

October 6, 2007

## The Price of a Four-Star Rating

**Was a free meal behind that glowing online restaurant review? The rising influence of food blogs has chefs plying Web critics with dinners and drinks to avoid bad write-ups.**

 By **KATY MCLAUGHLIN**

October 6, 2007; Page W1

*(See Corrections & Amplifications item [below](#).)*

Dine, a contemporary American restaurant in Chicago, has been open for less than two years. But on one popular Web site, it is already rated half a star shy of Charlie Trotter's.

How did Dine garner such favorable reviews? One thing that probably didn't hurt: It fed many of the reviewers free. Last August, Dine spent about \$1,500 on an event for members of Yelp, a Web site where consumers post reviews and rate restaurants. The nearly 100 members were treated to an open bar, duck roulade appetizers and red velvet cupcakes for dessert. As a bonus, they all received certificates for discounts on subsequent meals. The result: a torrent of favorable reviews on Yelp. Most reviewers mentioned that they attended a Yelp event, though few highlighted that the food and drink was free.

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**Katy McLaughlin explains**<sup>1</sup> how chefs and restaurant owners are paying more attention to food bloggers these days, and in some cases showing respect -- or fear. Plus, see a **list of Web sites**<sup>2</sup> that can be useful guides to good food and restaurants -- especially if you know where each site stands on graft.




"I think if I was picking up the tab I wouldn't enjoy it as much," says Leigh Kelsey, a 28-year-old Chicago file clerk at a law firm who attended the event and posted positive comments on Yelp. A spokeswoman for Dine says attendees were not required to write reviews of any nature, positive or negative.

As online food sites become increasingly influential in the restaurant business, chefs and owners are plying bloggers with free meals to get good write-ups. Some are also posting favorable reviews about themselves on popular Web sites or becoming Internet scribes.

Among those using the tactics are some of the biggest names in the business. Terrance Brennan, co-owner and chef of New York's Artisanal Bistro and Picholine, hosted a cheese class for bloggers last year, waiving the usual \$75-a-person fee. Bill Telepan, chef and co-owner of Telepan in New York, donated a \$200, four-course meal to one influential blogger's online contest. And in Washington, the Park Hyatt's Blue Duck Tavern says it invited a customer back for a free Father's Day meal after she posted a negative comment on the Washington Post's Web site. (In a follow-up post, the diner wrote, "We will definitely return to Blue Duck Tavern," not mentioning that she had been invited free.)

Traditionally, top critics for magazines and newspapers have tried to dine anonymously and paid their own way. The goal: to ensure that the review reflects the way average customers can expect to be treated. Some prominent reviewers have even donned wigs to conceal their identities.

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In recent years, online reviews written by the masses have emerged as an alternative. They promised honest, unbiased recommendations free from the potential snobbery and insider-ism of professional food writers. But now, restaurateurs are trying to woo the people who write about food online, creating a new crop of insiders.

Yelp CEO Jeremy Stoppelman says that "Elite Squad" events, such as the one hosted by Dine, don't guarantee positive reviews, and that attendees are asked to disclose any freebies. Still, Mr. Stoppelman is concerned that some reviews could appear influenced by the events. Yelp is now testing a system in which reviews of events are posted separately from regular reviews, so that readers will clearly understand when the consumer didn't

pay. In addition to restaurants, Yelp visitors can review many other services, from dentists to beauty salons.

There are now some 21,000 food blogs, according to Technorati, a company that tracks and analyzes blogs; in August, 40.5 million people visited the top 25 food-related Web sites, according to comScore, an Internet analyst. These include sites like Chow, which has a message board, Chowhound, that allows people to share tips with each other. On eGullet, foodies share pictures of their latest meals and debate issues like how to behave in a three-star French restaurant.

There are food sites for every gastronomic obsession, from Curdnerds, founded by a Brooklyn cheese enthusiast, to Chocolateandzucchini, the food diary of a young French woman. There are blogs hosted by self-appointed critics, like Restaurantgirl or Amateur Gourmet in New York, and gossipy blogs like Tablehopper, based in San Francisco. Many bloggers don't hide who they are, actively seek out relationships with chefs and accept free meals.

"I accept the comps because I don't have a budget," says Marcia Gagliardi, who writes Tablehopper. She says she eats free about two-thirds of the time, and that complimentary meals do not sway her opinion, writing on the site: "Just because a restaurant is hosting me...it doesn't mean I will write a glowing review."

Traditional critics often say they won't write a review until a restaurant has been open at least a month or so, and then only after dining multiple times. But blogs and message-board postings can turn one bad meal into a public fiasco.

Last fall, Amateur Gourmet blogger Adam Roberts slammed the New York restaurant Le Cirque in a blog entry entitled "Only a Jerk Would Eat at Le Cirque." Mr. Roberts, who was dining with his parents, recounted how he felt snubbed when the restaurant gave them a remote table at the back and the owner refused to hobnob with his mother. Readers responded with their own tales of unpleasant meals at Le Cirque and sympathy for Mr. Roberts.

To manage the debacle, the restaurant tracked down Mr. Roberts' parents in Boca Raton, Fla., and mailed them an invitation to return for a meal on the house. Le Cirque co-owner Marco Maccioni says he wanted to make up for the bad experience.

Mr. Roberts then penned another column about Le Cirque, and posted it on a blog called Serious Eats. In it, he described how the family was pampered during their subsequent meal. He also disclosed that the meal was free.

About three years ago, Mr. Roberts, 28, was an unhappy law school student with a hankering to write and an interest in food. He started writing blog posts from the perspective of a wide-eyed innocent in the world of gourmet cooking and dining, and says he was stunned when the blog became popular. He now lives off of advertising income from it, as well as free-lance writing jobs and a recently published book titled "The Amateur Gourmet."

Bill Telepan says donating a free meal last October to the blog Restaurantgirl was his way of saying thank you. The blog was launched last year by food enthusiast Danyelle Freeman. Ms. Freeman, says Mr. Telepan, had "been very nice to me. She did an interview with me, she's mentioned me in good terms." Mr. Telepan says he regularly contributes his time and energy to food magazines, and considered his donation to Restaurantgirl part of these promotional activities.

Ms. Freeman is one of a growing number of bloggers who have crossed the line into print media. In August, the New York Daily News hired her as its new restaurant critic. She says she stopped taking free meals before getting the new job to give her reviews more credibility.

Chefs say there's another upside to getting chummy with bloggers: advice on improving the food. In San Francisco, Chef Robbie Lewis of Bacar restaurant says he considers Ms. Gagliardi, of Tablehopper, "a friend" at this point. After hosting her at a "friends and family dinner" -- a meal to try out new dishes on close associates about a month after starting as the executive chef at the restaurant -- Mr. Lewis took her advice. He changed the way he plated a roasted baby leek dish, so it was easier for diners to get a taste of poached egg and sauce with each bite.

"I can't get feedback from other critics before publication," says Mr. Lewis. Ms. Gagliardi didn't write a subsequent review, but frequently mentions events at Bacar on her site.



Top to Bottom: Blue Duck Tavern, Washington; Bacar, San Francisco; Dine, Chicago

It's relatively easy for restaurants to ingratiate themselves to key food bloggers. Publicists across the industry say they now include bloggers and food Web site forum hosts on their media lists, and regularly invite them to opening parties, free meals and other events.

Sites that rely on consumers to post reviews and rate restaurants are vulnerable to another concern: positive comments written by restaurant employees who don't disclose their affiliation with the restaurant they're writing about. Zagat Survey, for instance, has been criticized for a system that could potentially allow staffers of a restaurant to submit positive reviews. Co-founders Tim and Nina Zagat say methods have been implemented to make sure this doesn't happen. They will not disclose what these methods are, but say they have dropped restaurants from guides when they discover that the owners have asked staff to submit reviews.

Ed Levine, CEO of Left Bank Brasserie Group, which owns six restaurants in the San Francisco Bay Area, says he was delighted when he read a Yelp post about Tanglewood, his year-old upscale American restaurant in San Jose. The reviewer wrote that he was "pleasantly surprised" that "portion size has changed dramatically," and service had improved. Previously, the restaurant had been blasted by Yelpers complaining about high prices and small portions. As a result, Mr. Levine lowered the cost of entrees and beefed up portions.



Telepan, New York

"I read it and said, 'Oh my God, the changes we made have really paid off! We nailed it!' " Mr. Levine recalls. However, he says he was later tipped off by a senior staff member that the review was posted by a waiter at the restaurant. Mr. Levine says he doesn't ask staff to post positive reviews on Web sites, though he does ask them to fill out Zagat surveys about the restaurant.

Scott Rodrick, president of Rodrick Management Group, which owns and operates 20 restaurants on the East and West Coast, says that a couple of months ago he noticed several Yelp postings about how friendly the bar staff is at one of his restaurants. That struck him as suspicious: Only a short while before, he'd reprimanded the bartending team for being aloof to customers. "I'm sure it's a case where they told their friends that 'my boss sat me down,' " Mr. Rodrick says.

Tom Walton, a San Francisco Bay Area restaurant publicist, says he encourages his clients to enlist their staff, friends and family to "stuff the ballot box to counter bad Web reviews." It is the only way, Mr. Walton says, to fight back against anonymous reviews that assail a business, whether justified or not.

One Web site set says it has set up a system for policing postings. Eater, a restaurant news and gossip site, posts reviews it suspects of coming from restaurateurs themselves in its "Adventures in Shilling" feature. Editors then assign passages a "shill probability" rating, up to 100%.

Eater says it does not allow writers to accept free meals when they are reviewing a restaurant. It does allow them to accept free food, including appetizers served at opening parties or meals eaten with a publicist, if they are not specifically writing a review of the restaurant. The site requires writers to disclose when they get something free. EGullet says it asks its forum hosts to disclose when they got anything free from a restaurant.

Chowhound says it does not allow posts from anyone connected to a restaurant or from consumers who have received complimentary meals. Staff writers for Chow can accept a free meal from a restaurant,

though not when they're writing a review of the restaurant, says Jane Goldman, the site's editor in chief. Ms. Goldman says it isn't financially feasible for the site to do otherwise. She says if she had the resources, she wouldn't allow contributors to accept free goods or services, "because it subtly influences the recipient."

Recently, a handful of restaurateurs have become outspoken critics of what they view as unfair posts. David Haskell, managing director of West Hollywood's BIN 8945, which specializes in wine pairings, says that about six months ago he attempted to respond to what he viewed as incorrect comments posted about his restaurant on Chowhound. One diner said the restaurant was "way too overpriced" while another called it "snooty for what it is."

But his posting was deleted by the site. Mr. Haskell then posted a letter on Eater's Los Angeles site announcing that he has officially "banned Chowhound." The ban is unenforceable, Mr. Haskell says, but expresses his disapproval of Chowhound's policy.

For Mario Batali, the tipping point was an article on Eater about a dispute between him and one of his restaurant's landlords. In response, he wrote an article for the site titled, "Why I Hate Food Bloggers," in which he decried blogs as bastions of "untruths, lies and malicious and personally driven dreck."

Jeffrey Chodorow, the managing partner behind 28 upscale restaurants around the world, including Asia de Cuba and China Grill, says food bloggers are "aggravating," because, he says, they base much of their reportage on unconfirmed rumor. Some of his restaurants have been panned in postings on Eater.

To create a platform to respond to critics and review other restaurants, Mr. Chodorow recently did the logical thing: He started his own food blog.

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### **Corrections & Amplifications:**

Adam Roberts was incorrectly referred to, in some references, as Mr. Adams in this article.

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