



THE FUTURE OF

Food Journalism

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PRESS RECAP



The Future of Food Journalism

By Louise McCready

What is the future of food journalism? Unfortunately for the attendees of Monday's panel discussion hosted by Culintrio, no one expert can give a definitive answer. After selected nibbles (dried fruit, hunks of parmesan cheese, olives, and nuts) and sponsored vodka cocktails, the lubricated would-be food journalists, restaurateurs and restaurant industry pr reps sat down to hear Salon.com's Francis Lam, Time Out's Gabriella Gershenson, Edible's Brian Halweil, and Tasting Table's Nick Fauchald predict the future profitability and viability of food journalism. Andy Smith, a professor of food studies at the New School, moderated the discussion, asking such questions as "Is print dead?", "What are the negative aspects of going from print to web?" and "Can you make it, financially, online?"

From Lam, who worked at the pinnacle of food writing at Gourmet -- admittedly a bit early in his career -- to Gershenson, who watched her job change over the course of four years from zero web responsibilities to professional success quantified in traffic reports, the panelists represented different sides of today's food journalism. Gershenson astutely compared the number of people who love Katz's Deli, yet infrequently visit the institution, with how many people were devastated by the closing of Gourmet. Was everyone who lamented the death of Gourmet a subscriber? Halweil, publisher of the 70 Edible magazines nationwide, sees the change in food journalism as reflective of the current revolution in today's food institutions. In 1940, when Gourmet was founded, ethnic and exotic food, such as couscous, was considered as foreign and aspirational as the pig roasts and 14th-Century Tuscan villas that graced the pages of National Geographic. Today, people want to know how to make their own Texas beef jerky and Iberian chorizo, and also how to slaughter and quarter their humanely-raised and organically-fed cow. With decentralized food comes decentralized magazines. Halweil stressed that specialty establishments--be they hyperlocal or niche-based--would prosper and Fauchald, as the founder of Tasting Table, is one of the beneficiaries of this hyperlocavore trend. Edible focuses on a smaller, but more interested and more influential audience.

Sex analogies were offered to answer the print to web question. With only 200 words per email, Fauchald recognizes the need to put sex up front at Tasting Table. Lam no longer has the luxury to warm up readers with 500 words of foreplay before reaching the climax. For Gershenson, learning how to selectively ignore second by second competition from online upstarts GrubStreet and Eater was the largest adjustment of moving from print to web, and she stressed that critical reading by consumers was vital. "So much is not fact-checked," she warned.

The elephant in the room was, of course, the question of profitability for food journalists. While Tasting Table pays its own writers, Fauchald noted that the Atlantic.com, one of--if not--the most renowned food websites, doesn't pay its writers because they each have their own agenda or brand to sell. Smith mentioned that Heidi Swanson, the 101 Cookbooks' blog author, earns \$10,000 a month from her website, but rhetorically asked the crowd, "Is that a viable model for everyone?"

Where do Facebook and Twitter fit in? For Time Out, they play an elemental part of the loop of self-promotion and free publicity. Twitter and Facebook drive traffic to the website which in turn drives subscriptions to the magazine, a symbiotic relationship for all involved. For Fauchald, the two new social media programs simply lengthen the work day and produce more noise. "Isn't it more than bad manners when an entire table of foodies are live-tweeting about their dinner?" he asked, citing a recent food event.

A nervous potential food blogger asked if the panel, as food writers at established networks, resented food bloggers who write for free? (She clearly didn't remember that a few minutes earlier they had spoken with a sympathetic tone about today's food bloggers who all too eagerly give away their valuable content, i.e. milk, for free and then wonder why no one buys the cow. Yes, yet another sexual innuendo.) The experts reiterated that it wasn't resentment they felt toward today's young, eager food journalists who passionately blog about Koreatown's best bi bim bap. What they did worry about was how much this reflects the greater trend that today's culture doesn't value anything that's free because nearly everything on the web is free. Halweil tried to spin this in a positive light by pointing out that issues like food security and sustainability make today the most exciting era for food journalism, but ultimately, the joy of transforming the current food system won't pay the bills.

At the very end, a couple of restaurateurs lamented the old days when a New York Times three-star review meant something and tried to determine what value to give to the abundant online food critics. For them, the panel had even fewer answers. Don't stress about the Yelpster who doesn't know how to spell kidney, just serve good food.

Perhaps the same can be said to future food journalists. Write well.



Panelists: Francis Lam (Salon.com); Gabriella Gershenson (Time Out NY); Nick Fauchald (Tasting Table); Brian Halweil (Edible Magazines); Andy Smith (Moderator)

FEBRUARY 2ND, 2010



Sietsema and Others Muse on the Future of Food Journalism

By Sarah DiGregorio

In this month's Columbia Journalism Review, Robert Sietsema pens a feature on the history of restaurant reviewing; the importance of anonymity; the increasing number of writers not only identifying themselves, but also accepting free meals; and how food blogs and sites like Yelp have changed the landscape.

It's a fascinating piece, and it raises questions for anyone who enjoys reading food writing. Do you care if a writer has gotten free food for a review? (Thankfully, that's never the case here at the Voice.) Is a piece useful to you if the reviewer has been fawned over, or knows the restaurateur personally?

Some of questions about online media and anonymity have been addressed by others, but not within the larger historical context and personal experience that Sietsema brings to bear. As for the question of free food, it seems like the elephant in the room of the food writing world--rarely talked about, always there.

It's unclear if the new FTC blogging regulations on disclosure for endorsements will cover positive reviews of restaurants based on free food. The FTC says: The revised guides specify that while decisions will be reached on a case-by-case basis, the post of a blogger who receives cash or in-kind payment to review a product is considered an endorsement. Thus, bloggers who make an endorsement must disclose the material connections they share with the seller of the product or service.

Might an in-kind payment be an expensive bottle of wine, or an entire comped meal? Even if it is, it's doubtful that it would be enforced.

Your browser may not support display of this image. If these questions interest you, tell us what you think. You may also want to check out Culintrio's panel discussion, The Future of Food Journalism, with Francis Lam from Salon, Gabriella Gershenson from Time Out New York, and Brian Halweil of the Edible magazines. The discussion is next Monday from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. and costs \$35 for members, \$50 for non-members.



The sold-out crowd at the Gabarron Foundation



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

By Rebecca Marx

Your browser may not support display of this image. 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 backflips: 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.



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Culintro founders Stephanie Kornblum + Alina Munoz



VeeV The World's First Acai Spirit



Top Restaurateurs attended such as Tracy Nieporent of Myriad Restaurant Group



Nick Fauchald of Tasting Table offers his opinion before a packed house



Attendees including Allen Salkin of The New York Times and Emily Takoudes, Random House Publishing



The crowd at the Gabarron Foundation



The Future of Food Journalism, Further Dissected

Earlier today we shared our thoughts on the future of food journalism and didn't charge you a cent, but if you care enough about the subject to spend \$50, Gabriella Gershenson of Time Out New York, Francis Lam of Salon.com, Nick Fauchald of Tasting Table, and Brian Halweil of the Edible magazines will be mulling it over at Culintro on February 8. Needless to say, the future of food journalism will involve a lot of panel discussions.