complain privately, excuse yourself from the table as though you're going to the bathroom and pull a manager aside on your way: "I just wanted to let you know that every time I need water refilled I have to search and wave for several minutes to get it. I'm trying to have a celebratory dinner here and this is putting a damper on my evening. Do you think you can help?" At any good restaurant, it is virtually guaranteed that the manager will not only address the issue right away with the service staff, but also will pay extra special attention to your table for the rest of the evening. If not, don't return to the restaurant.

Speaking up is fundamental to getting what you want. If you're being shown to a table that you don't like, for example one next to a noisy group or a bathroom entrance, request a different table before you sit down. Even if there are no other available tables, say you'll be willing to wait. A few minutes of awkwardness at the outset is better than a few hours at a table you won't enjoy. If a dish is overcooked or otherwise deficient, send it back and say why. If you feel the pace of your meal is rushed, ask to have it slowed down. If your server or a manager asks "Is everything okay?" and it isn't, don't say it is. Review your bill carefully, because if you notice an error the next day it will be infinitely more difficult to correct. So long as you are civil when voicing reasonable complaints, you are in the right. Writing a follow-up letter of complaint is another way

to convey your dissatisfaction, but by then it's too late for the restaurant to fix the problem. I prefer to make complaints immediately, no matter how uncomfortable it makes me, so as to fix the meal before it becomes a bad memory. I reserve follow-up letters for the complaints that weren't fixed, even after being voiced.

Conclusion

As I said, it's not earthshaking stuff. Mostly, it's a willingness to take charge of your dining experience, instead of letting it happen to you. It's a lot of little things that add up. Join me in the Q&A to discuss more ideas for getting the most out of your restaurant experience.