

# Reviews - who needs them or reads them?

Restaurant reviews are seemingly everywhere and are spreading like a plague across the Internet. The problem is that their very ubiquity is undermining their value - if any journalist fresh to Dubai with no food knowledge or any food blogger can write up their experiences with no apparent editorial control, how can real food writers continue to add value to the industry?

Are they lost in the crowds? And, if uninformed food ramblings are now so common, how seriously do chefs and their marketing colleagues take them?

To try to make sense of the confusion, we asked a selection of food writers, PR professionals working with F&B clients and, finally, chefs how valuable is a restaurant review in this region.

## THE FOOD WRITERS



### JAMES BRENNAN

Now a freelance food and travel writer, Brennan moved to the UAE in 2006 and worked as a food editor and restaurant critic for Time Out Dubai and then for The National newspaper before going it alone. He contributes regularly to magazines like Esquire Middle East, and also to The Sunday Times, CNN Traveller, What's On, Destinations Of The World News, 4Men and Gulf Life magazine, among others. He is also the current Academy chair of the Middle East & North Africa region for the San Pellegrino World's 50 Best Restaurants awards.



### DAVE REEDER

The editor of this magazine and previously editor of BBC Good Food Middle East as well as numerous other magazines, Reeder has written extensively about food and travel for a quarter of a century, with a particular interest in the cultural context. He is currently one of the judges for the Middle East & North Africa region for the San Pellegrino World's 50 Best Restaurants awards.



### MARIANNE SAULWICK

Senior Lecturer at Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management, Saulwick is an Australian with a 20 year history of owning both restaurants and an events company, as well as co-founding a food festival and a theatre company, both of which are still thriving.

She has been a food/restaurant reviewer for ten years and prefers to keep her anonymity.



### SAMANTHA WOOD (AKA FOODIVA)

Food blogger, journalist and PR consultant, Wood previously worked in F&B PR and marketing so has experiences of both sides of the divide. She's also the founder of restaurant review and foodie resource, Foodiva (www.foodiva.net), recently voted number two Best Blog in Dubai.

### Is there a value in restaurant reviews?

**BRENNAN:** They should be a guide for the consumer. Eating out means spending money, so people want to know whether a restaurant is worth shelling out their hard earned cash on. But reviews should also entertain. They should be interesting, informative, evocative and opinionated. If you're really lucky, they'll be funny too. A restaurant visit is an experience, so a review should tell the story of it and tell it well.

**REEDER:** I think they have a dual purpose: to explain to the reader in objective terms what a particular restaurant is trying to achieve - in terms of ambience, authenticity, innovation, etc - and then to detail whether it achieves those goals and so is - or is not - worthy of a diner's attention.

**SAULWICK:** Restaurant reviews can be regarded from a number of angles. A short, simple review will help the prospective diner make choices about where to eat, based on food style, price and a rating system. These guides are utilitarian and provide the adventurous foodie with enough information to go forth with reasonable expectations of what they will encounter. However, it is the longer review that interests me.

**WOOD:** Yes, when they share impartial, intelligent, balanced and constructive dining experiences with people looking for a restaurant so as to help them make an informed decision on where to dine out. At the same time, it's a great mystery shopper review for the restaurant if they want to perfect the experience!

### Compared to back home, how would you rate the quality of reviews here in the region? And why is that?

**BRENNAN:** The Middle East is a young market when it comes to restaurant reviews. I've read some good ones, and lots of bad ones. There's a tendency for reviewers to be a bit too cosy with PRs here. But there are independent reviews that hit



the spot. Those are the ones worth reading.

**REEDER:** With a small handful of honourable exceptions, I find most of the restaurant reviews here to be unhelpful, uninspired and unreadable. To me, a review isn't about "the bread basket took 90 seconds to arrive" or "the server didn't bring me a fork" but about how far the chef and the whole team delivered on the promise. Everybody has bad days - look beyond the niggling details and inform me about why I should, or should not, take notice of an outlet.

**SAULWICK:** Food/restaurant criticism provides a fascinating view into contemporary culture. Food and restaurant writing arose in France after the Revolution and with the development of a restaurant culture. Huge social changes were taking place and this public writing became a window into the manners and tastes of a particular section of society. And so it is today. Restaurant reviews exist on the one hand, to help the modern consumer who is anxious to make the right choices. On the other hand, once these choices are made, one's position in the social hierarchy is confirmed. The cultural values of the group (professional, moneyed, discerning) are reinforced. A lot of food writing is focused on food, ambience, service and value for money, in that order. This is as it should be. However, the review that attracts our attention is the one where we gain an insight into the way the writer sees the world. Good writing gives us not only the bare essentials of what was consumed but also shines a light on current style, culture, social status, interiors, etc. The quality of food reviewing here could be improved by locating writers with a food passion but also people with something to say, not just about food but all sorts of things!

**WOOD:** Back home for me is more Cyprus than the UK but, either way, aside from Foodiva, Time Out and The National, reviews in the UAE are not impartial and therefore lack credibility - this

is because most publications here do not review incognito, accepting freebies in exchange for a positive review. A certain lack of freedom of press also hinders honesty.

### Should reviewers dine anonymously? Or is there a value in being accompanied by marketing people?

**BRENNAN:** Anonymity is key. People need to trust a review. They want to know that they'll be treated just like the reviewer was. Most people don't dine out with a marketing person sat on their lap, so a serious review should always be anonymous. If it's an interview with a chef, or a preview of a restaurant opening, then the writer can be accompanied by 100 marketing people. But that's not a review. Reviewers should book under a pseudonym and keep a low profile. If they get well known, they should invest in a wig and a false beard!

**REEDER:** I see both sides of the argument and, as I'm not currently a reviewer in the sense of having a regular pitch, my inclination is towards interaction with the people involved in the restaurant - if I understand what they're shooting for, if they can explain the thinking behind the menu or detail the sources of ingredients, then I think that's of immense value to readers. On the other side? I'm reminded of the apocryphal story of a staff member (not a food expert by any means) sent by a well-known Dubai-based magazine to review a new, high concept Italian restaurant delivering a slating review about how dated and unimaginative the place was. Seems he went to an established pizza restaurant in the same hotel. A PR or marketing 'companion' would have avoided that dumb error. Just because you sit with these people, there's no need to toe a party line. When I used to review movies in London, I was banned from preview screenings from a couple of major distributors - I enjoyed the party and the drinks and the chat beforehand, but still told the truth as I saw it about the movie. And who are we kidding about anonymity? Do we really believe that on-the-ball F&B folk don't know what Oliver Robinson or Emily Shardlow look like?

**SAULWICK:** I think reviewers should be anonymous and I would keep the marketing people as far away as possible.

**WOOD:** There's absolutely no value in being accompanied by marketing reps. It's vital a reviewer experiences the restaurant like any normal, walk-in diner would - and that would not be the case if you were accompanied by staff or even recognised.

### When planning a trip to a city abroad, do you read reviews to choose places to eat? If so, what qualities in the review are you looking for?

**BRENNAN:** I do read reviews, but it's always good to get local knowledge as well - people who have nothing to gain by recommending a restaurant. Twitter is invaluable for that. I'll be looking for independent reviews, preferably ones that keep me entertained enough to read it to the end. I want to read about the restaurant, not the shade of the dining companion's hair - unless the waiter has tipped a bowl of lobster bisque on it.

**REEDER:** Yes, absolutely. However, I tend to rely less on popular opinion sites like Zagat or TripAdvisor (despite submitting to the latter) because I know nothing about the background, knowledge or taste of the 'critic'. The curse of social networking and 'people's journalism' is that the quality standards we're used to in the print world (however low they might go!) are impossible to quantify in these spaces. So I would look for reviews from major newspapers, food and travel magazines.

**SAULWICK:** Personally, I research the food scene of a city I am about to visit but I also take recommendations from foodie friends. If I don't know anyone in the particular city I will e-mail a local food writer for advice.

**WOOD:** Yes I do. Firstly the reviewer or blogger has to conduct reviews anonymously. In terms of content, I look for their opinions on the whole dining experience from food, service and location right through to the interior, atmosphere and price. I do also choose holiday destinations because of a particular restaurant I want to visit - making these reviews essential research.

### From anywhere in the world, are there reviews you read for pleasure even though you don't intend to dine in the reviewed restaurant?

**BRENNAN:** I like to read a range of reviews here and there on the internet, just to see what's happening in the world of restaurants.

**REEDER:** From the UK, I've read the infuriating but illuminating AA Gill for years and sorely miss regular inputs of Fay Maschler's insights. America is immeasurably poorer since the demise of Gourmet, but I read Ruth Reichl's new and old work over and over again, learning something new every time. The duo of Steingarden and Bourdain keep me amused also from the States. France, which I visit constantly? I'm not conscious of particular reviewers, but a good dose of both Le Fooding and Gault Millau on-line give me loads of great destinations.

**“THE QUALITY OF FOOD REVIEWING HERE COULD BE IMPROVED BY LOCATING WRITERS WITH A FOOD PASSION BUT ALSO PEOPLE WITH SOMETHING TO SAY, NOT JUST ABOUT FOOD BUT ALL SORTS OF THINGS!”** – MARIANNE SAULWICK

**WOOD:** Yes, I read reviews from the key restaurant critics in the UK and the US – not just for pleasure but for my own learning.

#### How seriously should chefs take reviews?

**BRENNAN:** It depends on who has written it. A good review is fine, but a chef shouldn't let it go to his head. A bad review isn't the end of the world, but a chef might be able to learn from it. Ultimately, chefs cook for customers, not reviewers. If customers are happy, then the chef is doing a good job. Reeder: If they respect the reviewer, then they should, of course. If the review comes from a lack of knowledge, then either move on or consider inviting the reviewer back and doing a tutored tasting menu - you won't get a second review, but hopefully you'll get a better reviewer. One thing I've done consistently over the years is give feedback that doesn't make it to the review or article. For example, I dined not so long ago with a hotel GM who took on board quiet comments about a lack of signage and frayed and stained menus - would it really have been worth hammering an extremely accomplished restaurant in print by focusing on those points?

**SAULWICK:** There is no getting around the impact that a food review can have on a business. There are famous instances where restaurants have launched legal action against a publication for a bad review, with mixed results. Yes, chefs should take note of reviews from reputable reviewers. The feedback can allow for improvements to be made and so on.

**WOOD:** If the reviewer or blogger has credibility, then chefs and F&B professionals should definitely take these reviews seriously and use them to monitor the operation.

#### What is the biggest mistake a reviewer can make?

**BRENNAN:** Reviewing a restaurant too soon after opening is one mistake. Restaurants need time to bed in. Getting complacent is another. You restaurant reviewers have a privileged job. You could be working in a bank or a light bulb factory. Instead, you're being paid to eat and write about it. So, don't whine unnecessarily, be fair, get your facts right, try to make me laugh, and never put the words 'tantalise' and 'taste buds' in the same sentence.

**REEDER:** Assuming that a review is based on personal taste. If you say, "I just adored the scallops", that tells me nothing apart from the fact that they weren't rubbery! I know nothing about you or what you enjoy, but if you'd mentioned how the scallops were lightly caramelised which brought out their sweetness which was then counterbalanced by a baby rocket salad, dressed in raspberry vinaigrette then I can picture the dish in my mind and start to decide if I would want to eat it. And being ignorant about food and regional cuisines, of course.

**SAULWICK:** The biggest mistake a food writer can make is to fall into arrogance and disdain - take a bow, AA Gill!

**WOOD:** To not review anonymously, but then again he/she is not a professional reviewer if that's the case.

#### Do you see a value in restaurant reviews?

**AKIELAN:** Reviews are hugely important as it provides a level of awareness among an audience that restaurants are targeting more effectively than simply relying on advertising, which can be a little one dimensional, or word of mouth. Readers gain a lot of insight from reviews, both positive and negative, and are therefore more inclined to go and try out a new place or a new dish based on a review that they have read. Reviews target a wide range of people and provide the key information that restaurants want to convey, namely the quality of the food and service, details about the location and atmosphere, which is what people ultimately want to know before visiting.

**ANDREWS:** A review is the written opinion of a guest at a restaurant and offers another source of feedback for our chefs. They provide an insight into a guest's experience of the restaurant. Whether that is a bad experience, or a good one, it creates the opportunity for restaurateurs to address any issues that have been raised.

**GARRETT:** Absolutely. The impartial restaurant review is a fantastic PR tool. However, it does depend on the consistency of the reviewer and the following they have. There are reviews and then there are reviews. Some journalists have a tremendous way with words and if you regularly read their reviews you can start to read between the lines. A reviewer needn't resort to harshing out a restaurant, but what they can do if the food is mediocre is turn the entire review into a commentary about the décor and ambience. Over the years in PR I have worked on restaurants which have received average reviews that resulted in an upswing of bookings. The review I remember was a French-Vietnamese restaurant which came under fire for its Ginger Crème Brulee. The days

and weeks following the review you had to go on a waiting list to get a table and requests for the Ginger Crème Brulee were off the scale. The revenues continued the upward trend and to this day the Ginger Crème Brulee is still on the menu and continues to be a best seller. In short, sometimes an average or even poor review can actually work in your favour to stimulate curiosity and interest.

**SARISEN:** Yes, it is a chance of learning about other restaurants and hotels, taste their food and what other hotels look like. This is how I create my concept by collecting the best from other experiences and putting my own ideas together.

#### Compared to back home, how would you rate the quality of reviews here in the region? And why is that?

**AKIELAN:** I think that the quality of the reviews here are generally very good and is comparable to the sort of reviews that you would find in the UK. The fact that a lot of the restaurant goers here are well travelled and come from a huge range of backgrounds and cultures mean that it takes a fair amount to impress, so reviewers have to be able to provide a quality review that will please the foodies or else they will be ignored. Some reviews take a slightly softer approach as opposed to making too much of a song and dance about any negatives, but overall I think that a majority are balanced and well thought out.

**ANDREWS:** Reviews back home in the UK are very similar to those here in terms of quality and diversity, however reviewers in Dubai come from a much varied background than anywhere else in the world, and so each review we receive differ somewhat in terms of expectations and preferences. Saying this, reviews are the same

## “BOTH SIDES HAVE THEIR PROS AND CONS. I’M ALL FOR THE ANONYMOUS REVIEW.” – SHARON GARRETT

where ever they are written, and restaurants should treat them as such.

**GARRETT:** I think many of the reviews are average and people don't really know their subject matter. On the whole reviewers play it safe. They've had a free meal and they don't want to upset the apple cart. There are a few key writers who I know will write what they experience and I find it refreshing. I especially like it when you are so proud of your product that you don't get nervous about unannounced reviewers. That's when you know a hotel or restaurant has everything together. It should not be a case of the VIP is here so do a good job, it should be consistent across the board.

#### Is a review made harder by the extreme multinational mix here?

**AKIELAN:** Potentially this could be a problem, but as I mentioned restaurant goers and reviewers alike are generally well travelled and are overall very keen on trying out new dishes and cuisines.

**ANDREWS:** It is not the review that is the concern with regards to Dubai's multinational mix, it is ensuring that the restaurant's product is accessible for all to enjoy. For example, Benjarong, our signature restaurant, offers Royal Thai cuisine which is well known for its fresh herbs, shoots and spices which are not common in the Middle East. To ensure our guests get the full enjoyment of the cuisine we adapt the flavor and recipe to match the guest's preference on salty, sweet, spicy hot or sour.

**GARRETT:** I think a lot of excuses are made for poor service. Why do people tip rubbish service? My mind boggles over the habit people get into rewarding poor service with a tip. If it was rubbish say so and don't reward it. For a chef or a restaurateur, the biggest favour you can do them, is let them know at the time exactly what is wrong so they have an opportunity to fix it.

**SARISEN:** No, I'm used to working with many different nationalities and cultures.

#### Should reviewers dine anonymously? Or do you think a marketing companion at the meal is a good thing?

**AKIELAN:** Personally I wouldn't want to make anyone feel pressured during a review as we want them to enjoy the experience as they would if they were any other guest, so I wouldn't be insistent on sitting in on a review. The staff at a given venue should be knowledgeable enough to answer any questions that a reviewer might have about the menu or the venue in general so it is unnecessary for a PR or marketing companion to be there.

**ANDREWS:** There are two ways to look at this. Do you want a true reflection of your restaurant in the review, or one that you have influenced heavily and will show to the reader. If it is the later, then you are

not confident with the product you are providing. We offer the same high level of service to all our guests and everyone receives the same excellent standard of experience when they dine with us, whether they are reviewing or simply dining.

**GARRETT:** Both sides have their pros and cons. I'm all for the anonymous review. However, meeting contacts over food is always good fun and helps build relationships. With competing priorities and larger workloads, sometimes those informal invitations to share a meal morph into a review which is a nice bonus for any PR team, since you've been there throughout.

**SARISEN:** Definitely need a marketing person. It doesn't matter which way we do marketing but it is important the people know what we do and come again.

#### From anywhere in the world, are there reviews you read for pleasure even though you don't intend to dine in the reviewed restaurant?

**AKIELAN:** Definitely. I am always really keen to read reviews of any of the big Michelin starred places or somewhere that has won a big award. For example I was really keen to read about NOMA in Copenhagen as it's rated as one of the best restaurants in the world and I wanted to know why and what people really think about the food. Similarly for The Fat Duck in Bray as Blumenthal is a fascinating chef and it's amazing to read about how well the molecular gastronomy really goes down with reviewers. Even with El Bulli, despite it no longer being open, I wanted to know what made it so special so I'll hunt down any reviews I can find to try and get a picture of what makes a restaurant so great even though I may not ever get the chance to visit!

**ANDREWS:** I have a former colleague in the UK who reviews some random places on her travels around Europe and I very much enjoy reading about her adventures and the odd dishes she tries. There is always a quirky-side to her writing that is entertaining.

**GARRETT:** Yes, I have a keen interest in cutting edge food and beverage concepts and I like to stay up to date with what is happening around the globe. I also take a keen interest in reading reviews of restaurants that are decades old and often admire how they have maintained their positive reviews and popularity in a fast evolving environment.

**SARISEN:** Not so far.

#### How seriously do chefs take reviews?

**AKIELAN:** Very seriously. I've been into kitchens and there have been photocopies of reviews stuck to cork boards with the comments highlighted and notes to the team to make sure that every dish that goes out is of the highest possible quality. Reviews

are real life experiences made public to a lot of people so every review is important to a chef and his or her kitchen team.

**ANDREWS:** Our chefs take reviews and other feedback very seriously. It is a critique of their work and creations and they take great pride in what they serve our clients. A review forms part of their personal development and everyday in the kitchen is for learning.

**GARRETT:** I think most chefs take comments on board and realise that everyone is different. In my opinion, many of the chefs I have had the pleasure of working with are true artists. They care about the guest experience and truly want diners to enjoy their food. Chefs take into account so many factors when creating a dish. For example, they are looking at how it works with the other dishes on the menu, the presentation of it and if it will be pleasing on the eye, the flavours and textures as well as the aroma and magical smells.

#### What is the biggest mistake a reviewer can make?

**AKIELAN:** Not being honest about the experience they had.

**ANDREWS:** The biggest mistake a reviewer can make are getting the facts wrong in a review. This could be prices, location or dish names.

**GARRETT:** To lie.

**SARISEN:** I'm not sure.

#### Are you under pressure from management after a bad review?

**AKIELAN:** All comments from reviews are taken on board and the feedback appreciated, the teams understand that the review is a direct result of a particular experience that I don't have control over. However, if reviews are seen as inaccurate then the pressure is on to rectify this with either a new review or further explanation from the reviewer.

**GARRETT:** Of course. The review is researched with all staff touch points and the gaps in service or quality are quickly identified. We see a less than perfect review as an opportunity for improvement and a dazzling fantastic review as an opportunity to acknowledge the contribution of our team members. We embrace reviews and they form part of our marketing communications strategy at Anantara.

**SARISEN:** I am open for criticism if it is constructive and take it as a chance to correct what we do.

#### What sort of journalist would be a dream reviewer?

**AKIELAN:** Anyone who has an interest in writing a clear and honest review, with a decent knowledge of food, how kitchens work and how hard a restaurant and its team have to work in order to deliver a good dining experience.

**GARRETT:** We like true food reviewers or critics. People who know their subject matter and are confident enough to challenge our chefs with questions. However, on the flipside, sometimes a newly initiated reviewer brings to the table a fresh perspective and brings us back down to earth and in touch with the expectations of the average Joe.

**SARISEN:** A magazine journalist.

#### THE PR PROFESSIONALS



**CHARLIE AKIELAN**  
Group Account Manager,  
Sept PR, representing  
OKKU and BICE Mare  
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**DANIEL ANDREWS**  
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**SHARON GARRETT**  
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**SENOLO SARISEN**  
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Manager at Gloria Hotels,  
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# “REVIEWS ARE VERY IMPORTANT TO A RESTAURANT WHEN IT IS FIRST OPENING, AS A GOOD REVIEW CAN MAKE YOU AND A BAD REVIEW CAN BREAK YOU.” – CHEF VIDAURRE

## Do you see a value in restaurant reviews?

**CONBOY:** Yes, feedback that you get from a member of the public or a journalist is generally constructive, and, if it is an experienced food critic it can be beneficial. Obviously, good reviews in respected publications and on-line blogs generate custom.

**GRADNITZER:** I believe a restaurant review is a fantastic opportunity and irreplaceable tool not only to receive critical comments but also to keep up the competitive spirit and look out for areas for improvement.

**JOST:** Absolutely. Restaurant reviews in the whole are useful on two fronts. Firstly, they serve as useful tool for restaurateurs as it allows them to measure guest satisfaction. Secondly, it serves as form of ‘free’ marketing/advertising that helps potential guests to make an informed choice of where to spend their time and money.

**VIDAURRE:** Yes and no. Reviews are very important to a restaurant when it is first opening, as a good review can make you and a bad review can break you. Whenever a new restaurant opens, a large number of people will read a review and will make judgments about the restaurant, but the only way to really know how good a restaurant is, is to go there and experience the food and atmosphere for yourself.

## Compared to back home, how would you rate the quality of reviews here in the region? And why is that?

**CONBOY:** In the UK, the reviews are a lot more critical. There are permanent food critics assigned

to most newspapers and the reviewers will review anonymously. The competition is far more fierce too, given the sheer volume of restaurants.

**GRADNITZER:** Having worked in many popular culinary destinations worldwide, I have noticed local differences in restaurant reviews approach. Here in the UAE, I would say that a large number of reviews are based on personal judgments and preferences whereas in other markets, critics may have a formal culinary background and experience on which to base their reviews.

**JOST:** Gastronomy reviews in the UAE and wider GCC are relatively new with little competition. The biggest difference between reviews in Central Europe and in this region is their roots. For instance, the concept of food quality in Central Europe did not start with restaurants, but with the knowledge of products and ingredients. Therefore, the main difference comes in the questions asked and terminology used by journalists.

**VIDAURRE:** In Peru there isn’t a great deal of reviewing going on in papers and magazines. However, there is a famous chef called Gaston Acurio (who is regarded as one of the greats) who reviews restaurants on his weekly TV show and looks at new places opening. His opinion on a restaurant is always highly regarded by the public, so you could say he is the main critic in Peru.

## Is a review made harder by the extreme multinational mix here?

**CONBOY:** No.

**GRADNITZER:** The fact that such a multinational mix of cultures is represented in Dubai makes pleasing guests and critics more challenging but at the same time more interesting.

**JOST:** On the one hand, yes, there are not many shades of food, it is either good, or not good. However, on the other hand, what is new to me is to find food critics that are experts in many type of cuisines.

**VIDAURRE:** Definitely. With so many different nationalities in Dubai, it is hard to please everyone. What is nice to one person or nationality may not be to another. The food we create in Toro Toro is quite new to Dubai; not everyone is used to the ingredients or flavours so it is sometimes hard for them say whether if it is traditional or authentic, as they have more than likely not tried this style of food before.

## Should reviewers dine anonymously? Or do you think interaction with you and your team helps?

**CONBOY:** They should dine anonymously and pay for their dinner to get a true experience of the restaurant.

**GRADNITZER:** An anonymous review allows a critic to get an unbiased picture of the service and quality of the food. It also pushes the staff to deliver a consistent high level of performance.

**JOST:** I don’t think it is a good idea to dine anonymously. Journalists should identify what the true purpose of their activity is and understand that by doing their work professionally, they may actually contribute and help restaurants improve their offerings. A journalist that engages in an honest interaction with the chef and the restaurant team can help all parties, including himself and future guest’s experience, as well as provide a constructive support to raise the level of gastronomy on the region.

**VIDAURRE:** To get a real experience of a restaurant, reviews should be done anonymously. Of course it always helps if the restaurant is aware it is being reviewed in advance, but this doesn’t give a true dining experience. If I find out a table is reviewing a restaurant, I treat them like every other table - a VIP! Having an interview where points are discussed about the food, operations, etc can be useful as it gives specific information about the restaurant, but this is not a review.

## When planning a trip to a city abroad, do you read reviews to choose places to eat? If so, what qualities in the review are you looking for?

**CONBOY:** No, I tend to speak to chefs I know who either work in that particular city or have worked there in the past. Personal recommendations from chefs are what I find most valuable.

**GRADNITZER:** Yes, I am guided by internationally recognised restaurant guides like Zagat, NYC Times Dining & Wine section and some others. A negative review, however, does not necessarily change my interest to one or another restaurant. There are times when a not yet well-known culinary concept turns out to be the most exciting and that is what I look for in a diverse culinary world.

**JOST:** Rather than reading reviews, I get feedback from colleagues and friends. If I come across reviews, I would first check the source of the information. Most trades have their jargon and depending how the review is written, selection of words and description of tastes and textures, then it shows how the journalist actually understands the subject he is reporting on. Not all are the same.

**VIDAURRE:** I hardly ever read reviews of countries that I visit. The best reviews always come from friends. If I know someone who lives in the country I am visiting, I always ask them for their recommendation. If I don’t know anyone living there, then I ask friends that have been there to give me their advise on the best places to eat out.

## From anywhere in the world, are there reviews you read for pleasure even though you don’t intend to dine in the reviewed restaurant?

**CONBOY:** AA Gill’s reviews are certainly entertaining, also Charles Campion.



**GRADNITZER:** Yes, I subscribe to many international on-line magazines and review the pages as this helps me to explore other cities in the world and see what food concepts and restaurants review are out there. I have also noticed that social media tools become more and more popular nowadays. Many food gourmets, who eat out at least three to four times a week and travel a lot, share their amazing dining experience on-line in a very realistic way.

**JOST:** Whenever I read reviews, there is always a professional interest to it. I use reviews as a source of information, they help me keep up to date on what is happening on the culinary scene and what the current restaurant trends are. Additionally, they help me apply what is relevant and see ways to add another dimension our guest’s experience. On the dining side, I prefer to meet the chef or restaurant manager in his environment as it tells me much more about himself and his food than sit at a table.

**VIDAURRE:** As above, I don’t believe reviews always say a lot about a restaurant. I prefer to ask close friends for their recommendation, or experience restaurants and new cuisine myself.

## How seriously do you and your brigade take reviews?

**CONBOY:** Extremely seriously. It’s a great feeling when you get a good review and any negative comments are definitely felt, but acted upon where necessary.

**GRADNITZER:** Every review is an opportunity to look at your work from a different perspective and, as a result, a chance for innovation or improvement. Therefore, we just either learn from that experience or simply feel content and proud of the positive result.

**JOST:** We take reviews very seriously.

**VIDAURRE:** We always read what people have said about us, whether it is a magazine, Trip Advisor or the comments cards from our guests. These are always looked into in depth and adjustments are made if trends are noticed or a regular comment is made. At the end of the day customer feedback is just as important as a professional review, if not more.

## What is the biggest mistake a reviewer can make?

**CONBOY:** Commenting on a dish negatively, that they don’t know the full background on,

highlights a lack of expertise.

**GRADNITZER:** Basing a review solely on personal food preferences.

**JOST:** Not meeting the chef, use of offensive words in a review, bad command of English for reviews edited in English, not ask questions when in the restaurant, being distant, not being specific.

**VIDAURRE:** Reviewers must be able to back their thoughts. It is not much use just saying that they liked or didn’t like something. They should explain the thoughts behind their feedback. At the end of the day, a review is the personal taste of the reviewer and may be very different to others. Reviews are as much important to guests as they are to the chefs of the restaurants.

## Are you under pressure from management after a bad review?

**CONBOY:** Not necessarily under pressure from management, but any bad reviews affect the kitchen. As long as you ensure the same mistakes are not repeated it is ultimately a beneficial process.

**GRADNITZER:** In a large operation complex like Madinat Jumeirah with 44 food and beverage outlets, it is quite hard for an entire culinary team to maintain perfect standards in every area. And as a member of the management team, it is my duty to support and understand colleagues in my departments on different occasions.

**JOST:** A good review is always easier to handle. **VIDAURRE:** I have more pressure from myself than anybody else. As I am in charge of the kitchen and the food leaving it, I wouldn’t be happy if somebody had a bad meal or experience as I am responsible for the food that they eat.

## If a review isn’t that complimentary, does it annoy you or do you see it as a chance to look objectively at what your team is delivering?

**CONBOY:** Most people find it difficult to take criticism but chefs tend to learn this skill (as much as it is possible to do so) fairly early on in their careers. All dishes are tasted by the chefs but a second opinion, and a third always helps. Depending on the publication, it is sometimes good to hear what your typical ‘regular guest’ thinks too.

**GRADNITZER:** Every negative review is a lesson to learn which can be turned into a benefit for the future; that is the attitude that I try to implement.

**JOST:** Everyone and every team want to be winners, so a review that is lukewarm - although not most welcome - offers the opportunity to get a view from a different perspective. If it is a well written and constructive criticism, it may help the restaurant and the team to review their offering and perform better.

**VIDAURRE:** It really depends on the comments made. If they comment on something that others have said in the past or I feel is a problem, then we definitely look into it. If I have 100 people saying being complimentary and 1 person complaining, it might be wrong to make changes.

## THE CHEFS



**CHEF SIMON CONBOY**  
Head Chef, The Ivy, Dubai.



**CHEF CHRISTIAN GRADNITZER**  
Resort Executive Chef, Madinat Jumeirah, Dubai.



**CHEF MICHEL JOST**  
Executive Chef, Yas Viceroy, Abu Dhabi.



**CHEF ALFREDO LAZO VIDAURRE**  
Chef de Cuisine, Toro Toro, Grosvenor House, Dubai.