

## Future of Food Journalism Is Fragmented, Niche-Oriented, and Possibly Too Concerned With Keith McNally's Ass

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Last night at the Gabarron Foundation, [Culintro](#) hosted a panel discussion about the future of food journalism. The overall message? Food journalism does actually have a future. In a discussion moderated by New School food studies professor Andy Smith, the panelists -- Salon.com's Francis Lam, *Time Out*'s Gabriella Gershenson, Edible magazines publisher Brian Halweil, and Tasting Table's Nick Fauchald -- considered what the death of *Gourmet*, the rise of the Internet, and the decline of places that actually pay a reasonable word rate to experienced journalists auger for the long-term prospects of the field. It was at once hopeful and bloody depressing.

In the category of reasons to be hopeful: Print is not dead. Why? Because people still like fingering the pages of magazines, especially if those magazines are geared to a very specific niche. Halweil reported that the circulation of the Edible magazines, which now number 70 city- and region-specific editions, has increased. "Food journalism," he said, is "co-evolving with people's perceptions of food...[readers] now want to touch the people behind your food; it's more experiential." The decentralization of the food system away from the monolithic industrial model, Halweil observed, has been mirrored by a move towards "hyper-local" publications that don't have a national office and depend on [badly paid] freelancers for their content.

And the magazines that do find a way to thrive won't do so based on their recipes -- as Fauchald noted, the migration of recipe-seekers to the Internet has hurt certain print publications. The job of online businesses like Tasting Table, he said, is to translate the needs of those people into a digital format. And the way to grab attention spans shortened by the Internet, Fauchald explained, is to put "the sex up front" by way of saucy headlines, teasers, et al.

Shortened attention spans and white noise emanating from the increasingly crowded blogosphere also pose a challenge to the reportage of anything of substance and integrity; as Gershenson observed, the microscopic focus on the movements of chefs and restaurants has reached almost farcical proportions. "Keith McNally wiped his ass -- that's the kind of minutiae we're dealing with," she said to a smattering of titters from the audience.

Which brings us to the 'bloody depressing' category: Although print may not be dead, and as Halweil said, the "food landscape occupies an infinite number of niches," the number of outlets that can or will pay a decent wage to writers by trade are shrinking. As Fauchald observed, "It's very, very hard to sell words about food for money." Fewer professional writers are writing for websites; instead, more people are eager to build themselves as a [brand](#), a somewhat dubious goal that often carries with it a host of ethical issues.

And the question of ethics -- i.e. accepting free food from restaurants -- itself made for one of the evening's more depressing idealistic back flips: Gershenson, explaining why *Time Out* wouldn't, for example, cover McNally's bathroom habits, said "we have a higher power to answer to that's called ethics," which in turn determines what the magazine deems relevant to its readers' needs. But a few moments later, after an audience member described her "shock" at learning that Josh Ozersky accepted free food during his Feedbag tenure, Gershenson replied that "in food journalism, ethics are play by your own rules," and added that readers should assume "everyone you're reading has accepted something for free."

So if food journalism is increasingly fragmented and site-specific, so, it seems, are the ethics that supposedly govern it. And though food journalism may not be dead, without a solid ethical foundation to support it, its future integrity rests on uncertain ground. Food writing's future isn't in doubt -- it will continue to reach people online or in an actual publication that can later tossed in a recycling bin, but the "journalism" part of the equation seems to be more what's at risk of getting lost in the shuffle.

But that doesn't seem to be dissuading aspiring food writers: As Smith noted, the New School's upcoming [Roger Smith Food Writing Conference](#), which will feature "top food writers [who] will examine food writing trends and the future of food writing," is sold out. So even if its long-term prospects are in doubt, perhaps food journalism's short-term prospects lie in endless discussions of what its future may be.