

MAKE OR BREAK

Building chefs in Sydney food media

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Abstract

The Sydney dining community is joined in a number of ways—through food, through the online information-sharing portal Twitter and through the food media. This article discusses these connections within the dining community and the ways in which they contribute to the industry’s perception of dining and of Sydney chefs. In particular, *The Sydney Morning Herald Good Food Guide* and weekly pullout magazine *Good Living* are significant indicators of the direction of Sydney dining and Sydney chefs. I assess the methods through which these titles contribute to the evolution of Sydney dining. Food critics also act as ‘gatekeepers’ to this scene. While they do not direct what goes on in Sydney kitchens, the influence of Sydney food critics affects how diners perceive Sydney chefs. Certain chefs are seen in contemporary culture as celebrity figures built by the media. As a result, the ways in which we understand food and chefs are changing. In one-on-one interviews with notable chefs in Sydney and through considering the effects of cultural capital amongst the dining community, I present a discussion on the impacts of Sydney food media and how they build the profiles of Sydney chefs in order to fuel what I call the ‘chef economy’.

Keywords

Sydney chefs, identity, food, media

Introduction

Chefs in Sydney have a lot to live up to. New restaurant openings are regularly documented in the media and the food community is constantly growing as new social media such as Twitter connects chefs with diners and diners with restaurants. The attention received by Sydney restaurateurs and chefs is arguably unprecedented—a new culture, or a new way of appreciating food and dining, is growing in Sydney. Through restaurant reviews, critics gradually contribute to the creation and evolution of the Sydney food and dining community. This article examines the contributions of both old and new media to the dining community. When speaking of ‘old’ media I refer primarily to food criticism in print media. ‘New’ media here refers to Twitter, which more accurately falls in the category of social media. Both discursive practices contribute to the construction of the chef and Sydney’s food community. While the Sydney food media relies on the restaurant industry for content, it also has some modicum of power to direct the industry itself. Whether or not chefs choose to follow food critics’ advice is one matter, but for the most part, critics’ advice is easily taken on board.

Sydney’s food writers have long been a significant influence on the evolution of the Sydney restaurant industry, while social media such as Twitter gives chefs the opportunity to engage and interact with potential diners, as well as their critics. Through food criticism in the print media and the community and self-presentation on Twitter, chefs are simultaneously portrayed as celebrity figures and as accessible personalities, with specialised knowledge and vocabularies. As Bourdieu writes in *Distinction* (1984), “The pure gaze is a historical invention linked to the emergence of an autonomous field of artistic production, that is, a field capable of imposing its own norms on both the production and the consumption of [chefs’] products” (xxvi). The media imposes particular norms on chefs; these are set out in different ways in print and reflected by chefs on Twitter. Each medium (print and Twitter) constructs the expectations of chefs, creating a reliance on chefs and their different roles; in turn creating a chef economy that affects the direction of the industry.

Celebrity chefs

As recently as 2009, food-themed programs dominated prime-time viewing. *Masterchef Australia* (on Network Ten) has produced wildly successful seasons of amateur cooking, with celebrity spin-offs and a junior version (8 to 12-year-old contestants). On other television networks, *My Kitchen Rules* (2010, Channel Seven), *Conviction Kitchen* (2011, Channel Seven), *Zumbo* (2011, SBS) and *Iron Chef Australia* (2010, Channel Seven) were similarly successful. If television ratings are anything to go by, the popular interest in food-related television is testament to the power of food in bringing people together. Of course, television ratings can only translate so much about our common interest in food. These programs are key in putting chefs in positions of authority over the everyday amateur cook—as judges, mentors, or instructors. The accessibility of television brings these critical positions of authority to the living rooms of a mainstream audience.

The concept of the ‘celebrity chef’ is not a new one (see Rosseau [2008] and Hollows [2003]). It is generally acknowledged within the industry that one of the first contemporary celebrity chefs was Marco Pierre White, a British chef who was awarded three Michelin stars by the age of 33. He has mentored high-profile chefs such as Gordon Ramsay and Melbourne’s Shannon Bennett (Bennett, 2011b: 22). In May 2011, Marco Pierre White was in Sydney to promote a brand of jelly stock. For many in the industry, it seemed highly unusual that one of the most lauded chefs in the world would endorse such a common household product. Sue Bennett (editor of weekly food pullout *Good Living*) wrote, “[T]here is something uncomfortable about one of the world’s legendary chefs singing the praises of a mass-produced jelly stock, sold in a plastic tub with tear-off lid and packaged with three identical jelly blobs in a cardboard box” (Bennett, 2011b: 22). This implies that the status of some chefs has been elevated such that they are considered above involvement with mainstream, commercial pursuits. Their ‘art’ positions them primarily as chefs, rather than TV personalities or brand ambassadors. Bennett asks, “Do chefs sell themselves out?” (ibid) but this question would not be posed if the role of the chef had not been elevated to something more than just someone who works in restaurant kitchens. In turn, ‘selling out’ is negative and something to avoid.

The media contribute significantly to the celebrity of chefs, whether it is through restaurant reviews, accolades, or guest judge appearances on programs like *Masterchef*. The media frame the cultural role that chefs fill. In *Celebrity and Power* (1997), P. D. Marshall suggests that celebrities can be used to “make sense” of the world (51) and are produced by the culture industries as figures of cultural legitimacy. Paired with cultural capital, the kind of celebrity that is embodied by chefs is one that can be utilised to further their work and attract more diners. Diners will eat at restaurants with the capacity to endow them with cultural capital, too.

The expectations chefs must meet in order to be regarded as successful and innovative in Sydney are constantly growing. The media, by giving chefs attention and accolades, are simultaneously guiding its audiences into having certain expectations of their dining experiences. So, in addition to constant physical exertion during service periods, chefs in Sydney also contend with media attention. The relationship between chef and critic is an interesting one: who decides what we eat—the chef or the critic? This then leads to bigger questions on the effect Sydney media has on the community of Sydney chefs and their diners, on how media influences our perceptions of chefs and ultimately, how food operates at the centre of the relationships between chef and audience. How has the media influenced the way we perceive chefs and value their work? And how do chefs, in turn, interpret these perceptions? In several one-on-one interviews with working chefs, I discuss how media has influenced the changing role of the chef.

Food critics

Food critics have a lot of influence, if not power, in the Sydney food industry. With the addition or loss of a ‘hat’ in the *Sydney Morning Good Food Guide* (a concept explained shortly), patronage at restaurants can decline or increase at an alarming rate. Sydney food critics provide potential diners with ideas of what to expect and in doing so, contribute to painting a picture of the chef in the kitchen.

Terry Durack is a food critic for *The Sydney Morning Herald*. He writes a weekly review in *Good Living*, a pullout food magazine that covers Sydney dining, and

includes recipes using seasonal produce, which are provided by various recipe contributors. *Good Living* is a well-respected publication, and many in the industry believe Durack to be informed and fair. Durack previously wrote for the *Herald* before leaving for London in the late 1990s. There, he wrote restaurant reviews for *The Independent* and won food writing awards including the Glenfiddich ‘Restaurant Critic of the Year’ and ‘Best Restaurant Critic’ at Le Cordon Bleu Food Media Awards (Taffel, 2009: online). Since his return to *Good Living*, the number of three-hat restaurants in Sydney has fallen, and more recognition has been given to smaller, more casual establishments. Durack has noted the rising talent emerging in Sydney: “It will be a changing of the guard a bit and I’d like to be around when that happens” (Taffel, 2009: online). Durack’s photo appears alongside his weekly restaurant review, so those in the industry have a fair idea of what he looks like when he comes in. The fact that Durack very frequently awards restaurants a score of 14 out of 20 has become an inside joke for the industry, with a fake Terry Durack Twitter account being set up (@DerryTurack, now defunct) Tweeting about everything being worth 14 out of 20. This aside, Durack’s opinion is still taken seriously by the Sydney restaurant industry, with his opinion holding much influence on restaurants’ business. Hamish Ingham, for example, is the head chef and owner of Bar H in Sydney’s Surry Hills. He was previously head chef at Kylie Kwong’s restaurant, Billy Kwong, and the winner of *The Good Food Guide* 2004 Josephine Pignolet Young Chef of the Year Award. On Durack’s influence, Ingham says: “I guess it does have a big influence. The people who get 14, 15, they’ll get flocked with people for quite a long time, a good period” (p.c. 2 May 2011).

While well regarded, Durack’s critique does come under the scrutiny of chefs, with some believing that his age prevents him from appreciating the more avant-garde efforts of young chefs. On appeasing the ‘older’ critic, Jowett Yu, head chef at Ms G’s restaurant (in Sydney’s Potts Point) says: “Terry, the stuff he really likes, the stuff he really gives 15 out of 20 are [sic] the ‘Frenghish’ gear. You know, the assiette of rabbit three ways, and that’s what he really likes” (p.c. April 2011). On Ms G’s, Durack writes:

Ms.G's looks like an out-and-out winner; full of wit, humour and fresh ideas pinched from the worlds of music, fashion, design and food.

If you have zero tolerance on issues such as no reservations, pitch dark dining rooms, high noise levels, drinking out of plastic and watching gaggles of bright young things having fun, it's probably best to go early or stay away. If not, you're in for a good year. (Durack, 2010a: online)

Ms G's scored 14 out of 20. Executive chef Dan Hong and his head chef Yu are part of the group that other chefs seem to refer to as 'those young guys' who are coming through into prominence. Indeed, they have taken their careers into their own hands with the chefs' group Taste of Young Sydney (TOYS). My own visit to Ms G's was informed by Durack's review. I read his reviews weekly and in some ways calibrate my expectations and standards to his. To me it is not arbitrary; it is with confidence in his experience and his reasonable judgement for quality that I take his opinions into consideration. A place like Ms G's – loud, fashionably self-conscious and aloof – may appeal more to someone like me, someone in their early 20s who dines out quite regularly, than someone more mature like Durack. Nevertheless, differences in taste and generational appeal are canvassed in his reviews. A self-confessed campaigner for the New Guard of chefs, Durack does attempt to write and judge for all audiences. In his review of Duke Bistro (7 December 2010), a trendy, low-lit restaurant run by 'Gen-Y chefs', Durack concedes,

This is a kitchen cooking for its peers, knowingly having fun with food for a generation bored silly with old-fogey establishments and the status quo. In one sense, it's tribal. In another, it's just timely. You don't have to be a cosmic dude to tire of conventional mainstream restaurants or to be engaged and interested in the evolution of dining. (Durack, 2010b: online)

His use of the terms 'old fogey' and 'cosmic dude' highlight his position outside of Duke's assumed targeted audience. Durack positions himself as an outsider to the 'dude' mentality of the younger chefs, but nevertheless is encouraging of what they aim for. In that same review, Durack describes the location of the restaurant cheekily, as though its very location was in defiance of older baby-boomers: "Not only that,

it's on the first floor of a pub, up a steep flight of stairs. With no inclinador. How loud a message do you want, boomers?" (Durack, 2010b: online) Whether it was the intention of Duke to chase younger diners (and subsequently alienate older diners) or not, through his review Durack has created an audience for the restaurant. It can be argued that the nature of a restaurant like Duke will simply appeal to the diners it appeals to, but it is an oversight to argue that the authority of Durack's words have no impact on how the restaurant is perceived. Durack's review of Duke is by no means a negative one, but it is part of the process of constructing an audience for Duke, thereby an audience for its chefs.

The relationship between critics and chefs in Sydney

Food critics are seen as occupying a position that enables them to evaluate quality and value for money at restaurants. In order to do this, an important criterion is anonymity when dining. As *Good Living* editor Sue Bennett explains, this is the method used in the United States, but Sydney's media take a more relaxed approach: "[M]any Australian publications, including the *Herald*, and their British counterparts publish reviewers' photographs alongside their work" (Bennett, 2011a: online). This offers transparency to restaurants but there are ways to counterbalance any special treatment that may be given to known critics. She writes:

Booking in a different name is a given. Many critics will also arrive later than their dining partner. That way, the restaurant cannot offer a superior table – something that's easy to arrange if a critic is seen looming at the door. [...] If the neighbouring tables are sat waiting . . . and waiting . . . for their food while the reviewer's meal arrives quick smart, that doesn't go unnoticed...But most of all, a kitchen that doesn't cook well cannot suddenly have a miracle of three-hat genius at the shake of a salt cellar, however much a chef may wish. Even if a kitchen pulls it off against the odds on one occasion, most reputable publications will visit more than once if there are any lingering doubts about a venue. (Bennett, 2011a: online)

While chefs' opinions of critics vary, there is no doubting the influence of critics on how they work and even critics' influence on Sydney dining. Two-hat chef Colin

Fassnidge believes that food critics in Sydney have a part to play in furthering the industry:

*[Y]ou need food critics I think, just to keep the bar and keep people on their toes... Well, good food critics, there's a lot of bad food critics. Simon Thomsen's good, Terry Durack's good... there's a few mediocre ones. I mean, bloggers on top of that, ... you know it's so easy to talk about food, or you'd like to think it is, but a lot of people haven't got a f***ing clue what goes on, or how much time and effort or flavours that have to... those few good critics realise and have been chefs, have travelled the world, so they know and respect what you do. (p.c. April 2011)*

Food critics' standards are relatively subjective, but Fassnidge also suggests that there is a certain level of knowledge and experience required in order to critique food. This speaks to Bourdieu's suggestion that "cultural consumption [is] predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences" (19684: xxx). Food critics promote a social and class gap, which drives the industry and creates aspirational cultural capital among chefs as well as diners. The media creates aspiration for both the people who cook food and for those who eat it.

Jowett Yu also appreciates the relationship between critics and chefs:

[I]t's a symbiotic relationship... Because with a good review, a restaurant is made. Simple as that. It's a simple formula. A good review can make a restaurant. A bad review can break a restaurant... it's natural. So, we need each other, really. (p.c. April 2011)

From these chefs' comments, it is clear that they have accepted the necessity of the food media in order to grow within the industry. Food writers get their content, and from this, restaurants get their patrons. There is a lot at stake for all involved – if a critic gives a good review but a large number of diners disagree, the reviewer's credibility is compromised. Conversely, when a restaurant receives a crushing review, its reputation and livelihood is on the line. There is a delicate balance in the

chef/critic relationship; critics must maintain some form of objectivity in order to do their job.

You can leave your hat on

In Sydney, dining enthusiasts are able to consult a copy of *The Good Food Guide* for the 'best' places to eat in Sydney. There is a minimum score of 15/20 to score one hat (quite simply, an icon of a hat), however the awarding of a hat with 15 is at the editors' discretion. A hat, or multiple hats, signifies a superior dining experience. In the *Guide's* terms, one hat means the restaurant is "very good" (Durack & Savaille, 2010: viii). In analysing the *Good Food Guide*, the number of hats is the most noticeable accolade rather than a score out of 20. While the *Guide* has a table explaining the meaning of numbered scores and how they are calculated, it would be reasonable to argue that diners do not look too closely into these calculations when a hat is a clear symbol for diners to use. Because of this, the *Good Food Guide* has become the main measurement of the quality of a restaurant in Sydney. Chefs have no involvement in the awarding of hats – they do not pay to appear in the *Guide*, nor are they given any information about their final review in the book prior to its launch. To chefs, scoring a hat in the guide means they feel compelled to do their jobs differently, at least initially. Fassnidge's Four in Hand Dining Room scored 16/20, resulting in two hats. He was concerned that the award of two hats could potentially change the nature of his restaurant.

When I got two chefs hats, I wasn't very happy for a few weeks, just because I was... there's a lot more expectation, well I put on myself. And is this good enough for... then I realised it's more our whole feeling of what we do, not just what's on the plate – it's everything. And we're sorta not aiming to be fine dining or, our whole philosophy goes onto the floor as well, you should be relaxed, and I think we tried to get a little bit stiff for a while, cos we got a shock. (p.c. April 2011)

Fassnidge is confident in what he does now, but tells of his trepidation of times earlier in his career as a young chef: "Years ago, food critics... I was like... you'd

tremble when they came in?” (p.c. April 2011). As his career has progressed, so has his ease in cooking for food critics:

I’m... happy within myself with what I do. So, if they like it they like it. And I think I have a very good product so, well years ago when you’re trying to find out, trying to find your feet and you don’t know if you should be following this trend, that trend. I didn’t follow a trend, I just did my own. But it’s a long time before you realise, that’s you, and there’s no point trying to... so we do what we do well, and I think they realise that. (p.c. April 2011)

It is difficult, on a practical level, to compare hatted restaurants. As Fassnidge points out, his two-hat restaurant is totally different to, say, Tetsuya’s. While Four in Hand Dining Room is a small, elegant restaurant attached to a popular suburban pub, Tetsuya’s is a large, city restaurant divided into several small dining rooms, much like a *ryokan* (Japanese inn). Four in Hand serves rustic, homely food – Fassnidge is described in the 2011 *Guide* as having an “almost housewifely way with bones, cheeks and feet that feels surprisingly modern, like a grandmother in a mini skirt” (Durack & Savill, 2010: 60) while Tetsuya’s 12-plus course degustation meals are described as “reverent journeys” and Tetsuya’s as a “destination restaurant” (Durack & Savill, 2010: 137). From this comparison, clearly the two restaurants provide very different experiences, yet are grouped together with the same two-hat score (although Four in Hand has a number score of 16, while Tetsuya’s has 17.5).

There seems to be a preconceived expectation that comes with hats, a reputation that has been built steadily over the lifetime of the *Guide*. The perception of the chef and restaurant, however, is constructed outside of the restaurant itself. It is in some ways an arbitrary and abstract idea of the restaurant. Fassnidge tells me about an apprentice chef who told him, “I only want [to work in] two hat”, to which Fassnidge replied:

[M]ate, what’s two hat? Like... I don’t get it. Like Tetsuya’s [a] two hat, which would be a lot different to what I do [...] I didn’t hire him, I said I think you’re chasing the wrong [...] you should want to do my style of food or want to learn what I know, rather than chasing hats. Like you can’t discount all the other

restaurants. Maybe a restaurant that hasn't even got a hat is good. Like, are you telling me you're better than them? (p.c. April 2011)

Indeed, the influence of the *Guide* goes far, such that even young aspiring chefs feel they should aim for a certain 'type' of restaurant. This confirms the influence of the accolade, but it does not say much about what being 'hatted' – an abstract ideal perpetuated by media – truly means.

International gatekeepers

The most recognisable sources of international food criticism are arguably the Michelin Guides and the relatively new San Pellegrino 'World's 50 Best Restaurants' list. Tyre manufacturer Michelin produced the former as a response to the burgeoning automobile industry. Its inaugural edition encouraged readers to take more road trips, which incidentally would eventually increase sales of car tyres (Michelin, nd: online). The maximum score is three stars and Michelin inspectors are notorious for their complete anonymity and exceedingly high expectations. The San Pellegrino List is compiled by 837 industry insiders from around the world, and is published annually in *Restaurant* magazine. While mineral water purveyor San Pellegrino sponsors the list, selling that company's mineral water is not a condition for making it on the list (World's 50 Best, nd: online). The 2012 list currently features one Sydney restaurant (Quay) in the top 50, but Sydney restaurants have appeared since the award's inception in 2002. From this recognition, Sydney is increasingly becoming noticed on the world stage as a dining destination.

Across three major food criticism texts – *Good Food Guide*, the *Michelin Guide* and the 'World's 50 Best' – the value of restaurants are condensed to a simplistic score or ranking. This suggests that cultural capital has a measureable value and this value can be translated to an audience. Bourdieu writes: "The field of production, which clearly could not function if it could not count on already existing tastes, [...] enables taste to be realised by offering it" (1984: 227). Consumers are more interested in 'consuming' chefs with a specific kind of middle class cultural capital; this is what the media are offering. For example, Jamie Oliver's Sydney restaurant, Jamie's

Italian, sees patrons queue for up to 90 minutes. The restaurant imparts cultural capital to the consumer because of Oliver's attachment, even though he has never worked in its kitchen. His fame and mass appeal translates to cultural capital, and this can be enticement enough for diners to visit his restaurants. As Durack writes,

It doesn't matter what I think about Jamie's Italian. It doesn't matter what I score it. It doesn't matter what the bloggers post about it. There is something about Jamie's Italian that transcends the opinions – good or bad – of the local reviewers in whatever town it opens in. It will do well anyway. Good or bad, it's called The Jamie Effect. And Jamie's Italian will get a lot of people dining out who wouldn't normally dine out, all because of the Jamie effect. (Durack, 2011: online)

Certainly, it is only this mass, international appeal that can potentially act as a buffer from poor reviews. The Fat Duck restaurant in Bray, UK, was named the best restaurant in the world in 2005. Since then the restaurant's founding chef, Heston Blumenthal, has been in the limelight, even appearing on Australia's *Masterchef* in the program's later series. On the impact of international acclaim, Jonny Lake, the head chef at The Fat Duck comments,

When you become number one that's huge media, you know. When this restaurant was given three [Michelin] stars in 2004, it was kind of like... there wasn't much media about that. The very next year when it was voted the number one restaurant in the world by this weird, like, board, and this tiny publication at the time, a tiny thing. That just went worldwide. So, way more interest came from that at the time, you know. [...] all of a sudden you go from being busy some nights, you know, for sure Fridays and Saturdays you're busy but maybe in the middle of the week, you know, lunches aren't so busy. To like, FULL. Like, instantly. (p.c. February 2012)

The Fat Duck was not mobbed by diners *purely* for the quality of food communicated by the *Michelin Guide* or their top world ranking. More than likely, it is the cultural capital imparted by this appreciation that inspires people to travel far and wide to dine at the restaurant. However, this would only apply to a certain group of diners – those with a deeper interest in food and with the financial capacity to do so. They

understand The Fat Duck as so-called higher order dining because of the media. In turn, The Fat Duck embodies cultural capital in a different way to Jamie Oliver. The cultural capital of The Fat Duck is rarefied and aspirational. This kind of capital fuels chefs' media profiles and creates roles for them to fill in diners' perceptions of the food community.

At The Fat Duck, staff are used to constantly being referred to among the elite:

Media tends to group restaurants together a lot. For years we were always grouped – it was always El Bulli [formerly World's Best 50 top ranked restaurant until 2010, when it closed] and The Fat Duck, but we were always two completely different restaurants. Completely different. You know, there was nothing [the two restaurants had in common]... But we were always put together. (p.c. February 2011)

With such condensed ranking and scoring systems, restaurants become *types* of restaurants. Their degrees of cultural capital and celebrity chefs are the main factors setting them apart from each other. A restaurant ranked higher or with a higher hat/star rating will be considered on par with similarly valued restaurants, regardless of cuisine type or any other differentiating factor. It is made clear by the media which restaurants and chefs are desirable: "Thus the tastes actually realized depend on the state of the system of goods offered; every change in the system of goods induces changes in tastes" (Bourdieu, 1984: 228).

The *Good Food Guide* uses a similar template as *Michelin*. Both guides and the World's Best 50 list condense the overall value of a restaurant into easily digested markers like hats, stars and rankings. This model of food criticism contributes to the rendering of cultural capital among chefs, making cultural capital easier to recognise and pursue.

Symbiotic relationships

In Sydney, the *Good Food Guide* is a significant text in shaping expectations of Sydney food, and in turn Sydney chefs. While chefs still have control over what happens in their kitchens, there is no doubting the media's impact on the evolution of Sydney dining, particularly influential publications such as *Good Living* and *Australian Gourmet Traveller*. Also important though is how Sydney chefs partake in their own promotion. Twitter is a personal medium through which many communicate with other chefs in the chef community. Twitter, in turn, is useful to chefs because of the potential exposure to a large and diverse audience. It reflects chefs' cultural capital—popularity on such sites translates to diners. This engagement with social media and maintenance of a public profile is important to be a successful chef. No longer an anonymous figure in the kitchen, the labours of chefs are changing in order to keep up with an evolving culture—a culture that is powered by multimedia forms. Through their Tweets, chefs play a role in the construction of their audience, Tweeting things that appeal to them in order to attract like-minded people. Although each chef's Twitter account provides individual updates, such media engenders a communal forum for the chef economy. In this sense, chefs privilege 'we' over 'I' and as a result Twitter "celebrates the collective" (Goldman, 1998: 288). The Twitter chef 'collective' is a platform that not only promotes the interests of chefs, but also reinforces the parameters and expectations of the media *through the chefs themselves*. These parameters and expectations continue to construct celebrity when they are incorporated into chefs' labours of self-presentation, producing a discourse around which to discuss chefs and food.

Probyn asks, "Does what we eat confirm our identities? Or are our identities reforged, and refracted by what and how we eat?" (Probyn, 2000: 11). On some level, Sydney chefs interact with and are certainly aware of the ways in which Sydney food media constructs and critiques Sydney's dining culture. It is in large part through the Sydney food media that Sydney chefs have the encouragement and profile with which to participate in the Sydney chef economy.

Community, identity and Twitter

Chefs are presented as accessible personalities and work to present their restaurants in the same way. They do this primarily on Twitter through acts of self-presentation: their Tweets.

According to Appadurai, “neighbourhoods both are contexts and at the same time require and produce contexts” (Appadurai, 1996: 184). In this instance Appadurai’s use of the term ‘neighbourhoods’ refers to geographical neighbourhoods and their respective cultural environments. The same concept can be applied to Sydney’s restaurants: Sydney’s restaurant industry is a neighbourhood itself and forms its own communities.

Appadurai’s work on ideas of the global and cultural are helpful in analysing the effects of a community created through media. He is interested in tracking how “electronic mediation transforms pre-existing worlds of communication and conduct” (Appadurai, 1996: 3). Print media is arguably still the most authoritative voice in Sydney food media due to its rich history and the experience and expertise of its writers—but contemporary social media also shapes the landscape in which these communities are formed. Appadurai argues that “[e]lectronic media give a new twist to the environment within which the modern and the global often appear as flip sides of the same coin” (ibid). Contemporary forms of media are key facilitators in taking the Sydney food and chef community to the global stage. Twitter is one form of electronic media on which a community has been built. Its tagline recently changed from, “Twitter is for staying in touch and keeping up with friends no matter where you are or what you’re doing” to “Share and discover what’s happening right now, anywhere in the world” (Bruns et al., 2010: 7-8). Twitter is not only a tool for keeping in touch but also a channel through which news happens. Twitter provides “new contexts of social visibility and connection” (ibid: 8).

An inevitable consequence of such forums is what Bruns et al. term “affective and emergent *publics*” (2010: 9 [original emphasis]). With the Habermasian idea of the ‘public sphere’ (cited in ibid) in mind, Bruns et al. argue that social platforms form

these publics, which “have obvious applications in researching the ephemeral and multiple discursive interactions that take place online” (ibid).

To give an example of Twitter’s reach over Sydney chefs, a fundraiser was organised by Sydney chefs to contribute to the 2011 Queensland flood relief appeal. On 13th January, 2011, Fassnidge announced on Twitter that he was organising a charity dinner:

Doing a Queensland dinner who’s in ie meat , fish , veg , wine , waiters and chefs.....put your hand up now! And PR to get the word out! (Fassnidge, 2011: online)

Almost immediately, other chefs on Twitter offered to cook, suppliers with Twitter accounts offered produce and media offered publicity. While Sydney chefs are connected through their career choice and understandings of the nature of the job, social media connects them more tangibly on a day-to-day basis. On Twitter, chefs adopt certain personalities to present to their followers, who are made up of diners, friends and other chefs. They network with each other and the media and are able to converse with diners. Twitter provides a platform on which to conceptualise and present themselves to their peers and also their audience.

Fassnidge is a prolific Tweeter. He Tweets during service and often posts photographs of the food he cooks.

I love Twitter. You have a laugh with it. And plus all my friends are on Twitter and all the other restaurants, so we could be talking to each other during service or just joking about something or [say] ‘have you seen this’?

Like if I want to find stuff or ingredients, like you know, where would I get this, how would you cook that, I just go to Twitter – within two minutes, it’s there. I don’t have to go onto the Internet or encyclopaedias – it’s there. And someone’s already used it, and has saved me a whole day of research. (p.c. 17 May 2011)

Fassnidge uses Twitter as a research tool and acknowledges that it has, to some degree, changed the way he works in a kitchen. Instead of having to test recipes or ingredients over and over, he has access to a wide community of like-minded people who are able to offer advice.

Twitter offers the opportunity to self-promote directly to diners, giving chefs the power to potentially subvert the power of food critics. When diners have direct access to chefs, this modulates their understanding of the chef—the chef is not anonymous but has a known personality, displayed on Twitter. As Fassnidge notes:

[S]omeone'll say something to you and you can start an argument with them just for fun. And people like to see all this, you know what I mean? And plus, people, customers read this and know a little bit more about the chef. It's not some guy you never see, yeah he does this and he likes to do this and you can actually see him out sourcing stuff or, we show our dishes, like a whole pig, we take a photo and put it on Twitter. And it's great for PR. You can't just sit in your restaurant and wait for people to come, you've gotta always push them in.
(p.c. May 2011)

Often, chefs will re-Tweet diners' opinions of their restaurants. Chefs on Twitter are interacting with their diners, letting diners know their patronage is desired and noticed. Through communicating with their diners, restaurants and chefs are imparting cultural capital to the diner, which encourages them to continue visiting, or plan to visit soon. This direct line to diners pushes the influence of critics to the background, and allows chefs some control over their audiences. Chefs are using the cultural capital given to them by the media to their own advantage. Chefs' media profiles encourage diners to interact with them, in turn allowing chefs to personally persuade them to visit their business. While chefs have become commodities, they still have control over their capital within the chef economy.

Diners often visit Four in Hand and request to meet Fassnidge, whose Twitter account has a popular following.

*It's a bit weird, because you know them as a little picture. And a lot of times it's not even a face. And, they're like, 'Hi I'm Sally62,' or something, and you're like, who the f*** is Sally62? They're like, 'Twitter!' and you're like, 'Oh ok, nice to meet you'. (p.c. 17 May 2011)*

Conclusion

Chefs' accessibility is modulated on Twitter. They are presented as accessible, 'Tweetable' personalities to the public. In this way they invite the public to engage with them and their work, subsequently building themselves a role on Twitter in addition to their role in the kitchen. Even so, there are times when the title of 'chef' can be seen to make someone seem unapproachable. As Hamish Ingham recalls:

There was a girl sitting like, right here [gestures to the bar] and I was cooking, and she was Tweeting hello. And I happened just to have a look, and I'm like, and I sort of recognised [the photo], two and two came together and I'm like, why don't you just say hello? Cos it just seems so stupid. Like, I'm standing there, and you probably know who I am, you know, and I sort of recognised the photo and you know, if you want to have a chat, you're in the prime spot! So that was quite strange, I thought. That kind of Twitter thing, I was like, woah... it was a bit weird. (p.c. 2 May 2011)

Diners may use Twitter as a tool to interact with the chef, but as in this example, we can see that the chef is still set apart due to specialised knowledge and assumed cultural capital. Both the print media and Twitter contribute to the new figure of the chef—a multi-tasking, business savvy and entertaining personality who is known outside of the kitchen. The print media communicates what is expected of chefs, and diners take on these expectations when they engage with the food community. Through Twitter, chefs communicate their embodiment of these expectations by presenting a certain persona and utilising the cultural capital afforded them by the media. Restaurants 'live and die' by their chefs, because they are consumed for their cultural capital. Food critics construct the values to which chefs must live in order to succeed in a very competitive industry—and on Twitter, chefs sustain their celebrity role in the industry. Therein is the symbiotic relationship that fuels the emergent chef economy.

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