



with Lou Perri from the Stunned Mullet.

palate *pleasures*

The Critic.

In 2005 Matthew Evans quit reviewing restaurants for the Good Food Guide. After 5,000 hours spent in around 2,000 restaurants, he departed from his post taking with him 4 lawsuits before the NSW Supreme Court.

"Truth is not a defence in a defamation case," he subsequently quoted to The Sydney Morning Herald. "It doesn't matter that the risotto was stodgy, the veal acrid or the lettuce rank; the law doesn't consider the truth when deciding whether a review is defamatory."

Are such lawsuits merely an indication of our increasingly American-style overly litigious society, or are the opinions of certain critics damaging enough to seriously cripple a previously flourishing business?

I might just be inclined to lean towards the latter myself ...

A.A Gill, Terry Durack, Simon Thomsen – if you are a restaurateur, you will know these names. And they will strike a mixture of fear, awe and morbid fascination into your heart.

When Neil Perry decided to close Rockpool after losing one of its three hats at the hands of Simon Thomsen; when the notorious Melbourne critic Stephen Downes is banned from at least a dozen restaurants there – stemming from pure terror of receiving a negative review – you know you are dealing with a force to be reckoned with.

Critics and journalists wield an astronomical amount of power in an industry already vulnerable to fads, fashions, skyrocketing prices ... not to mention the fickle demands of a multitude of individuals on a day to day basis.

Granted, freedom of speech is indeed a feature of democracy and we are all certainly entitled to our opinion, but when a single person's viewpoint on one night can take down an icon (let's cite Rockpool again here), you can see why a restaurant may want to retaliate against such attacks.

Reviews are relished by the public – especially bad ones. After all, they appeal to our sense of schadenfreude, our delight in the misfortunes of others. We relish with glee the systematic decimation of featured restaurants. We covet the cruel analogies and nasty metaphors that critics love to use – they make for hilarious reading.

A couple of gems from Matthew Evans, for

example:

"I'd rather risk a dodgy kebab at an all-night food van."

"Call me a sad purist, but I don't think a good prawn should die only to be cut in half, filled with a herb crumb mix and then fried."

"It's as if someone sprinkled Prozac in the staff lasagne."

Critics are celebrities in their own right – A.A Gill and his dining companion Joan Collins were famously thrown out by Gordon Ramsay for – you guessed it – bad reviews.

In Australia critics are very much big fish in small ponds. They are so well known that it's virtually impossible for them to review anonymously, and therefore objectively. A visible critic seated at a restaurant will be getting vastly different service to an average punter.

And there is very much of an Inner Circle that exists in the industry.

Never mind being decimated by a critic, but try actually getting reviewed at all if you

feel yourself to be up to the scrutiny – especially if you are located outside the major centres.

A great review is worth more than an infinite amount spent on PR and Marketing; a bad one is like a grenade to your business.

No reviews at all? Well,

as I said earlier, the restaurateur harbours a morbid fascination for the critic.

We detest their shameless and casual destruction of our industry colleagues, but we wouldn't mind lavishing our finest on them ourselves if only to feast on the glorious bounty of a pleasing appraisal.

And risking a bad one? Well, we only have that nugget of human nature that comes in to play in order for us to ever take a risk – "It won't happen to me ..."

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