Restaurant Reviews

By Michael Gordon, Ph.D.

I'd make a lousy restaurant critic. At least I think so. To be competent at that job, I imagine you'd have to be an analytical person with a discerning palate. You'd parse complex flavors, translate tastes into words, and have an unwavering sense of what comprises good food, capable service, and gastronomic value. You would need to be someone who arrived into this world primed to see all that is right, miss nothing that is wrong, and become infused with a sense of rectitude when engaged in the evaluation of others.

Critical people, being an extra smart breed, surely have a clear and unwavering sense of what constitutes perfection. They must also harbor some conviction that it is the obligation of others to serve them in a manner consistent with those standards of excellence. If you deviate, they will know.

And that's why I wouldn't be a good reviewer. I'm entirely too much into pleasing than being pleased. I just don't have that sense of entitlement required if you're going to be good at scanning for how life is disappointing you at the moment. If you spend too much of your time making sure others are served well, you get entirely too distracted from considering how they should best serve you.

What's worse, I make Pollyanna look like Debbie Downer. I'm much too bent on discerning the positive, even if it requires ample amounts of impaired reality testing and delusional thinking. It's pathetic, really. When someone underperforms or just plain messes up, my first impulse is to rationalize it all away. I'll immediately minimize the

transgression, talk myself into thinking that it's really no big deal, and then flush from memory any confirming evidence that it really was a big deal. These are not the proper instincts for a proficient critic.

Another reason why you'll never see my byline in your newspaper's restaurant review section is that, to my way of thinking, words weren't intended to describe sensory experiences other than in broad strokes. Don't get me wrong, I'm a big fan of words. I think they're great for all kinds of purposes, like giving directions or recording facts or telling stories. I even just like the way many of them sound, the rhythms they produce when strung together. But they always seem to fall short of capturing how something truly looks or smells or feels or tastes. I suppose there's a reason why a picture is worth a thousand words or why descriptions of sensual activities like music, food, and sex always seem contrived and lacking. Words are good, but they're not *that* good. Maybe that's why people always have generic descriptors at the ready when words fail them. We often start to describe sensory experiences in detail but soon lapse into stock descriptors like "marvelous," "incredible," "awesome" or (if you're in England) "brilliant." Better to offer a catchall adjective than suffer the frustration of conveying what may be inherently unconveyable.

While I may not be well suited for a career in food criticism, I do have a few ideas I'd like to share about what makes for a good meal out. I've noticed that most of these criteria have little to do with the food itself. Not that food shouldn't be flavorful. You can quote me here: Restaurants should serve tasty food. But I share the notion that how much you enjoy a meal, even how good the food tastes, depends on more than the expert concoction of fine ingredients. Neuropsychologists will tell you that sensory pathways

interconnect with abandon. Stimulation of pathways for one sense inevitably enervates those for others. That's surely why delicious food hideously presented will never actualize its full culinary potential.

I haven't yet gotten so obsessive as to assign a weighting to each of my culinary criteria. Not that I haven't thought about developing an evidence-based rating scale of meal satisfaction that would boast high inter-diner reliability, solid validity, and a robust standardization sample. For now, I'll present them straightforwardly, as follows:

1. **Aromas** – My first action upon entering a restaurant is to take a deep breath. Actually, I don't consciously take a deep breath; I just breathe because you need to do that regardless of where you might be at the moment. But if I take in the odor of an industrial cleaner slopped over tabletops, I'm immediately concerned that we're in for canned soups and reheated foods originally produced in a factory somewhere in Arkansas. To my mind, a restaurant should give off pleasing smells, perhaps of garlic or fresh cooked bread or maybe hickory smoke. Hell, I'm even OK with a neutral, clean smell tinged perhaps with just a whiff of olive oil or perfume. But keep me away from that Lysol disinfectant stench from hell. I have to imagine that cleanliness can be achieved without the restaurant smelling like a janitor's closet.

2. **Greeters** – This criterion may be one of those better kept private, but that would show more judgment than I routinely muster. I want to walk in and gaze upon a stunningly attractive hostess, preferably in a black cocktail dress, wearing a smile

that would bring an orthodontist to tears of joy. She should greet you with an attitude that purrs, “I am truly delighted you’re here, I very much hope you love the meal tonight, and, damn, you’re not too bad looking yourself.” She should float her way to your table like she were escorting you to the front door of Nirvana. She should be so adorable that you wouldn’t even care if the food were prepared in a factory somewhere in Arkansas. If the hostess is a host, that’s disappointing, but all right with me. I understand that not all diners are male; women deserve the opportunity to be escorted by an exceptionally good-looking fellow. But, again, the fellow should be well dressed and handsome. Now, as with most rules, this one has its exceptions. They derive from expectable differences across restaurant genre. You wouldn’t expect the same type of service at a hoity-toity bistro as you would at Davey’s Chuck Wagon Diner, would you? At a place like Davey’s, you’d want a heavy set, red-headed woman named “Marge” waddling you to a booth that sports red naugahyde (ripped) and a columnar sugar dispenser with mounds of discolored granules crusted around the flap. Or if you’re entering a tiny, family-owned Italian restaurant, it’s perfectly fine that Frankie with the once-white tuxedo shirt and black tie seats you at one of the six tables he serves while his brother, Rocky, and his wife, Gloria, are in the kitchen throwing pots at one another. You wouldn’t want it any other way. But at a fancier restaurant, I’m looking for the hostess equivalent of Catherine Zeta Jones.

3. **Tables** –You might not think that the table itself would find its way onto my list, but it does, big time. Although I’m habitually mild mannered, I lose a measure of

equanimity if I put my hands on the table and it tilts. I cannot stand a table that wobbles. Simply because I want to cut my steak doesn't mean that everyone's water glass should start sliding like deck chairs on the Titanic. And while I normally like problem solving, I don't expect to spend much time finding the right number of sugar packets I should fit beneath one or more of the table legs to gain stability. Someone else should keep my table at an even keel.

4. **Servers** – While I like my hostesses alluring, I'm much more intent on the server being competent than comely. I know from experience that being a waiter or waitress is a demanding job if you're intent on doing it right. You have to know how to interact well with an array of customers, not all of whom are respectful, sober, friendly, attractive, or generous. The opportunities for screwing up in some significant manner are bountiful as is the likelihood that you'll be the one getting yelled at if someone else (like the chef) screws up. Being a good server also entails having an innate sense of boundaries. You want to interject your personality while, at the same time, not intrude on the table's sense of intimacy and personal space. And that's only a partial listing of why it's hard being a server. I've noticed in this country, though, that many waiters and waitresses aren't terribly dedicated to their calling. Being a waiter in most of the US is, by definition, only a steppingstone to some another profession, like acting or financial planning. Except for the finer, big city restaurants, most don't even consider it a profession, per se. It's regarded as somewhat transitory and menial. Yet, if you visit restaurants abroad, you get the sense that being a waiter is an

honored profession. Those jobs can be so highly prized that they are passed along from parent to child should the opportunity arise. That's perhaps why servers in other countries seem so much more professional and earnest about performing their job well. You'd never hear a waiter in England (or a high-class American restaurant) rattle off that stock opening line uttered by anyone who's ever approached a booth at a family-style, franchise restaurant, "Hello, my name is Jennifer and I'll be your server tonight. Can I start you off with some drinks?" A classy waiter would approach your table with an air of dignity. He or she would have the sort of manner you'd hope for in an emergency room doctor or rescue worker. It says, "I know what I'm doing, I'm going to take good care of you, and nothing will befall you that I can't handle with ease. And if you want to make menu substitutions or have me bring you yet another basket of bread or ask me for some extra Thai peanut sauce or split the bill twelve ways, it's no problem. Sit back, relax, and enjoy." Ironically, I've found that attitude more often from a Marge at a place like Davey's Chuck Wagon Diner than in most other stateside restaurants. Marge has probably been wheeling that coffee pot for twenty years, has seen it all including more than her share of jerks, but she still retains enough maternal instinct and pride in her job to want you happy and well-served as long as you don't bother her too much. So, whether it's Marge at Davey's or Fernando at Per Se, you want someone who's dedicated, knowledgeable, and ready to serve.

5. **Cocktails** – I understand from a friend who owns upscale restaurants that most of the margin is in the margaritas (or other spirits). If most diners were teetotalers,

my buddy would be in deep financial trouble. I'm sure the same holds true for most other eating establishments. So I understand why bartenders pour with care. But it bothers me when a perfectly measured jigger of my Stolly or, worse yet, a sparsely filled glass of wine arrives at the table. It's not that I'm looking to raise my blood alcohol level with undue alacrity. If I need to order another drink for that or any other purpose, so be it. It's not a money thing. That initial drink represents your first encounter with what the restaurant has to offer. It arrives well before the breadbasket or appetizers (save perhaps an amuse-bouche). And if the first offering is skimpy, it sets a bad tone. It says, "Sorry, buddy. You're at a place where we're more concerned about profit margins and controlling costs than making you feel like we're invested in providing you a sumptuous meal. Drink this one quickly, and maybe we'll show a tad more largesse next 'round." I guess I like to feel as if I'm eating in a place run by nurturing people whose sole purpose is to make diners feel ever so spoiled.

6. **Menus** – My gustatory pleasures vary only modestly with the format or content of the menu. My middle-aged eyes do prefer a jumbo font so I can read the menu without asking around the table if anyone remembered to bring cheater glasses. And I appreciate the kindness of explanatory descriptions; it saves me from admitting that I can't speak French, Italian, Spanish, Thai, Korean, any of the Indian Dialects, let along Arabic, Vietnamese, or Mongolian. It's also easier for me to cover up my poor memory, in this case for gastronomic terms and references. I can never remember the difference between béchamel and béarnaise,

crostini and bruschetta, consommé and bouillon, miso and dashi, gateaux and ganache, Meunière and Mornay, à la Nicoise and à la Provencale, roulade and remoulade, bulgogi and bi bim bap. My only other menu preference is that it should offer at least one item that's singularly offbeat. I cook enough on my own that I don't want to order something I could easily make at home or that has ingredients available at the corner grocery. Give me a dish with pigeon or elk or squab or boar or tree bark or ostrich or flowers or juniper sausage or alligator or Tunisian style rope cultured mussels or any other organism someone, somewhere considers edible. I've been to China where everything's fair game: I've had scorpion (crunchy), pupae (chewy), grasshopper (crunchy), and other members of the animal kingdom I couldn't even begin to identify without the aid of several zoologists and a botanist or two. Think of me what you'd like, but I have no moral or ethical problems eating about anything, even Disney-sized critters like rabbit or frog. Given the opportunity, most of them would eat me, or at least consider the option.

7. **Wines** – Wine descriptions totally crack me up. It's worth the price of admission to a fine restaurant if only to revel in the unbridled silliness of the prose that graces the pages of spiraled wine lists. Understand that I start from the (perhaps unfair) premise that most of the nuanced characterizations of each offering represent more marketing than reality. My wine-enthusiast friends, though, gush similarly when they encounter a beloved Beaujolais or magnificent Merlot. I have more than a little trouble taking it all seriously. To me, expensive wines are like

Rorschach cards for the wealthy. People taste what they want to taste, largely independent of what's in the wine itself. I find it almost impossible to accept that individuals can detect "currant, graphite, fresh herbs and pepper showing, along with a suggestion of white chocolate" upon a sip of wine. And who wants a $64 bottle of wine that tastes, along the road from nose to finish, like a pencil point? Here's one of my favorites: "This wine has a wonderful combination of power, ripeness and extract that comes from this particular vintage, along with an elegant layering of pie cherries, leather, flint, and a garden of herbs. It is bold, yet subtle. What's striking is the exquisite balance. The oak is present only to support and not to dominate and has nice hints of spice." I tasted this wine myself because a fellow diner said it was outstanding, apparently not minding that it was described as tasting somewhat like a cross between Florscheims and a hard wood floor. And do you know how it tasted, this mélange of extraordinary essences? It tasted good. That's about all my slovenly, unsophisticated, boorish palate could discern. It tasted good, maybe even real good. I characterize it as such because it didn't make my lips pucker or my tongue numb from the tannins. And it did have a nice taste to it. Please believe me when I tell you that, under my friend's expert tutelage, I traversed the entire wine tasting ritual. I gazed, I titled, I swirled, I whiffed, I trilled, I sloshed, I gargled, I tasted, I after-tasted, and I couldn't for the life of me discern even one variety of cherry, let alone a pie cherry. It tasted good. My tablemate wasn't so bold, yet subtle as to claim he could divine each flavor. He talked more about it being "young and a little tight but with good legs" which, to me, sounded more like he was describing options at a bordello than a grape by-

product. But what do I know. You're only as good as your inputs when it comes to appreciating the extravagances of life. If you can't hear the full range of frequencies, you won't much benefit from high end audio equipment, unless of course you want to feel like you're indeed that sophisticated in which case you buy the $2000 a pair speakers with the $80 per foot speaker cable wire and talk yourself and anyone else who will listen into thinking you can actually detect the difference. Dissonance reduction is a powerful force of human nature. When it comes to wine, however, I have neither the lingual sensitivity nor the aspirational level sufficient to be a card-carrying enologist. I also lack the memory capacity required to store all the details required if you're going to be a wine connoisseur. All those grapes, combinations of grapes, areas of France, vintners, and winemaking terms swamp my paltry capacity for factual recall. Alas, devoted fetishism requires a prodigious memory. But, Lord, do I love reading those descriptions. I've even wondered if I could hire someone who writes these paeans to pinot grigios to come up with text for my tombstone. Why settle for, "Here lies Michael Gordon" when you could have, "This big, full-bodied yet complex and well-variegated individual had a lot of earthy, vanilla flavors on the nose hiding coyly the tooth of time."

8. **Music** – Profiles of renowned chefs invariably showcase the following scene: The intense, bereted master cook prowls through market stalls, thumping melons, sniffing tomatoes, and making sure the fish monger's offerings are clear-eyed and fresh smelling. The message is that high-class chefs understand the culinary

version of the digital dictum: “Garbage in, garbage out.” If you don’t have good ingredients, nothing good can happen. What I don’t understand is why they fail to show the chef engaged in an equally important exercise in quality control. Why no scenes of him leafing through his music collection, selecting tracks for his nightly music mix the way he chooses combinations of field greens for his salad? Nothing (other than perhaps the aforementioned really, really hot hostess) potentiates enjoyment of a good meal like good music. Next time you find yourself swept away by the joys of a dining experience, put down your utensils and listen. I bet you’ll hear the strains of Dave Brubek, Diana Krall, or Nora Jones in the background if it’s a fine dining establishment. Buddy Guy will be bending strings at your favorite barbeque, Frank Sinatra will be crooning at the Italian steak house, and Chuck Berry will be encouraging Johnny to go at a lively bistro bar. Music sets the mood every bit as much as the architecture, interior design, or floral display. But read a restaurant review and see if you find one mention of the musical ambience. You won’t. You’ll discover descriptions of the tin plated ceilings, art-covered walls, polished oak bars, koi-filled ponds, crystal chandeliers, and even custom-designed, hand wrought towel racks in the restrooms, but not a mention of the musical atmosphere. It’s a shame really, and not economical given that a few CDs are a whole lot cheaper than custom-designed, hand wrought towel racks in the rest room.

9. **Service** – Of the myriad elements of good service, I notice only three. One of them is so highly correlated with overall waitering that it alone stands as a robust

bellwether. Here I'm talking about water glass status. If a wait staff is attentive to water levels, odds are they'll also ensure that you've got enough silverware, napkins, butter, cream, sugar, and condiments. It also means that the restaurant has enough staff around to check if your glass is filled and your table is otherwise in good order. If you're getting bored in an elegant restaurant, drain your water glass and time how long it takes for a refill. The better the restaurant, the quicker the replenishment. Or at a really fancy place, as you head for the restroom, turn around to see if a waiter or busboy has refolded the napkin and placed it atop your chair. The classier the establishment, the shorter the latency. Understand that I would never complain to anyone if my water glass were empty, nor would resentment well up in my breast. I'd just ask for more water. But I do seem to notice water glass inattention. I become somewhat more agitated when the main course dishes are staggered in their arrival. I don't like politely waiting to eat my dinner because the chef couldn't get it together to have all the dishes arrive simultaneously. You're sitting there feeling bad for the people who are left bereft of food, but you're also annoyed because your hot food is getting cold and your cold food is losing its chill. The plateless people will urge you to go ahead and start. You'd like to dig in but it's not terribly polite and could draw spousal disapproval in the form of a look that means that you'll hear about it later should you dare to put fork to tenderloin prior to all dishes reaching their destinations. The only other service component I'm sensitive about involves dish clearing. When I'm done eating, I don't like looking at dirty dishes. No, I'm not even minutely obsessive about things being clean around me. Indeed, I could list off

> the top of my head a dozen people who wished I were more preoccupied with orderliness. It's more that dirty dishes are too painful a reminder that the meal is almost over. I've probably eaten too quickly (a bad habit), wished I had more to eat (another unfortunate tendency), and mourn the party's end (probably not reflective of any particular character flaw but somewhat pitiful). So when I'm done (not almost done, really done), I like the waiter to remove the dishes. I realize that etiquette intrudes here again. I'm not sure if the waiter is supposed to wait (ironically) until everyone is done before clearing or if he can clear dishes as they become available. I presume that he should ask the table, but ambivalence raises its ugly head once more: I'd like the dishes gone but feel guilty about putting pressure on the slow eaters. Regardless, when even the slowest are finished, let's wipe the table clean and move on.

Chronic undifferentiated orality engenders its share of burdens. Even with food in your mouth, you're contemplating prospects for the next meal. You're thinking, "Well, it's 1:15, we're eating smoked turkey panini which means that we can eat again around 7:00 if we can stay away from the refrigerator, not an easy task because we have some balsamico cipollini that would taste perfect on crostini and the Maytag blue cheese left over from the panko blue cheese topping from last night's rib eye, but if we can refrain from snacking maybe we can walk over to the Dark Horse Tavern because it's Tuesday and they'll have the Tilapia St. Charles which is always good, especially if Kate is working tonight because she'll make sure we have really big portions, although it might be more fun if I cooked my own tilapia and, with all the money we'd save by not going

out, I could splurge on some of that outrageously expensive Camembert that Larry and Diane would also really like if they're free and maybe she'd bring over the spinach and garlic stromboli that her Aunt Chubby taught her to make with those cool dough braids. Could you pass the salt?" I imagine that those who have ascended to higher levels of psychosexual development can generate cognitions that are completely unrelated to eating. Free from the draw of rampant epicurean reveries, they can consider geopolitics, scientific innovations, the latest news from the world of sports, or their stock portfolios. They can read books without recipes, write letters to friends that describe something other than their last meal, and worry about matters more significant than the chances of getting a Saturday-night reservation at that new French bistro in town. They also wouldn't be lousy restaurant reviewers; they could manage a modicum of objectivity about food. Go figure.