

“OF COURSE I’M GOING TO HAVE ROSE WITH LUNCH”:
AN EXAMINATION OF ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION
AMONG FOOD JOURNALISTS

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Chapter One: Introduction

From the outset of my journalism career, I knew I did not want to write about government, politics or crime. I wanted to cover topics that brought joy to people — human interest features, food, the arts. After taking a food and wine writing class with Nina Furstenau, I realized that my life experience had equipped me ideally to write about restaurants, food, alcohol and food culture.

After interviewing for internships with a representative for all of Voice Media Group’s alternative weekly papers, I was offered an internship with the *Riverfront Times* in St. Louis. The *RFT* was intrigued by my (admittedly little) experience with food and drink writing, as they were hoping to expand their coverage in that area, and I was eager to build upon those skills.

I worked under Tom Finkel, who later went on to become the editor-in-chief of the *Village Voice* for a short tenure, and with Ian Froeb, the *RFT*’s restaurant critic, who is now the chief critic and food writer for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and who also graciously agreed to be interviewed for this project. Tom assigned me to many of the smaller news stories and comedic, one-off articles that Ian didn’t have time to cover, as well as a few bar and cocktail columns. Because the drinking columns (“Girl Walks Into A Bar” and “Humpday Cocktail”) and top ten lists about alcoholic beverages were part of my regular weekly assignments, I spent a lot of time in St. Louis bars.

Toward the end of my internship, the *RFT* offered me a job, but because it wasn’t in their budget, they weren’t able to make it a full-time role with a title. Tom suggested I continue freelancing, promising he could ensure me a living wage, but after a month or so

of waiting around to be paid and not receiving a paycheck, I decided I needed to move on. I returned home to Texas, and even though I didn't feel entirely qualified based on the time I'd spent at the *RFT*, I applied to be the full-time restaurant critic at the *Houston Press*, a sister paper to the *RFT*. It was the only job I applied for, and I got it.

My experience at the *RFT* prepared me for the style of writing popular among alternative weekly papers, and it also helped me develop a baseline of knowledge about food and drink writing that aided me immensely in my new role. What it did not prepare me for was the rigor of a full-time journalism job that required at least 15 additional hours a week out of the office eating at restaurants and drinking at bars. I found myself working 60 to 70 hours a week and very quickly learning how to navigate difficult interpersonal relationships with my editor while balancing my newfound responsibilities and my unhealthy lifestyle (seriously, food and drink writing takes a toll on the body).

I lasted a little over a year at the *Houston Press*. It was not a pleasant job, due in large part to the difficulties I experienced with an incompetent managing editor and a borderline-sadistic editor-in-chief, but I can say that I learned more about food and about myself in that one year than I had in the previous six years of structured schooling combined.

I learned that you have to be confident in your own knowledge and skills, and that you can't let the anonymous commenters get you down. In fact, you shouldn't read the comments at all. Just don't do it.

I learned that there are a lot of ethical gray areas in journalism — and in food writing in particular — involving spending time with sources, drinking on the job and

accepting a free appetizer sent your way before you have time to stop the incredulous server.

I learned that, like many, stress makes me want to drink. So does spending much of my time in bars. And the desire to learn more about my beat. And nasty comments from mean readers. And ethical concerns. And writer's block. And thirst.

Finally, I learned that I don't want to be a food writer. I'm honestly not even sure that I still want to be a journalist. I'm not convinced that the 60-hour weeks, the low pay, the overly critical editors and the even more critical readers are for me. I used to think I was fairly thick-skinned from the years I spent in theater, but maybe I don't have it in me. Or maybe the period I spent at the *Houston Press* was a particularly vulnerable one in my life, and under different circumstances, I could handle the pressures of a life in journalism.

One thing I know, though, is that I'm immensely proud of the work I did for the *Riverfront Times* and the *Houston Press*, and I'm grateful that it led me to the research I conducted for this project, as I feel it is an important topic and one that needs to be discussed more openly.

Thanks to the advent of blogging and sites like Yelp and Trip Advisor, as well as the continued evolution of journalism itself, change is happening in the world of food writers. Addressing the issues they face head-on will ensure that the industry evolves in a manner that best serves the public *and* the writers.

That, I think, is something we can all drink to.

Chapter Two: Field Notes

Week 1: Jan. 7-11, 2013

On my first day of work, the office was super busy getting the next issue together, so they set me up at a desk and told me to read over recent articles on the website, as well as annual features like the “Best Of” awards, because the format remains the same every year. I had already read much of the recent content in preparation for starting this new internship, but the “Best Of” features — particularly the food related ones — were very informative.

On Tuesday, my editor gave me three assignments:

1. Complete a spreadsheet with information about local restaurants that we will be inviting to our Iron Fork event (much like Iron Chef) to serve samples.
2. Taste test Imo’s new Provel Bites, and write a review.
3. Try local chef Ben Poremba’s salumi that is now being sold at Schnucks, and contact Schnucks and Poremba to discuss the significance of an artisan, local product being sold in a chain grocery.

I spent most of Tuesday finishing the spreadsheet, as that was the first priority. Tuesday night I tried the Provel Bites and made notes. Wednesday morning I wrote my review of the Provel Bites, which I quite enjoyed, much to the dismay of the regular food critic, who hates Provel (a St. Louis cheese-like product). In the afternoon, I hand addressed envelopes for the restauranteurs who are being invited to Iron Fork. I made the mistake of announcing I know calligraphy, so that job took up the next two days. Writing with a quill and walnut ink is time-consuming.

On Thursday, I continued to try and contact Ben Poremba, to no avail. I also set up times to interview two winners of our Web Awards, one of whom I was able to speak to later in the afternoon. Friday was mainly busy work for other writers, but I spent the weekend making a long list of story ideas to pitch to my editor and the other food writer on Tuesday.

So far, I'm loving my job and my new city, but I'm surprised at the amount of responsibility I'm already given. I appreciate it, but I'm not used to posting articles to a public website without first handing them to an editor to check out. This is an issue that I heard about constantly in school: When editors are too busy to keep up with online content, mistakes get made. I'm a very thorough and conscientious writer, but I still worry that I'll make a mistake that won't be caught until the article has already been published. I want to ask either the copy editor or one of the content editors to have a look at my articles before they go live at least for the first couple of weeks, but I don't want to seem like I'm not confident in my skills. It's just a very new experience for me after working for *Vox*, when even 300-word articles got three or four edits. I might go ahead and email my articles to an editor when I finish and ask if he could give them a quick read-through until I get more accustomed to this setting.

I'm also a bit anxious about coming into a position of authority (food critic) in a city I don't know. Obviously, a bad critique could really harm a restaurant, so I get the feeling that the few restaurant owners I've spoken to are reluctant to deal with a new person. They might assume that I don't know what I'm talking about (which I do) or that I don't know St. Louis (which I don't). I'm sure it will take a few months to establish

myself, but I worry about getting my work done in the meantime. I can't write about people who won't grant me interviews!

Next week, I hope to finally get some articles up on the website and to pitch some stories that my editors and coworkers will think are good ideas.

Week 2: Jan. 14-18, 2013

This week, I finally published the two stories I wrote the previous week. When I went to check on them online, I discovered that they'd been majorly edited by my editor. The changes he made were good, but I wish he'd discussed them with me so I could have learned from what he did. That was a little disappointing.

While walking to work on Tuesday, I noticed some people with a McDonald's scooter and a bunch of video cameras huddled around the Chuck Berry statue. I found out that they were shooting a local McDonald's commercial, and my editor had me go down and interview the people producing the commercial. It was snowing like crazy, but the McDonald's folks were having a great time, so researching and writing that story was a blast.

I spent Tuesday evening at the Web Awards, which was a great way to meet new people and have fun with my coworkers outside of the office. Later in the week, I visited a number of local Chipotle restaurants and tried to order off of their "hidden menu." Apparently, it does not exist. I was able to get in touch with the media liaison for Chipotle, who confirmed that the hidden menu is a myth. Busted! I also did more work for Iron Fork (researching addresses, addressing envelopes, mailing stuff), and I think I'm finally done with all that.

At the end of the week, I published a story about the former president of Anheuser Busch, who's opening Jamba Juice franchises, and I looked into a local wine merchant's latest reasonably priced offerings. My editor made a lot of changes to my wine post, and again, I wish he'd talked to me about it first.

My primary issue with work this week was the fact that I'm not really feeling like I have an editor who works with his writers. In fact, I know he doesn't. This is the type of operation where everyone does his or her own thing, and the point is to get blog posts up quickly. If that means the editor has to change stuff without getting the writer's input, that's what happens.

It's not that I think my words are sacred; I know that my writing is not even close to a caliber that would encourage editors to leave it untouched. It's just that I'm here to learn, and I don't feel like I can do that if I don't know what I'm doing wrong in the first place. My editor is very verbose, and he loves to go on and on about what I need to change as a reporter (be more assertive, take action, keep calling people), but he doesn't give me much direction, writing-wise. I'm a major people-pleaser, so the fact that I don't know what he wants from me is frustrating.

The managing editor with whom I work from time to time is the exact opposite. He's super encouraging and friendly. It's like good cop/bad cop in their offices. That said, I've seen Tom, the editor, lash out at other employees for minor things. He has a way that he wants things done, and I get the feeling that sometimes he expects people to read his mind. I keep telling myself not to take it personally. I'm going to have to work with all different kinds of people in life, so this is good practice!

Next week is all about trying to publish more daily and growing a thicker skin. I want to inundate my editor with so many stories that he doesn't have time to nitpick and change everything. In order to do that, though, I really need to spend more time outside of work researching local food happenings.

Week 3: Jan. 21-25, 2013

Last week, I had spoken to the folks behind Roaming Hunger, a food truck locating website that just added St. Louis to their map. Earlier this week, I published the story, then I went back to check on the site and give an update about how it was doing. It wasn't doing great, so that taught me that I need to keep with stories even after they're published in order to provide updates for my readers.

I found out that Andrew Zimmern, a Travel Channel host, will be coming to the Souldard Market in March to film an episode of his show, so I did some research and wrote up a brief about that from the press release. Zimmern himself could not be reached.

I tracked down the PR fellow for Pizza Hut, which keeps bragging that they have a "pizza innovation" to be revealed during the Super Bowl. The PR fellow wouldn't tell me what it was, but he did give me some clues. My editor really wanted me to get a scoop, but I'm not sure how he expected me to do that when the PR guy was sworn to secrecy.

My *pièce de résistance* this week was a list of the most "boinkable" fast food mascots and a poll in which readers could vote. This piece had people on Facebook saying that *RFT* was pathetic and gross, which made my editor very happy.

At the end of the week, I got up a quick post about Angel Baked cookies, a bakery run by at-risk kids in downtown St. Louis. The students had been part of a photography project with UMSL, and their photos are currently on display.

This week, my writing prompted a budget meeting discussion about the use of profanity in blog posts. I've been reading *RFT* enough to know that profanity is rampant on the site, and a few times my editor has added select language to my posts before publishing them. I wrote a post in which I used "shit" in the headline and "fucking" as an adjective in the body. My editor emailed me and informed me that it's *RFT* policy not to use profanity unless it's in a direct quote, which was pretty confusing for me based on reading *RFT* and his additions to my articles.

Not one to be contrary, I said that I absolutely understood, and it wouldn't happen again. Still, he brought it up at the meeting (without naming any names) and made a big issue out of it. Again, I don't take it personally, but I sometimes feel like I cannot do anything right here. I think there's a lack of communication between the editor and the writers, but the other writers just seem to be used to it. Hopefully it's a learning curve, and I, too, will get used to the way things work around here.

I definitely published more this week, though, so that was awesome! I think my goals for the upcoming week need to be to pitch more stories on my own (instead of taking stories that are up for grabs).

Week 4: Jan. 28-Feb. 1, 2013

During the budget meeting on Monday, I discovered that a couple of pieces I'd been working on were going to be combined for a Valentine's Day feature. Pretty exciting! That also meant that I had to expedite the research process, so I spent most of

Monday through Thursday visiting more than 30 bars in St. Louis to determine which ones have the best bathrooms for a “quickie” (not my idea for a story, by the way).

I left work for dinner on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, then returned to the office in the evening to prank call local fast food restaurants and try to make reservations for Valentine’s Day. My editor loves anything that has to do with fast food. I thought prank calling would be fun, but it was actually really stressful, and I wound up feeling kind of bad, cause the people I was talking to were so nice. After reading my transcripts of that endeavor, my boss actually told me I was doing a great job, and I need to stop selling myself short. The first words of encouragement I’ve gotten since I started!

In spite of the fact that I got some encouraging words this week, I’m still feeling like I don’t really know what my editor wants me to do when he gives me assignments. I wrote up the piece about the best bar bathrooms for a quickie, and he said it was really not what he was looking for, and that I didn’t follow his instructions (which were nonexistent). He then told me to read similar posts in other Village Voice Media publications and make mine more like theirs. When I read them, I had no idea what he wanted me to do, because they were almost identical in form and content. I told the managing editor about my confusion, and he suggested I email links of the other stories to the editor and ask for clarification. I did, and he acknowledged that my story was similar to the ones from other magazines, but he still wanted me to make it “more reporterly.” I tweaked the story numerous times, but I get the feeling that he’s still not happy with it. It’s supposed to be a part of the Valentine’s Day feature, but he mentioned there may not be room.

I'm feeling very frustrated that I don't know what my editor wants. When writing for *Vox* or *The Missourian*, the editors were always very clear about their expectations for me or for a story, but here it's a lot more gray. I think the fact that this publication has more freedom in general is part of it, but I also think my editor might not be great at expressing what he's looking for from his writers until after they've written something, at which point he says, "this isn't it." I don't think it's just me who feels this way though, so that's encouraging. Sort of.

Week 5: Feb. 4-8, 2013

My cover story got published this week! It looks great, and it took forever, so I'm really proud of it. Some of the staff writers told me that interns never get cover stories, so that's pretty cool, too. My editor told me that he got an email from *RFT*'s lawyer about my story, saying how hilarious it was. Apparently, he never gets emails from the lawyer unless he does something wrong, so I'm on the editor's good side for now.

I didn't get to bask in the glory of my cover story for long before it was back to work calling people about the alcoholic energy drink Four Loko. This was my first experience trying to reach a major company (the FTC) and getting totally shut down. They kept directing me back to their press release, which really said nothing. Phusion Projects, the makers of Four Loko, had the same response. Luckily, I was able to get in touch with Alcohol Justice, a group who hates Four Loko, so that made the story a little more interesting. Later, my editor and I decided to respond to the news with an Instagram slideshow of people drinking Four Loko, because he loves stuff like that.

This week, I also interviewed the owner of Five Star Burgers because his burger made a national list of best burgers in the U.S. I really like it when I get to talk to chefs because they always invite me to come try their food.

Finally, I started a new column called “Where You Should Eat Tonight and What You Should Order.” When the main food guy gets back from vacation, it will be his column, but I wrote the first one about Sameem Afghan Restaurant. The owner was thrilled to be mentioned in the blog.

I got into a bit of a debate with my editor this week regarding following up with sources. My editor expects a lot from his writers, which is fine, but he doesn't always seem to understand that if it's taking me a while to complete a story (like the Four Loko one) it's not because I'm lazy. It's because I can't get anyone at these major corporations to talk to me.

I endured numerous texts and emails from him (some as early as 6 a.m. asking me if I was still sleeping and whether I was writing as I was supposed to be. I did manage to stay civil and explain to him that sometimes I have to work on something else while I'm waiting for a call back or a return email, but he didn't seem to think that was good enough. I'm not sure what else I could have done, and he had no answer when I asked him. So, I guess I just need to let it go. I understand that it takes time for people to respond to media inquiries, and if he wants a story with a comment, he's just going to have to wait.

Week 6: Feb. 11-15, 2013

In spite of my editor telling me it wasn't necessary, I decided to write a piece for Presidents' Day about the top foodie presidents. My editor really likes hard food news

reporting, but I like creative stuff, so I just did it, and I think it turned out really well. And I had fun researching and writing it. I also started two new columns this week, one of which will be mine and one of which will go to a freelancer who's currently out of town. The freelancer's one is called "Hump-Day Cocktail Suggestion," and it's basically saying, "It's Wednesday and work sucks, so go get a drink. Here's where." The second column is called "Girl Walks Into A Bar," which a different freelancer had been doing, but my editor decided she wasn't good at it, and he gave it to me. It's pretty fun because I get to go to a bar and interview the bartender and have a few drinks.

For Friday, I wrote another article that my editor wasn't completely on board with, but he ended up liking it. It's a menu suggestion for Oscar parties based on this year's Best Picture nominees, but it's very tongue-in-cheek. I like writing silly things like that where I can be creative. The readers seemed to like it too.

This week I learned what my coworkers did a long time ago: The editor will always shoot down your ideas. Write them anyway.

Apparently Tom has very clear ideas about how he wants everything done, and if we all bent to his will all the time, the blog would actually be kind of boring. It might be more what corporate wants (that's an odd phrase to use in reference to an alt weekly, huh?), but it'll be boring. It's not what the readers want. Readers expect a nice mix of news, reviews and goofiness from *RFT*, and if they only get news or reviews, why bother coming to our site? There are at least four food publications in St. Louis, but what sets *RFT* apart is the fact that we don't often take ourselves too seriously. So, for Presidents' Day we write about what our Commanders-in-Chief liked to eat, and to celebrate the Oscars, we make dumb food pairing suggestions.

When it comes down to it, I actually think Tom respects us more for getting done what he wants and then doing what we want on the side.

Week 7: Feb. 18-22, 2013

My editor finally gave in and told me I could do a round-up of the best bloody marys in St. Louis because I kept talking about how much I love bloody marys. Turns out he liked the article so much he put it in next week's print edition.

While I was at one of the bars in my bloody mary round-up, I met some people who just started at distillery where they make "moonshine." I got their business info and wrote a story about them, much to my editor's delight. I finally sniffed out a story on my own! I also tracked down the owners of a cupcake shop at their store to chat with them about moving to a new location and talked to a local chef about moving to a new restaurant.

Finally, I did this week's "Girl Walks Into A Bar" at a local vodka bar where I got talking to the people next to me. When I told them I was there writing about alcohol for *RFT*, they told me I had the coolest job in the world. Today, it kind of feels like I do.

This week I learned the all-important lesson that if you can't reach someone on the phone, just track him/her down in person. I was playing telephone tag with the owner of a local cupcake shop for a couple of days, and my editor was getting annoyed. "Hey," he said to me one morning, "why don't you just go to the cupcake shop to talk to them? Get some cupcakes while you're there."

That sounded like a novel idea (why didn't I think of that?), so I drove to the cupcake shop, and sure enough, the owners were there for me to talk to. And they gave me a bunch of cupcakes to take back to the office.

Sometimes I get in this mindset where I think I can't leave my desk, but that's so not what journalism is about. Especially food writing. I need to get out and talk to people in person more. And eat more cupcakes. Lesson learned.

Week 8: Feb. 25-Mar. 1, 2013

This week, I published my round-up of the best bloody marys in St. Louis, which readers loved. I also loved drinking all of those bloody marys.

Continuing on my mission of getting away from my desk and going places to find out more details for stories, I went to The Wine and Cheese Place to find out about their upcoming renovations, as well as the Market at the Cheshire, which just opened. I also wrote about a moonshine tasting, National Meatball Day and another renovation.

I broke the news (sort of) that Andrew Zimmern is filming at Soulard Market on March 16 after seeing it announced on the market's Facebook page. The next day, my editor got a call from one of Zimmern's press people who was concerned that we'd publicized the date, as it was a safety issue. My editor wants me to write something sort of mocking that message, which is a bit ridiculous. Still, it seems in bad taste to piss off Andrew Zimmern. If he even reads this.

Finally, I did a "first look" at the new Flying Saucer beer emporium in St. Louis. It's a chain, but it's a pretty popular one due to the insane number of beers they have both on tap and bottled. Again, it's nice to get out of the office and go review food and drinks. You know, like an actual food critic.

This week, I discovered how difficult it is to write when I've had a couple of cocktails. Because *RFT* has a designated food critic, I've become the alcohol writer for the paper. It's great, because I really am interested in learning more about various kinds

of alcohol so I can make that my writing niche. However, I've learned that when I go out to cover a bar or something, I'm useless as a writer after two strong drinks.

This has helped me to figure out that if I have to cover something where I'm going to need to drink, I need to do so in advance of the story's deadline. This seems like an odd reflection on a "work issue," but it kind of has become a work issue. I'm generally not a big drinker, so having to try a couple of cocktails in one sitting is not always fun for me.

That said, I do really enjoy learning about alcohol and writing about it. I'm just also having to learn that after a few drinks, I go to bed, and I get up nice and early in the morning and write. And I take a lot of notes while at the bar to make the morning writing go more smoothly. Again, I can't believe the fact that I have to drink too much is a work issue. What is my life?!

Week 9: Mar. 4-8, 2013

Per my editor's request, I started doing more news-related posts this week. He has the calendar editor forwarding me food/drink event info, and I use my stellar judgment to decide what to write about. It's boring.

I spoke to the owners of a café in Caseyville that will be featured on a TV show. I got details about a new branch of Mike Shannon's Grill opening in Edwardsville. I wrote about a whiskey tasting happening in honor of St. Patrick's Day. All of these only required a phone call or two, so I didn't feel like I accomplished much.

The interesting articles I got to write were about the two St. Patrick's Day parades that happen in St. Louis, and which restaurants and bars are on the different routes. That

one got a lot of hits online. I also rounded up the best Irish pubs in St. Louis, which also got a lot of hits. These types of articles take a long time, but I enjoy doing them.

For this week's "Girl Walks Into A Bar," I interviewed Bob Dolan, an old dude who's been bartending for *years*. He really brightened my Thursday by just being a fun fellow to chat with.

Finally, I wrote up a rather snarky tongue-in-cheek response to last week's voicemail from one of Andrew Zimmern's reps. I sent it to my editor, and then when I saw it online later I noticed that he's made it about ten times more malicious and spiteful. My name is on it though, not his. We'll see how this plays out.

After figuring out how fun food and alcohol writing can be over the last couple of weeks, I was treated to a lot of boring desk work this week. I understand the need to beef up the event preview coverage on the blog to get more readers coming to it specifically for that reason, but that the same time, it just doesn't feel like what *RFT* does. We write about things that you might not find on other sites. Most event listings can be found on other sites.

I guess that's precisely why we're doing it; to take traffic away from the other food publications in town. I just hate that it's all about how to get readers. Obviously, if I'm not concerned with getting readers, I'm in the wrong business. But it's starting to feel more like a numbers game than a writing game. Quantity over quality. Of course, I honestly don't know how it's done at other papers or alt weeklies, since this is the first one I've ever worked for. I just hate feeling like a sell-out. I guess I should probably get used to it.

Week 10: Mar. 11-15, 2013

I met with Andrew Zimmern in person over the weekend, which, under normal circumstances, would have been thrilling for me. But I was terrified to go to this meeting. Zimmern was really angry that we announced the filming date and time (even though the market where he was filming announced it first, and we just reported it), and he was livid that we then wrote an article mocking his assistant's concern for his safety. I understand where he's coming from, but I also think he's being overly sensitive. And I feel like my editor got me into this mess by adding a lot of snark to my already snarky post about the phone call. I really didn't feel comfortable having my name attached to it (more on that below). Anyway, I apologized to Zimmern for upsetting him (though not for writing the article), and he ended up saying he really liked me and thought I had a future in journalism. So, I guess that was good. I wrote an article about the meeting for Tuesday.

In the middle of the week, I reported on a few news-type things involving a cupcake shop selling their cupcakes in a local grocery store and a coffee shop needing to move locations because of a landlord dispute. I also reported on a few upcoming events, and I think I was able to inject a little more humor and voice into them than I did last week.

We found out that Tuesday was National Ravioli Day, and since St. Louis is famous for toasted ravioli, I put together a roundup of the best toasted ravioli in town. It got a lot of page views. I also wrote up a first look of a new restaurant/coffee shop for the end of the week. "First looks" are like a pre-review, so they're more like a statement of facts than a criticism, but I still enjoy doing them.

Finally, I reported on a person finding a mouse in a salad at a beloved local restaurant. We got the info from another publication and confirmed it with the woman who found the mouse (whom I tracked down on Facebook). I reported just the facts, and still commenters thought we were being incredibly malicious. I'm going to have to get a thicker skin to deal with commenters who call you pathetic journalists for simply reporting the facts.

As I mentioned earlier, my editor went into the brief story I wrote where I essentially asked, "What's the deal with Zimmern's assistant calling us and asking us not to report on something that's public knowledge? Is he that big of a celebrity that it's really a security threat?" and changed some things. The original article was very tongue-in-cheek, and I tried my best to be funny without coming across as malicious. Then my editor changed it so it actually sounded pretty malicious. He made it sound like the *Riverfront Times* was offended at the notion that we did something wrong, and that Zimmern's assistant is crazy. The readers did not appreciate it. Zimmern did not appreciate it. My name was on it.

I feel that as a beginner in the journalism world, I am allowed to make some mistakes and be forgiven for them. But I also don't want my name attached to something so intentionally malicious and incendiary when the offending words were not, in fact, mine. I talked with my parents about this, and I talked with some friends in the J-school about it, and all agreed that what my editor did was probably wrong. He should have changed the author's name to "RFT Staff" or something that didn't imply that I wrote the whole article, because I didn't.

I felt like my editor was using me as a scapegoat, but at this point in my career, I don't want my name associated with an article that was not written entirely by me and that makes me sound petty and mean. My editor is a pretty petty and mean guy. I am not.

I haven't had the nerve to confront him about this, but I did apologize to Zimmern for what I felt was a truly unfair criticism of the phone call we received from his assistant. If people want to be angry about my article on the mouse in the salad, fine. I reported the facts, and I stand by them. But I won't stand by petulance for the sake of being avant-garde or different. I really feel that a food writer or critic never needs to be spiteful to make a point.

Week 11: Mar. 18-22, 2013

Probably the most fun story I worked on this week was Bud Light's release of the new malt liquor beverage, the "Straw-ber-rita." Last year, Bud Light introduced "Lime-aritas," and because Bud Light is made by St. Louis brewery Anheuser-Busch, *RFT* reported on it. This year, the new reporting job fell on me, and it was a fun exercise in creatively describing an abominable beverage.

I wrote up several more events this week, one of which prompted an email from the organizer thanking me for writing about it because my article brought more people to the event. That was a nice reminder that these boring event posts are always important to someone.

This week, I took over another drinking column, "The Hump-Day Cocktail Suggestion," which means I now have to drink at least twice a week for work. Oy.

Thursday evening was *RFT*'s annual Iron Fork event, in which the best local restaurants are invited to come serve samples and a few chefs and bartenders are invited

to compete in food and cocktail challenges (like the TV show *Iron Chef*). I was fortunate enough to judge the mixology competition, which enabled me to meet a slew of great local bartenders and foodies. I now have many more connections to help me out on future articles.

This week I also learned that I have a lot to learn.

While talking to chefs at Iron Fork and helping to judge the mixology competition, I learned how woefully lacking my culinary education is. I didn't know half of the ingredients the bartenders were using in cocktails, and I saw chefs pair flavors that I had no idea could be successfully paired.

I had a bit of a revelation that clever writing and interview skills will only get me so far. I really need to educate myself on both food and alcohol if I want to continue to write about them. My minimal knowledge has worked fairly well at *RFT* so far, but if I hope to move up in the food writing community, I have *got* to learn more.

I went online over the weekend and started Googling and reading about various ingredients I encountered at Iron Fork. I also sat down and actually started reading the commentary in some of my cookbooks. I decided this needs to be a daily thing for me. Read about food or alcohol, try new food or alcohol, write from a more knowledgeable state.

Week 12: Mar. 25-29, 2013

This week I did another story that my boss pretty much vetoed, but that I thought would be amusing, so I didn't listen to him. I made a list of the best things to do with leftover Easter Peeps, and readers (and my boss) thought it was pretty funny.

I reported on seven event/news stories this week, which might be a new record for me. It's the kind of writing that my editor wants to see more of on the blog, so hopefully he's pleased with what I've done.

For my Friday bar column, I interviewed the winner of the Iron Fork mixology competition from the previous week. I'm already learning so much more about mixology just from asking more questions, talking to the right people and looking up anything I didn't understand online after the interview. I'm loving all this knowledge!

This week was a bit of a slow week, so it gave me an opportunity to do some thinking about my project (it's about damn time) and what I'll be doing after I finish my internship at *RFT* in two weeks. I mentioned to my editor that my internship will be ending soon, and low and behold, he said he'd like to hire me!

Apparently they don't have an opening for another full-time food writer, but my editor wants to work something out where I'll be able to make enough money to live on and work part-time hours. I won't have benefits, but it's a great temporary opportunity. I've come to really like all of my coworkers, and the St. Louis food scene and the city itself have far exceeded my expectations.

Week 13: Apr. 1-5, 2013

This was a slow week because I went to D.C. to visit a friend and to Columbia to work on my project amidst the inspiration of the J-school library. My editor agreed to give me a week off, but by that he meant that I didn't have to come into the office. I still had to write, but I tried to do that in between sightseeing in D.C. and reading about wine.

Before I left town, I conducted three interviews for my Friday bartending column and two interviews for my Wednesday column so I'd have several ready to go. Now I

don't have to worry about those for another couple of weeks. For this week's bartending column, I interviewed another guy I met at Iron Fork. He is super knowledgeable about the various ingredients that go into cocktails and interesting techniques to make cocktails new and exciting. Watching him work and learning from him was really a treat.

The only other articles I wrote this week were event posts that required a few phone calls. I didn't need to be in town to write the events up though, so that was nice.

This week was a real struggle between knowing I needed to work and wanting to play. I wonder if that ever goes away as you get older. Perhaps you just become more disciplined. I did not write as many articles or get as much done on my project as I had hoped, because there was so much to see in D.C. and so many friends to catch up with in Columbia. Hopefully one of these days I'll get this whole adult job thing down and realize that priorities are priorities.

One of the issues is that I'm having trouble staying interested in my topic. I picked it because I thought it would hold my interest for a while, and if I weren't working on other things it probably would. But I'm having a difficult time making myself carve out time to code articles when I'd rather be writing about a new restaurant opening.

It's also difficult because only one of the other writers in my office has a master's degree. I know I needed to go to graduate school because I had never studied journalism before. Still, it's obvious to me that one doesn't need a master's degree to be a journalist. I find myself getting annoyed with the people who are actually full-time employees with benefits at *RFT*, even though they're just out of school with a B.A. It makes me want to put off my project and just work (put it off more than I've already done, obviously), but I know that would be a bad decision. It's tempting.

Week 14: Apr. 8-12, 2013

The full-time food writer/critic was out of town this week, so the bulk of the blogging fell on me. I wrote seven event posts, which required quite a few telephone calls as well as some trips to locations to get more info. As I wrote several weeks back, this job has taught me that if you can't reach someone by phone, just go to the restaurant or the chamber of commerce or the town half an hour away. It's time consuming, yes, but it also feels more like real reporting than sitting at a desk and making phone calls.

Because the full-time critic was out of town, I got to take over one of his weekly columns: "What To Eat This Weekend And Where To Eat It." I hit up a local calzone restaurant that had just opened a few months earlier and ate a bizarre (but delish) Asian-Italian hybrid calzone. Because I went there instead of just talking to the owner on the phone, I was able to get a lot more of the background story about how the restaurant came to be, which I think really added to the column. Too bad I have to hand it back over next week.

With the regular fellow gone, it also fell upon me to report breaking restaurant news. Usually the main food guy does this, because he's the one with all the contacts. On Friday, I reported on a chef stepping down from one restaurant and moving to another, but fortunately, I'd met the chef at an event several weeks prior, so I already had his contact information. I finally feel like I'm becoming a part of the St. Louis food scene!

This week, I got a taste of what it would be like to be the main food writer for a publication like the *RFT*. When the blog needed a post (we try to post one article an hour between 6 a.m. and 2 p.m.) the responsibility fell on me to come up with something, and sometimes that had to be done fast.

Event posts can sometimes be written pretty fast, so those were helpful in filling in gaps in the blog posting, but I discovered that in order to have four things ready to go in the morning, you really have to do most of the writing the day before. I was already accustomed to writing one or two articles in the evening for the next day, but this week, I wrote pretty much everything (except a few event posts) in advance. On Monday morning, I was already writing for Tuesday, and that continued throughout the week.

The job of food critic is tough, but I really enjoyed the added responsibility. I didn't have to write a restaurant review because the critic had doubled up the week before, but I would have welcomed the opportunity. Hopefully someday I'll get to do that!

Chapter Three: Self- Evaluation

As I stated previously, I learned *a lot* from my internship at the *Riverfront Times*, as well as my professional position at the *Houston Press*, a role I reference here frequently because it had such an enormous impact on my choice to pursue this project.

While the work I undertook at the *RFT* was largely frustrating due to the lack of communication from my editor and my desire to tackle meatier stories, it did lead to a job offer from the *RFT*, which I feel is a reflection upon my high quality of work. At the time, I did not obtain any written feedback from my editor, who was also my on-site supervisor, and he has not responded to recent requests for feedback. He did write me a recommendation for my application to the *Houston Press*, though, so I know he was satisfied and, dare I say, even impressed with my work.

I am enormously proud of my growth as a journalist and of the work I did at the *Houston Press*. Unfortunately, my editor there refused to maintain contact with me after I quit the position, so I cannot obtain an evaluation from her either. Even though she told me she was very pleased with my work, promoted me to “food editor” about nine months into my tenure and went so far as to beg me to stay and continue to write for her on my last day at the *Houston Press*, she has failed to be cordial (or, in some cases, even respond) during my follow-up contact with her.

In spite of these fraught relationships with my editors (which I honestly don’t understand, as I have never had issues with bosses or coworkers before or since), I feel good about what I accomplished during my internship and subsequent full-time job. I was able to greatly expand my knowledge of food and drink, which was one of my goals

while I was working for the *RFT*. I published 142 articles for the *Riverfront Times* and approximately 750 articles for the *Houston Press*, including three cover stories. During my time at the *Houston Press*, readership of the food blog increased, and my articles were routinely the most read of the week.

I feel that both the quality and quantity of my work speaks for itself, and I am proud to share some of that work here.

Chapter Four: Physical Evidence

This work is presented in chronological order, beginning with my time at the *Riverfront Times* and encompassing my year as the restaurant critic and food editor at the *Houston Press*. It includes shorter pieces about local food news, as well as lengthier reviews and cover features.

Former A-B Prez to Open Jamba Juice Stores, Which Do Not Serve Beer

Posted By Kaitlin Steinberg on Fri, Jan 18, 2013 at 12:45 pm



A Jamba Juice BEEER smoothie -- now, that'd be a beverage Gut Check could wrap our mind around.

Foodies hoping for a little bit of California flair in St. Louis cuisine may finally get their wish.

Sort of.

California-based smoothie company **Jamba Juice** announced January 17 that it's coming to Missouri and Kansas as part of a franchise agreement with ShowMe Smoothie LLC, an investor group led by former Anheuser-Busch president David Peacock that also includes sports-broadcast big shot Joe Buck. Peacock resigned from A-B last year and has since decided to trade beer for smoothies.

(We think he's nuts, but whatevs.)

Jamba Juice first opened in California 23 years ago and now has more than 700 domestic and 33 international stores according to the franchise website, as well as a line of frozen smoothie mixes available at grocery stores. Devotees looking to get their smoothie on in St. Louis can find Jamba mixes in the frozen-foods section at Dierbergs and Target.

There are no stores in Missouri or Kansas (the closest Jamba to our fair city appears to be located in Springfield, Illinois), but Peacock told the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* he hopes to open his first franchise here this summer. The company also hopes to expand the JambaGo concept, which will bring smoothie dispensers and juices to grocery stores and gas stations. (Think Icee machines, only in blindingly bright colors.)

The menu at Jamba Juice was recently expanded to combat a few unprofitable years. Some franchises now offer "healthy" wraps and sandwiches in addition to smoothies, juices and "healthy" baked goods. Just, um, don't read the nutrition info Jamba makes readily available at the stores and online if you want to continue to believe that peanut butter smoothies and Asiago soft pretzels are good for you. Tasty, yes. Healthy, debatable.

Please join Gut Check in directing a slow clap Mr. Peacock's way, for abandoning the beer biz to jump aboard an industry that hit its stride in 1996. Now, if he were to somehow combine smoothies and beer, we'd stand in line to invest.

Local Blog Recounts St. Louis History One Cocktail at a Time

Wednesday, January 23, 2013

Posted By Kaitlin Steinberg on Wed, Jan 23, 2013 at 2:08 pm



Cameron Collins of web award-winning blog Distilled History.

Jennifer Silverberg

Cameron Collins' blog Distilled History was recently named Best Personal Blog in Riverfront Times 2013 Web Awards. For a full list of winners [click here](#).

Cameron Collins has always loved a good Manhattan, but his friends didn't always love hearing him gripe about the lack of well-made cocktails in this fair city. So he decided to start writing a blog about booze in St. Louis. That blog soon morphed into a collection of stories about St. Louis history and the origins of some of his favorite mixed drinks. More than a year later, Collins' blog, Distilled History, has developed a following of folks interested in both booze and the past.

"The point was to create a cocktail blog, but every time I sat down to write it, I felt like something was missing," Collins says. "It felt like it wasn't my passion. I like drinking, but the history is my passion. I thought it was a unique way to tie the history and the drink together."

By day Collins is a project manager for CPI Corp., a portrait-studio operator, but he admits to spending as many as fifteen hours a week hunting down stories about local history. His interest in St. Louis' past led him to downtown's **Campbell House Museum** (1508 Locust Street; 314-421-0325), where he now gives tours and spends time with other history buffs.

Recently Collins wrote on Distilled History about public bathhouses in St. Louis --- a research mission inspired by a washtub in the head servant's bedroom at Campbell House.

"It's difficult to overstate the malodorous condition of St. Louis in the late 19th century," Collins writes. "If you lived in this city 125 years ago, you probably reeked."

It's the conversational tone of his writing, combined with exceptional research, that form the spirit base for Collins' intoxicating blog. Historical images and Collins' fantastic photos (he studied photography in school) serve as decorative garnish, making the site that much more appealing.

Collins says his affinity for Manhattans stems from his memories of his father drinking the cocktail. But he is happy to experiment with any drink with ties to history. Which, if you ask Collins, is all of them.

"Give me a drink," he says, laughing. "I guarantee you I can tie history to it somehow."

No Reservations: Gut Check's Valentine's Day Fast-Food Experiment

Posted By Kaitlin Steinberg on Tue, Feb 12, 2013 at 8:27 pm



It's Valentine's Day, and love is in the air. But also burgers. Love and burgers. And fries. And does Gut Check detect a hint of waffle? We do!

This Valentine's Day, both White Castle and Waffle House are capitalizing on the romantic holiday by offering a (comparatively) upscale couple's dining experience. White Castle debuted its "Love Castle" two decades ago in a few locations and has since expanded the gimmick across the nation. Franchises require reservations for Valentine's Day, and couples that manage to get in are greeted by hearts, flowers, candlelight and romance in a locale best known for drunken chow-downs at 2 a.m.

"When you come in on Valentine's Day, it's just like you were walking into a steak house," says Joy Riley, a local White Castle employee since 1999. "There's a hostess who greets you, you're seated and everything, we take your meal to the table, and we just basically take the fast-food atmosphere away."

Last year Riley's White Castle was equipped with a photo booth; couples could take pictures, then download them later from the White Castle website. She says the servers dress up for the occasion in red shirts and slacks, and attendees tend to get fancy as well. "People who love White Castle really, really love White Castle," Riley tells Gut Check.

We couldn't find any local Waffle Houses that were doing anything special for the holiday, but locations in other parts of the country are hosting candlelight meals complete with cloth napkins and "alcohol-free champagne" (sooo...grape juice?). Many WaHos will also offer special menus featuring rib eye, pork chops and the like.

All this got Gut Check thinking about love and fast food. What if Taco Bell staged a Valentine's Day fiesta? What if Sonic encouraged diners to roll up their windows and get steamy after indulging in Chili Cheese Tots? What if Long John Silver's served up oysters on the half-shell?

We called a handful of local fast-food joints, just to see if we could get them in the mood. Our methodology was straightforward: We invented a scenario wherein we're an executive assistant (you can call us Catherine) whose boss has saddled us with the task of arranging a special Valentine's Day meal for him and his special someone at the purported site of their first date — only this time, he intends to pop the question. The transcripts of what transpired, lightly edited for your enhanced reading pleasure, follow.

To all the eager-to-please employees who pledged to go out of their way to make our Valentine's Day special: We salute you.

And to the dude at Sonic who sussed out our fake British accent: You, friend, are corporate-management material.

Papa John's Papa John's: Thanks for calling Papa John's, this is _____. Would you like to try any large one-topping for \$10?

Riverfront Times: *No, thank you, I'm actually calling on behalf of my employer. He would like to make a reservation for himself and his girlfriend on Valentine's Day, and we were wondering if you have any openings around 7:30?*

[Silence] Um, can I ask where you're trying to call?

Papa John's.

I mean...we...it's not a...we don't have an eat-in service.

Oh, you don't? Well, he said they had their first date at a Papa John's.

I'm sorry?

He said they had their first date at a Papa John's, and they wanted to -- there must be some that are eat-in? I thought it was this one.

Um, no, this one is not an eat-in location. I actually don't know of any eat-in locations in the St. Louis area.

Oh, really? I wonder why he said that. Well, do you have any Valentine's Day specials?

We have a heart-shaped pizza.

Are you using any, like, aphrodisiac ingredients? Like oysters, or chocolate pizza, or anything like that?

Noooo, we're not quite that upscale.

Oh, well. If I brought a photo of my boss' girlfriend, could you do her face in pepperoni or something?

I don't think we have anyone that talented here, I'm sorry.

Well that's all right. I'll try a different Italian restaurant, I guess. But here's an idea: He does want to propose on Valentine's Day. And he was wanting to, like, hide an engagement ring in something. If I brought the ring to you, could you bake it into the crust?

I'm gonna...you might want to talk to my general manager. I can't OK that. I'm sure he wouldn't really have a problem with it. His name is _____ and he'll be here tomorrow night at the same time.

Lovely! I'll call back then. Thank you so much.

Thank you.

Next..."Hello, Wendy's? Can you hide an engagement ring in a Frosty?"

Wendy's

Wendy's: Wendy's, may I help you?

Riverfront Times: *Hi, I'm calling on behalf of my employer. He's interested in making a reservation for Valentine's Day around 7:30.*

We don't do reservations. This is a fast-food company.

Oh. I mean, I know it's fast food, but he was wondering if I could do that.

We don't even do reservations.

All right. He told me that Wendy's is his girlfriend's favorite restaurant, and they wanted to eat there on Valentine's Day. Are you expecting a large crowd?

I'm not sure.

All right. Do you have any Valentine's Day specials?

No, ma'am.

OK. If he wanted to make it more romantic, say, by bringing a tablecloth and candles -- could he do that?

That's fine.

He's actually planning on proposing to his girlfriend on Valentine's Day, and he was wondering -- do you have a sign outside?

What kind of sign? Yeah....

Like, one with those movable letters. Is there any way he could come in and speak to you about getting "Will you marry me, Karen?" spelled out there?

Yeah, I can do that. That is so sweet!

They went on their first date at Wendy's, apparently.

And they're going to be at this location?

Yes.

Yeah, I can do that. I'm actually off on Valentine's Day, so what day did he want to come over and talk to me?

Maybe the day before?

Yeah, that's fine.

I'll have him come in, then.

I don't work that night. Have him come in Tuesday.

Tuesday. All right, I can do that.

Yeah, we can do that for him.

What about...could you, like, hide an engagement ring in a Frosty?

Yeah, I can do that. Yeah, yeah. Yes, I can! Have him come and talk to me, and me and him can work out some plans.

Next... "The Naked Tenders Combo -- that's not for Valentine's Day?"



Popeyes

Popeyes: Popeyes, how may I help you?

Riverfront Times: *Hello, I'd like to make a reservation for my employer for Valentine's Day.*

[Silence]

Do you have any openings around 7:30?

[Silence]

Nooooo. This is Popeyes. We don't make reservations.

Oh, you don't? All right. He told me he wanted to eat there, so I just assumed that I could. So he should just come in on Valentine's Day, then?

Mmmm-hmmm.

All right. Are you expecting a large crowd? Should he come early?

Are we expecting a large crowd?

Yes.

I'm not really sure. It's just based off the day.

Will you have any specials for Valentine's Day, then?

No, ma'am, just our normal specials.

Oh. I thought.... The "Naked Tenders Combo" -- that's not for Valentine's Day?

No, ma'am. That's an everyday thing.

I just read the name and assumed it was. I feel silly! Do you have fried oysters?

No.

You don't?

Do we have what?

Oysters. Do you have oysters?

No, we don't.

OK.... He told me that he and his girlfriend had their first date at a Popeyes, so that's why they're going back. And he wants to propose to her, so he was wondering if he could...if it would be possible to hide an engagement ring in something. Like a bowl of beans or something?

I'd have to ask my manager. That's over me. I'm not really sure about this.

Will you have valet parking?

No, ma'am.

You don't? OK. Well if he wanted to make it more romantic, could he bring some candles for the table?

I don't think so. I don't think we can actually allow that.

Are you afraid it will set the tablecloths on fire or something?

[Silence]

Um, all right. Well. I will let him know. So you're sure no reservations are needed?

No.

Thank you so much.

Next...Long John Silver's: No oysters, no lobster, no dogs allowed.

Long John Silver's

Long John Silver's: Long John Silver's, this is _____.

Riverfront Times: *Hello, I'm calling on behalf of my employer. He wanted me to make a reservation for him for Valentine's Day, around 7:30.*

We -- we don't do reservations.

You don't? All right. Are you anticipating a large crowd for Valentine's Day, then?

No, we're not.

Do you have any specials?

We have our current, everyday specials, but we don't have any specials on Valentine's Day.

Oh. No oysters or anything?

No, we don't.

You know what they say about oysters -- 'cause oysters are, like, an aphrodisiac.

No, we don't have any.

How about lobster?

No.

He loves Long John Silver's, because that's where he and his girlfriend went on their first date, and he wants to propose to her. So he was wondering if he could hide an engagement ring in a hushpuppy or something.

Yeah, you could do that. Just let us know when you come in.

All right. Speaking of hushpuppies actually, he also wanted me to ask....They're very attached to their dog. Could they bring him along? He's very quiet.

We don't allow dogs or animals in the restaurant.

Well, that makes sense. If he wanted to make it more romantic, could he bring some candles for the table?

Yeah, that would be OK.

And he could bring a tablecloth also?

Yeah.

Do you have any wine for Valentine's Day?

We don't, I'm sorry.

That's fine. So then he should just come in? He doesn't need a reservation?

No.

I will let him know. Thanks.

Next...Arby's: The molten lava cake. Definitely the molten lava cake.

Arby's

Arby's: Thanks for calling Arby's, how may I help you?

Riverfront Times: *Hello. I'm calling on behalf of my employer. He was interested in making a reservation for Valentine's Day, around 7:30.OK.*

You mean like to come into the lobby, or to make a catering order?

No, just to come in and eat.

Oh, well you're welcome to come on in. You don't have to make a reservation.

You don't? OK. Apparently it's where he took his girlfriend for their first date, so they wanted to go back there for Valentine's Day.

Awwwww!

Do you have any Valentine's Day specials?

Not to my knowledge at this moment, but if we do have anything, you can always call back up and ask. They usually announce that sort of thing on the television. Or, you know, online.

Are you anticipating a large crowd for Valentine's Day?

I would imagine not.

So you don't think he'll have trouble getting a good seat? Like by a fireplace?

There's no fireplace.

There's not?

You're calling Arby's....

Yes. No, I know. I've never been to an Arby's. I'm sorry.

Oh, no, you're fine.

Do you have any relatively private tables or booths?

Hmm. The most private tables or booths that I can really think of are like back seats. Less by the windows and more towards the back. Or we have rather large tables, but I don't think that would be good for a couple. However, when I would go on a date, I would always go to the table that we first had our little date at.

Oh, that's a good idea! I'll tell him that.

Yeah, that's what I used to do.

What kind of music will you have for the evening?

We mostly play -- let's see -- right now we're just kind of playing some stuff that you'd hear, like, on the radio. Like new hits.

So it's not live? It's on the radio?

No, it's not live. It's on the radio.

Now, he's actually wanting to propose to her. So if he wanted to hide an engagement ring in something, like a Loaded Potato Bite, could he do that?

We don't have that anymore, but I would suggest hiding it in a molten lava cake.

You guys would be able to do that if he brought it to you?

Yes, if he came a little bit early, or the day before. Well, probably not the day before. But if he came in a little early and was like, "Hey, you know, I'm proposing to my girl, and I want to hide this in a lava cake," we could probably do that. I don't know because of fast-food standards, but that's something -- I'll leave a note for my boss.

If he wanted to bring in some candles for the table to make it more romantic, could he do that?

Um, that's also something I'd have to ask my boss.

Do you think it's a fire hazard with the tablecloths?

There's no tablecloths, but still, the candles would probably be a fire hazard, just in general. But I'll ask. Maybe he'll think it's sweet, and he'll see if he can bend the rules.

Do you have any sort of wine selection for the holiday?

Um, no, 'cause we're a fast-food restaurant, again. So we don't really carry alcoholic beverages.

Oh, I didn't realize....

I'm just making sure you have the right restaurant, you know.

Of course. Let me just write down the little lava-cake-ring thing....That's a lovely idea!

I thought that would be really cute. Also, you have a lovely accent.

Oh, thank you!

Next...Taco Bell didn't just hang up on us -- did they?!

Taco Bell

Taco Bell: Taco Bell, _____ speaking, may I help you?

Riverfront Times: *Hello, I'm calling on behalf of my employer. I'd like to make a reservation for Valentine's Day, for around 7:30.*

I'm sorry, honey, this is Taco Bell.

Yes.

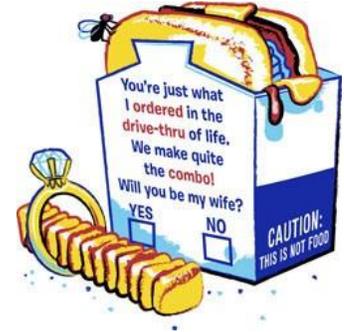
You don't need a reservation, honey.

Oh, you don't?

No.

So he could just come on in?

[Click]



A Different Taco Bell

Taco Bell: Taco Bell, this is _____ speaking, how can I help you?

Riverfront Times: *Hello, I'd like to make a reservation for my employer and his girlfriend for Valentine's Day. Around 7:30?*

For...Taco Bell?

Yes. Do you take reservations?

Oh. No, you just – we don't take reservations. But there'll be plenty of room for you guys to come up here and sit.

OK, well do you have any Valentine's Day specials?

No, we do not.

Oh, really? I'm sorry, I've never been to a Taco Bell. My boss just wanted me to call and find out. Um, if it's warm enough, will you have any instruments outside? Mariachis? Do you have an outside table?

No, we're a fast-food restaurant.

Ohhhhh, OK. Actually, they went to their first date at Taco Bell three years ago, and he's planning on proposing to her, and he was wondering if you could, like, hide an engagement ring in something.

No, we cannot.

You can't do that if he brings it in?

Nope. Health-department reasons. They're very strict.

Oh, interesting. All right. So you won't have any sort of entertainment?

No, we will not.

Will you have valet parking or anything?

No, we will not.

So you're not anticipating a large crowd?

I...no.

OK. Do you have any drink specials for Valentine's Day?

We don't serve anything but soda. And Frutista Freeze.

Oh. Interesting! So if he comes in, will he be able to get a relatively private table?

[Silence]

Hello?

I mean...no. I mean, this is a fast-food restaurant, ma'am. I don't know what to tell you besides that. Taco Bell is known around the world as a fast-food restaurant with no reservations and nothing like that. If you come in here, we'll give you great service if we can, but we don't have any instruments, private tables, candlelight, anything special like that. It's a fast-food restaurant.

OK, well I will let him know. Thank you so much.

Next..."I want to make sure I'm on the right page here. You are calling Hardee's.

Hardee's

Hardee's: Can I help you?

Riverfront Times: *Hello, is this Hardee's?*

Yes, it is.

I would like to make a reservation for my employer and his girlfriend for Valentine's Day.

OK.

Around 7:30?

OK. Hold on one second. I'm a little bit unfamiliar here. You want to reserve a space to eat, or...?

Yes.

OK, um, how many people will be coming?

Two.

Oh, OK. We don't actually have, like, a Valentine's Day spectacular or anything like that. Is that what you're thinking it was?

No, he just wants to eat there. They had their first date there three years ago. And actually, he's hoping to propose to her.

Holy crap, that's awesome!

Yeah! He wanted me to ask if you could bake an engagement ring into an apple turnover or hide one in a hamburger or something if he brings it to you.

Um, that may be interesting. I'm kind of open-minded to it, as long as we're all on the same page.

Right!

I don't want somebody to choke on it and end up with an accident or something.

No, no, of course! Maybe in a drink? Like a milk shake?

I'm sure we could work something out. [*To another employee: Are you working Valentine's Day?*] I'll tell you what. I need to -- we just got done getting beat up real good on this sausage-egg deal for this "Rise and Shine" today, and we're actually trying to wrap these numbers up and all that stuff right there. Um, I got me a pen here. What's your name?

Catherine.

Catherine. What number can I reach you at, Catherine?

OK, it's 314-754-5966.

And that is for 2-dash-14. That's actually next week.

Yes, I know! He wanted me to call and find out. I guess I just assumed that you made reservations, and I was worried that he wouldn't be able to get in.

Well, there are plenty of tables here. It's one of those things where if people would like to come in and set something up to where it was, you know, spectacular like that, I would be more than willing to offer him that area. And we can definitely work with the guy and help him out. Sounds pretty neat.

Now, I've seen your advertisements on TV, and I was wondering, do you actually have waitresses who look like Kim Kardashian or Kate Upton?

No, I don't, actually.

That might make his girlfriend uncomfortable.

I just want to make sure we're on the same page, because White Castle actually does do something....

Yes, I believe I've heard of that.

It is Hardee's that you're calling.

Yes.

Yeah, I think we can work on something with him. Is he maybe planning on coming in earlier in the day to do anything spectacular? Like setting things up or anything?

Sure, he could do that.

OK, terrific. You said this is your boss?

Yes. Will you have valet parking or anything?

I don't.

And will you have drink specials?

I want to make sure I'm on the right page here. You are calling Hardee's.

Yes. I'm sorry, I've never been to a Hardee's.

Well, we're a quick-service restaurant. So, you know, there's a drive-through, there's a lobby. I mean, it's not anything extravagant. But you know, if it's something special where they met, it's definitely what would work out good for them.

OK, well thank you very much. I will let him know.

Thanks, Catherine. Have a great day.

Next...Sonic: "If they roll up the windows of the car, will people come bother them after they're done eating?"

Sonic

Sonic: Sonic, this is _____, can I help you?

Riverfront Times: Hello, I'm calling to make a reservation for my employer and his girlfriend for Valentine's Day. Uh, we don't take reservations.

You don't?

This is Sonic Drive-In.

Yes. He and his girlfriend went on their first date to Sonic, so he told me to call and find out. I'm sorry, I just assumed that....

Yeah, no, 'cause we're a quick-service restaurant. I know White Castle does reservations, but we don't do — you just pull up any time, and you can place an order.

You pull up? Do you have tables?

There's the patio.

Oh, OK. Do you have any Valentine's Day specials?

Since it's Thursday, we have our Jr. Double Cheesburger and onion rings for \$2.99.

OK. So he can sit on the patio if he wants to?

Yeah, you can sit on the patio or in your car, whichever. We don't have a dine-in, but we do have a patio and everything.

Could he bring some candles for the table to make it more romantic?

If he wants to.

So, if he doesn't need a reservation -- you're not anticipating a large crowd, then?

No, not Valentine's Day night.

Will you have any music outside or anything?

My stereo is broken outside right now.

Oh no! You should get a string band for Valentine's Day!

Uh, I don't think my franchise would pay for that.

OK, so I have a weird question, I suppose. I know my employer fairly well. So if they pull up in the car...they can order in the car?

Yes.

OK.

If he's been to a Sonic before, he should know how it works.

Yes, he probably does. He didn't really tell me much. So, if they roll up the windows of the car, will people come bother them after they're done eating?

They might get a check-back, but that's about it.

OK. Just checking. I know this man.

Yeah, we just make sure that everybody is OK. They might walk by and give him a thumbs-up.

Like, "Way to go, sir! On Valentine's Day!"

Well, no, it's just making sure they don't need anything.

Right. And there's no tablecloths or anything outside?

No.

Good to know. So, he's actually planning on proposing, I believe. If he wants to hide an engagement ring in something that you make, would that be possible?

He would just need to talk to my assistant who's working that night. They would do something for him, they just need –

He can come earlier.

Yeah. I'm the general manager, but I won't be here Thursday, but one of my assistants can help him out.

They went on their first date to Sonic. I think that's why he wants to go back. OK, I will have him go there early then and talk to someone. Thank you so much!

The Market at the Cheshire Invites You to Belly Up to the Deli

Posted By Kaitlin Steinberg on Thu, Mar 7, 2013 at 9:00 am

Behind the stone and *fachwerk* façade of the new **Market at the Cheshire** (7036 Clayton Avenue; 314-932-7840) is, well, exactly what should be in a rustic little pitched-roof building. The Market is part gourmet grocer, part European-style bakery and café, and the interior is warm and provincial. There's a roaring fireplace, mismatched chairs and tables and stained glass windows, all of which invite guests to stay long past breakfast. And why not, when the lunch options are so tasty?

The Market is one of three dining options in the complex (the others are **The Restaurant at the Cheshire** and **Basso**), and it's by far the homiest. Think the little pub in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, but classier, and without a beefy prick singing children's songs.

The Market opened Monday in a building constructed more than 80 years ago by Bill Medart, a prominent local businessman. The complex, including the accompanying Cheshire Inn and restaurant building, has changed hands a few times in the intervening years; its current renovation was undertaken by St. Louis-based Lodging Hospitality Management in 2010.



"Because of our location and the neighborhood and families around here, we thought it would be a great place," says Market manager Lucy Bommarito. "It's close to Forest Park, so people can come in and get takeout to bring on a picnic." The kitchen serves breakfast and lunch; the market area features take-away items, cheeses and a daunting number of locally sourced goodies.

"We try to be as seasonal as possible," Bommarito says. "Part of our mission is definitely to be as local as possible as well. That's pretty important to me."

Wines are chosen by Master Sommelier-in-training Patricia Wamhoff, and Bommarito assures us that the Market's selection isn't available in any other stores in town. Most bottles are priced under \$30.

Lunch prices are likewise reasonable, with sandwiches ranging from \$6.75 to about \$10, and each sandwich is big enough to feed two people (provided you're not super-hungry). Bommarito says the turkey and chicken are smoked in-house, and everything is made to order. The lunch menu, created by executive chef Rex Hale, includes hearty sandwiches, salads and different soups every day. The Market chefs also make their own gelato, cakes and cookies.

Once the weather gets warmer, Bommarito says, the Market will add outside seating and, possibly, a small farmers' market. She hopes the outside seating will allow the café to be dog friendly (outdoors). With a fireplace, free wi-fi and a locavore-ish menu, the Market at the Cheshire hopes to inject a bit of European style to the eastern reaches of Clayton and the other end of Dogtown.

What To Do With All Those Peeps You Don't Want to Eat

Posted By Kaitlin Steinberg on Mon, Apr 1, 2013 at 9:00 am

Another Easter has come and gone. We've gorged ourselves with festive, pastel-colored candy (**only the best kind though**), we've found most of the **eggs that we hid in the yard** (that'll be a nasty surprise next year) and we've enjoyed spending time with family and friends (now we don't have to again 'till the Fourth of July). And what do we have to show for all of this holiday spirit?

Peeps. A shit ton of Marshmallow Peeps.

Sure, they're cute and they're an Easter icon, but what are they really good for anyway? Gut Check has rounded up our favorite Peep projects in hope that we can inspire you to greatness.



Here are the top six things to do with leftover Peeps...

1. Jousting Peeps

I don't know about you folks, but where Gut Check comes from, this is a tried and true Easter tradition. You'll need a microwave safe plate, two toothpicks and however many Peeps you're willing to sacrifice in battle. Oh, and a microwave. The chick Peep variety are best for this game, but bunnies will work too. Place the Peeps facing each other and stick the toothpicks into the Peeps so they look like they have their jousting rods facing each other. Turn the microwave on for a minute. Whoever's Peep inflates and stabs the other one first is the winner. Then, we suppose, you can eat the gooey mess.

2. Peepsicles

Let's face it: Peeps are pretty bland. They really need something to make them a little tastier, and since chocolate makes everything tastier, it's a perfect combo. Melt some chocolate (milk, dark, white – it don't matter), jam a stick up a Peep's rear, and dip it in. If you're feeling fancy, roll the chocolate-dipped Peep in some nuts. Freeze until the chocolate has hardened. These are especially fun because you get to say, "Peepsicle" a lot while making them.

3. Peep S'mores (S'meeps)

OK, so Peep s'mores aren't exactly innovative, but they are delish. We recommend placing two Peeps on one half of a graham cracker and two rectangles of Hershey's Milk Chocolate on the other half of the graham cracker. Broil in an oven or toaster oven until the Peeps double in size and the chocolate looks melty. Assemble and serve. Word to the wise: Peeps harden when they've been heated then cooled. So...have fun with that.

4. Peep Art

Pop artist Robert Rauschenberg said, "I think a painting is more like the real world if it's made out the real world." If you follow this line of reasoning, art will be more like reality if it's made of out Peeps. Yeah, we're pretty sure that's what he meant. Regardless, Peeps come in pink, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, brown and white. That's pretty much the full color spectrum. Now go! Get your hot glue gun and a piece of cardboard and make a masterpiece!
...Ahem, masterpeeps.



5. Peep-Infused Vodka

You guys, this is a real thing. Gut Check would love to take credit for this invention, but alas, peeps the world over have long been infusing vodka with Peeps. We made some of our own though, just to test it out. You'll need a mason jar or some other large, sealable receptacle, vodka and, of course, Peeps. Stuff that jar full of Peeps, then pour vodka (not top shelf, trust us) over the Peeps. Refrigerate for three days. The vodka will take on the color of the Peeps, so plan accordingly. Don't mix purple and yellow, or the Peep vodka will be even less appealing than it is by nature. Strain the Peep remnants out of the vodka before you serve, but don't throw them out! They're now a fun, alcoholic Easter treat with an atrocious texture! Fun!

6. Famous Peeps

Ah, the Peep diorama. It's become almost as much of an Easter tradition as hunting for eggs and biting the heads off of chocolate bunnies. If you do a search for "Peep diorama," you'll get millions of images of peeps recreating various moments from entertainment, politics and history. In honor of this, we've created some famous St. Louis Peeps. See if you can guess who they are! Scroll down for the answers.



Kaitlin Steinberg

Hint: These Peeps are St. Louis icons. Actually, the dude in the Cardinals baseball uniform could be any player, but we have a beloved, recently deceased Cardinal in mind.



Kaitlin Steinberg

Hint: These Peeps are in the entertainment industry. And the one on the far right has quite the bulge.



Kaitlin Steinberg

Hint: These are famous Peep couples. The couple on the left are well-known musicians, and the couple on the right are explorers. And only one of the explorers is actually from here.

Brio Tuscan Grille's Dirty Martini (With Cougar): Gut Check's Hump-Day Cocktail Suggestion

Posted By Kaitlin Steinberg on Wed, Apr 3, 2013 at 8:00 am

Wednesday. Hump Day. Congrats, you've made it halfway through the work week! Unfortunately, you still have two days to go.

Dunno about you, but in order to survive the midweek blues, we're going to need a drink. Which brings us to our Wednesday Gut Check feature: "Gut Check's Hump-Day Cocktail Suggestion"

Each week we take you to one of our favorite St. Louis bars (and, oh, the list is long) for a drink (or two) we -- in consultation with the bartender -- highly recommend.

According to a few of the bartenders, the hippest, most happenin' place to be in Frontenac on a Wednesday evening is **Brio Tuscan Grille** (1601 S. Lindbergh Boulevard, Frontenac; 314-432-4410).

Wednesday night is martini night at Brio, which means \$5 martinis with names such as "Razzberritini" and "Flirtini." Wednesday night is also when the cougars come out in droves to stalk their prey. No, wait, that's every night.

Brio has a reputation for attracting "cougars," older, attractive women who like to flirt with and date younger men. Gut Check had heard about this phenomenon at Brio, and not only did we witness it for ourselves, but the (cute, young, male) bartenders confirmed it.

"It always looks like Boca in here," one of the bartenders told us. "It's the dead of winter, and everyone's tan and dressed up fancy."

"Yeah, this guy over here's been getting gifts from customers," another bartender said gesturing to a third bartender. "I mean, you can't tell them to stop bringing you things. That's just not fair."

Look, we don't begrudge anyone -- cougars or otherwise -- a good time. But if you're going to get a cocktail at Brio, please be a man about it and order something that's not pink in color. Like a dry, dirty martini.

Brio has a full bar, but the cocktail list consists mainly of martinis. The dirty martini is made with Sobieski vodka, dry vermouth, a splash of olive juice and two bleu-cheese-stuffed queen olives. The olive juice and vermouth make the vodka go down easier, and the olives take on a pungent bite if you let them soak up some vodka before you eat them.

And while the flirtinis and I-want-to-drink-without-tasting-alcohol-tinis may still pack a punch, just one dirty martini will leave you feeling pretty, pretty, pretty good. So good, in fact, that you might be tempted to mosey on over to that lovely cougar sitting at the other end of the bar and strike up a conversation. *Meeeeeeow!*

First Look: Bombay Food Junkies Food Truck

Posted By Kaitlin Steinberg on Mon, Apr 22, 2013 at 10:30 am



Krupa Panchal in front of her new food truck, Bombay Food Junkies | Kaitlin Steinberg

When Sid and Krupa Panchal moved from Mumbai (formerly Bombay) to St. Louis eight years ago, they knew they would miss the street food of the coastal Indian city. Finding that none of the Indian restaurants in town specialized in the kind of food traditional to Mumbai, the Panchals took matters into their own hands.

On Saturday the Panchals celebrated the grand opening of their new food truck, **Bombay Food Junkies** (@bombayfoodtruck), with a special five-course tasting menu for their friends, family and invited guests.

"The inspiration was we grew up the majority of our lives in Bombay," Krupa Panchal explains. "It's so famous for its street foods. There are only a couple of restaurants here that provide something like it, but nothing with the same taste."

Sid and Krupa began working on creating their own food truck about six months ago. Krupa studied optometry and recently got a master's degree in gerontology. She worked in a doctor's office for a while but decided the food-truck route was her true passion. Sid is a computer engineer, and he plans to keep that job while helping out with food-truck events on the weekends. He, too, believes that Bombay Food Junkies is filling a niche in St. Louis.

"Others Indian restaurants in town are more northern Indian cuisine," he says. "It's not pick-up-and-go kind of food. You sit down and eat and have a proper meal. This is more quick, on the go. That works well with the idea of a food truck."

All of the recipes are Krupa's own, but she has had some help from her mother-in-law, who once ran a catering business back in India. Though Krupa herself is not a vegetarian, all of the cuisine that Bombay Food Junkies will serve is vegetarian, and many dishes can be prepared vegan by request.

"Ninety percent of Bombay street food is vegetarian," Krupa says, "but we don't really miss meat when we're in Bombay. We wanted to go with vegetarian because we want to have people know that there is nutrition in it, there is taste."

The Panchals took out a loan to fund the endeavor, but when it came time to decorate the truck, they realized they didn't have much money left. So they did what many restaurants have done recently: They turned to Kickstarter.

They launched a campaign in early March, offering pledgers everything from a dessert and a personalized thank-you letter for \$10 to a private party for 30 people for \$1,000. They met their \$5,000 goal on March 26, and the truck was wrapped with their colorful design and logo.



The Kickstarter-funded behemoth. | Kaitlin Steinberg

The same friends and family who helped fund the truck's design came out for the grand opening on Saturday afternoon. The Panchals offered free tastes of some of their Bombay street foods, a henna tattoo artist and some Bollywood dances courtesy of Krupa. The menu included *vada pav*, a potato patty rolled in chickpeas and spices, then fried; *pav bhaji*, mashed vegetables and spices; *bhel*, puffed rice with chopped onions and potatoes; *kulfi*, an ice cream flavored with cardamom; and finally *paan*, a betel leaf filled with rose petals, fennel seeds and dried fruit.

The Panchals intend to mix up the menu, offering different items daily, but some dishes will be fixtures. Mango lassi, a mango and yogurt drink, will always be on the menu, as will *kulfi* and the "Bombay Burgers," *vada pav*.

Based on the reaction from the crowd at the grand opening (and the speed with which the food was devoured), it's safe to say that Bombay Food Junkies has indeed supplied something that St. Louisans were missing.

The truck will officially start service at SAIC in Earth City on Tuesday, and they'll be updating their schedule daily on their website and Twitter. Bombay Food Junkies will initially spend most of its time in St. Louis county before moving into the city once it picks up some momentum. Maybe someday it'll even be popular enough to keep the same hours as street-food stands in Bombay.

"You go out on the street any time – it could be two in the morning -- and you'll find vendors selling food," Krupa says. "That's how popular it is."

The Fortune Teller Bar's "Mason Jar": Gut Check's Hump-Day Cocktail Suggestion

Posted By Kaitlin Steinberg on Wed, Apr 24, 2013 at 2:00 pm

Editor's note: Wednesday. Hump Day. Congrats, you've made it halfway through the work week! Unfortunately, you still have two days to go.

Dunno about you, but in order to survive the midweek blues, we're going to need a drink. Which brings us to our Wednesday Gut Check feature: "Gut Check's Hump-Day Cocktail Suggestion."

Each week we take you to one of our favorite St. Louis bars (and, oh, the list is long) for a drink (or two) we -- in consultation with the bartender -- highly recommend.

This week, our crystal ball told us to check out **the Fortune Teller Bar** (2635 Cherokee Street; 314-776-2337) to see what kind of magic it is mixing up.



Our charming bartender, Kelly, suggested we try the "Mason Jar" because it's composed of all housemade ingredients (aside from the dry vermouth, but close enough). The "Mason Jar," which is served in a martini glass, not a Mason jar, has a base of pickle-infused vodka that comes from a big ol' container filled with vodka and pickles on a shelf behind the bar. If you didn't know any better, you might assume you were getting pickle moonshine, but this drink goes down way smoother than moonshine ever will.

The pickle vodka is shaken with housemade lemon-hopped bitters and dry vermouth and garnished with an assortment of pickled veggies, also made in-house. They're not merely garnishes, though. With this drink, you get a tasty snack.

The folks at the Fortune Teller Bar are working on constructing an urban garden behind the building so they can grow all of their own fruits, veggies and herbs to use in their food and drinks. They hope to start pickling the home-grown vegetables and adding pickles to several more drinks.

Unless you're a bloody mary connoisseur, pickles and booze may not seem a likely pair, but trust us. It so works.

If you're looking for something a little sweeter than a pickle-y martini, try "A Pendulum." It's a refreshing blend of Espolón Reposado tequila, fresh lime juice, house-made lingonberry shrub and ginger beer. (A shrub is an infused vinegar, and yes, Gut Check is obviously having a vinegar moment.)

Stop by the Fortune Teller Bar this evening for one of these inventive cocktails and a bit of a celebration. From 6 to 9 p.m., chef Clara Moore will be at the bar launching a Kickstarter campaign to fund her new cookbook. She'll most likely have some mock-ups to show potential investors, as well as some food to demonstrate her culinary skills. We also heard something about a strolling ukelele player, but we're not getting anything definitive from our tarot cards at the moment.

Maryland House's Gin Rickey: Wednesday, May 15, 2013 Hump-Day Cocktail Suggestion

Posted By Kaitlin Steinberg on Wed, May 15, 2013 at 11:10 am

As evidenced by the multitude of cocktails consumed throughout the course of Baz Luhrmann's new spectacle, *The Great Gatsby*, Prohibition didn't exactly halt the consumption of alcoholic beverages. In fact, the alcohol ban inspired drinkers to get creative.

One such creative drinker was Col. Joseph Rickey of Missouri. He died in 1903, long before the cocktail he is said to have invented became fashionable among illicit drinkers during Prohibition.

According to Rickey's obituary, Rickey's drink of choice at the fashionable Washington, D.C. bar Shoomaker's was Kentucky whiskey topped with fizzy Apollinaris water. It wasn't until later that people started ordering the "Rickey drink" with half a lime. Later, during Prohibition when aged liquor like whiskey was hard to come by, many cocktails like the Rickey were reinvented with gin.

These days, we don't need lime juice and club soda to mask the flavor of "bathtub gin," but the drink has remained popular because it's a simple, refreshing cocktail. At **Maryland House** (4659A Maryland Avenue; 314-361-9444) you can sip a gin rickey without the fear of the feds busting in, but the speakeasy atmosphere of the place makes drinking this classic cocktail just a little more exciting.

The recipe for a gin rickey is simple enough: Two ounces of gin, the juice of half a lime and sparkling water. It's less harsh than a gin and tonic, and you also sound cooler ordering it. Maryland House bartender Aaron Barrow made us a gin rickey with St. George gin from California, and it was the perfect drink to sip by a window on a warm May night.

Maryland House also offers a number of other specialty cocktails on their summer cocktail menu, which was just introduced a few weeks ago. The menu includes drinks with names like "I Wanna Get Buzzed But I Don't Wanna Drink Drink," which is made with elderflower liqueur and "Don't Worry About It," a mixture of whiskey, ginger liqueur, fresh lemon juice and cherries.

So put on your fedoras and fringe dresses and sneak on over to Maryland House tonight for a Prohibition-era cocktail. Or don't sneak. 'Cause, you know, it's legal now.



Nine Prohibition-Era Cocktails in Honor of *The Great Gatsby* (And Because We Like to Drink)

Posted By Kaitlin Steinberg on Mon, May 20, 2013 at 1:00 pm



"There was music from my neighbor's house through the summer nights. In his blue gardens men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars...In the main hall a bar with a real brass rail was set up, and stocked with gins and liquors and with cordials so long forgotten that most of his female guests were too young to know one from another."

F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby, 1925

If Chapter 3 of F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic American novel *The Great Gatsby* doesn't make you long for a bottle of Champagne or a gin martini, you deserve Prohibition. It throws you headlong into one of Gatsby's famous parties, complete with a seemingly endless supply of bootlegged booze. The narrator, Nick Carraway, describes "floating rounds of cocktails," and a band playing "yellow cocktail music." At one point during the party, a woman "seizes a cocktail out of the air, dumps it down for courage and, moving her hands like Frisco, dances out alone on the canvas platform."

Like the party, Prohibition was in full swing, but the wealthy and careless people of Fitzgerald's novel (and the rest of the country) cared not a whit.

Fortunately for those of us who enjoy a good cocktail today, Prohibition did little to deter thirsty drinkers able to get their hands on bootlegged whiskey or bathtub gin. The pervasiveness of drinking in spite of the fact that high-quality liquor was unavailable led people to get creative with their mixed drinks.

Sure, a gin martini is a thing of beauty, but not when it's made from cheap grain alcohol mixed with juniper berry juice. To mask the unpleasant flavor of homemade spirits, people began making cocktails with other ingredients that would (hopefully) overpower the "bathtub gin." Of course, drinks like the whiskey-based Old Fashioned or the cognac Sidecar were still popular, thanks to bootleggers who brought the drinks from Europe to the U.S.

In honor of the recent release of Baz Luhrmann's bastardized version of Fitzgerald's novel, we thought we'd revisit some of the popular cocktails of the Prohibition era at some of our favorite local watering holes. Thankfully, these days, we can legally drink properly made liquor, so these cocktails have evolved from vessels to make bad booze go down easier into delicious drinks in their own right.

We imagine Gatsby would approve.

12-Mile Limit Sanctuaria (4198 Manchester Avenue; 314-535-9700)

Once the eighteenth amendment was passed and people could no longer drink in the U.S., they decided the logical solution would be to venture off the coasts into international waters. Originally, three miles was the boundary between the U.S. and no-man's land, but in an effort to keep people from partying within sight of beaches and boardwalks, the government extended its jurisdiction out to twelve miles. Of course, that didn't stop the wealthier "scofflaws" from moving their operations off the coast a few more miles where they could keep the party going.

There are several different ways to make a 12-Mile Limit, but Sanctuaria keeps it simple and strong. Bartender Nate Kromat's recipe uses white rum, Calvados (a type of apple brandy) and Swedish Punsch (a malty, slightly sweet spirit). This mixture of ingredients might sound strange, but trust us. It'll have you dancing the Charleston in no time.



Bee's Knees Mission Taco Joint (6235 Delmar Boulevard; 314-932-5430)

OK, so a Mexican Restaurant may not scream Prohibition-era gin cocktail, but bartender Nicholas Crow has made many of these in his time.

The phrase "the bee's knees" was slang for "the best" during the decades surrounding Prohibition. And what was the way to make bathtub gin taste the best? With a little lemon and honey, of course! Today, a Bee's Knees is usually made with gin, fresh lemon juice and honey simple syrup, but Crow opted to add just a touch of Fernet to make the drink more complex. We allowed it, because we happen to know that F. Scott Fitzgerald liked Fernet. He even mentioned it in his novel *Tender is the Night*, though we recommend sipping on a Bee's Knees rather than straight Fernet.

Brandy Crusta Salt (4356 Lindell Boulevard; 314-932-5787)

According to cocktail legend, the Brandy Crusta was invented in 1840 in New Orleans by a gentleman named Joseph Santini. At the time, it was the ultimate cocktail through which a bartender could show off his (and they were mostly men) skills. This is not the kind of drink your overage moonshiner would have been throwing together in his kitchen. This is what Gatsby would have consumed, just to show that he had the money for the bootlegged Cognac and the skilled bartender.

Tim Rabor insisted upon making this for us at Salt, partially as a challenge to himself. You see, the Brandy Crusta requires (depending on who you talk to) the peel of an entire orange or lemon. Some recipes will call for half a peel, but Rabor went all out for this drink. It's cognac-based with sweet, citrusy notes thanks to the peel that takes up a large part of the glass. The "crusta" part of the name refers to the sugar crust around the edge of the glass. It's not just a sugared rim, mind you. It is indeed a crust. And between that and the meticulously carved corkscrew peel, this drink is a work of art.



French 75 Maryland House (4659A Maryland Avenue; 314-361-9444)

Last week we offered up Maryland House's Gin Rickey as an ode to The Great Gatsby, and this week we're back for another speakeasy-inspired libation.

Bartender Arron Barrow popped a bottle of champagne just to make us a French 75, originally invented in Paris in 1915, but brought to the states shortly thereafter.

A French 75 is so named because the combination of gin, lemon juice, sugar and champagne is said to have the power of a French 75-millimeter M1897 field gun used in WWI. It's deceptively strong and quite possibly our new party mainstay. Champagne without gin? Never again!



Last Word The Royale (3132 S. Kingshighway; 314-772-3600)

The Last Word is made from equal amounts of gin, green Chartreuse, maraschino liqueur and fresh lime juice. Don't be fooled by its sweet, summery flavor though; this drink packs a punch. Robert Griffin of The Royale made us a Last Word, and indeed, it was the last thing we could drink. After downing the green cocktail, we were spent.

It was created in the early 1920s at the Detroit Athletic Club, which is more of a private social club than, you know, a gym. Many consider it one of the best cocktails to come out of Prohibition, though it was lost to the sands of time until the 1950s when Ted Saucier wrote about it in his cocktail book, *Bottoms Up!*

Saucier wrote: "This cocktail was introduced around here about thirty years ago by Frank Fogarty, who was very well known in vaudeville. He was called the 'Dublin Minstrel,' and was a very fine monologue artist."

We can't find anything definitive about the cocktail's name, but we imagine it's called a "Last Word" because, well, after you drink it, you're done. Consider it the singing fat lady of the cocktail world.

Sidecar The Royale

While we were at the Royale (actually, before we drank the Last Word), we had Griffin mix us up a Sidecar. This drink is thought to have been invented in Paris or London at the end of WWI, but the recipe had found its way into a few American cocktail books by 1922.

In his book, *The Fine Art of Mixing Drinks*, David A. Embury credits the invention of the Sidecar to an American Army captain in Paris during the first world war. Embury wrote it was "named after the motorcycle sidecar in which the good captain was driven to and from the little bistro where the drink was born and christened." How quaint.

The Sidecar is a 3-2-1 ratio mix of Cognac, Cointreau and lemon juice, perfect for a bootlegger with a nice stock of French booze.





Southside Sanctuaria

After we downed a 12-Mile Limit at Sanctuaria, we asked what else bartender Nate Kromat could mix up that might be reminiscent of Prohibition drinking. He suggested a Southside, which might be our new favorite cocktail ever. It's essentially a mojito with gin instead of rum. Minty, fresh and delish.

The Southside is said to have been invented at the 21 Club, a former speakeasy in New York, and named for the south side of either Chicago or New York. Another story places its invention in Chicago at the center of gang wars between the north city gangs and the south city gangs. The north city gangs were importing bootlegged liquor from Canada during Prohibition, but the south city guys were stuck making bathtub gin. As we mentioned earlier, it wasn't super tasty, so mint and citrus were added to make it go down a little smoother. It's said to have been the favorite drink of Al Capone and his gang, so next time you sip a Southside, put a little swagger in your step.

Ward 8 Taste *(4584 Laclede Avenue; 314-361-1200)*

Our last two Prohibition-era cocktails come from Taste, where bartender **Joel Burton** mixed up a couple of masterpieces.

The Ward 8 originated in 1898 at the bar of Locke-Ober restaurant in Boston. It got its name from Bostonian politician Martin M. Lomasney, who hoped to win a seat in the state's legislature, the General Court of Massachusetts. In 1989, Ward 8 provided him with the winning margin of votes, and the drink was created in honor of this victory.

During Prohibition, the cocktail was made with rye whiskey, which would have been pretty harsh were it not for the combination of lemon juice, orange juice and grenadine, which somewhat mask the whiskey. Today, of course, it's made with good whiskey, so the flavor is only enhanced by the citrus and grenadine.



White Lady Taste

Finally, a cocktail with egg whites!

The White Lady was invented in 1919 by Harry MacElhone of Harry's New York Bar in Paris. It originally included crème de menthe, but once gin became stylish in the mid-1920s, the minty liqueur was replaced with gin and an egg white was added to the recipe. And it's a good thing too, because the gin iteration is pretty darn good. The egg white gives it a thick, frothy texture, while the Cointreau and lemon juice balance out the gin.

The use of an egg white and Cointreau makes this drink slightly more upscale than your average speakeasy cocktail, but we can imagine the beautiful women at Gatsby's parties dripping in pearls and rhinestones sipping on a White Lady or two. As the evening came to a close, they'd set down their glasses still foamy with egg whites and attempt to strut out of the party, before ultimately being carried out to the car and driven back to the real world.

Time Magazine's 'Gods of Food' Feature Ignores Scores of Great (Female) Chefs

BY KAITLIN STEINBERG

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 26, 2013 AT 6 AM



Time magazine recently published a feature on the 13 most influential people in the food world. The list actually included 15 people and a company, but it wasn't the fact that editors seemingly can't count that had readers, chefs, restaurateurs and just about everybody else in the food industry commenting on the piece.

It's that of the 15 people, only four of them are women. And none of the four women profiled are chefs. They're influential in other ways --some would argue more so than the men written about -- but the glaring omission in the article begs the question: Where are all the great female chefs?

As soon as the piece came out, men and women in the culinary world began drafting commentaries on what most feel is an obvious snub of all the women who paved the way for some of the top male chefs to rise in the ranks or are innovating without shouting about it from the rooftops. People bring up Alice Waters again and again, as well as, among others, Elena Arzak, Nancy Silverton and Barbara Lynch.

Waters is, of course, the founder of Chez Panisse in Berkeley, and though she's more of a restaurateur than a chef, her emphasis on fresh, local organic produce back before it was cool to eat heirloom tomatoes certainly changed the way we eat and think about food. Arzak is a Spanish chef whose restaurant has three Michelin-stars, and she won the 2012 title of best female chef in the world from *Restaurant* magazine (though some might argue that the word "female" needn't be part of that epithet). Silverton redefined bread when she opened La Brea bakery in 1989, and has owned (and still owns) several other restaurants. Lynch has a veritable culinary empire in Boston and dozens of awards to her name.

And then there are the late, great female chefs, such as Eugénie Brazier, the first chef to earn six Michelin stars, which she did all the way back in 1933, and Julia Child, who brought gourmet cooking to the masses through her TV shows and seminal cookbooks.

So where were all of these women in the *Time* magazine feature? This is not to say that anyone featured on *Time's* list is undeserving. The chefs include David Chang, Alex Atala, René Redzepi, Albert Adrià, Yottam Ottolenghi, Sami Tamimi and Dan Barber, each laudable for his original cuisine, famous restaurant(s) and approach to food and eating. Chang opened the now legendary Momofuku and is the emperor of a global culinary powerhouse. Barber is a leader in the local food movement, and the James Beard Foundation named him the top chef in America in 2009. Redzepi's restaurant, Noma, in Copenhagen, has been voted the best restaurant in the world for the past three years. These are no small feats.

Still, the women on the list are renowned for considerably less flashy culinary roles, none of which involves being in a kitchen. Aida Batlle is a coffee grower in El Salvador who emphasizes site-specific, slow-roasted coffee. Amrita Patel is the chairperson of the National Dairy Development Board in India, and Vandana Shiva leads the charge against genetically modified food. And then there's Ertharin Cousin, the head of the U.N. World Food Programme, who *Time* says "is responsible for feeding more people than anyone else on the planet."

Aside from Cousin, these women aren't often in the spotlight -- at least not to the extent their male chef counterparts are. They're each incredibly influential, and yet, readers haven't been satisfied by this offering from. None of the featured women are the type of culinary innovators who get the level of national attention enjoyed by the likes of Chang, Redzepi or Atala, whom *Time* labels the "Dudes of Food."

In a separate infographic for Internet and iPad readers, *Time* traced the culinary lineage of chefs around the world, implying that many of the greats have either worked for or been directly influenced by René Redzepi, Alain Passard, the Adrià brothers (Ferran and Albert) or Thomas Keller. Of the more than 50 chefs mentioned on this list -- including Houston's Justin Yu -- none is a woman.

Again, we have to ask: Where are all the great female chefs?

The *New York Times* was one of the first media outlets to respond to *Time's* feature, and it did so by enlisting five individuals (four of them women) to debate the exclusion. Well, the paper calls it a debate, but it was more like five people each agreeing that female chefs are overlooked by everyone from the media to investors to diners.

Gabrielle Hamilton, chef and owner of Prune in New York City and the author of *Blood, Bones and Butter: The Inadvertent Education of a Reluctant Chef*, delivered one of the most interesting ideas in her essay, a portion of which is excerpted below:

There are a lot of important opportunities to raise up one's voice, to throw bricks, but this one just seems suspiciously too simplistic and low-hanging -- even for me who is always so quick to ire. I just don't like the way it perfectly sets me up like a dog on a leash: Master kicks the dog and I'm supposed to bark? I think the kicking of the dog speaks for itself.

It's a compelling notion -- that *Time* is essentially poking readers in anticipation of their cries. But then Hamilton asks a more important question: Where are all the neighbors who see the master kicking the dog? What do they think? What do David Chang or Thomas Keller think about being lauded on a list that left out an entire segment of their peers? What is more important, more meaningful: women standing up for other women, or the fawned-over men admitting the *Time* piece is unbalanced?

Hamilton concludes her brief by writing:

Waiting to get on a list, working to get on a list -- this is a time- and soul-suck with no good end. To slip the leash and leave the master standing there holding it while you meanwhile are around the corner throwing an awesome party with all of your friends is the greatest act of defiance I can think of.

Other chefs who commented for the *Times* response looked for a way to place blame for the fact that women do, in actuality, wield less power in the culinary world. Chef Anita Lo, who owns Annisa in Manhattan, says that investors and media consumers should be held responsible. Amanda Cohen points to the attention the media gives to male chefs over female chefs, while Alan Richman thinks the list is "accurate and, for that matter, obvious," because men in the industry hold women back. It's not the women's fault, he seems to be saying, that they just aren't up to snuff in the kitchen.

Boston Magazine immediately reached out to Barbara Lynch, a woman many thought should have been on the list, to get her take on *Time's* snub. Lynch said she thinks *Time's* editor, Howard Chua-Eoan, was clearly looking to get attention with his choices for the feature. "Not that the men in the article aren't talented," she says. "But come on, they have major PR support, and because I've chosen not to be a flash in the pan, I've worked that much harder to be on the national playing field."

In an [interview with Eater](#) about the story, Chua-Eoan addressed the omission of Lynch. He basically said that though Lynch has just as many restaurants as David Chang, Chang's are spread over the globe, while Lynch's are in Boston only. Therefore he has more cultural influence. "David is a very good entrepreneur," Chua-Eoan said, "which is something beyond just being a cook."

In a nutshell, here's the reasoning Chua-Eoan gave Eater for not including any female chefs among the "Gods":

None of them have a restaurant that we believe matches the breadth and size and basically empire of some of these men that we picked. They have the reputation and all that and it's an unfortunate thing. The female chef is a relatively recent phenomenon, except for Alice, who has been around for a long time. None of them have the recent breadth that these guys have.

We aren't sure we completely accept Chua-Eoan's excuse for the lack of -- shall we say -- goddesses on the list. We reached out to some local chefs to find out how they feel about the issue.

"I guess the interesting thing is that unless we yell and scream about it, they're not going to do it any differently," says Monica Pope, chef and owner of Sparrow Bar + Cookshop. "But if we do we're bitches."

Pope is a well-known and outspoken local food personality, and has made it clear that she's offended not only by *Time's* lack of acknowledgment of the great female chefs out there, but also the lack of respect she feels as a female chef here in Houston.

"People think 'Oh Monica is bitter and angry and resentful,'" Pope says. "But I'm past all that. Years ago, a local writer here did a cover story about 100 foodies in Houston. It could have been anyone -- chefs, real estate agents, whatever. Ninety-nine percent of the descriptions of the foodies were positive, but mine was 'The most failed chef in Houston.' I asked what does that mean? I was two years into t'afia. Why am I the most failed chef? You know what the response was? 'Oh, we were just being snarky.'"

Pope seems to have landed on an issue that comes up again and again when discussing women in positions of power or authority, particularly in the kitchen: a lack of respect, even from other women. In responding to *Time's* article, legendary restaurateur (and chef, though many won't call her that) Alice Waters told a *Time* reporter, "When you see women in the kitchen you think it's a domestic thing, and when you see men you think it's a creative thing. That's what we need to change."

"It's related to what women do, which is nurture and cook for their families," Pope says in agreement. "That's not cool. And with the men, it's all about the whole pig and the fire and the 'look at me.'"

Sylvia Casares, chef and owner of [Sylvia's Enchilada Kitchen](#), thinks that there's a business aspect to the oversights as well. Men are generally more respected in the business world, and as anyone who's owned a restaurant knows, it is first and foremost a business.

"Women have been in leadership roles everywhere for the past 20 years," Casares says. "We've been breaking the glass ceiling and educating ourselves to do things that have been male-dominated. It may be that there are no empires run by women chefs, but the food industry is very male-dominated."

Tracy Vaught, owner of [Hugo's](#) and [Backstreet Cafe](#) and a partner at [Prego](#) and [Trevisio](#), thinks the notion that women are somehow lesser than men -- in the kitchen or the boardroom -- is absurd. Vaught, along with her husband, Hugo Ortega, has been busy getting her latest venture, Caracol, up and running, but she took the time to respond to the controversy in an email. "I do feel it is ridiculous to imply or say that women aren't as good as men as cooks. How many successful women in the business do you think were asked to weigh in on the issue? Rhetorical question. It seems silly to even address it, and I am not really interested in the controversy of it all. Rather, I will just get right back to work."

That seems to be indicative of the attitude of successful female chefs and restaurateurs. Put your head down and get back to work, and maybe, someday, someone will notice.

Casares thinks the best way to make sure women start getting the credit they deserve is to not keep quiet when influential media outlets like *Time* drop the ball. "I think we need to be calling people like *Time* out on it," Casares says. "We need to be pointing it out. If you keep quiet, they'll just keep doing it. It's going to take time, but women just have to continue to push and compete and get the attention of whoever is influential in media."

Others, like Pope, think that it's going to take a lot more than a few angry women to change things. She wants to see men standing up for female chefs as well.

"Maybe we are guilty of not standing up for ourselves and saying fuck all of y'all," Pope says. "And I'm pretty sure the articles won't be any nicer if we do say that. The world isn't equal, it's not balanced. It's still 76 cents on the dollar we're paid. And guys think that's perfectly fine."

So where do we go from here? The answer seems simple: Give women the credit they deserve. But it's not that easy.

As Alice Waters said, *Time's* feature didn't focus on the things that are important to many people: eating local, sustainable, seasonal food; feeding your community; and making a difference outside of the kitchen as well.

"If we celebrated food for what it should be celebrated for," Waters says, "women would just naturally rise to the top."

All That Glitters Isn't Gold at Mr. Peeples

BY KAITLIN STEINBERG

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2013 AT 4 AM



Coming back for brunch the next day was like returning to the scene of a crime.

Under the harsh light of day, the previous night's gluttonous escapades seemed somehow dirtier, the revelry less validated. Even the waitstaff had a different air about them, slower and almost guilty, as if they, too, had been overcome by the smorgasbord of food and alcohol and glittering lights and loud, reverberating techno music from the night before.

Sidling up to the bar for some eggs and hair of the dog, I wondered if the place should even be open before dark. Sure, there were plenty of people stopping by for smoked salmon omelets and Captain Crunch French toast, but does anyone really need the option of \$30 lobster risotto or *petit filet mignon* at noon? Does anyone yearn to dine nestled in plush, overstuffed, scarlet-red chairs beneath ornate pink crystal chandeliers while completely sober? Is graffiti as hip and alluring in the glow of daylight as it is when seen through shafts of purple and fuchsia light, illuminating a word ("dance") here or an image (Pee-wee Herman) there?

In my opinion, the answers are no, no and no.

As I ate my jumbo lump crab omelet to the sounds of a techno remix of Neil Young's "Heart of Gold," I couldn't help wondering if this place was, somehow, someone's idea of an inside joke. When a restaurant group has enough money, it can open whatever the hell it wants and hope that curiosity and hype alone keep it afloat, right? How else to explain the 40,000-square-foot-hip-hop-lounge-meets-Vegas-steakhouse-circa-1987-meets-the-set-of-Prince's-*Purple Rain* that is the inimitable **Mr. Peeples**?

Am I missing something?

The crab-meat omelet I had for brunch was probably the best thing I ate at the newest project from the Landmark Houston Hospitality Group, which unveiled Mr. Peeples at the end of July this year. The restaurant's slogan is "Seafood. Steak. Style", but I found the less stylish dishes to be more alluring than the overwrought steaks and the sometimes superfluous lobster for lobster's sake.

Of course, it's hard to mess up an omelet, but I appreciate that Mr. Peeples doesn't endeavor to do so. Three fluffy eggs envelop chunks of ripe avocado, marinated artichoke hearts and crab meat as good as what you could get at any fresh-seafood dive. On the side is a perfectly fine potato and bell pepper hash. The omelet is topped with roasted tomato salsa and microgreens, an omnipresent garnish at Mr. Peeples. It was filling. It was tasty. It didn't challenge me, but it served its purpose, which was to be flavorful and sate my hunger. But the entire time I was eating it (and listening to the bartender tell me about the novel he's writing), I kept thinking about similar omelets available elsewhere for less money.

Of course, other omelets don't come with glittering chandeliers and red velvet pool tables and microgreens.

"Sweet" and "mushy" are the words we settled upon to describe Mr. Peeples. Sweet and mushy.

Even before dessert arrived, we'd unanimously agreed that those two adjectives best characterized the food, which is unfortunate, because, generally, the only course that should be sweet and mushy is dessert.

And then there's the atmosphere, which, in spite of the restaurant's desperate attempt to be hip and edgy, also feels sweet. And mushy. Describing it can sound like a monologue from *Saturday Night Live's* Stefon.

"This place has everything: Artist-commissioned graffiti with Banksy-esque stencils; gilded fences guarding the entranceway that may or may not be repurposed headboards from a kinky Medieval bed; curtained VIP lounge rooms that invite some hanky-panky while you wait for a table; ever-changing LED disco lights; chandeliers that glow without any apparent light source; husky-voiced waiters who know how to sell steak; women shivering because they're not dressed for the cold and/or the decor is giving them a seizure; dazzled drunks; confused Midwesterners; a DJ ruining all your favorite hits from Club 6400; shag carpet; topiaries; and enough purple to make Tinkie Winkie blush."

The over-the-top glitzy design could be forgiven if the food lived up to the intrigue of the space. But the menu, which focuses on steaks and seafood prepared in every classic style from *campechano* to coconut-crusted, seems humdrum, even under glowing neon lights.

Take the crab cakes, for example. They're possessed of plenty of lump crab meat with nary a shell in sight, but they're so undercooked that they don't hold together at all. Even the dark sear on the outside of each half-dollar-sized nugget cannot mask the fact that they're more crab mush than crab cake. The flavor is fine (if oddly saccharine), but the cilantro aioli, Dijon cream and maddening microgreens that accompany the appetizer do little to make it stand out amid a sea of other crustacean dishes.

The *campechano* (as it's written on the menu) – which, when referring to the food and not the Spanish word for "friendly" should be spelled *campechana* – is full of excellent lobster and crab meat and served in a martini glass surrounded by bright yellow strips of fried plantain chips. It paints a colorful picture, but suffers from too much sugary ketchup and not enough acidic citrus and spicy chile sauce.

Perhaps the best appetizer is house-smoked salmon "served with traditional accompaniments." Turns out these traditional accompaniments include everything one could want with smoked salmon – crispy bagel toast, diced onions, dollops of whipped cream, capers, hard-boiled eggs and a decoratively sliced lemon. Oh, and microgreens. The deconstructed lox and bagels is one dish at Mr. Peeples that's as spectacular in taste as it is in presentation.

But as the restaurant's slogan suggests, it's the cooked-to-order steaks and the expensive seafood entrées that Mr. Peeples is most proud of. Much of the top-dollar cuisine here can be disappointing, but I'll give the restaurant props for its near-perfect pork chops. The double Berkshire chops glazed with honey and perched atop a caramelized onion and apple slaw demonstrate how sweet and savory can work together harmoniously. There's nothing excessive about this dish. The chops are seasoned with salt and pepper, then pan-fried in the honey glaze and served with a single sprig of rosemary. Every aspect – from the light seasoning to the slight crust that keeps the interior juicy – is well executed.

I cannot say the same about the Wagyu steak, however, whose price increases if you want sauce or anything other than a single hunk of meat on your plate. I ordered mine medium-rare. The waiter dropped it off at the table, then walked away with nothing but a quickly uttered "Enjoy." When I cut into the steak, it was immediately obvious that it was well-done (on its way to desiccated), but the server was nowhere to be found. I hailed a busboy, who politely agreed to inquire about a new steak. When my server reappeared, he seemed jovial, as if pleased I'd already eaten the impeccable piece of meat.

By the time the new (smaller) steak was ready, my companions had nearly finished their pork chops and luxurious but questionably sweet vanilla lobster risotto. The steak was good, and the \$15 Oscar sauce that topped it was salty. That's about all I have to say about that.

Have you been keeping track of how many things I described as sweet, sugary or saccharine? Have you counted how many of those were desserts? Don't bother. None of them was a dessert, because the desserts at Mr. Peeples are in a sweet and mushy category all their own.

I was honestly surprised by the unimpressive white chocolate bread pudding and confusing strawberry cheesecake, because I've had other desserts made elsewhere by the pastry chef, Johnny "Sweetcakes" Wesley, and they were interesting, delicious and beautiful. Perhaps the server steered me wrong; "the best bread pudding in Houston" tasted like challah bread soaked in sweet milk, then baked for a few minutes, while the cheesecake with "strawberries three ways" and a crust of crushed graham crackers left me scratching my head. Crushed graham crackers look a lot like dirt, and one of the three ways the strawberries were presented was chopped – as if this were a feat of culinary excellence.

At brunch the next day, in between sipping on a Bloody Mary that tasted as if it had been made with a cheap mix and trying to figure out if the chandeliers were actually that fantastic or if their glowing hues came from nearby colored bulbs shining on them, I ran the previous evening through my mind. Had I gone back in time to a club in the late '80s, where atmosphere trumps taste and surf and turf is the dish *du jour*? What was in that risotto that made it so mysteriously sweet? Was that Einstein painted on the wall? Is this really the future

of Midtown dining?

Adding together the valet, the cocktails and wine, the appetizers, entrées and desserts, a dinner for two at Mr. Peeples can run you about \$200. Some of the things you eat, such as the smoked salmon and the pork chops, will be worth it. Most of the rest of the menu can be found elsewhere around Houston for less money and with less pretense.

It's an interesting place, I'll give it that. And it seems to be someone's idea of what Houstonians want, though I don't personally know anyone who seeks out crystal and spray paint and velour and steak – and microgreens – all in one convenient location. In a way, those damn microgreens are a metaphor for Mr. Peeples as a whole. Aside from a few particular types of flavor-packed baby greens, such as cilantro or Italian basil, they don't add anything substantive to the meal. They're decorative. They proclaim to the diner, "This is fancy and pretty and expensive, and someone put a lot of thought into it."

Someone put a lot of thought into that funky decor, too, and really, that's what you're paying for at Mr. Peeples. The atmosphere. And the DJ. And the microgreens.

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The Alamo Drafthouse Takes Dinner and a Movie to a New Level

BY KAITLIN STEINBERG

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 2014 AT 4 A.M.



It was as if Joaquin Phoenix and I were on a date.

We gazed into each other's eyes. I took a sip of wine. He chuckled lovingly. I took a bite of my oversize burger, the thin, almost fast-food-style patty bringing back memories of high school dates at Whataburger. He told me about his failed marriage and how he longs to be in love again. I sighed and started to tell him about my life, but I got shushed by the person sitting next to me. Apparently he and Joaquin were having a moment as well, only theirs was over nachos and a martini instead of wine and a burger.

This is dinner and a movie — simultaneously instead of one after the other — at **Alamo Drafthouse Cinema**, where conversations happen silently between you and the person on screen rather than the person next to you. There's a no-talking rule, of course, because you're in a theater, but that doesn't detract from the dining experience. Somehow, eating in the dark with only the glow of a screen illuminating your plate is a very intimate experience.

When you eat in a theater, you no longer eat with your eyes. They're otherwise occupied. You no longer dissect your meal verbally with the person next to you, commenting that there's some acid missing here or too much salt there. You no longer take photos of your food and send them off into cyberspace for the rest of the world to see and crave. You do what you're meant to do with food, what we often forget to do in this age of constant criticism and technology. You eat.

I honestly couldn't tell you if my pizza at Alamo Drafthouse was visually attractive. At times, when the screen went white for a moment, I could make out the vaguely pink outline of sliced prosciutto, the dark-green wilted crescents of spinach tucked beneath a thin layer of sour pecorino and stretchy mozzarella. I could see the oily glint of the slightly charred crust flicker before me for a moment before the room went dark again and my meal became vague outlines of gray once more.

What I can tell you, though, is that the pizza – in fact everything I ate at Alamo Drafthouse – is surprisingly good. I was excited to learn that much of what comes out of the Alamo Drafthouse kitchen is made from scratch. The pizza dough doesn't come pre-kneaded from a Sysco freezer truck. It's prepared on-site, as is the creamy white sauce that serves as a base for about half the pizzas on the menu (the other half employ a zingy red tomato sauce). The mozzarella and pecorino are grated fresh for each pizza order, and nothing topping the pies tastes canned or frozen, from the portobello and oyster mushrooms on one pizza to the brussels sprouts and goat cheese on another.

The only thing that could improve upon the Drafthouse pizzas is a wood-burning oven. But really, we're still talking about a movie theater here. I'm impressed there is pizza at all.

When I think of movie food, I picture bright-yellow popcorn so salty it makes your mouth dry out and \$5 boxes of Milk Duds or Sour Patch Kids. I remember sipping Coke ICEEs while huddling next to a boyfriend during a scary movie. It seems that as I've matured, though, movie food has as well.

Alamo Drafthouse was founded in Austin in 1997 with two primary tenets: No talking would be allowed during films, and good food and beer would be served. Perhaps because it started as such a small operation — one screen in an old parking garage and specialty meals made to pair with specific films — the Drafthouse has managed to maintain a high standard of cuisine, even though the chain now operates more than a dozen theaters in six states.

Of course, the concept of a dinner theater isn't new. As long as there have been stages, there have been people eating while they watch performances, but the specific style of Alamo Drafthouse is so successful that it's been emulated by other theaters around the country. So, too, has the steadfast rule stipulating that if you talk or text during the film, you'll be kicked out of the theater. But for me, being cut off from sharing my thoughts digitally makes a meal more enjoyable.

When you sit down behind one of the long tables that line every row (preferably before the lights go out), you take a look at the menu and write down your selections on paper stored in a cubbyhole. Then, at any point before or during the film, a server will come by, crouching and walking softly, retrieve your order, give it a once-over in the dim light of the screen and head back to the kitchen to get things cooking. It's an amusing spectacle, these servers scurrying about, trying as diligently as possible not to interrupt the moviegoing experience. They won't even talk to you unless they have a question about your order — a welcome relief from those pesky waiters who want to be immediate friends in so many restaurants.

The servers stop taking orders and bring you your check 30 minutes before the film ends, but if you're still hungry by then, you're doing it wrong. The menu features just about anything one might crave at a movie – save for truly ethnic items like curry, stir-fry, garlicky pasta, etc. Stylistically, it resembles the type of food one might find at Chili's, but flavor-wise, it's far better, from the salads to the freshly baked cookies that arrive at your table still too hot to eat.

The cookies (chocolate chip, double chocolate and peanut butter) are made in the kitchen at the theater. Dessert options are limited to cookies, ice cream, movie candy (still in those cardboard boxes and still overpriced) and milkshakes made even better by the addition of a little somethin' somethin'. The Mexican chocolate shake is the ideal end to a movie dinner, spiked with a bit of *reposado* tequila and laced with cinnamon for that slightly spicy *abuelita* chocolate taste.

If sitting for two hours and eating heavy food sounds like a recipe for a stomachache, don't let a movie theater salad scare you; Alamo Drafthouse's lighter options are the way to go. An \$11 chopped salad made me fall in love with a simple vegetarian dish – devoid of truffle oil or pork belly or unnecessary fruit and nuts – all over again. Too frequently I'm put off by overly complicated mixtures, but the chopped salad here is an ideal blend of arugula, radicchio, and red and green leaf lettuce, with just a hint of basil pesto balsamic dressing. The roasted red peppers and Kalamata olives add vinegary acid to the mix, while marble-size balls of fresh mozzarella provide a cool surprise every few bites.

Veggie burger patties, available in place of any regular burger on the menu, are juicy and flavorful enough that most wouldn't miss the beef, and a basil pesto frittata off the brunch menu (which is offered "all day, every day") is perfect for an afternoon screening.

I did take issue with the nachos, though, which had too much chip for the amount of beans and cheese melted on top. In the center of each fried tortilla strip was a small dollop of spiced black beans with a few shreds of melted cheddar. That's it. The plate comes with sour cream on the side, as well as a tomato cut into fourths and half an avocado, not sliced, just plopped on the plate. It's dark in there, Alamo Drafthouse. Don't make us cut anything. It could end poorly.

The Hatch green chile *queso blanco* also has the potential to end poorly if you don't gobble it up immediately. It's available as a bowl of queso or on top of fries or a burger, but in each instance it congeals too quickly, somehow making everything in its presence simultaneously hard and soggy.

The Drafthouse redeemed itself in my eyes pretty soon after the dangerous nachos and questionable queso, however, with its burgers. During my time in Houston, I've become something of a burger snob, desiring freshly ground chuck and homemade toasted buns gently cradling a perfectly seared patty. I wasn't expecting much from the Drafthouse burgers, but the toppings sounded good.

And then I bit into the mushroom and white Cheddar burger, and my mind rushed back to all the fast-food burgers of my youth. There was the thin patty, maybe a little too charred on the outside but not quite overcooked, and the basic bun, buttery but clearly not from an artisan baker as so many are these days. And yet, there was a dimensionality to this burger not found in even my guiltiest fast-food pleasures. The melted white Cheddar was tart and smooth, the sautéed mushrooms and caramelized onions simultaneously sweet and earthy. And right when I was about to do that thing that all food critics do – look for something, anything, wrong with the burger – I found the spicy spread of Dijon mustard hidden in the center of the patty, just what the burger had been missing, and I chided myself for trying to find fault with the dish.

I find the moviegoing experience to be very nostalgic. I don't go out to see movies much anymore. I'm too busy, and there's Netflix, and who can stand to sit still for two or more hours, bereft of technology? Seeing a film in the theater reminds me of middle school and high school, when my parents would drop me off outside Tinseltown to meet friends for a night of overpriced sugary treats, arcade games and, no doubt, terrible movies. I miss the innocence of that routine.

But an evening at Alamo Drafthouse brings it all back to me. For a brief moment in time, I can't talk to anyone. I can't text or check my email to see if I'm missing something important. I can't worry about the future because, safe in my cushioned chair in the dark, I can't do anything about it anyway. And besides, I'm off in another world, chatting with Joaquin or battling demons or watching a couple fall in love.

The food plays a big part in the nostalgia, because away from Instagram and the ability to verbally dissect the ins and outs of a dish while I'm eating, food becomes blissfully thoughtless again. A burger is just a burger — albeit a very good one. A pizza tastes like what my mom and I used to make at home, nothing fancy but with quality ingredients. A salad is divine in its simplicity.

And that ubiquitous movie popcorn? Still there. Still an unnatural shade of yellow. Still so aggressively salty it'll have you grabbing your drink at all too frequent intervals.

Only now that we're older, that drink is a cocktail, delivered right to your table in the middle of a film, artfully prepared with craft gin and a touch of Lillet. Shaken, not stirred.

Each Meal Is a Production at The Pass

BY KAITLIN STEINBERG

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2014 AT 4 A.M.

Never had Julia Child so invaded my psyche as she did at this dinner. She was there from the first course, a trio of oysters whose finesse "The French Chef" would have been proud of, each with a different flavor profile – Champagne, salad, cream puff. She was there in the middle of the meal, her influence apparent in a roll of chilled *foie gras* surrounded by red velvet cake and a few bites of lamb wrapped in puff pastry on a smear of coffee yogurt. She was there in the bathroom, her distinctive voice bouncing off the tile walls. And she was there on the wall, her now-immortal words written in chalk on a large blackboard:

"Drama is very important in life. You have to come on with a bang. You never want to go out with a whimper. Everything can have drama if it's done right. Even a pancake."

There aren't any pancakes here (yet), but there is a near-overabundance of drama. Each meal is a production, with a rising action that begins as you cross into a hidden room behind a black wall that falls back to become a doorway into the quiet dining area. The action continues into the first few courses, during which servers come by to perform a show of sorts by gracefully pouring broth into a bowl while reciting the complicated ingredients from memory. Toward the end of the eight-course tasting menu comes the climax, a few brilliant proteins completely reimagined, followed by the slow, gentle, sweet denouement that ends with a cart of *petits fours*.

This is the nightly performance at The Pass, the ultra-modern restaurant that's been garnering praise from media outlets across the country since it opened in late November 2012, nearly a month and a half after its sister restaurant, Provisions, made her debut. It's the creation of chefs Terrence Gallivan and Seth Siegel-Gardner, who first wowed Houston with their Just August pop-up restaurant, followed by the Pilot Light series of dinners, which sold out within half an hour and cemented the duo's place as stars in the Houston culinary scene.

Now, a little more than a year after it opened, The Pass isn't drawing quite the same crowds it did during its first few months of life, but the food is better than ever. The restaurant recently debuted its newest tasting menu, which features some of the most creative and gustatorially tantalizing dishes the Gallivan and Siegel-Gardner team have served. There's also a new vegetarian/gluten-free/almost-vegan menu that mirrors some of the ingredients and flavors of the regular menu, only without gluten and, for the most part, any animal products.

Where the regular menu offers oysters three ways, the vegetarian menu serves oyster mushroom chowder. Instead of chocolate or vanilla cakes, there's strawberry peppercorn sorbet, and mushroom bread with ricotta is replaced by the most flavorful bowl of enoki mushrooms and truffle purée ever to grace a table.

After all the writing that's been done about The Pass – from *Bon Appétit*, where it was named the sixth-best new restaurant of 2013, to a rave review in *Texas Monthly* – what's left to say about the restaurant that, along with other heavy hitters including Oxheart and Underbelly, has put Houston on the culinary map?

What's left is this new vegetarian menu, and the way in which a restaurant that could easily rest on its laurels is continuing to step up to the plate, and then reinvent the plate entirely.

"It's so beautifully arranged," Julia Child once said. "You know someone's fingers have been all over it."

And here at The Pass, they have. As have tweezers and liquid nitrogen and maltodextrin and anything else that ups the whimsy factor. From the first course through the eighth, each meal is meticulously planned, from fingertips to tongue, to achieve the maximum amount of surprise and thrill from diners who have, by now, come to expect the unexpected from the two quiet chefs determinedly plating masterpieces in the open kitchen.

From one of the 40 or so seats in the stark yet inviting black-and-white dining room, audience members (because that's really a more apt term than "diners") can see most of the long kitchen in which dinner for The Pass is prepared. It's not quite separated from the Provisions area of the kitchen, but there's a definite divide. On the Provisions side, there's a glowing wood-burning oven and the frenetic activity of rotating pizzas, slicing meat, and firing orders from behind a black countertop that looks out on a warm, wood-paneled dining room. On the other side of the imaginary divide, a few chefs stand at the serving station up front, delicately but swiftly arranging each of the many ingredients that compose a single dish before sending it off with a server or sometimes walking it to a table themselves to explain what exactly you'll be eating.

For a recent tasting menu — one that was retired in mid-January — Gallivan seemed to take the lead, standing at the front of the kitchen and expediting. Now it's Siegel-Gardner's turn to take the position of the captain helming the masterful ship. When I first went to The Pass, back in October, I left amused but unimpressed. The eight-course tasting menu is \$95 per person. If you choose to tack on the optional wine or cocktail pairings, you'll be at \$160 per person. Even by Houston fine-dining standards, dinner at The Pass is not an inexpensive meal.

In October, the dinner opened with a duck egg *chawanmushi* served inside the egg shell with a foie gras mousse and granola, which added an odd texture to an otherwise smooth, creamy bite. I had also hoped the "nest" on which it was served would be edible, but upon inspection I discovered it was wood shavings. The Pass is tricky like that.

The worst dish of that evening was coffee-rubbed venison served with a whole rutabaga that had been baked in a salt pack. The venison was tough and too bitter thanks to the coffee, and the salt had so inundated the rutabaga that it was odious to the palate. The two dessert courses at the end of the meal (not to be confused with the final petits fours course) were also disappointing. Truffle risotto had an odd sweet flavor, while the cheese plate with a Camembert-esque wedge from a dairy farm in Georgia came with bread so crusty it was difficult to chew, let alone taste the cheese I'd spread on top.

Still, I counted the meal a success, thanks largely to the pumpkin course (which was sweet enough that it really should have followed the risotto course). I was given a plate with an apple cake, apple butter and toasted pumpkin seeds, and while I was admiring the shiny glaze on the cake, a server appeared with a jack-o-lantern that was emitting steam. From the large pumpkin, he scooped out freshly frozen pumpkin ice cream that had been solidified with the help of liquid nitrogen. It was more than a course in a tasting menu. It was a show, and the food served as part of it was the best of the meal.

I'm harder-pressed to choose a favorite dish from the current menu at The Pass, since I was both intrigued and enormously satisfied in each of the categories I use to judge a place like The Pass: whimsy, presentation and, of course, taste. I genuinely loved every course on the vegetarian menu, which I ordered not because I wanted it, but so my companion could get the meatier menu. As it turned out, I think I had the better meal.

Where he had lamb, solid but not overly exciting, I had squash, several different kinds prepared in at least half a dozen ways. There was a ring of butternut squash lightly -caramelized and topped with slices of dried zucchini and surrounded by bits of spaghetti squash, squash mousse and some sort of squash cream. Never before had I been so enamored of a gourd.

The vegetarian mushroom course was revelatory, featuring delicate enoki mushrooms bunched together and wrapped in a thin layer of potato, then flash-fried and served over some grayish smears of truffle sauce, powdered basil and tiny pickled mushroom caps. Like the squash, the mushroom dish is a sort of variation on a theme (this theme being fungi), and the different flavors the chefs are able to extract from similar vegetables are almost mind-blowing.

The best dish on the regular menu is the foie gras wrapped in red velvet cake — a combination of flavors that shouldn't work but really, really does, thanks to the faintly sweet foie and the not-so-sweet cake. Of course, while my dining companion oohed and ahed over the foie gras course, I was doing the same with my squash, and then again with crisp layers of smoked potato and apples, and once more with that spectacularly spicy strawberry sorbet that I expected to find interesting but not as incredible as it turned out to be.

So, too, did I find myself falling unexpectedly in love with a sliced fennel bulb, something I had previously thought I didn't really like. It's cut into a sort of figure 8, with overlapping lines that create spaces into which various sauces are poured. Think you don't like olives? Try the little pocket of Kalamata olive sauce with a bite of roasted fennel and get back to me. And then, if you're still not sold on odd flavor combinations, revel in the palate cleanser that is the strawberry sorbet dotted with Thai peppercorns and served on a smear of fuchsia hibiscus syrup and a bit of popped buckwheat for a little crunch. I ended up wiping my fingertips across the plate to get every last bit of pink syrup and melted sorbet, then licking them clean, manners be damned.

But really, I don't think anyone — especially not the chefs — would mind such a breach in decorum. In spite of the upscale atmosphere and lofty prices, The Pass is fun. It's really fun.

When dishes arrive at tables, diners' faces light up with joy, and they're amazed by the form that a simple bread course has taken. Guests delight upon discovering unexpected textures on plates almost too pretty to eat, and they laugh heartily as the vapor from liquid nitrogen momentarily obscures their vision. If you want a classy meal, go to Brennan's or Tony's or Da Marco. If you want food with a wink and a nod served by two tattooed guys who may or may not be punking us all, go to The Pass.

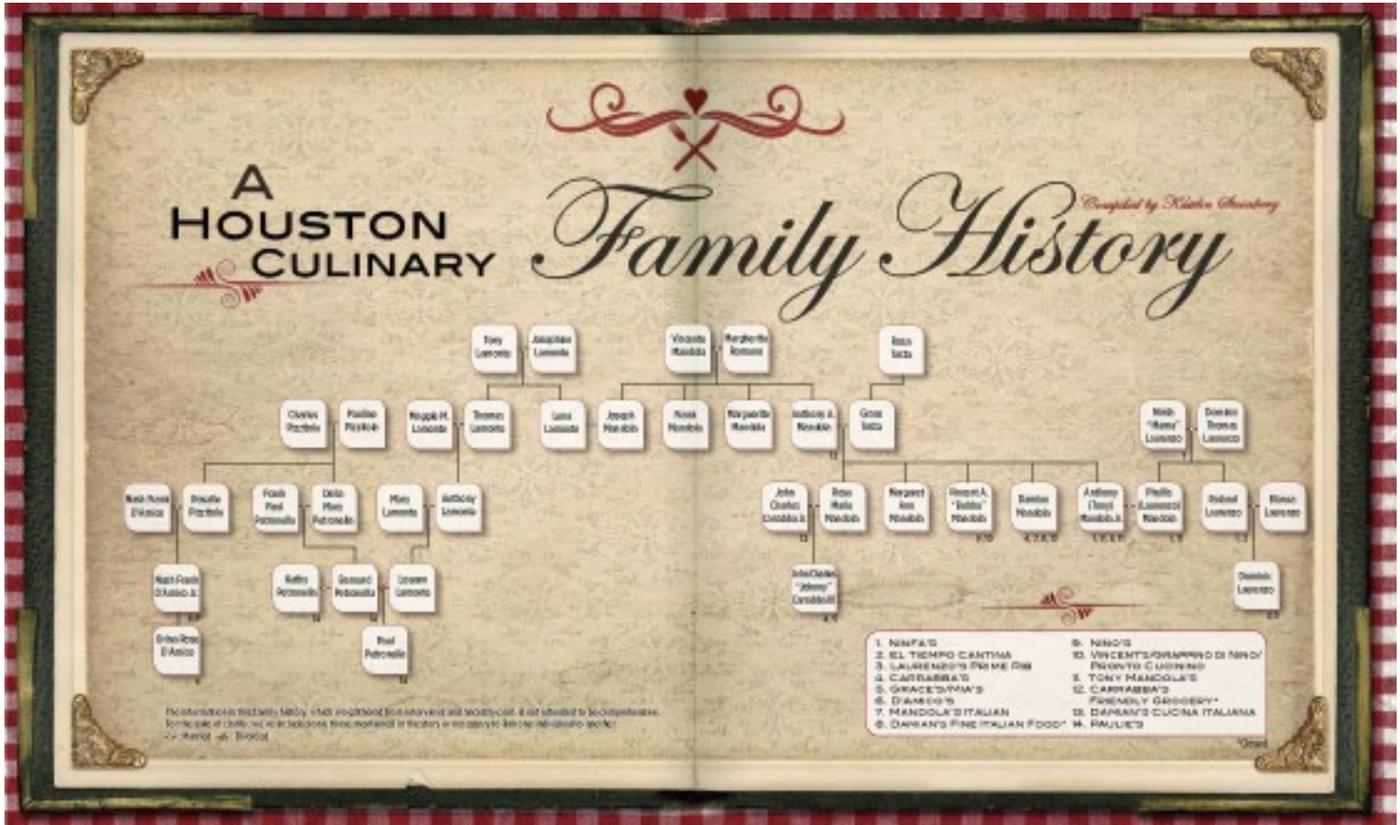
Back in the bathroom, the words of Julia Child emanate from a speaker, at first surprising visitors, then, when you listen more closely, providing context for the evening's meal.

"This is my invariable advice to people," Child warbles over the whoosh of flushing toilets and running water and the faint hum of conversation from the dining room outside. "Learn how to cook. Try new recipes, learn from your mistakes, be fearless and above all have fun!"

Meet the First Families of Houston Food

BY KAITLIN STEINBERG

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2014 AT 4 A.M.



Graphic by Monica Fuentes

During dinnertime on a Tuesday, the tables are set and the bar is stocked, but it's still dark inside the unopened Grace's restaurant on Kirby. Back in the kitchen, Johnny Carrabba and his staff are putting the finishing touches on the back of the house, finalizing every detail and making sure the space is perfect for the grand opening the following day. In spite of his overwhelming success in the restaurant business thus far, Carrabba is anxious.

"This business is tough," he says. "It's kind of like an entertainer coming out with a new album. You like it, but you don't know how the public is going to accept it. You're kind of putting yourself on the line, and you feel very vulnerable. There's a lot of anxiety, but that's kind of why we do this."

This project is particularly important to Carrabba because the inspiration behind Grace's is so personal. Grace Mandola was his maternal grandmother, a first-generation American born in Louisiana, and this restaurant will be his tribute to her.

It won't be another Carrabba's, though. It won't even be an Italian restaurant. Grace's will serve a little bit of everything, just as Grace herself did. There's a story that's been passed around for a few generations about how Grace used to trade her famous Italian meatballs for tamales when she lived in Houston's East End. Carrabba doesn't know whether that's true, but he does recall that when he was growing up, there were always tamales around the house. There was also gumbo, a dish Grace learned how to make while living in Louisiana, and fried oysters, a Gulf Coast specialty. She mastered everything from tortilla soup to meat loaf, while still teaching her family how to make Italian food so good that the recipes would later help build restaurant empires.

"When I look at Grace's, I think it's very comforting," he says. "I want it to feel like Houston. Look how diverse Houston is. It's very eclectic, wandering. I think Grace would be proud of it."

Grace Mandola would likely be very proud of the legacy she has left in Houston. Her children, the Mandolas, have opened some of the most successful restaurants in the town's history. Her family also includes the Petronellas, who are related to the D'Amicos and the Patrenellas, and of course the Carrabbas, who now own restaurants in 32 states. These restaurant families have shaped the way we eat in Houston, along with the Cordúas, Goodes, Laurenzos, Molinas, Pappases, Vallones and, of course, the Landrys, who started with a small Gulf seafood restaurant in Katy in 1980. Landrys, Inc. maintains headquarters in Houston, but the business ceased to be a family-run Houston venture after Tilman Fertitta gained control of the company and took it global in 1986. He now owns more than 450 restaurants, casinos and hotels around the world.

Still, the Landrys and the other pioneering restaurant families are the reason that Houston has been able to keep so many large chains out and, in doing so, embrace the smaller, local restaurants that make this culinary scene so exciting and so personal.

In Houston, you won't find scores of Olive Garden restaurants. They can't compete with the family-run Italian eateries that Houstonians love. There's one On the Border Tex-Mex restaurant in town, three Johnny Carino's locations out in the suburbs and a handful of Red Lobsters. According to *Forbes*, we have more local restaurants per capita than most other cities in the country, and fewer chains than other American metropolitan areas.

And we have these families to thank for that. Most of the information about these 11 families came from interviews with matriarchs, patriarchs and children who now run the business, as well as historical information posted on the restaurants' websites and previously published articles in the *Houston Press*. Thanks to all the families who reached out to tell their stories.

The Patrenellas

As with many Houston restaurant families, Sammy Patrenella's career in the industry began in a grocery store. His father ran the store, called Patrenella's Grocery, and the family lived in a small apartment behind it until, in 1938, his father built the bungalow that today houses Patrenella's Restaurant, and the family moved in there.

"I'll tell you something very interesting about Houston families in the restaurant business," Patrenella says. "I'm guessing 99 percent of our parents were in the small neighborhood grocery business, which went away after the war. You could make a living servicing a two-block area. All of our parents were great cooks, and all of us ended up in the restaurant business. The history of the neighborhood groceries is tied to the Carrabbas and D'Amicos and Mandolas and all of us."

After World War II, larger grocery stores began taking over Houston, and Patrenella's father decided to turn the grocery store into an apartment and rent it out. At that time, he says, his family became slumlords and he booked musical acts coming through town on the side.

For a brief time in the 1960s, Sammy Patrenella owned a burger joint called Sammy's Burgers A Go-Go, but the restaurant was short-lived. In 1991, his son suggested he give the burger business another try, so he turned the family homestead into a burger and meatball sub shop.

"My wife started making the marinara sauce for the meatball sandwiches," he recalls. "And then she made pasta, then lasagna, and the next thing you know...I can't remember the last time we served a hamburger."

Even fairly recently, though, Patrenella says, the area where Patrenella's sits off Washington Avenue was a bad neighborhood. He recalls that ABC came to town in 1991 to film a segment about the improvements in Houston inner-city neighborhoods, and the mayor suggested the crew speak with Sammy.

"The interviewer said, 'What made you come in this barrio?'" Patrenella remembers. "And I said I didn't have enough money to open in the Galleria. And the mayor yelled 'Cut!' So we changed it to 'It's my roots and I wanted to give something back to where I grew up.'"

Today Patrenella is still just as spunky, and he's still in the restaurant every day. His son is in charge of private parties and relieves his father at night, and one of his daughters does the payroll and insurance and keeps the books.

"I guess you'd call it a family affair," Patrenella says. "And here's the best part: When I wake up in the morning, it's 48 steps to the cash register."

The Cordúas

Patriarch Michael Cordúa didn't intend to be a restaurateur. He was born in Managua, Nicaragua, and initially came to Houston to study economics and finance at Texas A&M University, graduating in 1980. By that time, the revolution in Nicaragua had made it a dangerous place to return to, so Cordúa started working for the International Gulf Chartering company at the Port of Houston. He was a port captain and shipping agent, which he enjoyed, but when the oil boom went bust in the mid-'80s, the shipping company was liquidated. Cordúa found himself with a wife and young family, a lot of free time, and no solid career path.

"The owner of the company closed down," Cordúa explains. "I didn't see myself out of a job. I saw myself out of a career. I knew cooking was what I loved to do. I had a hard time believing that, but it's true."

Cordúa had taught himself to cook shortly after moving to Houston because he missed the food of his home country. Suddenly without a job, he decided to take a gamble and open a small restaurant to showcase the food of his homeland.

On August 8, 1988, Cordúa opened his first restaurant, Churrascos, even though he had no formal training in the industry or in a kitchen. In spite of the fact that the food won high praise from critics, the restaurant lost money initially, because people were more accustomed to Tex-Mex cuisine than Latin American food. In 1989, however, Churrascos made *Esquire* magazine's "Best New Restaurants in America" list, and people began to take notice of the 130-seat Latin American joint.

"When we opened using the Spanish word *churrascos*, people assumed it was Mexican," Cordúa says. "There was no genre of Latin American. When we were opening, Houston had very good steak, very good barbecue, good Tex-Mex and some Italian, but very little beyond that."

Thanks to the popularity of the first restaurant, Cordúa opened a second, larger Churrascos in 1990, emphasizing the namesake churrasco meat that he is credited with introducing to the United States. In 1994, Cordúa was named a best new chef by *Food & Wine* magazine, and he was later inducted into the *Food & Wine* Hall of Fame.

Following the success of Churrascos, Cordúa decided to go a bit more upscale with Américas, which was named restaurant of the year by *Esquire* in 1993. Later came Amazón Grill in 1999, Artista in 2002 and another Churrascos.

In 2007, Cordúa's son, David, a graduate of Le Cordon Bleu Paris, decided to join the family business, though, as with his father, cooking wasn't his ultimate goal, either.

"For David, it was seen as a punishment," Cordúa says. "If he missed curfew, he'd have to go peel plantains. He thought he was going to be a rock-and-roll man, not a chef."

It wasn't until college, when David found himself working in a soup kitchen, his father says, that he "discovered the power of food."

Together, the father-and-son team has expanded the business into eight Houston restaurants and a hugely successful catering company. The fourth Churrascos opened in Gateway Memorial City in late fall 2013.

The elder Cordúa doesn't necessarily credit the fact that his restaurants are part of a local chain for his success.

"I don't think it's so much that people are faithful to their roots here," he says. "I think it's that we know our people here."

The family recently came out with a cookbook that features 99 recipes, many of which helped make the restaurants famous. It's not a traditional Latin American cookbook, because the Cordúas have been so influenced by the melting pot of cultures and cuisines in Houston, from Tex-Mex to Vietnamese. There are also some new recipes that David says are indicative of the continuing evolution of the Cordúa restaurants and the directions the family will be going in the future.

The Vallones

"L'occhio del padrone ingrassa il cavallo," Tony Vallone says. "The owner's eye fattens the horse."

It's an Italian proverb, and one that Vallone has recalled frequently during his nearly 50 years as a restaurateur.

"You don't achieve fine dining from a golf course or from an office in Cleveland," he says. Obviously he knows what he's talking about. Today many people know Vallone for his eponymous Italian powerhouse, Tony's, as well as Ciao Bello and his new steakhouse, Vallone's. Fewer remember the Vallone Restaurant Group's Los Tonyos, Anthony's, La Griglia, Grotto and a previous incarnation of Vallone's. Though Vallone himself no longer owns these places, he wants to make one thing clear: "We've never closed a restaurant. We've sold them, but we've never closed."

Vallone started in the restaurant industry as a saucier, working his way through kitchens around Houston before finally opening his own restaurant, Tony's, in 1965 in the location that currently houses the Macy's on Sage Road. In 1972 he moved his small Italian joint to a larger

spot on Post Oak, and during the reconfiguration of the place, the food switched from hearty Italian to fine dining.

"We were at the first place seven years, and Gerald Hines, the developer, came up to me and said, 'I've got to tear this place down,'" he explains. "He said he wanted us to move to a new shopping center on Post Oak, and he could arrange for us to get the loans, but he also wanted fine dining, no more mom-and-pop style. It was a hit right away."

Vallone's second restaurant was Anthony's, which he opened in Montrose in 1982. Shortly after that came Grotto, which opened in Highland Village in 1987, and La Griglia, which opened in 1989. In the mid-'90s he opened a steakhouse called Vallone's, which was later taken over by Anthony's after Vallone's lost its lease in 2002.

Tex-Mex concept Los Tonyos was open for about a year before it was sold to the Serrano's Cafe Group (the same people who now own Ninfa's). And then, in 2004, Landry's bought La Griglia, Grotto and Vallone's, leaving the master restaurateur with only Tony's.

"In 2003 I got very sick," Vallone explains. "I was one of the first people to have West Nile. I almost died. They told me I might not have long to live, so that's when I sold the restaurants to make sure my wife and family would be taken care of."

Clearly Vallone has gotten back in the game with a vengeance, moving Tony's to its current location and opening Ciao Bello and the new Vallone's steakhouse, but he does sometimes wish he'd hung onto his other establishments.

"Had I not been so worried about my health and thinking it was over for me, I wouldn't have sold," he says. "But I did the right thing and made the right decision for my family at the time."

Ciao Bello opened in 2009, and though the casual Italian restaurant wasn't an immediate hit, it has grown into one of the best Italian eateries in town. Later there was the short-lived Caffè Bello, which never quite matched people's impressions of what a Tony Vallone restaurant should be.

Meanwhile, his son Jeff opened Amici in Sugar Land in 2007, but later closed that restaurant to focus on working with his father at Caffè Bello and Ciao Bello. He remains involved in Ciao Bello and Tony's, and Vallone's daughter Lauri Mazzini is the group's business manager.

"And of course my wife, Donna, is my partner," Vallone is quick to remind people. "She's my partner in everything. She has this wonderful warmth to her. She adds so much warmth to the restaurant because she's so kind, sweet and motherly."

In late 2013, he opened Vallone's along with Scott Sulma, the general manager and partner, and Grant Gordon, the executive chef and another partner in the restaurant, and, of course, Donna was right there by his side through it all. Gordon left the group earlier this month to pursue other options, but Tony says the new steakhouse is continuing to draw crowds.

For his part, the 70-something-year-old spitfire isn't slowing down anytime soon.

"I think as long as you work, you're going to stay young and vital," he explains. "If God's good to me, I'll work forever.

"Someone asked me the other day, 'When are you going to retire? You're getting old.' I was offended. I said, 'First of all, I don't feel old. And I hope they carry me out of here with pasta in one hand and fish in the other.'"

The Molinas

Why did Ricardo Molina's family get into the restaurant business?

"They wanted to eat, I guess," Molina says, chuckling.

His grandfather, Raul Molina Sr., whom he calls Papa, came to Houston from Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, in the late 1920s to escape the Mexican Civil War. Upon his arrival he couldn't speak any English, but he was able to save money working as a dishwasher and busboy at the downtown James Coney Island. He was eventually promoted to working the counter at Tip Top Coney Island (now closed).

In 1928 Raul Molina married Mary Sarabia, whose family started a Mexican newspaper, *La Gaceta Mexicana*, that focused on the perspective of Mexicans living in Houston rather than just reporting on what was happening in Mexico. Ricardo Molina recalls that his grandmother's family had to figure out how to make money after her father was killed by bandits during the Mexican Civil War, so they started the expat newspaper and opened a Mexican grocery store.

"Mama had some tough brothers," he says. "Papa met her and they eloped, because their relationship didn't go over too well with the brothers. He says some Jews hid him out in a chicken coop when the brothers came to annul the marriage with a .38."

Eventually Mary's brothers came around on the marriage, and she and Raul Sr. began saving money to open their own restaurant. By 1941 they were able to open the Old Monterrey Restaurant at 1919 West Gray.

"They lived upstairs and had the restaurant downstairs," Molina says. "It was a small deal. Papa had worked in restaurants and Mama could cook. It wasn't even a Mexican restaurant, though. It was more like a diner. And they'd have to lay off half the staff during the summer because they didn't have air-conditioning and no one wanted hot, heavy food in the summer."

Still, the couple made it work, in part because there were only five or six other Mexican restaurants in Houston at the time. In 1945 the restaurant was moved to South Main and renamed Molina's Mexican City. Soon after that, Raul Molina opened several more locations, which were eventually called Molina's Cantina.

"The original recipes were very basic," Molina says, remembering that one early menu even featured Italian spaghetti. "Mama and Papa had their recipes, and later Santos (a long-term employee) came in. He trained me to cook. He was with us for more than 50 years. They'd collaborate, and things changed over the years. As we began to grow, you have to get standardized."

In the '70s the family began catering in response to repeated requests from customers. Unlike many restaurants that later launched catering arms, the Molinas never sought out that business. They began catering only after persistent inquiries from longtime customers and, eventually, presidents, including George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, who chose to have Molina's cater events in Houston.

"Catering is a big part of our business now," Molina says. "We do engagement parties, wedding parties, divorce parties – sometimes all in the same family. We go from cradle to grave."

Raul Molina Sr. sold the business to his sons and retired in 1977, and his family has continued to run the restaurants that made Molina a name in the Houston food scene. He remained a fixture at his restaurants, greeting customers at the door and checking on tables until the mid-1990s. Molina passed away in 2001 at the age of 91.

Today there are three Molina's Cantinas in Houston, all run by Raul Sr.'s grandsons, Raul III, Roberto and Ricardo. They're recognized for being among the first Tex-Mex restaurants in Houston as well as some of the best. Many of the employees stay with the company for decades because they love the food and the welcoming atmosphere of the place. Ricardo Molina says that one thing he's very interested in for the future is negotiating changes in the minimum wage and health care for his employees, who are family to him.

"I'm third-generation," he says proudly. "I remember people coming in here when they were kids, and now they're having kids. I know that we're serving four generations now. And if someone remembers an old recipe, I have cooks who remember it, too."

The Goodes

The first Goode Co. BBQ opened somewhat by accident. Jim Goode was a corporate graphic artist who had grown weary of being beaten down on prices after he'd already done the work for his advertising executive clients in the late 1970s. He had always loved fishing and cooking barbecue, so he thought he might want to do something with those skills.

"As fate would have it," his son, Levi Goode, says, "he came to this Goode Co. BBQ restaurant, which was the Red Barn Barbecue back in the '70s. The food wasn't good, but there weren't many options."

Jim Goode got to know the husband-and-wife team who owned the small restaurant, but one day when he went in for a late lunch, he noticed the wife manning the brisket and the register on her own. She said that her husband had passed away a few weeks earlier and she wasn't sure how she'd be able to run the business on her own. It was her husband's passion, not hers, and she longed to move back to where her family was in east Texas.

"And my dad said, 'That's interesting; I've been trying to figure out a way to get into the barbecue business,'" Levi Goode explains. "So while he ate his lunch, she sat down and they started talking. And it was pretty simple. He said, 'I've got \$3,000 in savings, and I've got another \$3,000 owed to me by the ad agency. And that's all I've got. Take it or leave it.' And she decided to take it. So she took off her apron and handed him her keys. Before he'd even finished his lunch, he was the new owner of a terrible barbecue restaurant."

Fortunately, Jim was really good at smoking brisket, and he enlisted the help of his uncle, Joe Dixie, in getting the restaurant started. Dixie had been a prisoner of war in Japan during WWII, and he'd become the cook for the soldiers and other POWs.

"In order to keep everything going, it was a 24/7 job," Levi says. "My dad and my uncle practically lived there. One of them would sleep on the picnic bench outside, and the other one would sleep near the pit on a cot or on a chest freezer. They had a loaded shotgun and an alarm clock, and they'd wake up every hour and check on the meat and stoke the fire and reload the wood."

Even with such dedication, business started off slow. Jim Goode would measure growth by how many bags of trash filled with paper plates he'd take out to the curb at night. By the time he was filling up half a dozen or more bags of trash each day, he decided it was time to look into opening another restaurant.

In 1983 Goode opened the Goode Co. Taqueria, which featured standards from his grandmother's kitchen and items cooked on a mesquite grill. There was an abandoned brick warehouse behind the taqueria that was turned into an office and test kitchen. Three years

later the family borrowed some of what they'd learned with the taqueria and working with a mesquite grill and applied those techniques to Gulf Coast seafood at the first Goode Co. Seafood, on Westpark.

"My parents got divorced in the early years of the restaurant business," Levi Goode says. "It's hard. My sister and I ended up moving to southern Louisiana with my mother, and during that time we experienced a lot of Cajun festivals and famous restaurants from Lafayette to New Orleans and everywhere in between. So that's why you see things on our menu like gumbo and étouffée. The primary influence is Texas Gulf Coast seafood, but you also get Mexican and Cajun/Creole dishes as well."

During the next ten years, the Goodes opened another barbecue restaurant and the Barbeque Hall of Flame, a retail shop catering to all things barbecue. They also began shipping their now-famous pecan pies in the signature pine boxes.

By 2000 the Internet had begun to take over shopping, so Levi, now in business with his father, decided to move the barbecue store online and turn the former storefront into another restaurant. In 2003 the father-son team opened Armadillo Palace next to the original Goode Co. BBQ on Kirby, but it didn't have a name at first.

That was solved when Levi and his father came across a giant armadillo outside an antique store in Wyoming. They hauled it back to Texas, jazzed it up with some mosaic tiles and Armadillo Palace was born.

Levi Goode now owns the entire business on his own, and he's happy to keep the Goode name here in Houston.

"I wouldn't say we'll never leave Houston, but I think there are still opportunities in the city," he says. "We just finished a new commissary that also houses our e-commerce business with the test kitchen, so everything's under one roof. So we have a good foundation for really evaluating what's next."

The D'Amicos and The Petronellas

"Most of the Houston Italians are from Sicily," Brina D'Amico explains. "We're all sort of semi-related in some way. Everyone came from the same areas in Sicily and came in through the Port of Galveston."

Brina is the daughter of Nash D'Amico, owner of D'Amico's Italian Market and Cafe, a Rice Village fixture since 1996. Today the two are partners in their restaurant company, but Nash started in the industry back in 1975.

He graduated from Sam Houston State University along with his cousins Tony and Damian Mandola, and the trio weren't quite sure what to do with themselves after college. "They had business degrees and a couple of recipes," she says of her father's decision to open a restaurant. "I think they did it on a whim, and it was something they were all good at. And it evolved. It wasn't a driving passion where they'd been dreaming about it since childhood."

The cousins borrowed \$2,000 from relatives and opened Damian's Fine Italian Food in Huntsville in 1975. The restaurant was a success, even though the boys didn't really know what they were doing.

"The first kitchen we had was so hot," Nash D'Amico recalls. "We made friends with David Tinsley of Tinsley's Fried Chicken in Huntsville, and one day he came into the kitchen and asked why it was so hot. We didn't know we needed an exhaust fan over the stove."

Encouraged by how well their first restaurant did in Huntsville, all three cousins moved back home to Houston, where D'Amico opened D'Amico's Ristorante Italiano in 1977 and the Mandolas went on to open their own restaurants.

From 1983 to 1992, D'Amico opened four more restaurants, all called Nash D'Amico's Pasta & Clam Bar: one in Rice Village, one on Westheimer, one in Galveston and one in Clear Lake.

In 1995 he decided he wanted to spend more time with his family and also get back to the small, family-style restaurants he likes best, so he closed the Pasta & Clam Bars and created D'Amico's Italian Market and Cafe, which remains a popular eatery in Rice Village.

Around that time, Brina D'Amico entered the business, though, like her father, she says running a restaurant was never part of her plan.

"I didn't work for my dad until I was 18," she says. "I didn't want anything to do with it. I went to College Station for a year and didn't know what I was going to do, so I came back to Houston to study hotel and restaurant management thinking I'd do catering. Then I realized that catering is actually harder than the restaurant business. So I thought I'd give it a shot."

In 2011 the father-and-daughter team decided to partner with Hospitality USA Management Inc. (HUSA) to expand the D'Amico empire. They hope to open additional D'Amico's Italian Market and Cafe locations throughout Houston with the help of HUSA, but the original in Rice Village remains family-owned.

"A lot of us are in the restaurant business," Brina D'Amico says. "The generation before us were all in the grocery business. And now it's going over to the next generation. You can't get away from it. It's in all of us."

Indeed, her cousin Paul Petronella of Paulie's remembers growing up in the kitchen of his uncle Nash's restaurants, playing with Brina, sleeping in the office and eating garnishes at the bar.

"Nash D'Amico and my two uncles, Charles and Frank Petronella, owned this full-service Italian restaurant on Westheimer near Kirby," Petronella says, referring to D'Amico's Ristorante Italiano. "So I've just always been around that kitchen scene. Dad would always come home smelling like the kitchen. Then my parents opened Paulie's in 1998."

After the success of the original Paulie's at Westheimer and Driscoll, Petronella's parents, father Bernard and stepmother Kathy, opened three more Paulie's restaurants starting in 2006 – one at Holcombe and Kirby, one on the north side of town off Louetta and one in Galveston.

After going to school to study advertising, Petronella came back to his roots and took over the Paulie's restaurants in 2009. He sold all of them except the original, on which he chose to focus his attention in an effort to improve the quality of the food and the overall experience.

"We've gone through some transformations," Petronella says. "When I took over, it had already been open ten years, and it had a following. The question was, how do you make it your own without pissing people off? So changes came really, really slow."

Paulie's is now a popular Italian restaurant that draws crowds of industry professionals who know they're going to get a great Italian meal out of Paul Petronella's kitchen. Last year he opened a wine bar, Camerata at Paulie's, expanding his empire beyond Italian food. He'd like to open an Italian market or something similar someday, but he says he doubts there will be any more Paulie's locations.

"This is the original," he says, "and we like it that way."

The Pappases

Pappas might just be the most famous name in Houston. In nearly every square mile inside the Loop, there's a Pappas restaurant to be found, and we can thank Pete and Jim Pappas and Jim's sons, Chris, Greg and Harris, for that.

The Pappas history actually began much earlier, though, with Pete and Jim's father, H.D. Pappas, who emigrated from Greece in 1897 and opened Greek restaurants in Texas, Arkansas and Tennessee. In 1946 Jim and Pete (and their two other brothers) moved to Houston from Dallas and began selling refrigeration equipment. During that time, Pete patented several types of commercial refrigeration equipment, some of which are still in use today. Eventually

the refrigeration business led to a restaurant-supply business, but the brothers weren't happy merely selling to restaurants. They wanted to own one.

Dot Coffee Shop opened inside 610 off I-45 in 1967, and shortly thereafter the brothers ventured into the barbecue business with the Brisket House, now called Pappas Bar-B-Q. In 1970 Jim Pappas's sons joined the family business, eventually opening their first restaurant, the Strawberry Patch, which later became Pappas Bros. Steakhouse.

The Pappases were still involved in the refrigeration and restaurant supply company, though, and their work often brought them to the original Houston Don's, owned by the Landrys and Jim Gossen. The brothers learned a lot about Cajun-style Gulf seafood at Don's, where they would ask questions and pick up tips from Gossen and the Landrys.

In 1981 the Pappases opened the first Pappas Seafood House. Jim Pappas died the following year, and his sons built him a legacy by expanding the business at lightning speed. By 1989 the brothers had 25 restaurants in the greater Houston area, and began expanding into Dallas, Austin and, later, San Antonio. Pete Pappas remained involved until the late 1990s, when he stepped down as head of the company.

The original Strawberry Patch restaurant closed in 1993, and in its place the Pappas family built the first Pappas Bros. Steakhouse three years later. It joined the other Pappas ventures: Pappas Seafood House, Pappadeaux, Pappasito's, Little Pappas Seafood House and Pappas Bar-B-Que.

Since then the Pappases have also opened Yia Yia Mary's and Pappas Burgers, as well as a successful catering company. Today there are 50 Pappas restaurants in Houston and dozens more throughout Texas and in Chicago and Atlanta.

The Pappases and fans of the restaurants credit the family's success to the large portions they serve and their ability to keep prices down and quality up. All the Pappas restaurants have established themselves as leaders in their respective genres – from the fresh seafood at the Seafood House to the great Texas barbecue at Pappas Bar-B-Q. Grandpa Pappas would be mighty proud.

The Laurenzos

Ninfa Rodriguez Lorenzo moved to Houston in 1949 with her husband, Domenic Tommy Lorenzo, and the two started a life selling tortillas and pizza dough out of a little shop on Navigation. Domenic died young, leaving Ninfa a widow at 46 with children to look after and a business that didn't make much money.

In 1973 Ninfa Lorenzo established Ninfa's restaurant in the front section of the tortilla factory. Using loans from a friend in Mexico, she was able to open a 40-seat restaurant, one that almost succumbed to a fire a week after it opened. But Lorenzo rallied, and the restaurant in what was considered a bad part of town became known for its cheap, hearty Tex-Mex and its gregarious owner and hostess.

It was the fajitas that initially made Lorenzo – now referred to lovingly as Mama Ninfa – famous in Houston, and then throughout Texas and the rest of the country. The restaurant became so popular that Ninfa was able to close the tortilla factory; expand the first location and open a second; on Westheimer, in 1975.

By 1980, the Ninfa's boom was in full swing. There were seven restaurants in Houston, so the family decided to expand to other cities. Branches in Dallas and San Antonio were less successful, but in 1983 the Ninfa's empire was the largest Hispanic-owned business in Houston.

Things started to go downhill in 1985, when Ninfa's partnered with McFaddin Ventures to protect itself against some of the risks involved in opening new restaurants. Not long after deals were signed, the relationship between the Laurencos and McFaddin soured, with McFaddin suing the Laurencos for allegedly trying to hurt service at McFaddin restaurants. The Laurencos countersued, and both parties eventually agreed to a settlement.

Moving past the litigation, the Laurencos founded RioStar Corporation, which set about expanding the Ninfa's name even further – including all the way to Leipzig, Germany. Unfortunately, the quick expansion caused RioStar to build up major debts with Sysco, the primary supplier of non-food goods for the restaurants. In 1996 the restaurant group, which now owned 40 restaurants around the country, was sued by Sysco for \$2.8 million, which forced RioStar to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection.

Two years later, Serrano's Cafe out of Austin bought RioStar, and the Laurencos, who had worked so tirelessly to create an empire, were no longer involved with Ninfa's. In spite of agreeing to a non-compete clause in the deal, which stated that Ninfa Lorenzo could "not engage, directly or indirectly, as a consultant, employee, officer, director, owner, shareholder or investor in any business which owns, operates, provides or designs restaurants, cafes, bars, catering services, food delivery, or any other food business," her son, Roland, and grandson, Domenic, opened El Tiempo on Richmond in 1998. In name Ninfa was not involved, but as the *Houston Press* reported that same year, that didn't seem to be quite the case in practice.

El Tiempo thrived, and it now has five locations around Houston, including one right next to the original Ninfa's on Navigation. The family also owns Lorenzo's, a steak and seafood restaurant on Washington.

Mama Ninfa passed away from bone cancer in 2001, but her legacy lives on through Lorenzo's, El Tiempo and all the fajitas in Texas.

The Mandolas and The Carrabbas

"In our culture," Tony Mandola says, "we eat."

Mandola can hardly remember a time when he wasn't in a kitchen. His mother, Grace, the namesake of his nephew Johnny's newest restaurant, was always cooking and inviting her children to assist in the preparation of huge family meals.

"Every Sunday growing up, every family came to our house, and we would have those three-hour Sunday lunches," Mandola recalls. "Mom would start Saturday cooking the meatballs, and it was really overboard. We always had plenty of food in case someone came in."

When he was a teenager, Mandola helped out behind the counter at Ray Hay's restaurant, owned by his uncles Luke and Frankie B. Mandola and their friend Ray Hay. Because of that experience, he was a natural choice when it came time to open the original Ninfa's on Navigation. He had been best friends with one of Mama Ninfa's sons growing up, and he eventually started dating, and later married, her daughter Phyllis, linking the two major restaurant families. Though at the time, the couple explains, that wasn't the case.

"Back then we weren't two restaurant families," Phyllis Mandola says. "First Ninfa's opened, then the restaurant in Huntsville, then Tony and his brother Vincent Mandola opened Nino's in 1977, and before you know it, there were a bunch of Mandolas and Laurenzos in the business."

In an article published in the *Austin Chronicle* in 2009, Frankie B. Mandola recalls growing up in his family's Houston grocery store, where the women would get together in the back kitchen and cook up traditional Italian meals for 50 or 60 people. Frankie B.'s cousin, Frank A. Mandola, eventually turned the store into Mandola's Deli, which is still open on Leeland Street in East Downtown.

After helping open several restaurants himself, Mandola says, he became infatuated with New Orleans-style cuisine, like the type he ate at Houston's Capt. Benny's, which had opened in 1967, and he wanted to modify that idea and turn it into a place of his own.

"I got in the position to open my own restaurant in 1982 with the Blue Oyster Bar on Gulf Freeway," Mandola says. "Between downtown and Kemah, there was no other seafood place. I had 35 seats divided between a long bar and seven tables, and that was it. And it was a tremendous success. We had a line out the door every Friday and Saturday night."

When other seafood restaurants discovered the area between downtown and Kemah, Mandola expanded his business by opening another Blue Oyster Bar, on Shepherd, where Spaghetti Western is now located. In 1988, Tony and Phyllis had the opportunity to move to the River Oaks shopping center, so they opened Tony Mandola's Gulf Coast Kitchen. Several years ago they moved again, to the current location on Waugh Drive, and Brasserie 19 moved into the space they left. They also dropped the "Gulf Coast Kitchen" part of the name, making the restaurant simply Tony Mandola's.

During the years that Tony Mandola was making a name for himself in the restaurant business, his brother, Damian Mandola, and Frankie B. opened Damian's Cucina Italiana, which is still serving customers today. In 1986 Damian Mandola went into business with his nephew Johnny Carrabba, who says he never wanted to go into the grocery business, as the Carrabba side of the family had done, because it seemed as if the hours would be too long. He later discovered that restaurants require even longer hours.

"When I was growing up, I was really raised in the grocery store business," Carrabba says. "We had Carrabba's Friendly Grocery, where my dad was the butcher, my grandpa was the owner and my grandmother was the cashier. We ran this business where all the customers had credit. I learned a lot about how to run a neighborhood business from the grocery store."

When Carrabba wanted to open Carrabba's, the whole family helped get it up and running. He and Damian Mandola were turned down for a loan by ten different banks before an 11th bank finally decided to take a chance on them.

The original restaurant was a 3,000-square-foot building that had previously been an adult bookstore, but the family built a wood-burning pizza oven in the space, and, thanks to Damian Mandola's reputation, the crowds came. In 1988 Carrabba and Mandola opened a second location, at Woodway and Voss, where Carrabba's father, John Charles, still makes sausage and his mother, Rose Marie, greets diners every day.

"In 1993 we got approached by Outback Steakhouse, who wanted to grow the company," Carrabba explains, but he doesn't want people to think Carrabba's is only corporate now. "Even though we have an interest in the chain Carrabba's, I own the two originals solely now, as well as Mia's, named after my daughter, and now Grace's, named after my grandmother."

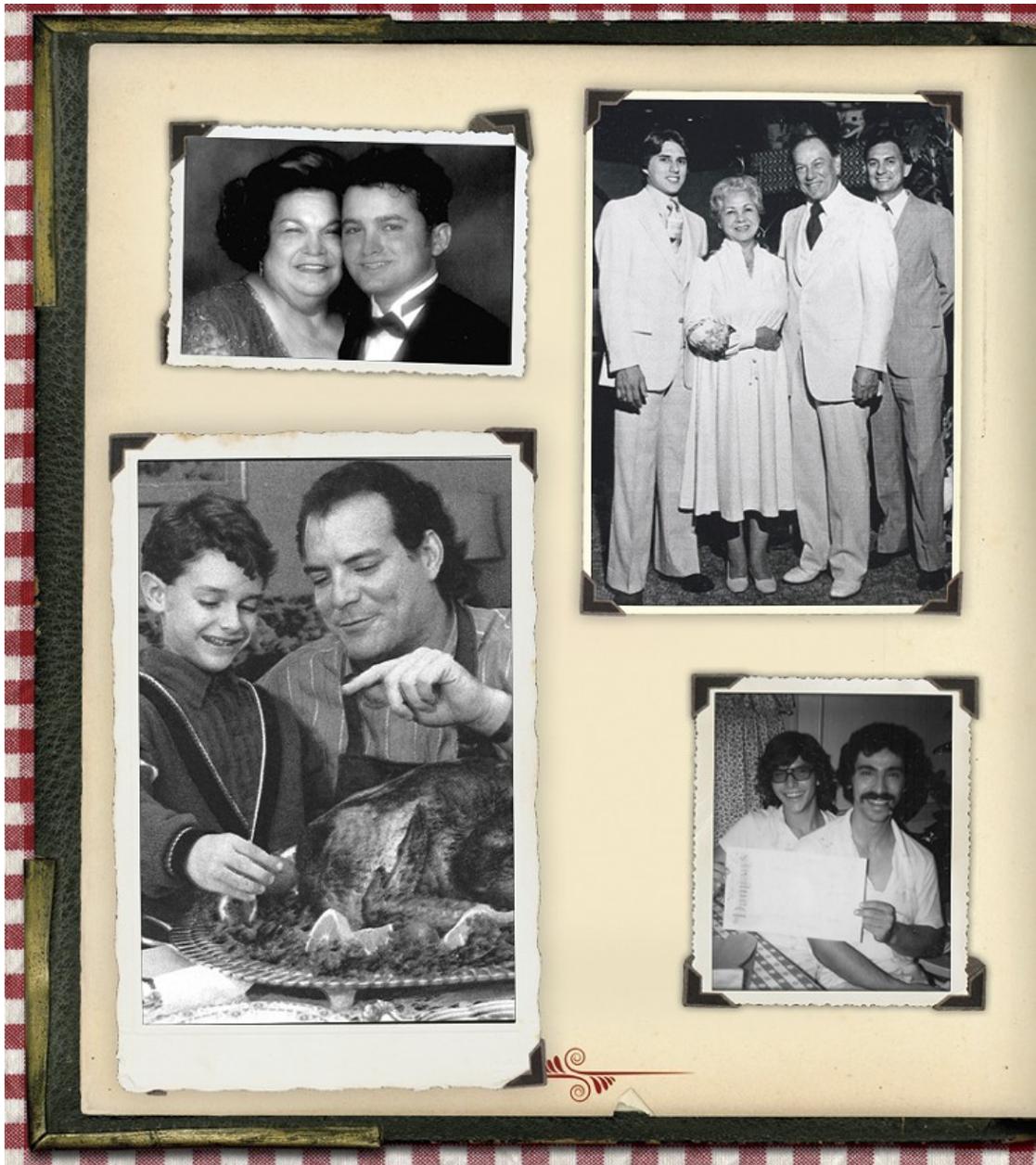
In spite of his dedication to the traditional Italian recipes his grandmother first made for him more than 50 years ago, Carrabba isn't averse to change.

"The main thing for me is most companies lose their vision and culture as they get older, and we work hard to keep those old-fashioned values," he says. "But on the other hand, even though we hold onto our old-fashioned values, I tore down the original Carrabba's and

rebuilt it. You can hold onto your old values, but you can't become old. You can't become a dinosaur."

And that's where Grace's comes in. It's a departure from the classic Italian food of Carrabba's, and Johnny Carrabba thinks it may be his final foray into a new business venture.

"It's been a very interesting run," he says. "But again, I'm not the kind of person who wants to sit back and celebrate. I have work to do."



1. Ninfa Lorenzo and her grandson Domenic, who is now the executive chef and owner of El Tiempo restaurants. 2. Three generations of the Molina family: (left to right) Raul III, Mary Molina, Raul Sr. and Raul Jr. 3. Nash D'Amico and Charles Petronella in their first restaurant, which was located in Huntsville. 4. Michael Cordúa teaches his son, David, how to cook.

Smoked Meats and a Charming Brood Welcome You to Brooks Family BBQ

BY KAITLIN STEINBERG

WEDNESDAY, MAY 7, 2014 AT 4 A.M.



Barbecued salmon on a bed of field greens and strawberries is a unique option at an otherwise beef-heavy restaurant. Go behind the scenes of this week's review in our slideshow, "[Brooks Family BBQ: A Closer Look](#)."

Troy Fields

'Excuse me, ma'am,' came the shout from across the room directed my way. "We don't allow that kind of language here."

Don't ever utter the word "vegetarian" inside the walls of [Brooks Family BBQ](#).

I'd just been called out at a barbecue restaurant for talking about vegetables. My shame was palpable. I don't remember how the forbidden word came up in conversation or why, but one bite of my chopped brisket sandwich on thick, buttered Texas toast had me forgetting those naughty green things that grow in the ground even exist.

The chopped brisket isn't the juiciest I've ever had, but the aroma of smoke and the heat from the signature Big & Bold Rub imbues every bite with a flavor you have to taste for yourself to fully understand. It's clear the lean meat has been cooked slowly while the smoke from gently burning wood infuses the huge slabs of ruddy beef and racks of ribs. Each mouthful (or forkful, because there's no way that much chopped brisket is ever going to stay between two slices of bread when you pick it up) is pure, rich beef and smoke with just a hint of spice from the Brooks Family rub.

Still, the meat is juicy enough. There's very little fat on it, which I tend to appreciate, and the fat that is there is ideally rendered. There's nothing chewy or superfluous. Just meat, glorious meat, some of it burned ever so slightly at the ends, which takes on a deeper flavor and a crunchy texture. Add the special Brooks Family Big & Bold BBQ sauce, and my search for the ideal brisket sandwich in Houston is over. And at only \$6.95 each, I can see myself eating a lot of them.

Of course, none of this would surprise owner Marlon Brooks, whose father, Harlon, first established Harlon's Bar-B-Que in 1977 in Houston with his high school sweetheart, Freddie. This led to a barbecue empire of more than 24 restaurants across Texas and the surrounding states. Marlon explained that the business went through some tough times in the past several years, eventually going bankrupt. There are no longer any Harlon's Bar-B-Que restaurants or catering businesses.

Barbecue is in the Brooks family's blood, though. After Harlon's Bar-B-Que closed up shop, it wasn't long before Marlon got the urge to open another place, this one with a different name and some new recipes. Last December, just two days after Christmas, Marlon and his wife, Ros (along with help from the entire Brooks brood, including Harlon), opened Brooks Family BBQ on Scott Street using the knowledge that he and his family had gained over years in the business. It's a fledgling restaurant, still relying heavily on catering but gaining popularity among the students at the University of Houston right across the street, and even a few folks who make the trek from downtown for a quick lunch.

Once business picks up and the restaurant becomes more self-sufficient, Marlon says, he's hoping to bring back the wholesale shop that once put the Brooks name in grocery stores all over the city. But he knows that will take time, and he's willing to wait.

The motto of Brooks Family BBQ is "family first, barbecue second," and when you walk in the door, this mantra comes to life. Everyone working there is family. Marlon is often in the kitchen with a sibling, and any number of other family members work the counter or greet guests.

On one occasion, what seemed to be Marlon's entire immediate family was seated in the dining area, his sons wearing their school shirts and throwing a tennis ball back and forth while talking about middle-school dating. Uncle Clifford, who had been standing behind the counter taking orders, pulled a despondent younger boy aside.

"We've all been broken up with by girls," he explained gently. "Even the best of us."

I wanted to walk across the restaurant and give the kid some barbecue – as if he hadn't had it dozens of times before – in a gesture of compassion. The family is so tight knit, you can't help longing to be more than an outsider looking in, munching on sausage and ribs.

It's easy to become absorbed in the goings-on of the Brooks family while eating at Brooks Family BBQ because the few times that I was there, I was virtually alone in the dining area. It's a cheery enough space that seems to have been constructed on a shoestring budget in an old corner store. The walls are a warm butter-yellow, and reclaimed wood paneling has been affixed to the lower half for a more rustic feel. The ceiling is lined in corrugated tin, which helps diffuse the outside light coming in through several large windows and a glass door.

From inside, you could be sitting in an old-fashioned Southern barbecue joint, save for the view of UH out the front windows and the strong emphasis on brisket, as opposed to burnt ends or pulled pork. The barbecue at Brooks is steadfastly Texan. In fact, when I asked whether they ever prepare pulled pork (something I crave from my days living in Missouri), Uncle Clifford laughed at me.

"You're in Texas, girl!" he replied. "Here, have some ribs."

Like the brisket, the ribs are beautifully lean, and the meat pulls cleanly off the bone. The beef is tender and juicy and ever-so sweet from a thick barbecue-sauce glaze that also makes an appearance on the barbecued salmon, without a doubt my favorite item on the short menu.

Most barbecue joints offer meat, meat and more meat, so I was surprised to find fish – moist, flaky salmon, no less – served on a bed of field greens at Brooks Family BBQ. The BBQ salmon salad is made to order, and it takes about ten minutes to prepare, a point I make only because the rest of the meat is already smoked and just needs to be sliced and served. Marlon cooks the salmon on the grill, giving it a smoky sear on the bottom, all the while glazing it with a subtly sweet and spicy marinade. The edges of the fish get almost caramelized from the heat of the grill and the glaze, and as I devoured my salad, I saved them for last, a final sweet bite of smoky salmon to pair with the fresh strawberries and tangy, fruity vinaigrette on the greens.

Lest a salmon salad sound a little *too* healthy for a barbecue restaurant, though, keep in mind it's served with two giant slices of buttered and toasted jalapeño cheese bread, and you can augment your order with one of Marlon's five side dishes – collard greens, potato salad, coleslaw, baked beans or spicy *ranchero* beans. I generally find barbecue-plate side dishes to be superfluous, something I order purely because they're included in the price. I'd eat a whole pint of Brooks Family BBQ's bitter collard greens, though, brightened with a hint of citrus and spice. The *ranchero* beans are equally alluring, stewed with red, green and orange bell peppers as well as jalapeños and bacon for some of the most flavorful, complex pinto beans I've ever encountered.

It's this attention to detail in a cuisine that's been done and done again in Houston that makes Brooks Family BBQ stand out to me. This city is brimming with excellent smoked meat, but this modest little restaurant sets itself apart with special efforts and personal touches. It's the addition of cranberries to the coleslaw, the tricolored peppers in the beans, the extra bit of smokiness that infuses every inch of meat. And it's the warm welcome I get every time I walk in the door that keeps me coming back.

Brooks Family BBQ isn't the type of place you have to return to again and again to get a feel for the menu. There aren't chef's specials or seasonal dishes. Sometimes they don't even have everything on the short list of available items because they've run out. But dining there is like dining at your grandparents' house. Whatever they have is yours, if you want it.

"Just help yourself," Marlon said to me as I glanced into the kitchen during one meal, searching for someone to ask for water. "Whatever you need. There's water on the counter. If you want tea, have some tea. You need another bottle of barbecue sauce? Just grab it."

I gathered my drink and more homemade sauce and returned to my table and my huge plate of brisket, idly chatting with Marlon and Clifford between bites as the thick, tangy sauce ran down my chin. Rather, they chatted with me, interjecting humorous comments into the conversation between my dining companion and me.

Normally I want to be left alone while I'm eating, but not here, where the boisterous Brooks family is part of the restaurant's charm. "Family first, barbecue second," they repeat while cooking, as if infusing the meat with the message. Then they laugh at you and tell you to stop talking about veggies and eat your darn ribs. I've only been here a few times, but already I feel like an old friend welcomed into the fold with simple, solid smoked meat and a side of chitchat.

One trip to the humble restaurant with barbecue worth bragging about, and I daresay you'll feel like family, too.

An Ode to the Classic Texas-Style Roadside Burger

BY KAITLIN STEINBERG

FRIDAY, JULY 18, 2014 AT 9 A.M.



Champ Burger: Unchanged since 1963.

"How's your dad?" asks a man stepping in front of the line to pick up a burger from the window. He called ahead; clearly he knows how this works. He's talking to the owner of **Champ Burger**, whose father used to be behind the window before he got too old and had to let his son take over.

When the man notices me looking at him, he addresses me: "I've been coming here for 25 years. These are great burgers, good people. You want a burger, you've come to the right place."

Of course, the 25 years that he's been visiting Champ Burger is only half of the hole-in-the-wall burger joint's life. It's been open since 1963, serving thin but sprawling, greasy patties on toasted buns with a sprinkle of shredded iceberg lettuce, chopped onions, pickles and a few slices of tomato. There's a smear of mayo on one bun and mustard on the other. If you want ketchup, cheese or anything else, you have to ask for it.

This is the Texas-style burger, the kind you used to get a drive-thrus and roadside stands before fast food empires took over the landscape, serving poor excuses for cheap burgers that eventually created backlash and led to the gourmet burger. In many cities, those are the only options available: Chain restaurant fast food burgers and gourmet monstrosities. Nostalgic burgers like the one at Champ Burger are hard to come by.

Not here in Houston, though, where we remain loyal to the modest burger joints that have been serving us for generations.

Mytiburger opened in 1967, just four years after Champ Burger and on the opposite side of town. Champ serves a motley crew of neighborhood folks, downtown business people and nostalgic foodies from its small building in East Downtown. Mytiburger serves a similar cross section of the population, only in Garden Oaks. The classic drive-thru has changed with the times, now offering turkey and veggie burgers, but it's the thin, greasy Mytiburger with cheese for only \$3.90 that's best stood the test of time. Though the restaurant has changed hands from the original owners, it was purchased by a Mytiburger devotee, who's kept the old-school charm intact and even initiated classic car nights, where locals bring their vintage automobiles to the Mytiburger parking lot and admire the craftsmanship over a burger and chocolate malt.

One year later, **Burger Park**, originally Bonus Burger, opened in South Park, once a quiet suburban neighborhood that became crime-ridden and dangerous in the 1980s and '90s, before eventually turning into the veritable wasteland that it is today. Katharine Shilcutt profiled the rise and fall of this neighborhood -- and how Burger Park has remained a constant through it all -- in a [cover story](#) in 2011. It's now owned by a Korean family who hope to keep the place running in spite of the neighborhood's shortcomings. The Kim family introduced non-frozen patties and leaner beef, but other than that, the slightly scorched burgers topped with the usual lettuce, tomato, onion and pickle foursome haven't changed a bit.

Bellaire Broiler Burger joined the scene in 1972, serving a flattened, 1/3-pound patty that practically absorb the American cheese melted over it, obscuring the beef altogether until you take a massive bite. The official name is Pat and Joe's Bellaire Broiler Burger, indicating the spot was and is family-run. It's not fancy by any means--but then, that's part of the charm of a roadside burger joint, and this one looked dated even back when it opened more than 30 years ago. The french fries are crinkle cut, like the frozen logs that tumble out of an Ore-Ida

bag, and the buns deflate quickly once the burger and veggie juice hit them. Still, the burgers themselves are classic: Moist, slightly charred on the outside, and totally weird-shaped, a sure sign they're hand-formed.

What's a roadside burger without a glass of Kool-Aid to wash it down? At **C&D Burger Shoppe**, you can have the uber-American kids' drink with your skinny, Texas burger and a side of Frito pie, too. The burger shop, open since the early 1980s, used to be a Dairy Queen before Joe Craddock bought it and turned it into a neighborhood hotspot. As noted in our review of the place, many Houstonians recall eating at C&D nearly every night when they were in high school on the southeast side of town. Though the menu has options beyond burgers and Frito pie, those are the best bets here.

There are a few other burger stands in town that, like the ones already mentioned, serve a mean roadside burger that makes you long to hop in the car and chow down as you head west toward some unknown destination. Places like **Cream Burger**, which has been open for "decades," though no one can say exactly how many. The burgers here taste half of beef and half of sinus-clearing vinegar, thanks to the heap of pickles and onions and generous smear of mustard that nestle between the patty and the top bun. And places like Shuttle Burgers & More, whose crumbly, hand-formed patties are served with a side of tacky, space-aged memorabilia like photos of shuttle launches and astronaut crews.

When I called to ask what year Shuttle Burgers opened, the person on the other end of the line laughed. "Ummm...no one really knows," she said, as if referring to something that was not a concrete event once upon a time, but a scientific mystery yet to be solved. "At least 30 years, I think. Probably. Yeah, no one knows."

That's the things about these historic burger shops. They survive when newer restaurants serving foie gras-topped burgers with artisan buns fail, but no one remembers the specifics. What's important are fleeting moments spent inhaling a burger while leaning against the building or in the car after a long, hard day at work. What's important are the families who still run the joints, and the way the thin, greasy patties haven't changed a lick since they made their debut so many years ago.

Here's to you, Texas-style, guilty pleasure burgers. May you never change.

Let the Food of El Sazon de Cuba Put You in a Miami State of Mind

BY KAITLIN STEINBERG

WEDNESDAY, JULY 23, 2014 AT 4 A.M.



The classic Cuban sandwich found everywhere on the streets of Havana and Miami is reproduced for Houston diners.

Miami, baby. Miami.

Whenever he said the name of the city, he got a wistful look in his eyes, as if he were actually picturing walking along the beach in the hot Florida sun or eating a Cubano under the shade of a palm tree. He moved here from Miami, and even though he likes Houston, he still has Miami on the mind. That's part of the reason he loves being in the restaurant. It may be Cuban cuisine, but the vibe is all Miami, "Gateway to the Americas," the Cuban sandwich capital of the country.

It's only fitting then that Julio Iglesias, co-owner of El Sazon de Cuba (not the singer), makes a perfect Cubano.

He starts with Cuban bread, like white French bread only with more fat, often lard, mixed into the dough. He butters the bread, then smears a generous helping of mayonnaise on one side. On top of that goes a layer of ham, then roasted pork. On the other slice of bread, a squirt of mustard, a few pickles and several slices of Swiss cheese. He places the halves together, squishing them a little in his hands before laying the sandwich on a hot panini grill. He grabs the handle of the lid and presses it down, searing brown burn marks into the top of the bread.

As the sandwich warms and starts to sizzle, Iglesias sways to the rhythm of the Buena Vista Social Club playing over the speakers. You can see he's thinking of Miami, of the street-corner stands with hot griddles where vendors serve up Cubanos on the go. Somehow, as if by magic, he infuses a bit of that culture into every sandwich.

That's what makes it the best Cubano in Houston, and well worth the drive out to Highway 6, to a small shopping center where the unassuming Cuban restaurant is tucked into a corner next to a church. From inside the restaurant, you can often hear percussion, loud thumping bass notes coming from the church. I don't know what's going on next door, but when I closed my eyes and bit into my Cubano sandwich with the staccato drum beat reverberating in my ears, I felt as if I, too, could be in Miami.

Iglesias's family moved to Miami from Cuba years ago, bringing with them their recipes for traditional dishes that made the homesickness a little more bearable. When Iglesias decided to attend college in Houston, the family came with him, settling into the Addicks area of town, which Iglesias says is home to a large Cuban population.

Now he works two jobs to support his family. During the day, he has an office job. He wears pressed, button-down shirts – though always in bright, tropical hues – and a tie with slacks and shiny shoes. In the evening, he comes to the restaurant, where he unbuttons his shirt, rolls up his sleeves and plays host to whoever might wander in for dinner. More often than not, it's fellow Cuban immigrants, families like his who come by for food that reminds them of the island.

He guarantees the cuisine is authentic, not just because the recipes are his family's, but also because his uncle recently moved here from Cuba to work in the kitchen. He makes traditional dishes like *ropa vieja* (shredded marinated beef) and *congrís* (black beans and white rice), but he also likes to experiment.

One of the best dishes I had at El Sazon de Cuba is the *enchilado*, which is nothing like a Tex-Mex enchilada. It's a spicy garlic, onion, tomato and olive oil sauce with cumin and paprika that's generally served over shrimp on a bed of rice. Iglesias's wife encouraged me to try it with chunks of fresh fish – her uncle's specialty – and I was blown away by the flavorful sauce and the way I could still taste the delicate white fish through the earthy chile powder and oil. I asked her to make it extra-spicy, and the kitchen delivered. The bright red sauce had chunks of jalapeño and slices of green olives swimming in it among the diced garlic and wilted cilantro. No enchilado recipe I've seen before had all these different elements in one dish. It's an Iglesias original.

The *filete relleno* isn't unique to the Iglesias family, but it is unique to Cuba. In Mexico, a stuffed fish is usually filled with more seafood or peppers and onions, but in Cuba, it's essentially a Cuban sandwich with fish as the bread. A whole white fish (whatever the restaurant gets in from the market) is stuffed with spiced cheese and slices of ham, then covered in a cornmeal batter and fried. It's not like most fried fish with a thin, flaky batter, though. The crust on this fish is like an eggshell, and the delicate flesh and cheese inside like the buttery yolk.

Many dishes are fried in Cuba, but unlike deep-fried seafood with a crunchy batter, pork gets a *milanesa* batter, which lends itself better to the meat. A bone-in pork chop is coated in egg, flour and pepper before pan-frying, so the meat inside stays juicy while the exterior gets crisp and brown.

This dish and many others are served with a side of unripe plantains that have been sliced and flattened before they, too, are fried. Plantains are very starchy, and the thick slices need a lot of salt to enhance the flavor, but once you shake some on, they taste like rich potato chips with a hint of sweetness.

The ripened plantains are even sweeter than the unripe ones because the starch changes to sugar as the fruit matures. These are sliced lengthwise and fried even longer, until they're dark brown and practically dripping with sticky syrup. Though sweet, they're served as sides with savory dishes, but the pairing works. Seafood and plantains are as natural in Cuba as a burger with fries is here.

A dish that Houstonians might be more familiar with is the *empanada*. One empanada is on the appetizer menu for \$1.75, and it's a mighty large pre-meal snack. The pastry is flaky and crisp, and little bubbles form on the outside while it's frying, making the shell even lighter and more fragile. Break it open and you'll find spiced ground beef and potatoes enveloped in a pocket of hot air. If you're dining with a friend, be sure to order two, in spite of the size. You'll be fighting over them.

And then there's the pizza, a familiar dish for sure, but something that seems out of place in a Cuban restaurant. Not so, Iglesias will tell you. It's a popular street food in Cuba and some parts of Miami, but it's also, as he says, a labor of love. It takes about an hour to prepare because it's all made from scratch. The dough is pressed by hand into a cast-iron pan, then it's topped with a special tomato sauce that's heavy on the onions. It gets a hearty sprinkling of cheese and, if you wish, slices of ham that brown a little in the oven. The crust is thick and chewy, and the cheese and ham topping reminiscent of a Cubano, only in pizza form. It's indicative of the blend of cultures in Cuba – the mingling of classic Cuban flavors with a dish that's popular around the world.

"We basically live at the restaurant," Iglesias explains by way of apology. El Sazon is full, but I'm the only customer. Everyone else is there for his daughter's fifth birthday party. The theme is *Frozen*, the Disney movie, and the little girl has just changed into a dress like the one worn by the main character in the film. The Buena Vista Social Club has been turned off, and the *Frozen* sound track is playing instead.

"We're always here," he says. "So we had to have the party here. I hope that's okay."

It's wonderful. I sit there by myself drinking an Iron Beer (like a fruity Dr Pepper) and eating a Cubano and witnessing this big family come together for each other.

"Go back to the party," I keep telling Iglesias. "I'm good. Go spend time with your family."

"I am," he says. "But I have to work, too. You gotta work for the dream."

This restaurant is his dream – bringing the food he remembers from family trips to Cuba and a childhood in Miami here, to his small corner of Houston. This is why he works two jobs and why his mother gets up every morning and makes velvety flan and why his uncle moved from an island paradise to the urban jungle.

It's clear from the way Iglesias talks about Miami that he'd rather be there. He jingles the gold chains around his neck and rubs his goatee while he tells me that he's still a Miami boy. The move to Houston was better for his career, though, and ultimately better for his family.

So for now, until he can get back to the Magic City with its palm-lined beaches and the smell of roasting pork wafting down the streets of little Havana, he's here, making food that reminds him of home...food that makes even this native Texan dream of Miami, too.

Review: Dear Toby Keith, You Don't Want Your Name on this Bar & Grill

BY KAITLIN STEINBERG

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 13, 2014 AT 8 A.M.



The T.K. Stackers "South of You" burger actually isn't bad-- when the kitchen remembers to add all the toppings listed on the menu.

Photos by Troy Fields

There is definitely a dress code at [Toby Keith's I Love This Bar & Grill](#).

After sitting at a table waiting to get service for 20 minutes, I realized that the people around me in plaid, button-down shirts with pearl snaps and dusty brown cowboy boots with Wrangler jeans tucked into the top were getting drink after drink and platters of appetizers within minutes of being seated. I, in my green cardigan and Urban Outfitters sandals, still didn't have a glass of water. Once my friends came and we'd ordered and eaten, we all regretted that we had, eventually, been served.

Toby Keith's I Love This Bar and Grill, named after Keith's popular song "I Love This Bar," is anchored by a 95-foot guitar-shaped bar mirrored on the ceiling by a 95-foot guitar sculpture painted with an American flag. The rest of the space houses a large dance floor in front of a stage for live performances, multiple pool tables, private event rooms and all manner of Toby Keith and Americana memorabilia placed haphazardly on the walls and in cases by the front entrance. If that (as well as the ridiculous name of the place) isn't enough to convince you that Keith's hand is upon this godforsaken place, you need only glance at the dozen or so televisions above the bar, each playing a Toby Keith music video that does not sync up with the various other country artists being played over the speakers.

Keith's scruffy visage was easily visible on those televisions on each of my visits, not blocked by hordes of adoring fans descending upon the restaurant for a true country experience bookended by a Bud Light and some fried Twinkies. No, when I made the trek out to the veritable ghost town that is West Oaks Mall to mingle with Keith's Houston-area groupies, I found myself in a 500-seat restaurant with about 20 other people, a few of whom got up and danced or played a round of pool occasionally. But mostly, we were alone in our small groups, separated by what seemed like miles in the cavernous, empty restaurant, while Keith's face mouthed silent words on the TV screens.

I could have sworn the words were, "Go. Now. Before it's too late."

I'm still somewhat mystified by my experiences at Toby Keith's I Love This Bar & Grill. From the nearly inedible food -- strangely one of the less memorable aspects of my adventures in Keith-Land -- to the "Whiskey Girls," who serve with a smile while their bare midriffs with sparkly navel rings meet diners at eye level, the whole place is like an amusement park that's seen far better days.

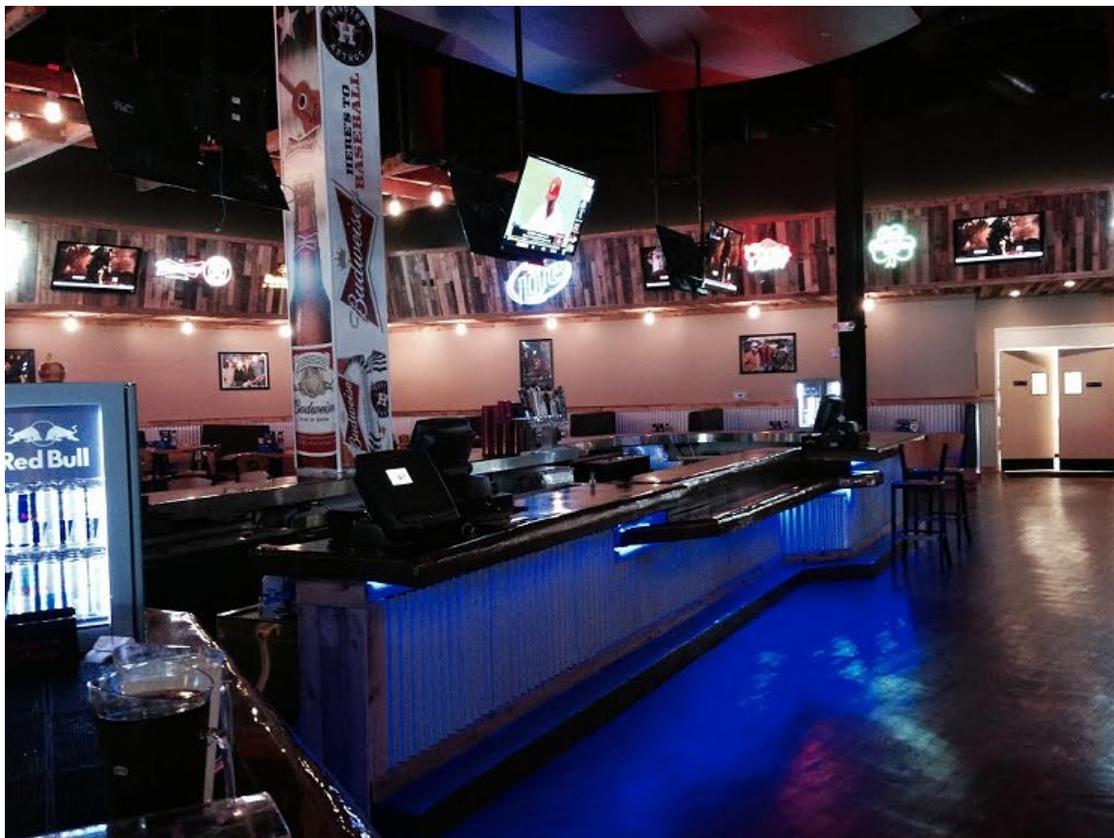
Supposedly some of the other outposts of TKILTB&G (as my friends and I have come to call it) are thriving in cities like Las Vegas...and Auburn Hills, Michigan. Which makes me wonder if, somehow, here in Houston, Toby Keith is punking us all. I intend to ask him.

Dear Toby Keith,

I have a few thoughts and questions regarding the latest countrified chain restaurant that bears your name right here in Houston, Texas, at a once grand but now majestically empty mall on the outskirts of town. My friends have some thoughts, too, which they were kind enough to share with me.

First, Mr. Keith, you really should've been a cowboy, not a restaurateur. I understand that you don't personally own any of these Americana abominations with your moniker -- you merely have a licensing agreement with the chain's CEO, Frank Capri -- but I'm somewhat amazed that you seriously want your name on items like the "T.K. Stacker Regulator." Honestly, that burger with two cooked-to-death but flavorful patties topped with cheese and chili is one of the better things on the menu. It was only later that my friends and I came to regret our decision to eat it.

And what was with those St. Louis-style ribs, featuring special "Toby's Barbecue Sauce" sweet enough to send a diabetic into a coma? As one who has lived in St. Louis, I can say with certainty that those are not St. Louis style. They're more akin to Chili's style, only the ribs I recall eating years ago at the national chain of family restaurants were juicy, even without being covered by a thick layer of gelatinous fat.



All I can figure is that someone in the kitchen mixed up the sugar and salt when preparing your signature sauce, because the pulled pork sandwich -- drenched in Toby's Barbecue Sauce -- was also sickeningly sweet. Fortunately, the bun on which the pulled pork was served along with a diminutive side of mayo-laden coleslaw was light and fluffy, a decent roll on a plate of otherwise confusing food. Of course, the bottom bun became so soggy with sweet sauce that it was rendered inedible. But the top half was good.

The same buns were used with the burgers, which were also not bad as chain-restaurant burgers go. But I do wonder, Mr. Keith, if the kitchen is aware of the ingredients listed on the menu. When we ordered the T.K. Stackers "South of You" burger (by the way, what's with the name?), it came without jalapeños or the cilantro cream cheese listed on the menu. When we asked for the cilantro cream cheese on the side, the server brought us a -ramekin of sour cream. Also, the onion straws were less like crisp straw and more like limp, wet hay. Maybe you could show the kitchen the photo of the burger on your website and tell them to emulate that?

Still, give the folks in the kitchen a pat on the back for cooking what looked like frozen burger patties until they got a nice sear on the outside. True, they ended up a little dry, but I bet some of that cilantro cream cheese could have helped the situation.

While we're on the subject of the burgers, you might also want to give the staff some pointers on how to answer questions regarding the provenance of your food. Granted, most people who come into TKILTB&G probably don't care where their burgers come from, but for the assholes like myself who are prone to asking, "They come off a truck" isn't a great answer.

Not that I'm surprised that anything I ate came off a truck, possibly right before being plated and served. The Toby's Platter -- an appetizer option featuring nachos, "Whiskey Girl Wings," jalapeño poppers, deep-fried pickle spears, mozzarella sticks, and fried macaroni and cheese triangles -- seemed as if the fried and then frozen offerings had been plated and then driven across the country in the back of a hot 18-wheeler, allowing them to thaw, then heat, then become stale and soggy during the ride.

Can we both just agree that macaroni and cheese should never be served in triangle form? And could you let me know how long ago the desiccated pickles enveloped in limp, flavorless batter were prepared? And why were the Whiskey Girl Wings lumpy? We never did figure that out.

We also couldn't figure out why the "zesty Southwest Ranch Dressing" on the Southwest Chicken Salad tasted like dishwater. Or why the chicken topping it arrived cold, with shredded and congealed cheese stuck to both it and the stale, multicolored tortilla chips

intended to Southwest-ify the dish. And what part of the Southwest grows and then candies pecans for their zesty salads? Just curious.

Mr. Keith, I am ashamed to admit that one of my favorite dishes at your befuddling restaurant was the fried Twinkies. True, the batter on them is a strangely dark hue, making them appear more like stacked turds on a plate than carnival food, but the crispy logs filled with melted artificial cream were actually a pleasant end to the strange meal.

It would have been nice to cap the dinner with a strong Old Fashioned from your "fully stocked" bar as well, but when the waitress replied, "An Old Fashioned what?" to my order, I figured another Lone Star would have to do, especially since the bartender was having trouble keeping up with the orders from the two people seated along the giant guitar bar.

By the way, is there a reason the Whiskey Girls' shorts are so short their ass cheeks hang out the back?

Do you see now, Mr. Keith, why I'm confused by this restaurant? Especially being that it's here in Texas, where all you really have to do to create the type of bar I think you're probably aiming for is to play country music and watch the wannabe cowboys saunter in...? I can see how your establishment might do well in places like Massachusetts or Minnesota, where Stetsons and cowboy boots are few and far between. But opening Toby Keith's I Love This Bar & Grill -- even on the outskirts of Houston -- feels a bit like opening an Olive Garden in Florence, Italy.

I forgive you for the misstep, though, buddy. Houston is a difficult city to define. It's hard to know what will work here and what won't.

What I don't forgive is that nasty song you wrote about critics back in 2003. Though I guess this letter isn't likely to change your mind.

Most sincerely,

Kaitlin Steinberg

Review: Common Bond's Pastries Are So Divine We're Driven to Rhyme

BY KAITLIN STEINBERG

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 20, 2014 AT 8 A.M



**It's buttery, flaky, a cavernous treat,
the type of thing no one can help but eat
when they see the whole tray piled high behind glass,
beckoning diners who gather en masse.**

The puffy, crisp roll has a light outer shell that begs to be sliced to reveal each round cell created by yeast and what must be a ton of butter, at least, in every one.

There's an art to the dough, called viennoiserie, but most guests don't care, they need only see the counter abounding with baked goods galore, then they end up ordering quite a bit more than intended. It's all cause their eyes filled with want the moment they locked on the perfect croissant. The chef made a bold claim long before the bakery even opened its doors, and since then he's dealt with a misquote he hurled: He He wants to run the best bakery in the world.

Though the jury's still out on the world domination,
the new shop has proved to be quite the sensation.
From the croissants that make food-lovers swoon
to the savory items, it's hard to lampoon
chef Shvartzapel's quote now that clearly, hands down,
[Common Bond](#) is truly the best bakery in town.

It opened to fanfare that somehow, magically
hasn't died down yet, leaving tragically
few chairs on the bright dining floor,
not designed for a line that's -- more often than not -- out the door.
People don't seem to mind, though, as they converse in line,
comparing notes on which dishes are fine,
while chef Shvartzapel observes from the kitchen,
pleased with his pastries and their knack for bewitching.
The same folks come in here day after day,
eager to feast on the veritable buffet
of croissants, macarons and the best, kouign amann,
and Shvartzapel waves to each, the gracious bakery Don.
Recently, while waiting in line with the crowd,
I heard someone near me wonder aloud,
"What should I get? It all sounds so great!"
"Excuse me," I said, "I'm sorry, I hate
to interrupt you, but here's what to get:
A kouign amann, a croissant, some bread...and yet,
savory is good, too..." I trailed off while she looked at me slightly distraught.
"Sorry," I said. "I eat here a lot."
And so it is that I find myself staying up late,
computer in lap, scone on plate,
enjoying the fruits of Shvartzapel's labor
while I virtually put pen to paper
in an effort to capture pastry with words.
It's no easy task; this one ain't for the birds.
But I feel you should know of this food, so sublime.
Common Bond is so great, it drives me to rhyme.

[Roy Shvartzapel](#) came here by way of New York.
He was born in Houston, but he left town to work
with some of the greatest chefs in the world,
under whose guidance his talent unfurled.
After graduating from the CIA
(culinary school, not government play),
Shvartzapel worked with chefs world class from
Thomas Keller to Alain Ducasse.
Houston investors took note of his skill
and lured him back here for the chance to fulfill
the dream of a lifetime, a gourmet bakery
to show off the chef's impressive pedigree.

Kathy Sanders and her son, Brad,
invested in him and the team that he had
assembled from years of working in pastry
to create something unique and so very tasty.

Common Bond is a bakery, first and foremost,
but it recently began preparing a whole host
of other mouthwateringly great savory dishes
from soft scrambled eggs to fried chips and fishes.
One of the greatest in Shvartzapel's oeuvre,
a divine chicken torta that it would behoove ya
to order the next time it's on the lunch menu --
the offerings change day to day at this venue.
The chicken torta is a sandwich so grand,
it is hard to consume it with just your two hands.
You'll need knife and fork in order to eat
the smooth guacamole and warm shredded meat.
Jalapeños and salsa add extra spice
while cotija and crema cool it off nice.
It's all stuffed between a telera roll,
which soaks up the juices and adds heart and soul
to the artisan sandwich that many demand,
thanks to the great bread made with love and by hand.

In addition to pastry, Common Bond makes some bread
that, though pricey, will stop you from heading instead
to grocery store aisles that stock cheaper loaves.
One bite and you'll understand diners coming in droves.
The pear and pecan is best with just butter,
while olive with cheese tray sends hearts aflutter.
The bread finds its way into brunch dishes, too,
like the fish n' chips sandwich or rich pain perdu.
'Course, pain perdu is not bread in the traditional sense;
It's croissant dough -- buttery, sweet and dense --
packed into a loaf pan then baked and made sweeter
by turning it into french toast that just teeters
on the edge of too rich and too much.
Served with whipped cream that melts at a touch,
it's a decadent breakfast, that is for sure.
And still, when I'd finished, I kept craving more.
I also lust after a charred romaine salad
with dressing so tangy it's worth a whole ballad
devoted to lemon and vinegar creamy.
Mixed with citrus and onion, that salad is dreamy.
Lightly grilling romaine brings out deeper flavor,
while pickled red onions are something to savor.
There's no protein here on this all-veggie platter,
but the taste is so good, it won't even matter.

For the more meat-inclined, try the hot mole hash.
Octopus and carnitas you might think would clash,
but when slathered in subtle but dynamic mole
and sprinkled with cheese, the flavors convey
a fusion of Latin and Gulf Coast cuisines
unique to our local, Houston food scene.
I wish the same could be said for the lunch fish n' chips,
but potatoes are dry and the fish filet slips
out from between two soft rounds of brioche,
and asking for extra aioli seemed gauche.
And the whole thing was dry, a fried mess of batter.
Between mole and this, stick to the latter.
Or you could skip the savory completely in favor
of pastries and sweets nearly bursting with flavor.
Kouign amann (the first word sounds like "queen," for the record)
is my favorite treat and largely unheard
of in Houston prior to Common Bond's reign.
Shvartzapel says now it's now hard to maintain
a stock of the sticky, sweet treats in the shop
now that's he's introduced it to this Houston crop.
It's much like a croissant only with extra fat
and sprinkled with sugar then rolled out till flat.
It's cut into squares and pinched at the top,
then dredged in more sugar before being dropped
in large, rounded molds where it's baked, and the sugar becomes something new.
It caramelizes in a hot pas de deux
of sucrose and heat that I think might be
the best breakfast dish I ever did see.
And at this point I feel I must mention the tarts
and the black forest mousse and the delicate parts
that make up each dainty dessert so composed
they're like works of art superimposed
on a canvas of goodies already consumed.
Don't save room for dessert, and I fear you'll be doomed
to return here again and again in your quest
to try each new item and see which is best.
When Common Bond opened, I, too, was suspicious
of the New York-trained baker and his best-in-class dishes.
Who comes to Houston and intends to beat out
all our other great bakers without the same clout?
But he's proven his worth, as has the café,
which wins people over not with pomp or with sway
but with simply great food and a mission to please.
Still, with such success, Shvartzapel's not at ease.

He's constantly working to continue improving,
to keep the crowd happy and keep the line moving.
Though customer service still has its flaws,
like slowness, confusion and order faux pas,
the many new servers are learning their trade,
getting better at coming to customers' aid.
In large part they project the most pleasant of auras
(but I must say I hate all their stupid fedoras).
I am happy to have a spot like this here,
proving we can lure great chefs far and near
to oft-changing Houston where now, it sure seems,
we're getting the restaurant scene of our dreams.
Raising the bar on pastry and bread
means commitment to quality surely will spread
across town and keep making Houston's light brighter,
which really excites this humble food writer.

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Chapter Five: Analysis

Introduction

When I was a restaurant critic, I drank.

Lunches always called for some sort of lavish libation or at least a craft brew (one must know the entire menu), and with dinner invariably came wine. Happy hour after work was drenched in unique and trendy cocktails — after all, bars are as much a part of the restaurant scene as diners for the contemporary critic. Brunch, well, that was a meal made for mixing booze and buffets to nurse the previous night's debauchery. Come Monday, the cycle started anew with, perhaps, a midday potation...just to get the creative juices flowing.

I didn't enter the realm of food writing with the intent of becoming a lush. I fell into it sort of by accident. As a journalism student, I was drawn to subjects that I felt made readers happy; news and politics were often depressing and antagonistic, but everyone liked to read about food and alcohol, right? Years of world travel enhanced by parents who loved good food and good wine and some family in the culinary industry endowed me with a baseline of knowledge that allowed me to make the leap from writer to food writer, for better or for worse.

With little actual experience beyond an internship at the *Riverfront Times* in St. Louis, during which I primarily covered bar happenings to save the full-time critic from late nights and nasty hangovers, I was hired as the restaurant critic and food writer for the *Houston Press*. Suddenly, for my first professional journalism job, I was one of two arbiters of taste in the nation's fourth-largest city. The other, a restaurant critic for the

daily newspaper, the *Houston Chronicle*, had been in the business longer than I had been alive. And, by all accounts, she was a bit of a tippler, known for closing down the bars at some of the city's best restaurants on a regular basis.

This was my role model.

I was terrified, and I needed to learn the ins and out of the job. Fast. The individuals I sought out in order to find my place in the world of restaurant criticism were largely fellow food writers and, of course, chefs. If the stereotype of the curmudgeonly, disheveled, hard-drinking journalist has some basis in fact, then so, too, does the stereotype of the foul-mouthed, tattooed, hard-drinking chef.

And so, I drank because it was a job requirement to some extent, but also because I wanted to fit in, to be a part of my new crowd. It was difficult to tell at the time if I drank to feel a part of the group of other writers or if I drank to curry favor with chefs, who were always ready for a strong dose of liquor to bring them down from the high of working the line for fifteen hours straight. Or perhaps it was a combination of many factors, including, yes, the desire to fit in and the need to constantly educate and re-educate myself on the latest potables. But there was also the stress of constant deadlines, the hope that drinking with a chef would lead to printable gossip, the longing for a creative spark and, somewhere, deep within the recesses of my subconscious, the notion that *this* — writing and drinking and drinking and writing and passing out on my keyboard while ordering another — this is what journalists did.

Theoretical Framework

I knew that, as a writer prone to drink to excess, I was not alone. Drunk writers and, more specifically, journalists, find themselves in the company of F. Scott Fitzgerald,

Ernest Hemingway, Hunter S. Thompson, Christopher Hitchens, David Carr. Those who write specifically about food join the ranks of AA Gill and Giles Coren and chefs-turned-journalists Andrew Zimmern and Anthony Bourdain. There are probably more who have yet to write confessional tell-alls about their dark, substance-fueled pasts, having come out the other side unscathed, but I simply don't know. That's what I want to find out.

In addressing the topic of alcohol abuse among food writers, I want to know, primarily, if the stereotype of the alcoholic writer extends to journalists in the food writing arena; is alcohol abuse truly an issue among food and drink writers? If the writers I interview confirm that alcohol abuse is problematic among this population, I will examine why. I know why I drank, and I know the many reasons that journalists and writers have historically given for debaucherous tendencies, but through interviews with food writers around the country, I hope to learn about their drinking habits directly to propose causes for excessive alcohol consumption related to the job, as well as possible solutions.

I will be examining these questions through the lens of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), best defined by Kevin O'Rourke (2006) as "personal factors, such as beliefs, expectations, attitudes and knowledge (cognitive) plus environmental factors, such as resources, consequences of actions, physical setting (behavioral) plus behaviors, such as individual actions, choices and verbal statements [that] influence learning and motivation" (p. 72). According to Albert Bandura, individuals are influenced not only by the behavior of other individuals, but also by the collective agency of which they are a part and by the behaviors that are presented in the mass media. Young, new journalists,

then, develop habits based upon other journalists with whom they interact, the circles within which they run and the images of journalists throughout history.

Literature Review

The Hard-Drinking Journalist

To determine if alcohol abuse is indeed an issue among food writers, it is necessary to briefly examine the history of alcoholism among journalists in general, as the journalism culture affects the ways food writers establish their identities when they join the profession.

In discussing the historical links between writing and alcohol consumption, Doug Underwood coins the term “journalist-literary figure” to encompass writers who began their careers as journalists, such as Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Kerouac, Mailer, Graham Greene, James Agee, Henry Miller, etc. (2007, p. 186-189). An examination of the lives of these journalist-literary figures showed that a higher-than-average proportion of them battled substance abuse, but this does, of course, raise the issue of correlation versus causation. Underwood asks, but does not answer, if creative types prone to alcoholism and substance abuse are more drawn to professions like writing than other people or if there is something inherent in the professions of writing and journalism that leads to substance abuse. He writes: “Did the life of the artist — and before that, the work of the journalist — facilitate the kind of personal behavior that could be so damaging to the journalist-literary figures and those close to them? Or did people who were fatally drawn to drink, afflicted with depression, and prone to excessive personal behavior choose journalism...?” (p. 194). Similarly, in his book *Alcohol and the Writer* (1988), Donald W. Goodwin asks if writing ability and alcoholism have comparable origins. Like

Underwood, he is unable to draw a conclusion regarding the perceived relationship between the job of writer and abuse of alcohol, but the question continues to be raised in scholarly accounts of the lives of writers and journalists.

Many point to a particular “journalism culture” as being the reason for heavy drinking among those in the field. Angela Romano writes that “journalists have a strong sense of social identity, so that there is commonly a uniformity of opinion among them about their role in society” (2003, p. 9). She even goes so far as to suggest that journalists audit the appropriateness of their own behaviors and actions through their interactions with other journalists. This notion exemplifies Bandura’s theory of modeling and the influence of a collective agency.

Not only did journalists drink in each other’s company, but often, according to Australian journalist Mungo MacCallum, hitting the bar could be a means of newsgathering. Before the age of constant connection via the Internet and social media, journalists would spend time at popular bars in the hopes of bumping into police and government officials (Vine, 2010, p. 21). Similarly, restaurant critic and food writer Gael Greene wrote about time she would spend at Elaine’s in New York City in the 1970s, chatting up restaurant industry bigwigs and fellow writers alike (2007). One need only look at the numerous articles touting journalists’ favorite bars from New York (Lincoln, 2012) to New Orleans (Welch, 2014) to Washington, D.C. (Scott, 2013) and even London (Howells, 2015) to establish the connection between journalists and a drinking culture predicated upon often conflicting desires to unwind or to seek inspiration in a meeting of minds or at the bottom of a bottle.

In his article, “Why do writers drink?” published in *The Guardian* (2013), Blake Morrison quotes Kingsley Amis, British novelist and critic and self-described drunk, who compares writers to actors and suggests “displaced stage fright as a cause of literary alcoholism.” Through Amis, Morrison touches upon the idea that alcohol can be used as a creative stimulant, quelling writerly doubts and enabling words to flow more freely. Adam Gopnik addresses this same notion in *The New Yorker* article “Writers and Rum” (2014), noting that, while actors, painters and other artists have a physicality to their work, writers must make the act of writing physical — “take the drug or drink and hope that it helps to ‘physicalize’ the work, move the pedals, and start the breathing...or else make the transition from mind to hand sober, knowing that the exhaustion it engenders will call for an antidote.” Gopnik admits “this is false reasoning, of course,” but based on accounts of drinking habits of early journalist-literary figures chronicled in Olivia Laing’s *The Trip to Echo Spring: On Writers and Drinking* (2013), it seems to be the preferred excuse of many.

Underwood lays out additional reasons for journalists to imbibe, including erratic schedules, transient work culture and “the demands of a professional activity that tends to put the needs of the present above worries about the future. He points to the research of Lichter, Lichter and Rothman (1986), which gave personality tests to a group of journalism graduate students and practicing journalists and determined that much of the energy behind things like investigative reporting comes from the tendency to project inner struggles to the outside world, ultimately leading to unhealthy psychological tensions. More recently, researchers have shown correlations between alcohol use and

psychological disorders among journalists involved in war coverage (Feinstein, Owen & Blair, 2002).

Of course, most food and drink writers are far removed from the life of a war correspondent, and the stereotype of the hard-drinking journalist à la Hemingway has largely faded away in favor of a more professional comportment both on and off the job. Still, as Jack Shafer notes in *Slate Magazine*'s "The Whiskey Rebellion" (2008), "every profession needs what academics call an 'occupational mythology' to sustain it, a set of personal and social dramas, arrangements and devices...as hard drugs are to the hard-rocker and tattoos are to the NBA player, so booze is to the journalist — even if he doesn't drink."

The Role of Food Writer/Restaurant Critic

Scholarship regarding the functions of food writers or restaurant critics is noticeably lacking, as most education in this area seems to come from on-the-job experience. There is no one food writing code of ethics to look to when determining how best to comport oneself, as there is for the general journalist, and food writers often find themselves in circumstances that a city reporter, for instance, would not.

In her autobiography, Gael Greene writes about one particularly decadent trip to France with fellow food writers and chefs: "Never quite sober on our seven-day mission, we groaned as the small corporate jet's fridge was opened to reveal fresh bottles of Moët every morning before lunch...and drank it anyway" (2007, p. 140). Similarly, alcohol writer Dan Dunn wrote in his autobiography, "My job is alternately wonderful, brutal, glamorous, reprehensible, dangerous, hangoverific, toxic, deadly, a gift from the lipid solvent gods, and the best excuse for pretty much any horrible behavior you can think of"

(2011, p. 8-9). Of course, there is a difference between alcohol writing and food writing, but many food writers are expected to cover all aspects of dining — from the valet service to the wine list — so drinking on the job is often unavoidable. Still, the role of a food writer is unique in that journalists on this beat are generally expected to participate in behavior, like drinking on the job, that would otherwise be considered a breach of journalistic ethics.

Back in the 1950s, Craig Claiborne, the first male to hold the title of “restaurant critic” for the *New York Times*, did establish what Robert Sietsema referred to as “an ethical and procedural framework for restaurant reviewing.” In an article for the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Sietsema described Claiborne’s rules as such:

Reviews would be done by a single individual. The reviewer would set his own name to the work. He’d visit a restaurant at least three times, and each visit would involve a table of at least three or four diners, with an eye to covering the menu as completely as possible, eating some dishes more than once to test for consistency. The publication would pay for the meals, and no free meals would be accepted. Most important, perhaps, was the stricture that the restaurant critic remain anonymous. Thus, the reservation would be made under a false name, and the critic and his party would do nothing to call attention to the fact that a review was in progress (2010).

A more recent code of ethics developed by food bloggers for food bloggers (Greenstein & Burton, 2009) touches upon similar ideas as those put forth by Claiborne, but it, too, fails to mention anything about drinking on the job or the ways in which food writers are expected to handle such dilemmas. Even the very detailed code of ethics put forth by the Association of Food Journalists doesn’t touch upon alcohol consumption, other than to note that food writers should not accept free food or drink if at all possible (AFJ, 2017).

Another ethical gray area for food writers and critics is their relationship with people in the hospitality industry. Often, critics are expected to remain completely

anonymous, negating the possibility for any interaction with chefs, bartenders or servers outside of the immediate dining experience. Food writers, on the other hand, are expected to maintain a level of familiarity with people in the restaurant industry in order to knowledgeably write about them. Where some food writers — and even critics — have come to embrace the need to hobnob with folks in the restaurant industry, others, like Peter Calder, former critic for the *New Zealand Herald*, flat out refuse to maintain relationships in that area. “My relationship with the [hospitality] industry is virtually zero,” he notes in an interview. “I like it that way...[I] never go to industry functions because I don’t believe that I should have any personal relationship with anyone in the industry” (Goodsir et al., 2014, p. 131).

If one is prone to imbibing to excess, Calder’s rule is a good one, as evidenced by Dan Dunn’s propensity to overindulge in professional arenas: “Occasionally on booze junkets...I get wasted (my hosts’ fault entirely for overserving me, you understand) and wind up behaving in a manner polite society deems inappropriate or — as a former editor of mine at the Tribune Company observed moments before firing me — ‘completely and utterly assholeish’” (p. 37). Again, Dunn is a unique case as a writer whose beat is specifically alcohol and whose job requires he attend press events. Still, many food writers and critics not known for drunken antics, from Gael Greene to Alan Richman (Richman, 2004) to Craig Claiborne (McNamee, 2013), have admitted to overindulgence in drink while on the job, while still more, like A.A. Gill (Gill, 2015), Giles Coren (Hampson, 2014) and Anthony Bourdain have become known for their drinking.

Reasons for Alcohol Consumption Among Food Writers

If the primary reason for journalists to drink is the glamorization of the hard-drinking journalist, as many have claimed (Ehrlich, 2006; Pressé, 2015; Shafer, 2008), and the “relationship between the tradition of alcohol consumption and journalism’s cultural norms and practices” (Vine, 2010, p. 9), the justifications food writers and restaurant critics give for alcohol abuse are myriad and ill-defined. Through my research, I hope to provide greater insight into the drinking culture among food writers, but, in the meantime, rationales for alcohol consumption and abuse among this population can be divided into four categories: job stress, creative stimulus, nature of the work and proximity to restaurant industry habits.

Job stress and creative stimulus are notions that most journalists — and writers, more generally — throughout history have given for turning to the bottle. In 2015, the *British Medical Journal* published a study that found that working more than 55 hours a week (par for the course for many journalists, including food writers, who generally count time spent eating out at restaurants as “work”) increases the odds of “risky” alcohol use, defined as more than 14 drinks per week among women and more than 21 drinks per week among men (p. 2). According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, numerous studies have confirmed that stress — be it general life stress or something that stems from a catastrophic event — tends to lead to an increase in alcohol consumption (Keyes, et al. 2012).

More romantic is the notion that alcohol somehow serves as a means of inspiration, breaking down the walls of writer’s block, an idea touched upon above during the discussion of journalists’ and writers’ romanticizing of alcoholism as an

“occupational mythology.” Goodwin expanded upon the interaction between writing and alcohol:

Writing is a form of exhibitionism; alcohol lowers inhibitions and prompts exhibitionism in many people. Writing requires an interest in people; alcohol increases sociability and makes people more interesting. Writing involves fantasy; alcohol promotes fantasy. Writing requires self-confidence; alcohol boosts confidence. Writing is lonely work; alcohol assuages loneliness. Writing demands intense concentration; alcohol relaxes (1992, p. 425).

Notorious boozing journalist Christopher Hitchens wrote, “Alcohol makes other people less tedious and food less bland, and can help provide what the Greeks called entheos, or the slight buzz of inspiration when reading or writing” (Buckley, 2013).

A 1992 study by Mark Brunke and Merv Gilbert sought to prove in a somewhat scientific manner whether drinking alcohol does truly facilitate creative writing through examining the use of figurative language among test subjects who were given enough alcohol to bring their blood alcohol level to at least 0.09 (above the legal limit in the U.S.). The study found that, while those who were given alcohol before writing (as opposed to the control group, who received a type of placebo beverage), did not use more figurative language, implying a higher quality of writing, they did indeed write more, suggesting that alcohol could serve as a first aid for writer’s block.

Again, the notion of drinking to spur inspiration is common to all types of journalists, not just food writers. Still, the idea behind booze as a muse is the same. The tendency of journalists to drink at all times and show up to work hungover seems to be shifting, though, in this “age of lawsuits and enforced workplace decorum,” writes Jared Keever for *The Richest*. “Today, newspapers are on the financial ropes. Cigarette smoke

in the newsroom is as rare as a typewriter...showing up drunk at the office is frowned upon more than it once was. People just don't consider it cute anymore" (2014).

Unique to food writers, one could argue, is the necessary role that alcohol plays in their work. Yes, some writers might claim to *need* drink to write, but many food writers and restaurant critics literally must drink in order to write about a restaurant or bar. The world of food writing has seen its share of sober journalists, but, by and large, a food writer or restaurant critic is expected to be able to drink and write knowledgeably about what they've imbibed. Critic Julia Sexton reinforces this point, noting that while alcohol consumption is often a necessity, moderation is key: "As a restaurant critic, drinking is part of my job...When I'm reviewing, I drink moderately. Imbibing too much can blunt my palate and memory. That said, it's important to drink a little when I review; a restaurant's beverage program is as important as its food" (Sexton, 2011). On each of her many magnificent European food tours, Gael Greene found herself confronted with the opportunity to drink to excess and often welcomed it, either out of the desire to taste something special or out of concern for offending the host. "Rude to resist" (p. 104), she writes of one particularly decadent night, and countless other food writers have echoed this conundrum.

In a 1985 profile of restaurant critics based on their experiences and habits, one critic who was polled noted that even though drinking is often a necessity of the job, "a reviewer must know his limits and hold to them...A reviewer drinking on the job can make restaurateurs feel the review has been clouded by spirits" (Burry et al., p. 403). It would seem that critics recognize the effect drinking can have on both their ability to remain sharp and their public persona, but it is not always true that a restaurateur would

judge a writer negatively for having too much to drink. “Alcohol is inextricably tied to the restaurant industry,” notes chef Mike Randolph in an interview for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. “It is part of the tradition and pleasure of dining out” (2016).

Indeed, if any group is acquainted with drinking on the job, it’s chefs. Because the job of a food writer is so closely linked to the restaurant industry, it can be difficult to separate the professional critic from the writer who spends time with chefs and industry insiders to aid in the completion of stories. Gael Greene wrote frequently about her moments of overindulgence at the behest of chefs who were either serving her or spending time with her off the clock. Anthony Bourdain, first a chef and now a renowned travel journalist can be seen on television at least once a week drinking to excess with a cook in a foreign country as a means of gathering information.

This proximity to the heavy drinking culture of the restaurant industry creates a toxic cocktail in which social modeling again plays a factor. A 1995 study of heavy drinking in the restaurant business by Kristina Kjaerheim et al. “confirmed very strongly the influence by co-worker modeling on the risk of heavy drinking” (p. 1493). Looking at alcoholism in the workplace, Kaye Middleton Fillmore summarized the work of Roman and Trice (1972), noting that they put forth a “stress hypothesis,” which “emphasized the importance of stressful work roles,” and an “availability hypothesis, focused on drinking around the workplace with co-workers” (1984, p.55). Both of these factors — stress and availability — seem to play a prominent role in the drinking lives of restaurant industry professionals, as well as food writers and critics.

Alcohol Use Among the General Population versus Journalists

In order to determine if heavy drinking is indeed an issue among food writers and critics, it is important to first look at drinking norms in the U.S., where all of the intended interviewees for this study live. I have previously defined “risky” drinking, based on a study by the *British Medical Journal*, and the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) defines “binge drinking” as “a pattern of drinking that brings blood alcohol concentration (BAC) levels to 0.08 g/dl (NIAAA, n.d.). This typically occurs after four drinks for women and five drinks for men — in about two hours.” The NIAAA considers anything below seven drinks per week for women and 14 drinks per week for men “low-risk drinking,” as it pertains to Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD), so it stands to reason that women who consume more than seven drinks or men who consume more than 14 drinks per week are at risk for developing AUD. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) defines heavy alcohol use as “binge drinking on five or more days in the past month” (SAMHSA, n.d.). According to the 2015 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 56 percent of Americas age 18 or older report that they drank in the last month, while 26.9 percent reported engaging in binge drinking and 7 percent in heavy alcohol use (NIAAA, n.d.).

A 2017 study on “the mental resilience of journalists” found that of the very low number of respondents (21 people out of a pool of 90), those who drank reported an average of 16 drinks a week. Forty-one percent of the respondents reported drinking up to 18 units a week, putting journalists in the top 20 percent of Americans for alcohol consumption (Swart, p. 7). It should be noted, however, that this was not a peer-reviewed

study, and further scholarship into the drinking habits of journalists is necessary to draw more accurate conclusions.

Method

Through interviews with food writers and restaurant critics, this research explores whether the role of food journalist contributes to excessive drinking, both on the job and in a writer's personal life. Qualitative research was the ideal method for this inquiry because it provides "insight into cultural activities that might otherwise be missed in structured surveys or experiments" and because it is "well-suited for accessing tacit, taken-for-granted intuitive understandings of a culture" (Tracy, 2013, p.5). The experiences of food writers — particularly when it comes to their alcohol consumption — are so unique and personal that simply surveying them with pre-determined answers would not elicit the same level of individual detail as the comprehensive interviews.

This research relied upon semi-structured interviews, because this method is optimal for delving into the experiences of individuals for the purpose of establishing a greater understanding. As Sarah J. Tracy explains, "interviews provide opportunities for mutual discovery, understanding, reflection and explanation via a path that is organic, adaptive and oftentimes energizing" (p. 68).

It was the organic and adaptive nature of interviews that appealed most to me, partially because I knew that in examining the often-taboo subject of drinking habits, a comfortable rapport would need to be established with interviewees. I also appreciate the adaptive nature of interviews — if certain questions weren't eliciting detailed responses or were not well understood, I could change them. Similarly, if a subject brought up a point that I hadn't considered, I could weave it into my list of questions moving forward.

I have always been comfortable conducting one-on-one interviews, and I hoped that, for this research, my confidence would put the subjects at ease. Even though this is not strictly a scholarly or scientific inquiry, I wanted to be sure I was always aware of my inherent biases, i.e. “this was my experience, so it must have been other people’s as well.”

Tracy notes that, because “the researcher *is* the qualitative research instrument (p. 12),” it is important to be aware of researcher biases, experiences and potential lack of subjectivity in conducting this research. Indeed, while talking with the food writers I contacted for research purposes, I was very up front about my own experiences, mostly because potential interviewees wanted to know how I arrived at this topic of inquiry. After giving some personal context, though, I always made it very clear that I wasn’t looking for subjects to back up what I thought I already knew — rather, I wanted unique perspectives that would help me gain a broader understanding of the relationship between the role of food writer and alcohol consumption.

Participants were print journalists that came from magazines, newspapers, alternative weeklies and online publications. Some are currently employed as full-time food writers; others are freelance journalists and authors who have worked as full-time food writers in the past. A couple have never been full-time, choosing to write freelance while working jobs outside of the journalism field. Participants labeled themselves as food bloggers, restaurant critics, food editors, food writers, food journalists, food and drink journalists or some combination thereof.

The organizations represented by the full-time journalists interviewed include *Houstonia Magazine*, *Houston Food Finder*, *San Antonio Current*, *Dallas Observer*, *LA*

Weekly, The Coloradoan, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, The Charlotte Observer, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Tampa Bay Times and *The Post and Courier* (Charleston, SC).

Freelancers have been published in *Salon, The New Yorker, Harper's Magazine, Lucky Peach, The Sacramento Bee, Washingtonian, My Table Magazine* and *Edible Houston*, among others. Subjects have also authored a number of food and drink-related books.

For the purpose of this research, I decided not to pursue anonymity. I offered all interviewees the option of anonymity, but all expressed that they felt this is important research, and they were happy to lend their names to it. I believe that, because the responses are so tied to the type of work the subjects conduct — be it blogging, criticism, cocktail writing, etc. — it would not make sense to seek anonymous feedback.

I recruited participants primarily through contact with the Association of Food Journalists, who expressed an immediate interest in my project and allowed me to advertise for interview subjects in their newsletter and on their Facebook page. I also “cold” emailed restaurant critics across the country, but I received little feedback from this method of contact. Finally, I reached out to food writers I know through my own professional network, which is why there are five subjects who are currently living and working or who have lived and worked in Texas. I would have liked more geographic diversity among my interview subjects, but I was limited by the scope of my network and the time I allowed myself to contact journalists.

I was able to interview 17 people for this research. All of the interviews were conducted via phone, and they lasted from approximately 15 minutes to approximately 40 minutes. I used an “interview guide” (Appendix A), as defined by Tracy (p. 139) to

conduct the semi-structured interviews, aiming to ask the same or similar questions each time, while allowing the conversation to be dictated by the subject's responses.

I refrained from taking notes during the interviews, because I wanted to be able to focus entirely on what the subject was saying and tailor my questions and responses accordingly. After all the interviews were complete, I began transcribing, but I transcribed only the relevant statements in order to save time and ensure my notes were as clear as possible. After transcribing, I highlighted particularly compelling comments and added handwritten notes regarding themes that were emerging and potential organizational structures for the analysis portion of the research.

While some questions elicited nearly homogenous responses among all subjects, providing for comfortable extrapolation, interviewees did express disparate opinions on certain topics. This means, of course, that the research questions are not easily answered, but it also reassured me that I wasn't inadvertently coloring my subject's responses with my own observations and that I hadn't unintentionally contacted people who all had the same experiences I did.

Results

After 17 interviews, some themes regarding food writing and alcohol consumption emerged. Four of the writers I interviewed acknowledged that, while there is the potential to overindulge in alcohol, be it from stress or access, they did not believe that food writers were more inclined to drink to excess than people in any other profession. That left 13 interviewees who provided a number of reasons that they or other people they know in the industry have experienced problematic drinking related to the job in the past.

While the literature I examined on the topic led me to posit four rationales for alcohol consumption and abuse among food writers — job stress, creative stimulus, nature of the work and proximity to restaurant industry habits — the interview subjects expanded upon my initial ideas, and even refuted some while adding others. Several themes emerged during the interviews, which shed light on the issue of drinking among food writers:

- Expense accounts
- Job stress/deadlines
- Access to alcohol
- Education/desire to expand knowledge of alcohol to improve writing
- Spending time with chefs/bartenders

A number of interviewees also mentioned both the social and the ritual aspects of drinking, but they recognized that neither of these reasons are unique to food writers. The notion of the “culture of the writer” came up as well, but, again, this would be an issue among writers that trickles down to food journalists, not a reason for drinking unique to food writers.

Cynthia Clampitt, a food historian and travel writer, said, “I think the culture has created the idea [that writers need to drink], and therefore a lot of people feel they need to do it in order to be great journalists. I think it’s something we’ve created, but I don’t think it’s a necessary evil.”

None of the participants agreed that the desire for a creative stimulus would lead them to drink, as I had theorized. In fact, every one of them expressed confusion that anyone would choose alcohol as a means to combat writer’s block. Even though,

historically, writers like Hemingway and Fitzgerald turned to the bottle for inspiration, this does not seem to be a common occurrence among contemporary food journalists.

Overall, though, participants felt that drinking is a problem among food writers, and nearly all expressed a desire to aid in this research in the hope it could in some way change the industry standard.

Expense accounts

One of the factors that came up repeatedly during interviews is the fact that, often, expense accounts take away the financial burden of drinking from the journalist, instead putting it on the publication. This is tied to the notion of easy access to alcohol and the idea that drinking is a part of a food writer's education, but it seems to be distinct enough to warrant its own discussion, particularly because it did not come up during any prior research on the subject.

Eleven of the 17 people interviewed said they had expense accounts for their reviews, and, often they are allowed to expense alcohol, though there does not appear to be a correlation between heavier drinking and access to expense accounts. Some writers who have what they call "budgets," rather than expense accounts (meaning they have an amount they aren't supposed to exceed per month, and they collect receipts then turn them in for reimbursement), noted that they aren't allowed to use publication funds for alcohol unless the story is about alcohol and they have previously cleared this with the editor.

Katherine Spiers, food editor of *LA Weekly*, said:

If you have an expense account, you don't have to pay for [alcohol], and, certainly, if you are of the new school who is comfortable taking free stuff all the time, there is a lot of free stuff to be had in this world. There are a lot of people who are like, "If you're going to offer it to me, I'm going to take it."

Laura Reiley, food critic for the *Tampa Bay Times*, echoed this sentiment, expanding upon how easy it can be for a writer to overindulge when he or she isn't the one paying for it:

You're not picking up the tab, especially if you're a food and drink journalist who's also going to events and there's free flowing alcohol. You're mindlessly consuming things that you're not paying for, and I think that that does lead to a hazy knowledge of precisely how much you've had.

Jenna White, a freelance writer who worked for several publications in Houston, also spoke of the idea of free drinks as a motivating factor, saying, "It's hard to turn down. It's such a great opportunity, and I could never afford it on my own."

Other food writers had different experiences, though, related to limited expense accounts keeping their drinking in check. "Work will pay for me to have one glass of wine with dinner, but I don't have an open budget for alcohol," Hanna Raskin, food editor and chief critic for *The Post and Courier*, said.

Cara Strickland is a freelance writer who doesn't have an expense account. "I will go out and have a cocktail with someone, but I won't usually have more than one, because that's \$20," she said. "A lot of my drinking thoughts are financially motivated." Ian Froeb, restaurant critic for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, noted that while literally being required to drink for your job can lead one to drink more than the average person, newspapers "aren't rolling in cash these days...nor am I, as the employee of a newspaper."

Contrary to the notion that access to expense accounts might encourage more drinking, Phaedra Cook, former restaurant critic for the *Houston Press* and founder of *Houston Food Finder*, said that if all publications were required to reimburse writers for

their alcoholic beverages, “limits would be set real quick.” She adds, “They want writers to write about beer and wine and cocktails, but most publications don’t reimburse it.”

There does not appear to be any data on the specifics of newspaper or magazine expense accounts, i.e. which ones have expense accounts, how much money they provide for reviews versus articles, if alcohol can be expensed, etc., though it is common practice for publications to reimburse writers for story-related expenses. Some publications do, however, have rules regarding reimbursing alcohol.

Job stress/deadlines

Every participant interviewed — with the exception of two who admitted to stress eating instead of stress drinking — acknowledged that job-related stress is a great catalyst for alcohol consumption, and that their stress drinking isn’t limited to on-the-job consumption.

Strickland stated: “Now that I work remotely and I am my own boss, I love my job, so I don’t have the same kind of ‘Oh, I need a drink at 5’ that I did with other jobs. I had a few bosses that would make me cry, and I’d come home and just really need a drink.”

While Strickland’s freelance status has reduced her stress, interviewees who are still employed as full-time journalists acknowledge that the industry can, at times, be brutal. Cook elaborated upon the idea of journalism as a punishing profession, saying, “It’s a deadline-driven industry. These days, it does not have nearly the monetary reward or perks or expense account that it once had. So, the stress is way ratcheted up, you’re working your butt off, and you don’t have much to show for it.”

Author Todd Kliman echoed this notion, explaining:

The single greatest threat to food writers is journalism itself, and the fact that it doesn't really exist the way it used to or the way it needs to. What is being asked of journalists and the money they're being paid is absolutely insane. That's what drives journalists to drinking. You're constantly being whipped to do more work, and you've got to produce, and you've got all these deadlines, and then you go out to this restaurant, and it's a chance to relax. It's this haven, this escape.

Food and nightlife editor for the *San Antonio Current* Jessica Elizarraras also spoke about how difficult the stress of constant deadlines can be. "We are so driven by that scoop and that deadline that you do it at whatever cost," she said. "And I don't think it's until much, much later that you find out self-care is important." She acknowledged that, when she drinks more than she thinks she should, "I know on some level that I'm numbing, so I try not to do that."

Scott Reitz, former restaurant critic for the *Dallas Observer*, allowed that stress and drinking often go hand-in-hand, but, unlike many of the subjects interviewed, he was reticent to blame the stress of the job for his drinking. "I guess stress was a trigger," he admitted, "but in terms of correlation versus causation? It's not like I felt stressed, therefore I drank. It was just a habit developed early in life that I think food writing facilitated."

Managing editor of *Houstonia Magazine* and former restaurant critic Katharine Shilcutt had some particularly harsh words about the industry and its ties to her drinking habits when she was a full-time critic. "This job is not rewarding," she said. "You're killing yourself over it for nothing. Angry chefs, angry readers, angry editor."

Access to alcohol

So, then, why do it at all? As many participants noted, the perks can be quite nice.

“It was a bit of a fairytale in terms of great food and exposure and access to chefs and experiences,” Reitz explained. Often, these experiences involved alcohol.

“There is so much access to [alcohol].” Cook said. “If you walk into a restaurant and you’re spotted as a food writer, someone is probably going to send a glass of champagne to you.”

Jacob Laxen, the “Eat and Drink Reporter” for *The Coloradoan*, agreed that he does occasionally have to reconcile the availability of drinks with a concern for his health. “I do have to make a concerted effort to keep my drinking to a minimum, because you get invited to these multi-course dinners, and you have to not always finish everything or just drink the things that interest you. There’s definitely a conscious effort.”

Kathy Flanigan, a reporter covering features, entertainment and beer culture for the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, spoke about how drinking on the job can become almost second nature for food writers. “It’s true that it’s just too easy,” she said. “It’s too easy to drink more. It’s too easy to get caught up in the lifestyle.”

Froeb, too, discussed the availability of alcohol as motivation to drink more than he otherwise might. “It’s really easy in this job to drink too much and to eat too much, partially because of the sociability of it,” he said. “It’s an obligation when you’re out at a restaurant.” But, he added, constant access to good alcohol can also have a moderating effect. “When you are exposed to the better quality, more expensive product, moderation introduces itself. You learn to appreciate the nuances.”

Reitz also spoke about how being around alcohol all the time can lead to overindulgence:

I think creative people and writers in general are probably a little bit more statistically inclined to indulge in something, to have a vice. And then food

writers, with that propensity, have access to alcohol in a way that other professionals might not. If you go to a press dinner, that's how they grease the skids.

Like Reitz, Raskin noted that a predisposition toward alcohol abuse likely plays a factor in immoderation. She explained:

Can the work of being a food journalist lead to excessive drinking? Of course it can. I mean, the exposure is enough. I think you have to be genetically inclined to addiction, but I am certain I would not drink as much as I do if I were not in this industry.

Even if a food writer isn't genetically predisposed to drinking too much, Elizarraras noted that alcohol consumption can quickly become habitual with the job. "We don't think about it," she said. "It's like second nature. Even if you are cognizant, it's like, 'Of course I'm going to try this pairing. *Of course* I'm going to have rosé with lunch.'" Shilcutt expressed a similar sentiment regarding the normalcy of drinking on the job or for the job: "I started seeing the daily happy hours after work and the drinking on the weekends as, like, this must be how everyone does this job. This must be how people survive."

Kliman, too, acknowledged that easy access to alcohol can cause a writer to drink excessively, but, he said, the greater threat could be to the writer's credibility:

Let's say the restaurant is decent. You start the night out with a cocktail; that's gonna skew how you perceive the restaurant. Nobody's perfect, so there are times when I've done that. You go out, and you have a gin and tonic, and you have another drink, and damn, you're already in a great mood fueled by the alcohol, and then the food starts arriving, and you're already predisposed to liking the restaurant.

Education/desire to expand knowledge of alcohol to improve writing

Food journalists can make a lot of excuses for their drinking habits, but none are as readily accepted as “I have to taste this in order to write about it.” While there certainly are food writers who don’t drink, either for health or for personal reasons, “I don’t know how you can do this job and not drink,” Reiley said.

Cook elaborated, saying:

A challenge for a food writer is to develop a wide base of knowledge, and some of the deepest topics have to do with alcoholic beverages. You don’t want to look like an ass because you don’t realize Vermentino isn’t an Italian grape. And you should know all of the craft breweries and what they make, or the beer nerds will hang you. And then there’s cocktails, and that’s entirely different subject matter...

Shilcutt was initially surprised by the amount of drinking that was expected of her, but rather than feeling like she needed to learn all about the different types of alcoholic beverages to succeed at her job, she found pressure to learn how to keep up with the other heavy drinkers she encountered through her work. She explained:

I remember thinking “I need to learn how to drink” and putting it to myself as a test. Like, I need to learn how to hold my alcohol so that I don’t look like an asshole and embarrass myself at events. So, from that point forward, I started training myself like I would for anything else. I would go out and make it a point to drink every time I went out, thinking I would build up a tolerance and educate myself about a category of dining that I didn’t know much about to begin with. Before I knew it, it was this normal, everyday part of my life.

She also noted that, as the scope of journalism has expanded to include blogs and multimedia reporting, so, too has the knowledge base that a food writer must have.

“There is no longer an expectation that you are just a food writer. You’re no longer just reviewing restaurants. You’re expected to review beer menus and cocktail programs and wine lists, and you’re expected to drink at all of these occasions.”

Like Shilcutt, White found a steep learning curve upon beginning her career in food journalism. “There is an acclimation period,” she said. “There isn’t a whole lot of training. If you’re someone who loves food and who loves trying new things, it’s hard to say no, especially in the beginning when that feeling — the specialness — is new.”

While not a problem drinker herself, Reiley has seen other food writers fall victim to the same excitement White references. “To me, when I go to an event that is all food writers, I think there’s a lot of bad behavior that gets masked by ‘Oh, it’s my job.’ I kind of always am leery of people who are super gluttonous and make it out like it’s part of the job.”

Cook, too, has witnessed firsthand food writers at events drinking what might be an unsafe amount of alcohol under the guise of on-the-job training. She even admits to having fallen victim to this tendency herself. The problem, she said, is one of both access and the desire to try everything in an effort to learn more:

I wanted to know everything, and I felt like I had to try everything... Going out to walk around tasting events, the wine or beer or whatever alcohol they’re serving is free. There’s a real temptation there to just go around and say, “I’ll try this, and I’ll try this!” And before you know it, you’ve had the equivalent of six glasses of wine, and it’s like, “What did I just do?”

Garrett McCord, a writer, editor and recipe developer in Sacramento, acknowledges that, for food writers, drinking is “literally going to be a part of the job.” As for drinking too much because of the job? “I could see how it could easily slip into that,” he said.

Spending time with chefs/bartenders

“I miss being a critic, but one of the things that I will say is I love not being weird about being friends with people in food,” Strickland said when asked about her

relationship with people in the restaurant industry. “They are a really fantastic group of people, and they’re passionate about the same things I am.”

Indeed, developing friendships with the same people upon whom you do most of your reporting can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they can provide valuable information for stories. On the other, relationships with chefs, bartenders, servers and restaurateurs can create a bit of an ethical dilemma.

“I think I’m the youngest of the old-school journalists, where I’m not trying to be friends with anybody,” Spiers said of the close relationship between food writers and those in the restaurant industry. “I don’t want to socialize with the people that I write about.”

Shilcutt initially took a different route in her professional life, often spending time with people in the restaurant industry, but she did find her closeness with this group troubling.

You’re not meeting anyone else. This becomes your social circle. I ethically didn’t like the expectation that you’re supposed to be friends with these people but then also cover them and be unbiased. I just couldn’t reconcile the closeness that was expected in Houston with my own ethical concerns, and I think that maybe alcohol is another factor in that, because maybe I did drink because I was uncomfortable, and that would calm me down and put me at ease.

Most of the drinking that goes on among food writers and restaurant professionals isn’t so distinctly related to ethical concerns, though. As Raskin put it, “You’re talking about two industries that can really drink.”

Amelia Cantos, a freelance writer and sous chef in Los Angeles knows this firsthand. “It’s a way of life for food journalists and in the restaurant industry,” she said.

“You have to de-stress after work. Plus, you’re around [alcohol] all the time, so it becomes normal.”

Cook expressed a similar sentiment, saying, “Alcoholism and drug use is a huge component of an industry that we are very closely related to, and we’re supposed to get in good with those people and really understand them. There’s a wash over.”

Elizarraras has felt the same pressure as many others to get close to restaurant industry professionals, even when that proves difficult because of their habits.

The biggest thing, as a young, female reporter, for me, at least, is just trying to keep up. You’re keeping up with people who are seasoned drinkers. And other things. There’s a reason coke is still so prevalent in kitchens. They can’t stay awake for 14 hour shifts without it because they were partying the whole night before.

On the bright side, though, Froeb notes that there is a move toward a greater recognition of substance abuse issues in the restaurant industry. Froeb himself wrote an article in 2016 detailing a St. Louis chef’s newfound sobriety.

There’s definitely a growing awareness, not just of this problem on both sides of the industry, but of the need to talk about it. I think the more that people are at least willing to talk about it, the better. It’s good that people are talking about it. It’s not going to end the problem, but it will let people know they aren’t alone.

Acknowledging drinking problems

As evidenced by the various issues participants raised that could contribute to problem drinking among food writers, the notion of alcohol abuse by food journalists, specifically, did not come as a surprise to many. While some of the interview subjects stated that their drinking was not and never has been problematic, others readily admitted to a troublesome relationship with alcohol.

“There definitely was a time where I was worried that I was becoming an alcoholic,” Cook acknowledged. She elaborated:

It’s just because I was out so much. I still drink every day, even though I’m not going out. And you start wondering, do you have a problem? That was the point where I started looking for opportunities to just have a day and not drink. How do I feel? Do I feel needy? Am I missing it? Do I feel bad about it? No, not really...I needed to remember that things are perfectly fine if you don’t drink, but there was a time where it felt like maybe I was developing a dependency problem.

After training herself to tolerate a significant amount of alcohol in order to keep up with her fellow journalists and restaurant professionals, Shilcutt recalls slowly realizing she might be drinking too much.

You go from training yourself to build up a tolerance so you’re not that drunk asshole at dinner, and before you know it, you’re just drinking all the time. I never really considered it as having a drinking problem, because it never occurred to me to think of it that way.

Eventually, after one particular instance where she consumed nine cocktails in the span of about an hour and noticed she didn’t even feel buzzed, Shilcutt grew concerned.

From there I started to extrapolate out, and I realized I don’t go a day without drinking anymore, much less a meal without drinking. I don’t hang out with my friends without drinking. I don’t go out without drinking before I go out. It had taken over my life, and I didn’t even realize it.

Elizarraras and Reitz shared similar anecdotes. Elizarraras remembers realizing that she was regularly having 10 drinks over the course of an evening because she would start so early with work-related happy hours. She was never “shitfaced,” she said, but “I’m not going to blow into anything at that point.” After noticing she couldn’t remember the last time she didn’t drink, she began to make a conscious effort to take time off from regular alcohol consumption.

Reitz went so far as to quit drinking for an entire year, and he did it while still a full-time restaurant critic and food writer. He realized that alcohol was causing him to behave “in a way that was not congruent with my personal moral compass,” and, because trying to drink less wasn’t working for him, he went with a “hard reset.”

Raskin has also found herself wondering if her habits are problematic, ultimately concluding they are not. “I have questioned myself,” she said. “Do I have a drinking problem? But when it comes down to it, if I open a bottle of wine and I don’t like it, I’ll throw it away.”

Writers who have never experienced problem drinking

Like Raskin, a number of the interviewees stated they have never had a problematic relationship with alcohol, and they gave several reasons why.

For Kathleen Purvis, food critic at the *Charlotte Observer*, professionalism takes top priority.

I have seen people who, you look at them and think, “You probably aren’t being as thoughtful as you ought to be.” We need to remember that when we’re doing our work, we need to be taking notes. A sip of wine, a sip of water makes a huge difference when you’re going to a four-to-six-course wine tasting dinner. You still have to be able to pay as much attention to the dessert as to the amuse bouche.

Laxen also monitors his drinking because “Once I became a food and beverage reporter, from the start of that, I knew I had to be really responsible.” He said he drank more as a sports reporter, but became more careful after making the move to food writing. “If the food and drink reporter gets a DUI, he’s not going to keep his job. I’m super, super conscious of that, because it is a great job, and I don’t want to lose it for something like that.”

Flanigan said that with age (she's 60), comes less desire to spend her time drinking with her much younger coworkers. Plus, she admitted, "I probably stress eat more than I stress drink."

Kliman said much the same thing about eating, noting that the amount he and other food writers have to eat is what concerns him about the job. Still, he said, "There would be nights where there would be a cocktail and a glass of wine. And you go, 'Oh, that's a light night,' but for anybody else, like the average person who has to hold down a job, that's a lot of drinking."

While several subjects said they probably drink "more than the average person," a few of them monitor their drinking due to family histories of alcoholism. "I have a lot of heavy drinkers in my family, so I try to stay pretty aware about that," Reiley said. "There's a lot of absurd rationalization in my family about drinking behavior, so it's certainly something I think a lot about." McCord said much the same thing: "I'm a lightweight, and I have enough family in AA that I realize I probably shouldn't drink alone." He went on to note, "My opinion is that if you're working in food and drink, you should already be well aware of these issues. If you're not, then you probably aren't doing your job properly."

Strickland, meanwhile, said she appreciates drinking too much to let it become a problem:

For me, my whole philosophy of drinking is that it's an experience. It's like going to a movie — it's entertainment. If you go and you watch six movies in a row, you're probably not going to remember very much. They aren't going to have as much impact.

She added, “I really like drinking, so I really don’t want to become an alcoholic. I need to make sure I’m keeping this under control. That’s why I say I don’t feel my drinking is problematic, because I’m so aware that it’s possible.”

Blogging versus criticism

During the interviews, the idea arose that food bloggers — writers who churn out a lot of content in rapid succession for an online platform — might have a greater tendency toward alcohol abuse than restaurant critics who write one review a week, due to the nature of the job. Kliman said:

The food bloggers, the ones who are connected to the scene but maybe aren’t major players shaping the scene, they get a lot of things coming their way. They get a lot of freebies, they’re courted. There’s a lot of “Hey, let’s go out.” Most people don’t act like that or talk like that. I think on that circuit, it can get a little dangerous if you’re not careful.

Kliman notes that, these days, there are so many media outlets, and “people need to fill it with something,” so they’re turning to younger, less experienced writers who may not be aware of the potential pitfalls regarding drinking while writing about food.

Shilcutt made a similar point about bloggers, saying, “The industry shifted really drastically with the advent of the internet, and I think all these young people got pulled into food writing without knowing what to expect, without knowing what the rules were — if there were any rules.”

White, who, like Shilcutt, Elizarraras and Reitz, has done extensive work for online publications, said “No one warns you, ‘This is how you should approach this dinner.’ I think, initially, there’s just a lot of excitement, and you don’t realize this is a job. I should probably have some guidelines or something.”

Education/next steps

If, as they say in Alcoholics Anonymous, admitting the problem is the first step, food writers and restaurant critics are moving toward a better understanding of the problems associated with job-related drinking and, in turn, toward a solution.

“I don’t know whose responsibility it would be [to educate new food writers],” Spiers said, “but if a food writer is just starting out, they could turn to their elders, and we could all be like, ‘By the way, if you don’t watch out, you’re going to gain 30 pounds in a month.’”

Joking aside, Froeb agreed about the need for a supportive environment:

I think more editors need to be like, “this is your beat, you need to take care of yourself.” If you’re hungover or distracted or whatever, you’re a shitty employee, and it goes up the chain. So, I think it’s important for supervisors to be more proactive in a good way, in a supportive way.

Cook discussed the need for publications to establish specific rules about drinking. Many do, though she has never worked for an editor or a paper that set guidelines about on-the-job alcohol consumption. She said:

I think it’s important for companies to lay down rules. It doesn’t have to be “You can’t drink when you’re on assignment,” because I think alcoholic beverages and food for adults are intrinsically linked, and I think enjoyment of both together can heighten the overall culinary experience. But, I think if I’d ever had an editor who said, “You need to limit your consumption to two drinks on any assignment,” I think that’s a good rule. Or “You may only have one glass of wine on assignment, and no drinking at lunchtime.” I think that’s fine.

Cook also pointed out the hypocrisy in the way many publications are managed, noting that, in the journalism world, there is often a “drinking culture” that bleeds into the office.

Maybe organizations need to take a look at themselves and determine whether or not they are perpetuating a drinking culture. I know of publications that definitely do. Instead of giving their writers more money, they take their writers out on happy hours after work. Or all their Christmas parties are at bars. It sends the wrong messages.

While a number of the interview subjects pointed toward broader reform in journalism education or mentoring from elders in the field as a means to combat problematic drinking, some have developed their own, unique ways of dealing with the constant pressure to drink. For McCord, who has never experienced a drinking problem, the solution is all about awareness and self-reflection.

I guess if your job is to be around it all the time, there's a little more need to be steadfast in your approach and self-control. If you're a food writer who knows that you're going to have a problem or you come from a family with a history of problems, it's going in with the knowledge of that and keeping track of it.

Elizarraras and Shilcutt have taken to ordering “mocktails” — non-alcoholic cocktails — in order to both save their livers and avoid the inevitable questions that come with refusing to drink among journalism or restaurant industry peers.

“Not drinking in our industry is anathema,” Shilcutt said. “It's unheard of. The few times that I was like, ‘I'm really not in the mood,’ I was immediately met with resistance. You not wanting to drink is you rejecting some portion of this world.”

“Sometimes I just say, ‘Can you make me something quick and mocktail-like so I can fake it?’” Elizarraras admitted. “Mocktails saved me, because nobody asks you [if you want a drink] if you're already holding something that has mint in it.”

Clampitt has learned how to make one drink last an entire evening, eliminating the need to keep refilling her glass, and she offered helpful advice for others looking to do the same. “I'm better at nursing a drink than anyone I know. Don't get anything you

like if you have to nurse a drink. Get something strong and not particularly pleasant. Don't get a tequila sunrise. Get whiskey on ice."

Cantos combats the desire to drink excessively by treating each drink as a unique and special treat, which, arguably is how most food writers should approach the job. "I think it's important to use all your senses, so you aren't just swallowing it. Then it becomes a learning activity. It becomes special."

Discussion

The importance of acknowledging the potential for alcohol abuse among food writers and taking steps to prevent it came up in every interview. Even those who had never thought about the issue or experienced it firsthand agreed that it shouldn't be swept under the metaphorical bar and ignored. In order for food journalism to continue to evolve in a positive way, any problems within the industry must be addressed.

"I think it's important to this industry, because I think there are a lot of high-functioning alcoholics who are writers," Strickland said. "I think it undermines the whole industry if we just say, 'This is part of the job.'"

The interviews indicated a number of factors that can lead to alcohol abuse among food writers, but, unfortunately, most of these circumstances are fairly unavoidable. Not much can be done to limit the access food writers have to a veritable cornucopia of alcoholic beverages, nor can one suggest that food writers should stop feeding the need to expand their knowledge base. In fact, as several subjects pointed out, the advent of blogging and constantly updated online content has increased the opportunities for writers to be wined and dined at media events or to test their palate at various industry tastings.

Kliman did point out that age and on-the-job education could hinder some of the drinking and partying in which younger journalists engage:

It used to be — even 15 or 20 years ago — you couldn't even think about doing this if you were 24. This was something that, generally the people who were coming to it had done other sorts of writing...experiences, living, having done a lot of reading and traveling, and having a broad frame of reference to draw from. Being able to put something in its context. You just can't do that at that age.

Because young writers are entering the field, though, guidelines for new food writers are becoming ever more necessary. As it stands today, food journalism guidelines or codes of ethics are generally directed toward critics rather than those who write about food more broadly, and few — if any — mention alcohol. In order for any set of rules governing how to be a food writer to be effective, journalists must want to use them. Creating a greater sense of awareness around the potential issues that could arise from drinking on the job may serve as a deterrent.

Journalists are, of course, trained to be skeptical, though, so the establishment of guidelines for best practices could be met with resistance. Members of the media frequently serve as catalysts for change, so the shift in behavior among food writers must start with the food writers themselves. There is a need not only for food journalists to be self-aware and practice self-care, but also to take care of each other.

Though not every writer interviewed for this project has battled drinking demons — or even witnessed other food writers drinking excessively — they did all see how alcohol abuse could potentially be a problem in this field. Still, based upon my own experiences and the actions of my fellow food writers that I witnessed and heard about, I expected unequivocal responses that drinking is absolutely an issue among food writers. Several people whom I interviewed said that they just never felt the need to drink or that

they don't particularly like drinking, and since I've never known a food writer who felt that way, those responses surprised me.

Though I had occasionally started drinking to get the metaphorical creative juices flowing, and the literature review supported the notion of drinking to combat writers' block, every single person I interviewed scoffed at that idea. The notion of alcohol and creativity can be traced back to ancient Greece and, after that, to China during the third century. "Once drunk, a cup of wine can bring 100 stanzas," Morrison writes in *The Guardian*, quoting the poet Xiuxi Yin. "The drunker the bard, the more the words flowed" (2013). My findings, then, did not support the literature, which provides numerous examples of writers drinking to bring forth inspiration.

At times, I even found myself becoming slightly offended by the dismissiveness of some of the interviewees, though I swiftly reminded myself that the purpose of this research is not to confirm what I already thought to be true or to validate my past bad behavior, but to investigate an issue I had noticed.

When McCord said "if you're working in food and drink, you should already be well aware of these issues. If you're not, then you probably aren't doing your job properly," I had to take a moment to compose myself to refrain from getting defensive. I'm the first to admit that the extent to which I drank as a food writer was not professional or healthy, and it probably clouded my judgment at times, but hearing such a blunt condemnation was initially hard to take. That said, learning about experiences that differed from mine helped to reassure me that I wasn't inadvertently skewing the results of my inquiry by inserting my own opinions too forcefully during interviews. In

retrospect, I think the differing opinions make this research stronger and more well-rounded.

Limitations and future research

The primary limitation affecting this study is the small pool of journalists who were interviewed. There are several writers whom I knew (based on their personal histories) would provide unique insight into this topic, but they refused to speak about it, citing either time constraints or an unwillingness to be so forthright about their issues.

I also worry that, because I relied upon my professional network to gather subjects, too many Texan writers are represented. I would have preferred to have more geographic diversity among the interviewees, because part of my concern going into this project was that my experiences with the drinking culture among food writers was unique to Houston. Because three of the people I interviewed are Houston-based, it could be suggested that the data is slightly skewed.

Future scholarship on this topic could include a larger pool of food writers and restaurant critics, and it could focus more on potential solutions to the issue of alcohol abuse among food journalists, rather than establishing that there is, indeed, a problem. If drinking on the job is a bad way to conduct oneself as a food writer, how should one approach the job? A discussion of changes in food writer training or practices should include editors and possibly publishers in addition to food writers themselves. A number of interviewees pointed to editors as being in positions to help guide writers to practice self-care, so it would be interesting to gather editors' perspectives on their role as it relates to their writers' drinking habits.

It would also be interesting to look at demographic differences. Is there a contrast between male food journalists and female journalists in terms of alcohol consumption? Do younger journalists have different drinking habits than older, more established journalists? Unfortunately, there is not much demographic info to be found regarding gender and average age in the food writing industry, but hopefully more studies will enable that information to be made available in the coming years.

Conclusion

Based on the mythos that journalists in general are heavy drinkers, as well as the myriad contributing factors specific to food journalists and my own personal experiences, this research addresses the perceived problem of alcohol abuse among food writers and attempts to propose, if not solutions, then at the very least an elucidation of the issue in order to take steps toward improvement. Generally, food writers are aware of the many avenues through which drinking can become problematic both on and off the job, but correcting the issue is a trickier topic.

The subjects who introduced the notion of a need for better support systems from editors and peers felt that cautioning new food writers about the potential pitfalls of the job could help them avoid problems in the future, but they were hesitant to suggest strongly that guidelines for best practices must be put in place, believing instead that it falls to a writer's network to provide support. Some subjects also seemed dismissive of the notion of alcohol abuse entirely, believing that drinking excessively is a character flaw, and perhaps people who battle such demons shouldn't be food writers at all.

I believe that this research is a good first step in addressing the problem, though, because acknowledging that there is the potential for drinking problems among food

writers can and will open the floor for further discussion. I feel the most logical next step is a set of guidelines, and I think the Association of Food Journalists, who have assisted greatly with this research by advertising for interview subjects, would be the ideal organization to lead the charge. I hope to work with them in the future to create such guidelines for alcohol consumption on the job, or to add direction about food writing and drinking to the current guidelines the AFJ has published on their website. These additions could be presented at a future AFJ conference for feedback, before eventually being disseminated to food writers across the country.

Guidelines about drinking on the job should include mention of expense accounts and when/if it is appropriate to expense alcoholic beverages or build their cost into budgets. They should also address drinking during events (as opposed to on reviews or while researching stories involving alcohol); drinking with chefs, bartenders or other interview subjects on and off the job; accepting free drinks; and greater transparency with readers and editors about drinking on the job. A workshopping of such guidelines will no doubt lead to additional protocol, and I welcome the advice of my fellow food journalists, editors and publishers in creating these new standards for the field.

The stereotype of the hard-drinking journalist prevails for a reason, and the many opportunities afforded to food journalists to drink do little to quash this image. However, as the food writing world continues to shift thanks to the advent of online publications and the substance abuse issues of restaurant professionals become less taboo to address, there is great potential for positive change in both industries.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Before you became a journalist, what was your perception of journalists?
Describe what you thought the typical journalist was like.
2. Before you became a food/drink writer, what was your perception of them?
Describe what you thought the typical food writer (or, more specifically, restaurant critic) was like.
3. How did you get into food writing, specifically? What experiences in your life led you to choose this area?
4. Did you have a mentor? What did he or she teach you?
5. Describe a typical day (or week) in your life. Where do you go? Who do you spend time with?
6. How much time do you spend outside of work with other journalists? How much time do you spend outside of work with chefs or people in the restaurant industry?
7. Do you drink alcohol?
8. If yes, on what occasions do you drink?
9. If yes, what alcoholic beverages do you drink, and how much would you guess you drink weekly?
10. Are there any factors/events that always lead you to have a drink or, at least, to want a drink? Stressed about work? Writer's block?
11. Have you ever classified your own drinking as problematic?
12. Do you ever have to make a concerted effort to keep your food or drinking to a minimum? If yes, how?
13. Throughout your career, have you ever encountered other journalists — food writers or otherwise — who you could tell had problematic drinking habits?
Describe them.
14. In your opinion, can the work of being a food or drink journalist lead to excessive drinking? Why?
15. What can be done to ensure journalists just beginning their careers as food writers practice the self-care needed to maintain their careers?

Appendix B: Interview Transcripts

Amelia Cantos Transcript

Age 60. Not currently a food writer. Cantos wrote for a travel magazine in San Francisco many years ago, and she's now working as a sous chef at Sur la Table.

I stopped drinking because I realized that it was making me put on weight. It's a social thing.

I was warned that I would go through a withdrawal when I stopped drinking. I really experienced the withdrawal, and I thought I don't ever want to feel that way again.

I definitely drink when I'm stressed. After I was a full-time writer, I became a teacher. My daughter told me I never drank regularly when I was a writer, but it became an excuse. You're so stressed for work, so you drink.

I didn't drink as much when I was a writer because I was always on a high.

Now I work as a sous chef, and when I get off work, I drink for a relax drink, not for stress.

I think awareness is so important for food writers, because it can get excessive.

It's a way of life for food journalists and in the restaurant industry. You have to de-stress after work. Plus, you're around [alcohol] all the time, so it becomes normal.

I think there needs to be an awareness of what is "regular drinking."

I think it's important to use all your senses, so you aren't just swallowing it. Then it becomes a learning activity. It becomes special.

Cara Strickland Transcript

Age 29. Freelance writer in Spokane, Washington. Strickland is a former restaurant critic for Spokane Coeur d'Alene Living magazine whose current writing focuses mainly on food and drink, singleness, mental health, and faith. Her work has appeared in The Washington Post, Salon, Phoenix New Times and Tales of the Cocktail.

I took food writing very seriously as a charge, because I hate the thought that anybody went into a restaurant at my recommendation and had a disappointing experience.

She worked remotely and didn't have to go into the office.

I was an anonymous critic, so the goal was to limit [contact with chefs] as much as possible. Outside of work, I wasn't fraternizing with anybody. I didn't have friends who were chefs at that time. I was very careful, ethically.

I miss being a critic, but one of the things that I will say is I love not being weird about being friends with people in food. They are a really fantastic group of people, and they're passionate about the same things I am.

My thought is that if you can be bought at any price, then you can be bought. If you can be bought by a free scoop of ice cream, then you can be bought by a free cruise. A good critic can rise above that, but the anonymity is helpful.

One of my specialties is drinking." Cocktail column in Phoenix and writes for Tales of the Cocktail.

I definitely drink socially, and I like to drink with other people. I will go out and have a cocktail with someone, but I won't usually have more than one because that's \$20. A lot of my drinking thoughts are financially-motivated.

I pretty much like drinking any time drinking is appropriate.

Drinks per week: 4

Now that I work remotely and I am my own boss, I love my job, so I don't have the same kind of 'Oh, I need a drink at 5' that I did with other jobs, but that used to be the case. I had a few bosses that would make me cry, and I'd come home and just really need a drink.

I think writer's block is a total myth.

If I go to a city where I know food writers and we hang out, we pretty much always have a drink, but that's true of anyone I visit, because that's a huge part of how I live my life socially.

I've never classified my own drinking as problematic. That's part of my strategy in keeping my low ability to process alcohol. It's harder to be problematic when you're having one or two drinks.

I would not limit it to food writing. It's so hard to prove causality, but I do think the type of person who is attracted to the writing life is sometimes also the type of person who is attracted to drinking. In my experience with food writers as well as other writers, there's kind of this idea about writers, that they sit at a typewriter with a glass of whiskey and a cigarette.

If you're a food writer, not only is it fun because you're going out and having a drink with a friend, but you're also like 'Oh my God, this Corpse Reviver No. 2 is perfectly executed!' Honestly, for me, that's where I want to be, because it's still interesting and fun. When you get past a certain point, you don't taste the differences anymore. For me, my whole philosophy of drinking is that it's an experience. It's like going to a movie—it's entertainment. If you go and you watch six movies in a row, you're probably not going to remember very much. They aren't going to have as much impact.

Important to note: Some employers make rules about how much their writers can drink.

I really like drinking, so I really don't want to become an alcoholic. I need to make sure I'm keeping this under control. That's why I say I don't feel my drinking is problematic, because I'm so aware that it's possible.

I find alcohol to be so interesting, and I would hate to cut myself off from it because of a self-control issue.

I think it's important to this industry, because I think there are a lot of high-functioning alcoholics who are writers.

I think it undermines the whole industry if we just say 'this is part of the job.'

Cynthia Clampitt Transcript

Age 66. Writer, speaker and food historian. Clampitt contributed long form pieces to the Food Cultures of the World Encyclopedia and World Encyclopedia of Street Food, as well as shorter articles to the Encyclopedia of Chicago Food and Drink. Her book, Midwest Maize: How Corn Shaped the U.S. Heartland, was published by the University of Illinois Press in 2015.

I'm better at nursing a drink than anyone I know. Don't get anything you like if you have to nurse a drink. Get something strong and not particularly pleasant. Don't get a tequila sunrise. Get whiskey on ice.

Eating can be a problem, but my drinking has never been a problem.

I think the culture has created the idea [that writers need to drink], and therefore a lot of people feel that they need to do it in order to be great journalists. The American iconic writers were all heavy drinkers. I think it's something that we've created, but I don't think it's a necessary evil.

I think people drink because they want to drink, and maybe becoming a writer is a good excuse. A lot of people need that help, whether to loosen up or to kill the pain or whatever. I don't think it's exclusive to writing, and I don't think it's required for writing, but we have created a mythos that somehow it's connected. It's sort of like tattoos and chefs.

I know a lot of food writers who are perfectly happy to not drink at all.

It is kind of a drug, so it's something you have to be cautious with.

Garrett McCord Transcript

Age 34. Food writer and recipe developer. McCord's work has appeared in many print and online publications such as the Sacramento Bee, Gourmet, Saveur, Huffington Post, Smithsonian and NPR. He writes about cocktails on his website, Coupe de Grace, and he has penned several cookbooks.

Yes, he drinks. He last cookbook was an e-book on Sacramento bartenders and their cocktails.

Generally, if I'm at a social event, I usually am drinking, but for the most part, I don't sit there at home and drink by myself, aside from the very occasional glass of wine. I do enjoy it, but not that often.

My drinking is mostly a social habit, and even then, I keep it to one or two glasses of wine or a cocktail and something to eat. I'm a lightweight, and I have enough family in AA that I realize I probably shouldn't drink alone.

Sometimes drinking more than the average person is literally going to be part of the job. As for problem drinking, I could see how it could easily slip into that.

My opinion is that if you're working in food and drink, you should already be well aware of these issues. And if you're not, then you probably aren't doing your job properly.

I don't think there's much that editors can do. I think it's more a question of how you're raised. Were you raised to have a respect for food and alcohol, or were you not? As for excess, we're all going to go to some sort of event where that will be the case—it's going to happen.

To classify it as a drinking problem—it's like, how do you tell a doctor to be aware of their drinking problem, how do you tell a bus driver to be aware? I wouldn't necessarily classify food writers as apart from anyone else. Yes, we have more interaction with it, but it would almost be the same as...I know a lot of winemakers and distillers, and none of them have drinking problems, even though they have daily contact with it.

I think it's part natural disposition, and the other part is having had the education and understanding of placing responsible limits on yourself, whether that was through parents or through school or through friends or your own understanding of the world and personal education.

I guess if your job is to be around it all the time, there's a little more need to be steadfast in your approach and self control. And if you're a food writer who knows that you're going to have a problem or you come from a family with a history of problems, it's going in with the knowledge of that and keeping track of it.

When I did restaurant reviews, I rarely talked about wine except to say, “There’s a wine list.” The chef has nothing to do with the wines except selecting which wines go on the menu, but they have nothing to do with what’s in the bottle. I would go into cocktail menus often, because that’s something the kitchen had control over.

Hanna Raskin Transcript

Age 40. Food editor and chief critic for the Post and Courier in Charleston, South Carolina. Raskin previously served as the food critic for Seattle Weekly, the Dallas Observer and Mountain Xpress in Asheville, North Carolina. In 2017, Raskin won the James Beard Award in a new category, Local Impact Reporting.

I drink at the end of the day, with a meal, when I get home, in social situations—probably the normal situations.

I drink a martini at the end of the day.

Charleston is a really heavy drinking city. It's very ritualistic, as it is for many people.

Because I work so many long hours, I really like having a drink to close out the day. It's my way of saying 'I can't work anymore.'

As much as I drink—and I drink way more than most American women my size, I'm sure—it's not like 'oh my god, I've got to have a drink.' I mean, I enjoy it, but I've never had to run out of the office early or drink with lunch.

If I decided that I didn't want to drink anymore, I could still do my job.

Work will pay for me to have one glass of wine with dinner, which is important because the food is made to be eaten with wine, and the wine is made to be drunk with food. But I don't have an open budget for alcohol.

I get the same benefits [from going out and drinking] as reporters on other beats—it's a really great place to talk to people. When I was in college and worked for the student newspaper, I briefly took up smoking for that reason.

As a reporter, it's not just about opening yourself up, it's about being around people who are opening up too.

I have questioned myself, like 'do I have a drinking problem,' but when it comes down to it, if I open a bottle of wine, and I don't like it, I'll throw it away.

She said she absolutely drinks when she's out with people from the restaurant industry or when she's out with other journalists. "You're talking about two industries that can really drink."

Can the work of being a food journalist lead to excessive drinking? Of course it can. I mean, the exposure is enough. I think you have to be genetically inclined to addiction, but I am certain I would not drink as much as I do if I were not in this industry.

Ian Froeb Transcript

Age 39. Restaurant critic for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. Froeb has been writing about food and restaurants since 2006, first for the alternative-weekly the Riverfront Times and, since 2013, for the Post-Dispatch.

I'm a pretty casual everyday drinker. I'll have a glass or two of wine with dinner, a beer after a long day at work, a cocktail if I'm out at a restaurant. It's pretty much just a part of my everyday diet.

Maybe 20 drinks a week

It's the ritual of you're an adult, it's what you do at the end of the day. It's definitely part of the ritual of dining out.

If I have a horrible deadline that I need to meet, I'm drinking caffeine. I can't drink and write, nor do I want to.

There have been times where I've been like, whoa, it's been a really bad couple of weeks, just cause I'm been especially stressed about something, so I've pulled back the throttle. It's one of those things that you observe and go OK, I overdid it. The term "problematic" wouldn't be the word I'd say, but it's more like moderation time.

It's really easy in this job to drink too much and to eat too much, partially because of the sociability of it—it's an obligation when you're out at a restaurant. I was brought up to always clean my plate, and that's been stuck in my subconscious all these years.

It's kind of a cycle where as you've been doing it, you learn more about good wine and good liquor and good cocktails, so you're a little more inclined to experiment at home. You develop an interest.

When you are exposed to the better quality, more expensive product, moderation introduces itself. You learn to appreciate the nuances.

On the one hand, you can see how you might get sucked into that lifestyle of drinking more than the average person, but also, we're still a newspaper. We aren't rolling in cash these days. Nor am I, as the employee of a newspaper.

There's definitely a growing awareness, not just of this problem on both sides of the industry, but of the need to talk about it. I think the more that people are at least willing to talk about it, the better. It's good that people are talking about it. It's not going to end the problem, but it will let people know they aren't alone.

Whoever is your direct editor or the person who most supports you—I think that has to be something. When you're brought on as a food writer, it's not a *glamorous* gig, but it's

one that people are like oh ho! I think more editors need to be like 'this is your beat, you need to take care of yourself.' People need to be more cognizant of you need to take care of yourself. If you're hungover or distracted or whatever, you're a shitty employee, and it goes up the chain. So I think it's important for supervisors to be more proactive in a good way, in a supportive way.

Jacob Laxen Transcript

Age 29. Eat and Drink Reporter at the Coloradoan. Laxen previously served as a food, dining and beer reporter for St. Cloud Times Media and as a sports reporter for the Ames Tribune.

I pretty much drink just beer and wine.

He probably has an average of one a day or 7 drinks a week.

More as a sports reporter I would drink for stress reasons. It's a stressful industry with lots of layoffs. It's not an easy job, and there's a lot of criticism always.

I had to be more careful when I became a food writer, because if the food and drink reporter gets a DUI, he's not going to keep his job. I'm super, super conscious of that, because it is a great job, and I don't want to lose it for something like that.

Even when you're off the clock and just out for drinks with friends, I worry about it. If the beer reporter gets a DUI, it wouldn't look very good.

I've had a beer when writing about beer sometimes, but I wouldn't say that's a regular occurrence. I've occasionally had a beer while making a video or something like that, but I wouldn't drink for inspiration.

All of the gatherings I've been to with other food writers, there has always been alcohol present. I think that's the common way to bond. The journalism industry is made up of a lot of different people with different backgrounds, but it seems everyone agrees on that.

Yes, I do have to make a concerted effort to keep my drinking to a minimum, because you get invited to these multi-course dinners, and you have to not always finish everything or just drink the things that interest you. There's definitely a conscious effort.

Once I became a food and beverage reporter, from the start of that, I knew I had to be really responsible.

There's certainly plenty of temptation. You have to be very strong-willed and very conscious of things and very smart about things. There are certainly opportunities for [excessive drinking].

I think just the transient nature of the industry too—meeting new people. That's the easy social way.

I've had editors tell me that it is acceptable to drink on the job because it's part of the role.

Jenna White Transcript

Age 30. Freelance writer. White currently lives in the Netherlands, but she studied journalism at the University of Missouri and wrote about food and drink in Houston for Houstonia Magazine, Edible Houston and Recipe for Success.

Once I was doing more regular writing, you get all these invitations for free meals. I come from a background of you don't waste food, so I was struggling with overindulging in general. And certainly, those nice dinners have pairings, so you want to take advantage of that, and everyone else emptied their glasses. Or if they didn't, you look over, and you're like, "Oh, should I not be drinking all of this?"

5-8 drinks per week, including weekends

I give in to fun peer pressure, so if I was invited to something that realistically maybe I shouldn't be doing, I could easily be swayed if it seemed like a really cool opportunity. And then I would figure out how to deal with the consequences.

The issues that go along with being a small person and social drinking were certainly there in college, but for me, I got more concerned with how overindulging was affecting my weight.

And you feel like you want to be in the know and you have to be networking, but my goal is to not drink during the week.

I got frustrated a little bit between the media dinners we were hosting, because it's so hard to turn down. It's such a great opportunity, and I could never afford it on my own. But it certainly got in the way of my own personal health goals.

I certainly envy someone's ability to have a couple sips of a drink and move on.

There is an acclimation period, it seems like. There isn't a whole lot of training, especially if you're someone who loves food and who loves trying new things. It's hard to say no, especially in the beginning when that feeling—the specialness—is new. It's something that I definitely noticed in myself and some of my friends who are also food writers, but if you stay in the industry, there seems to be a leveling off, the shininess wears off, and you realize that it's a job.

No one warns you, this is how you should approach this dinner. I think initially there's just a lot of excitement, and you don't realize this is a job, and I should probably have some guidelines or something.

Jessica Elizarraras Transcript

Age 31. Food and nightlife editor for the San Antonio Current. Elizarraras previously served as a staff writer for the San Antonio Express-News and as an editor at The Paisano.

6-10 drinks a week, but more before she started cutting back

My job is food and nightlife, so a lot of it does involve me going out to events that aren't between 9 and 5. If you go to a happy hour or media preview night, they're just throwing drinks at you.

I know on some level that I'm numbing, so I try not to do that.

I did 12 days that I didn't drink last year, just to see if I could do it. I was getting to the point where I was like 'I can't remember the last time I didn't drink.' That was scary for me.

The biggest thing, as a young, female reporter, for me, at least, is just trying to keep up. You're keeping up with people who are seasoned drinkers. And other things. There's a reason coke is still so prevalent in kitchens. They can't stay awake for 14 hour shifts without it because they were partying the whole night before.

If I have a big book due, I will for sure have a drink and not think about it, but I try to be a little more cognizant these days.

It was climbing up to absurd numbers like 10 drinks a night, because I could start so early or because I got to have that beer in the office before I went out. I measured it once, and it was 11 or so drinks over the course of 10 hours, so I'm not shitfaced by any means, but I'm not going to blow into anything at that point. It's when I started noticing that trend that I was like maybe I shouldn't.

Sometimes I just say, 'Can you make me something quick and mocktail-like so I can fake it?' Mocktails saved me, because nobody asks you [if you want a drink] if you're already holding something that has mint in it.

We don't think about it. It's like second nature. Even if you are cognizant, it's like 'Of course I'm going to try this pairing. Of course I'm going to have rosé with lunch.'

Because I'm the food and nightlife editor, I'm like, 'I *have* to try this for work.' But I really don't.

We are so driven by that scoop, and by that deadline and the byline, that you do it at whatever cost it takes. And I don't think it's until much, much later that you find out, oh yeah, self-care is important.

I don't know how you would introduce that into a curriculum without making us all seem like drunks.

Katharine Shilcutt Transcript

Age 36. Managing editor of Houstonia Magazine. Shilcutt is the former food critic for the Houston Press. She's been nominated for a James Beard Award and three Association of Food Journalists Awards, taking home the latter twice.

Idea of journalists before becoming one: Grizzled and cynical and they drink a lot because the pain of existence is overwhelming. It's a very stressful job, you work a lot of hours, people are mad at you all the time. There's a lot of pressure. More pressure than you realize.

I started seeing the daily happy hours after work and the drinking on the weekends as like, this must be how everyone does this job. This must be how people survive.

My perception of a food writer was someone who led this very leisurely life, occasionally dropping into restaurants to review them, then spending a lot of time cooking at home and working on recipes. I thought it was much more bucolic and sanguine than it actually is.

She started seeing other food writers hanging out with chefs and realized they weren't, in fact, anonymous, and wondered if maybe her perception was wrong.

I remember thinking 'I need to learn how to drink' and putting it to myself as a test. Like, I need to learn how to hold my alcohol so that I don't look like an asshole and embarrass myself at events. So, from that point forward, I started training myself like I would for anything else. I would go out and make it a point to drink every time I went out, thinking I would build up a tolerance and educate myself about a category of dining that I didn't know much about to begin with. Before I knew it, it was this normal, everyday part of my life.

Then, like everything else, it snowballs. You go from training yourself to build up a tolerance so you're not that drunk asshole at dinner, and before you know it, you're just drinking all the time. I never really considered it as having a drinking problem, because it never occurred to me to think of it that way.

She recalls waiting to conduct an interview at a bar and having a few cocktails with a friend while she waited for the interview subject to arrive. The guy was half an hour late, and she had arrived early, so in an hour and a half, she had consumed 9 zombies, and she was fine. She wasn't even buzzed. She thought it might be a problem if she could drink that much.

From there I started to extrapolate out, and I realized I don't go a day without drinking anymore, much less a meal without drinking. I don't hang out with my friends without drinking. I don't go out without drinking before I go out. It had taken over my life, and I didn't even realize it.

This job is not rewarding. You're killing yourself over it for nothing. Angry chefs, angry readers, angry editor.

There is no longer an expectation that you are just a food writer. You're no longer just reviewing restaurants. You're expected to review beer menus and cocktail programs and wine lists, and you're expected to drink at all of these occasions. Not drinking in our industry is anathema, it seems like. It's unheard of. The few times that I was like, 'I'm really not in the mood,' I was immediately met with resistance. And part of it is that peer pressure attitude. We all drink, this is what we do. You not wanting to drink is you rejecting some portion of this world.

I had this worry when we hired [Alice Levitt] that was can she do this job? And of course she can. Drinking isn't anywhere as pivotal or integral to the job as I thought it was.

You're not meeting anyone else. This becomes your social circle. I ethically didn't like the expectation that you're supposed to be friends with these people but then also cover them and be unbiased. I just couldn't reconcile the closeness that was expected in Houston with my own ethical concerns, and I think that maybe alcohol is another factor in that, because maybe I did drink because I was uncomfortable, and that would calm me down and put me at ease.

The industry shifted really drastically with the advent of the internet, and I think all these young people got pulled into food writing without knowing what to expect, without knowing what the rules were — if there were any rules.

Katherine Spiers Transcript

Age 35. Food editor for L.A. Weekly. Spiers has been writing about food in Los Angeles for more than a decade. She previously contributed to Serious Eats, Gourmet and Tasting Table and served as food editor then managing editor for KCET Link Media Group.

I was thinking about the hard-drinking, hard-living, take-no-shit journalists. Like, burly people, even women, too. Just being badasses. I knew that I didn't want to be a war journalist. I wanted to be a lifestyle writer. But even then, the adventurous kind.

This is the rare, non-blue-collar job where you have to consider your health.

The people who write about booze, they can really put it away.

I think I'm the youngest of the old-school journalists, where I'm not trying to be friends with anybody, I'm not trying to promote anybody, I don't want to socialize with the people that I write about.

It's never not an occasion to drink. I don't drink alone.

2-4 drinks a week.

Drinking isn't really my vice. Two drinks, I'm pleasantly tipsy. Three drinks, I'm off my fucking gourd drunk.

A drink can help take the edge off, for sure. I'm more of a celebratory drinker than a stress drinker, for sure.

It's sort of all tied up—food and drink. I know it's a problem overall of knowing when to say no, or to balance it with only eating brussels sprouts at home.

There is certainly the opportunity [to drink heavily]. If you have an expense account, you don't have to pay for it, and, certainly, if you are of the new school who is comfortable taking free stuff all the time, there is a lot of free stuff to be had in this world. There are a lot of people who are like, 'If you're going to offer it to me, I'm going to take it.'

It is a little tricky in LA because you have to drive everywhere.

I don't know whose responsibility it would be [to educate new journalists], but if a food writer is just starting out, they could turn to their elders, and we could all be like, 'By the way, if you don't watch out, you're going to gain 30 pounds in a month.'

Listen, it's obviously a really privileged position to be in. We're not coal miners. It's not going to kill us.

It's not some kind of a moral decision. It helps that I don't like beer, and I don't want to drink wine by itself. For me, wine has always been a food side dish. Drinking beer and wine at home seems fine to me, but I don't do it. Drinking cocktails at home bums me out.

Kathleen Purvis Transcript

Age 58. Food critic for the Charlotte Observer. Purvis is a member of the Association of Food Journalists, the Southern Foodways Alliance and the James Beard Foundation awards committee. She also writes regularly for Our State magazine and other publications.

Nobody ever questions whether covering mortgages for a business writer is news, and not everyone has a mortgage. Yet, when I went to cover food, I actually had an editor in the newsroom who said, 'You're a good journalist; why would you throw away your career?'

She's always made a point of not being anonymous, because she wants to get to know chefs and for them to be able to come up to her and talk to her and tell her stuff.

To say that you are not treated differently when you are not anonymous is willful misunderstanding.

I also drink wine with dinner. I drink beer pretty often. There's a big craft brewing scene here, so it's important for my job. (Others have said the same thing about the brewing scenes in their towns.)

She estimates 6-8 drinks a week.

I think that drinking in moderation and being aware of how much you drink is a wise thing. We all need to know our consumption.

A certain level of food, to me, you don't want to drink with water. You aren't going to go to a good restaurant and carefully order a lovely menu to have with a glass of milk. Not gonna happen. I also like to sit with my husband. I work a high-stress job, I'm on the road a lot. I generally work about 60 hours a week, so having time with him and our adult son...I'm always going to want to have a cocktail with that.

Admits to sometimes having a drink from being stressed about work.

I came into this job in 1977. I had a boss who kept a bottle of whiskey in his bottom drawer, and he would pour himself a shot before he wrote his editorial.

I've always been aware [of my drinking]. I can walk away from it, and I have. I give it up for Lent sometimes.

I generally don't drink on weekdays unless there's a business-related reason to. I don't see any reason to be drinking on those days. Honestly more for calories.

I have seen people who, you look at them and think you probably aren't being as thoughtful as you ought to be. Also, we need to remember that when we're doing our

work, we need to be taking notes. A sip of wine, a sip of water makes a huge difference when you're going to a 4-6 course wine tasting dinner. You still have to be able to pay as much attention to the dessert as to the amuse bouche.

I have seen people, particularly at some of the southern journalism events, where it becomes almost a drinking competition.

Kathy Flanigan Transcript

Age 61. Reporter covering features, entertainment and beer culture for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. Flanigan has been writing about food and beer for 23 years, and her book, Beer Lover's Wisconsin, was published in June.

Since I started, if it's a new brewery and I'm trying their beer, I'll immediately say 'This isn't personal, but I can't drink this. I like my job, I have to drive, I'm just going to leave this here.'

I probably stress eat more than I stress drink.

Never classified her own drinking as problematic.

On weekends, I might have two or three drinks. Some of it is just the time factor. I'm pretty lazy when I get home, so I've had to be more cognizant of just how easy it is to keep drinking when you're watching TV and then to tell yourself 'Oh, I need to know about this [drink].'

It's fine to have one and go, 'Ok, I tried this new one, and that's great.'

Tells a story about beer reps she knows and how one of them developed gout at a young age after drinking and eating so much.

It's true that it's just too easy. It's too easy to drink more, it's too easy to drink more. It's too easy to get caught up in the lifestyle.

I've scaled back a lot. I don't have to go to all these events. Isn't the purpose of being a journalist to do it before everyone else so you don't have to be there when everyone else is there?

I think what's spectacular about being 60 and working with people who are a lot younger. I'd feel awkward sitting in a van with them [on a beer crawl] and going from place to place. So I can check it out, but I don't have to be part of it.

I'm not gonna sit and get really drunk with [people], because that would be silly. (because of her age)

If you can get to the middle ground, it's an OK place to be.

Laura Reiley Transcript

Age 50. Restaurant critic for the Tampa Bay Times. Reiley is the former critic for the San Francisco Chronicle and the Baltimore Sun. She is the author of four books in the Moon Handbook series and was a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize in criticism in 2017.

Most food writers are features writers at newspapers who move sideways. Most did not go into it intentionally.

I am an anonymous critic, so you really don't want to hobnob. As much as I love so many of the chefs in our area and so many people in the restaurant industry, you really try not to be their friends.

I don't know how you can do this job and not drink, though I know there are some people who do. I drink daily, almost always with food.

She allows herself 2.5 drinks a day, maximum, and one day to drink more if she wants.

I'm more of a ritual drinker. I have a lot of heavy drinkers in my family, so I try to stay pretty aware about that. There's a lot of absurd rationalization in my family about drinking behavior, so it's certainly something I think a lot about.

Frequently a chef or a bartender is stone cold sober, and you look like a doofus if you're having three glasses of beer while you're talking to them. To me, that's never a good idea. Not that it hasn't happened.

Food writers have had a rough bunch of years, so there's sort of a gallows humor grimness to the way business gets conducted.

I have definitely classified my own drinking as problematic, and I think that's partially because of family history. I try to stay pretty aware.

To me, when I go to an event that is all food writers, I think there's a lot of bad behavior that gets masked by 'Oh, it's my job.' I kind of always am leery of people who are super gluttonous and make it out like it's part of the job. The person who had my job before me got diabetes and couldn't do the job. That is a liability when you're in a job where there's so much access to stupid calories.

You're not picking up the tab, especially if you're a food and drink journalist who's also going to events and there's free flowing alcohol. You're mindlessly consuming things that you're not paying for, and I think that that does lead to a hazy knowledge of precisely how much you've had.

I think any job where you spend a lot of time socializing with strangers, there's a temptation to inoculate yourself with alcohol. I think a lot of us are more comfortable

versions of ourselves if we're socially lubricated in that way. So I'm not sure if it's what we're reporting on or that we're frequently in social settings with strangers where we have to kind of bust in on conversations.

Phaedra Cook Transcript

Age 49. Founder and editor of Houston Food Finder. Cook has previously served as restaurant critic for the Houston Press and has freelanced for My Table Magazine, Houstonia Magazine and the Houston Chronicle.

Recently I've had to cut out any midday drinking because it makes me so incredibly sleepy that all I want to do is die by 5 p.m.

Drinks at least every night. Average 14 drinks a week.

It seems almost uncivilized not to have a drink with dinner.

Stressful days definitely make me want a drink. I have those afternoons where it's like Miller Time can't come soon enough.

Going out to walk around tasting events, and the wine or beer or whatever alcohol they're serving is free. There's a real temptation there to just go around and say "I'll try this, and I'll try this!" And before you know it, you've had the equivalent of six glasses of wine, and it's like what did I just do. Tasting events are a huge temptation. It's too much of everything.

There definitely was a time where I was worried that I was becoming an alcoholic. It's just because I was out so much. You start worrying. I drink every day. I still drink every day, even though I'm not going out. And you start wondering do you have a problem? That was the point where I started looking for opportunities to just have a day and not drink. How do I feel? Do I feel needy? Am I missing it? Do I feel bad about it? No, not really.

I needed to remember that things are perfectly fine if you don't drink, but there was a time where it felt like maybe I was developing a dependency problem. I had to make a conscious decision to start swapping in other drinks.

The other problem is weight gain.

Now I have writers, and I can "share the love," so I don't have to burden anyone, myself included, with trying to attend every significant event that happens every week. There has been a lifestyle change. I learned to be grateful to not go out all the time, instead of FOMO.

It's hard, because you have competitors who do go out to everything, but then you see the effect that has on people. There is someone in the industry who, if I think about it, I really could worry. Because it's someone who is drinking all the time.

A challenge for a food writer is to develop a wide base of knowledge, and some of the deepest topics have to do with alcoholic beverages. You don't want to look like an ass

because you don't realize Vermentino isn't an Italian grape. And you should know all of the craft breweries and what they make, or the beer nerds will hang you. And then there's cocktails, and that's entirely different subject matter.

I wanted to know everything, and I felt like I had to try everything. I actually love going to educational industry events.

I think access is a big part of it. There is so much access to it. If you walk into a restaurant, and you're spotted as a food writer, someone is probably going to send a glass of champagne to you.

Alcoholism and drug use is a huge component of an industry that we are very closely related to, and we're supposed to get in good with those people and really understand them. There's a wash over.

I have friends in the industry. I don't really care if I make more. I want to have professional relationships based on mutual respect. I don't need to have a relationship that's based on "Hey remember that time when you were so drunk?" It's not what I want for myself.

One thing I'm very proud of is that in all my years as a food writer, I think you'd be very hard-pressed to find anyone in the industry who can say that they saw me drunk.

Journalism culture has always been pretty punishing. It's a deadline-driven industry. These days, it does not have nearly the monetary reward or perks or expense account that it once had. So, the stress is way ratcheted up, you're working your butt off, and you don't have much to show for it.

I think rules are good. I think it's important for companies to lay down rules. It doesn't have to be "You can't drink when you're on assignment," because I think alcoholic beverages and food for adults are intrinsically linked, and I think enjoyment of both together can heighten the overall culinary experience. But, I think if I'd ever had an editor who said "You need to limit your consumption to two drinks on any assignment," I think that's a good rule. Or "You may only have one glass of wine on assignment, and no drinking at lunchtime." I think that's fine.

We're relying on their bosses to set the standard. Maybe organizations need to take a look at themselves and determine whether or not they are perpetuating a drinking culture. I know of publications that definitely do. Instead of giving their writers more money, they take their writers out on happy hours after work. Or all their Christmas parties are at bars. It sends the wrong messages.

They want writers to write about beer and wine and cocktails, but most publications don't reimburse it. If they had to start reimbursing it, limits would be set real quick.

Scott Reitz Transcript

Age 37. Freelance writer based in Los Angeles. Reitz is a former food critic for the Dallas Observer and former freelancer for the Washington Post.

It was a bit of a fairytale in terms of great food and exposure and access to chefs and experiences.

My professional and personal lives meshed. There was no personal life. My professional life was everything. I drink with meals if alcohol is being served. I tend to indulge a post-work drink or two. I go to bars a couple times a week, like most people.

I drank a lot, until I quit for a year. My last year of food writing, I didn't drink any alcohol. But before that, every day after work. I may or may not have brought a beer into work on occasion. On work dinners, if alcohol was served there. I don't have television, so I've always spent my spare time in bars. I love talking to people and telling and listening to stories, as opposed to sitting on a couch. So it was pretty constant.

(30 drinks a week. If you have seven drinks a day, that's 21, so between 21 and 40 drinks a week)

I guess stress was a trigger, but in terms of correlation/causation? It's not like I felt stressed, therefore I drank. It was just a habit a developed early in life that I think food writing facilitated because I was always out looking for the next story. Now, I think I have a more typical relationship with alcohol. I drink when I get home from work because I'm thirsty. I don't have stress anymore.

Every time I tried to drink and write, I fell asleep. I chain smoked cigarettes.

I quit drinking for a year because I did classify my own drinking as problematic. I think that I had grown tired of making decisions that I wanted to govern my life during the day when I was sober, and then breaking those rules when I was drunk. I was demonstrating a lack of control over self when intoxicated and acting in a way that was not congruent with my personal moral compass. I kept saying, 'I'll drink less.' But I decided that I needed a hard reset. Trying to drink less wasn't working for me.

My life and job were so intertwined. I was a big drinker before I started this whole gig. Did food writing create a problem for me? No. But it was definitely a catalyst, and it facilitated a lot more heavy drinking.

I think creative people and writers in general are probably a little bit more statistically inclined to indulge in something, to have a vice. And then food writers, with that propensity, have access to alcohol in a way that other professionals might not. If you go to a press dinner, that's how they grease the skids.

But there are a lot of food writers who seem to have family at home and lead happy lives and have one cocktail and drive home after that, and they're fine. It's certainly not an absolute.

Todd Kliman Transcript

Age 51. Author, essayist, cultural critic and food writer. Kilman has won two James Beard Foundation Awards, including a 2016 MFK Fisher Distinguished Writing Award. He previously served as the food critic for the Washingtonian, and his writing has appeared in numerous publications, including The New Yorker, Harper's, The Oxford American and Lucky Peach.

For me, it was never an attraction or an issue. I know people who are critics—particularly ones who have good budgets—but I generally have a rule for myself that I want to have the money to spend, so rather than hit a place and bring along a bunch of people, I never did that. One, because I wanted to have the money to spread around and be able to use when I needed it, and the other thing was that I just didn't like going out in big groups.

If you start drinking, and let's say the restaurant is decent, you start the night out with a cocktail, that's gonna skew how you perceive the restaurants. Nobody's perfect, so there are times when I've had that. You go out, and you have a gin and tonic, and you have another drink, and damn, you're already in a great mood fueled by the alcohol, and then the food starts arriving, and you're already predisposed to liking the restaurant.

I've never had a problem with drinking. It never became a thing or even a temptation. For me, the big thing to watch was the way this [job] is punishing on the body. For me, the real cross to bear is what it does to you, physically.

I knew people who drank a lot—I don't want to say it was in an alcoholic way, or a quasi-alcoholic way, but they just love going out.

It used to be—even 15 or 20 years ago—you couldn't even think about doing this if you were 24. Now you have so many channels open because people need to fill it with something, anything, really. But it used to be that this was something that, generally the people who were coming to it had done other sorts of writing. Experiences, living, having done a lot of reading and traveling, and having a broad frame of reference to draw from. Being able to put something in its context. You just can't do that at that age.

There is an insider party thing that I see all around the country. The food bloggers, the ones who are connected to the scene but maybe aren't major players shaping the scene, they get a lot of things coming their way. They get a lot of freebies, they're courted. There's a lot of "hey, let's go out." Most people don't act like that or talk like that. I think on that circuit, it can get a little dangerous if you're not careful. I don't hear people talking about the drinking so much as "I gotta cut back."

For me, I was really trying to be cognizant of it. I tried to keep it to one glass of wine a night. And there would be nights where there would be a cocktail and a glass of wine. And you go, oh, that's a light night, but for anybody else, like the average person who has to hold down a job, that's a lot of drinking.

There's something kind of festive and lusty in [older] writing, and you don't see that so much anymore. You have a lot of people who are very professional about it. They'll graze, and they'll take a couple tastes of this and a couple tastes of that. I really don't like those people writing about food and publishing pieces. I kind of want somebody who is going to go too far. There's a sensualness and a passion, and you know that person loves food.

I think there are still people who get gigs like this and think 'oh wow, this is incredible,' but I just don't think those people make up the community of food writers as much as they used to.

The single greatest threat to food writers is journalism itself, and the fact that it doesn't really exist the way it used to or the way it needs to. What is being asked of journalists and the money they're being paid is absolutely insane. That's what drives journalists to drinking.

You're constantly being whipped to do more work, and you're constantly being hounded, and you've got to produce, and you've got all these deadlines, and then you go out to this restaurant, and nobody can come at you, and food comes on the table, and it's good, and it's a chance to relax, it's this haven, this escape. And it's not hard to see why. I just don't think that I saw a lot of that going on.

People I knew were older—35 and up—and for them, the larger issue was 'how do I keep from gaining a lot of weight?'

It's unusual to see people do this for a long time.

Appendix D: Association of Food Journalists Food Critics Guidelines + Ethics

Guidelines

Introduction

The following guidelines for restaurant critics and/or reviewers are just that – guidelines suggested by the Association of Food Journalists. They are not rules that will be enforced by the Association of Food Journalists.

Restaurant criticism is not an objective pursuit, yet readers expect a measure of objectivity from critics. The goals of a critic should be:

To be fair

To be honest

To understand and illuminate the cuisine about which he or she is writing.

To look beyond specific dishes and experiences to capture the whole of a restaurant and its intentions

Ethics

Good restaurant reviewing is good journalism. Reviewers should subscribe to the same accepted standards of professional responsibility as other journalists. That means adhering to the traditional Canons of Journalism of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi, and the Code of Ethics of the Association of Food Journalists.

Wearing Two Hats

The Association of Food Journalists recognizes that many critics are also tasked with reporting on restaurants. Critics should discuss with their editors which role is most important, since a critic's position precludes him or her from participating in the food community as a reporter might. Critics should avoid functions that restaurateurs and chefs are likely to attend, such as grand openings, restaurant anniversary dinners, wine tastings or new product introductions. Critics should also avoid in-person meetings with publicists.

If a critic writes about restaurants, restaurant owners or chefs, he or she should strive to conduct interviews by phone. Also, try to steer clear of interviewing the staff of restaurants that have been recently reviewed or are on the immediate reviewing schedule.

Anonymity

Reviews should be conducted as anonymously as possible. The goal of restaurant criticism is to experience the restaurant just as ordinary patrons do. However, true anonymity is often no longer possible. In that case, critics should engage in the practice of anonymity. Ideally, that means keeping all photos and social-media profiles photo-free and restricting public appearances.

Even when total anonymity is impossible, restaurant critics should make every attempt to arrive at restaurants unannounced and maintain as low a profile as possible during their visits. Reservations should be made in a name other than that of the reviewer and meals should be paid for using cash or credit cards in a name other than the critic.

Installing caller ID blocking on one's phone, maintaining a separate email account for communication with the restaurant, and maintaining one or more identities on restaurant-reservation sites is recommended.

Multiple visits

Within the constraints of time and budget, critics should visit a restaurant as many times as is needed to properly assess a restaurant. Two or more visits to a restaurant are ideal for the purposes of full-length reviews. Service, food quality and atmosphere can vary, sometimes quite dramatically, from day to day. Multiple visits give the critic a better understanding of the restaurant, helping him or her to more accurately gauge its rhythm and spirit.

When only one visit is possible, it is best to attempt to have the most typical experience diners will be seeking out at a restaurant. Do not visit at lunch to write about a restaurant specializing in dinner; if the restaurant's specialty is a tasting menu, it would be best to order that instead of à la carte if it is financially possible. If writing a full-length review on the basis of a single visit, acknowledge the situation in the review.

Ordering

Reviewers should sample the full range of the menu, from appetizers to desserts. Reviewers must taste everything ordered, or at least all the items they mention in a column. Bringing guests along helps the critic by allowing the table to order a greater variety of dishes, but guests should be properly prepped in advance on review meal protocol.

Order dishes that involve different cooking techniques (steamed, deep-fried, sautéed); different ingredients (one orders fish, another asks for beef); different styles (something traditional, something eclectic). Is there something the restaurant is known for doing well? Order it. In general, guests should avoid ordering the same thing. If the critic returns for a second visit, it may be worth again ordering a dish that was particularly wonderful or terrible to see if the experience is consistent.

Payment

Pay in full for all meals and services. Don't accept free meals or use gift certificates donated by the restaurant or a special-interest group. Publications should strive to budget enough money for restaurant visits so the reviewer can do the job without having to resort to personal funds to help pay the bill.

If a restaurant critic is recognized, or accompanied by a person known to the kitchen, and the restaurant sends over free food, request that the cost of the items be added to the check. If such an incident occurs, it should be acknowledged in the review.

Variety

Reviews should reflect the full range of a region's restaurants, from neighborhood haunts to luxury venues. Offer readers dining choices in a variety of price ranges, cuisine, neighborhood and style. If your publication has eligibility policies prohibiting the review of chain restaurants or advertisers, for example, they should be shared with readers.

New Restaurants

To be fair to new restaurants, reviewers should wait at least one month after the restaurant starts serving before visiting. These few weeks give the fledgling enterprise some time to get organized, and helps distinguish the professional critic's opinion from online chatter.

If, however, a restaurant must be visited because of timeliness, enormous reader interest or journalistic competitiveness, consider offering readers "first impressions." This piece should be more descriptive than critical, avoid labeling it as a review if possible. The emphasis of such a sneak preview could be on the fledgling restaurant's clientele, its decor and maybe the chef's background rather than a blow-by-blow account of the menu (though food would, of course, be mentioned.)

In recognition of the diverse and changing opinions on waiting periods, it's ideal to acknowledge in your review when you visited the restaurant. Did you go on the first day? Did you wait three months? Say so.

Ratings

Some publications issue starred ratings along with the reviews, while others let the writing stand for itself. AFJ does not take a position on the validity of ratings. Should you use ratings, here are some suggestions for how to think about imposing them:

Ratings should reflect a reviewer's reaction to menu, atmosphere, service and value, and should be determined with regard to what the restaurant is trying to accomplish: An Indian restaurant shouldn't be downgraded because it doesn't serve filet mignon, for example. A star system should not serve as a hierarchy of elegance.

Have a sense of what a star or other rating symbol mean. Although you should develop a rating system appropriate for your readership, here are some definitions to consider:

FOUR STARS

(Extraordinary) Transcendent. A one-of-a-kind experience that sets the local standard.

THREE STARS

(Excellent) Superior. Memorable, high-quality food; exciting environs; savvy service; smart concept.

TWO STARS

(Good) Solid example of restaurant type.

ONE STAR:

(Fair) Just OK. A place not worth rushing back to. But, it might have something worth recommending: A view, a single dish, friendly service, lively scene.

NO STAR:

(Poor) Below-average restaurants.

Although most readers have a sense of what the stars mean, every review should run with a box explaining the ratings.

Changes

Some restaurants get better, some restaurants get worse. A critic should have some sort of mechanism in place to make note of these changes. A full-blown re-review is appropriate if the restaurant changes hands, wins or loses a high-profile chef or moves to a new location.

Negative Reviews

Negative reviews are fine, as long as they're accurate and fair. Critics must always be conscious that they are dealing with people's livelihoods. Negative reviews, especially, should be based on multiple visits and a broad exploration of the restaurant's menu. Following a consistent reviewing policy without deviation may protect a critic from charges of bias or favoritism, while providing a platform from which to defend the review.

Fact Checking

Follow basic journalistic precepts for accuracy. Confirm spelling of the restaurant and chef's names; address; telephone number; hours and any other information accompanying the review. If possible, check the review against an online or printed menu.

Source: <https://www.afjonline.com/food-critics-guidelines/>

Ethics

Food journalists serve their communities by stimulating more informed conversations about what we eat and why. Our primary responsibility is to share news, ideas and opinions as fairly, accurately, completely, independently and honestly as possible.

We strive to honor our readers' trust by always upholding the highest ethical standards. To that end, the Association of Food Journalists has developed the following set of standards to protect its members' integrity and preserve their credibility. These guidelines should be considered supplementary to the codes of ethics presented by leading journalism organizations or a journalist's employer.

Although these guidelines are applicable to members working in a variety of situations, the Association acknowledges that situations will sometimes arise which aren't explicitly addressed here. Members with specific concerns are encouraged to consult their editors or the Association to resolve the dilemma in a manner consistent with the core principles outlined here.

These are our five core principles:

1. We take pride in our work, and respect the work of others.

- 1) Food journalists should write under their real names, and make their contact information available to the general public.
- 2) Food journalists should use their bylines only in conjunction with material that they have produced. Food journalists should not attach their names to reprinted press releases or articles provided by publicists.
- 3) Food journalists do not plagiarize content. Material from other sources should be credited, and actively hyperlinked if presented online.
- 4) Originators of unique information or opinions should be acknowledged in any work indebted to them, and the source material actively hyperlinked if presented online.
- 5) Food journalists should always honor copyright laws, including those pertaining to recipes and photographs.
- 6) To assure accuracy, press releases and material from other sources should be substantiated. Secondhand information, such as rumors published by a competing publication, should not be presented as fact.
- 7) Factual errors should be corrected promptly and prominently.
- 8) Expression of opinion, editorials and articles devoted to the writer's own views should be clearly labeled as such and thus easily distinguished from news reports.
- 9) Social media is not a refuge from the expectations of exemplary conduct. Food journalists should observe the Association's standards in all public communication.

2. We do not abuse our positions.

- 1) Food journalists should not flaunt their titles in hopes of securing favors for themselves, their friends or their relatives. Favors could include restaurant reservations; desirable tables; party invitations or free food or drink.

- 2) Food journalists should not accept gifts valued at more than \$50, whether sent to them directly or distributed at an event. Exorbitant gifts should be returned to the sender or donated to charity. If food or drink is comped at a restaurant, the food journalist should make every attempt to pay for what he or she was given.
- 3) Food journalists should not accept invitations to privately dine for free in a restaurant. Offers of free travel or lodging should also be refused.
- 4) Food journalists should very carefully weigh invitations to participate in media dinners and other invitation-only events at which attendees will be feted with food and drink. It is worth remembering that only the most financially-fit organizations are situated to host such affairs, and journalists risk creating the perception of bias by participating in them.
- 5) Food journalists should refuse samples of food, drink or any other product which they don't intend to evaluate for publication.
- 6) Food journalists should not sell or otherwise profit from samples they receive in the course of their work.
- 7) Food journalists on assignment may accept complimentary passes to cultural and educational events which can't be manipulated for the enjoyment of the media, such as plays, films, conferences, seminars and lectures.
- 8) Food journalists attending events for personal pleasure should not use their position to gain access, discounted or free admission.

3. We avoid conflicts of interest.

- 1) The Association is committed to the absolute separation of editorial responsibilities and advertising interests. If an article or publication receives sponsorship, it must be clearly noted.
- 2) Food journalists should not make deals in exchange for access, special treatment or discounts. They should not vet story angles with publicists, allow sources to preview coverage or make promises concerning story placement.
- 3) Food journalists should not enter commercially-sponsored contests promoting specific food products.
- 4) Food journalists should not write about organizations which employ them, or with which they are politically or financially involved. While the Association recognizes that food writing is not a full-time job for many writers, food journalists should not seek employment in the food, drink or restaurant industry in the fields of public relations or sales.

4. We recognize and respect diversity.

- 1) While pure objectivity is impossible, food journalists should aim to acknowledge and examine competing points of view.
- 2) Food journalists should present opposing viewpoints fairly and accurately.
- 3) Food journalists should avoid perpetuating stereotypes and prejudices.

5. We are committed to total transparency in our work.

- 1) If food journalists accept anything for free, including a meal or product sample, it must be acknowledged in coverage of the item or experience.

- 2) If food journalists write about current or former employers, co-workers, friends or relatives, the relationship must be disclosed.
- 3) If food journalists suspect they received special treatment in the course of reporting a story, they should share their suspicions with their readers.

Source: <https://www.afjonline.com/ethics/>

Appendix D: Project Proposal

Working Title: Alcohol consumption among food writers

Introduction

When I was a restaurant critic, I drank.

Lunches always called for some sort of lavish libation or at least a craft brew (one must know the entire menu), and with dinner invariably came wine. Happy hour after work was drenched in unique and trendy cocktails — after all, bars are as much a part of the restaurant scene as diners for the contemporary critic. Brunch, well, that was a meal made for mixing booze and buffets to nurse the previous night’s debauchery. Come Monday, the cycle started anew with, perhaps, a midday potation. Just to get the creative juices flowing.

I didn’t enter the realm of food writing with the intent of becoming a lush. I fell into it sort of by accident. As a journalism student, I was drawn to subjects that I felt made readers happy; news and politics were often depressing and antagonistic, but everyone liked to read about food and alcohol, right? Years of world travel enhanced by parents who loved good food and good wine and some family in the culinary industry endowed me with a baseline of knowledge that allowed me to make the leap from writer to food writer, for better or for worse.

With little actual experience beyond an internship at the *Riverfront Times* in St. Louis, during which I primarily covered bar happenings to save the full-time critic from late nights and nasty hangovers, I was hired as the restaurant critic and food writer for the

Houston Press. Suddenly, for my first professional journalism job, I was one of two arbiters of taste in the nation's fourth-largest city. The other, a restaurant critic for the daily newspaper, the *Houston Chronicle*, had been in the business longer than I had been alive. And, by all accounts, she was a bit of a tippler, known for closing down the bars at some of the city's best restaurants on a regular basis.

This was my role model.

I was terrified, and I needed to learn the ins and out of the job. Fast. The individuals I sought out in order to find my place in the world of restaurant criticism were largely fellow food writers and, of course, chefs. If the stereotype of the curmudgeonly, disheveled, hard-drinking journalist has some basis in fact, then so, too, does the stereotype of the foul-mouthed, tattooed, hard-drinking chef.

And so, I drank because it was a job requirement to some extent, but also because I wanted to fit in, to be a part of my new crowd. It was difficult to tell at the time if I drank to feel a part of the group of other writers or if I drank to curry favor with chefs who were always ready for a strong dose of liquor to bring them down from the high of working the line for fifteen hours straight. Or perhaps it was a combination of many factors, including, yes, the desire to fit in and the need to constantly educate and re-educate myself on the latest potables. But there was also the stress of constant deadlines, the hope that drinking with a chef would lead to printable gossip, the longing for a creative spark and, somewhere, deep within the recesses of my subconscious, the notion that *this* — writing and drinking and drinking and writing and passing out on my keyboard while ordering another — this is what journalists did.

Analysis and Theory

I knew that, as a writer prone to drink to excess, I was not alone. Drunk writers and, more specifically, journalists, find themselves in the company of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Hunter S. Thompson, Christopher Hitchens, David Carr. Those who write specifically about food join the ranks of AA Gill and Giles Coren and chefs-turned-journalists Andrew Zimmern and Anthony Bourdain. There are probably more who have yet to write confessional tell-alls about their dark, substance-fueled pasts, having come out the other side unscathed, but I simply don't know. That's what I want to find out.

In addressing the topic of alcohol abuse among food writers, I want to know, primarily, if the stereotype of the alcoholic writer extends to journalists in the food writing arena; is alcohol abuse truly an issue among food and drink writers? If the writers I interview confirm that alcohol abuse is problematic among this population, I will examine why. I know why I drank, and I know the many reasons that journalists and writers have historically given for debaucherous tendencies, but through interviews with food writers around the country, I hope to learn about their drinking habits directly to propose causes for excessive alcohol consumption related to the job, as well as possible solutions.

I will be examining these questions through the lens of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), best defined by O'Rourke (2006) as "personal factors, such as beliefs, expectations, attitudes and knowledge (cognitive) plus environmental factors, such as resources, consequences of actions, physical setting (behavioral) plus behaviors, such as individual actions, choices and verbal statements [that] influence learning and motivation" (p. 72). According to Bandura, individuals are influenced not only by the

behavior of other individuals, but also by the collective agency of which they are a part and by the behaviors that are presented in the mass media. Young, new journalists, then, develop habits based upon other journalists with whom they interact, the circles within which they run and the images of journalists throughout history.

Literature Review

The Hard-Drinking Journalist

To determine if alcohol abuse is indeed an issue among food writers, it is necessary to briefly examine the history of alcoholism among journalists in general, as the journalism culture affects the ways food writers establish their identities when they join the profession.

In discussing the historical links between writing and alcohol consumption, Doug Underwood coins the term “journalist-literary figure” to encompass writers who began their careers as journalists, such as Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Graham Greene, James Agee, Henry Miller, Jack Kerouac, Norman Mailer, etc. (2007, p. 186-189). An examination of the lives of these journalist-literary figures showed that a higher-than-average proportion of them battled substance abuse, but this does, of course, raise the issue of correlation versus causation. Underwood asks, but does not answer, if creative types prone to alcoholism and substance abuse are more drawn to professions like writing than other people or if there is something inherent in the professions of writing and journalism that leads to substance abuse. He writes: “Did the life of the artist — and before that, the work of the journalist — facilitate the kind of personal behavior that could be so damaging to the journalist-literary figures and those close to them? Or did people who were fatally drawn to drink, afflicted with depression, and prone to

excessive personal behavior choose journalism...?” (p. 194). Similarly, in his book *Alcohol and the Writer* (1988), Donald W. Goodwin asks if writing ability and alcoholism have comparable origins. Like Underwood, he is unable to draw a conclusion regarding the perceived relationship between the job of writer and abuse of alcohol, but the question continues to be raised in scholarly accounts of the lives of writers and journalists.

Many point to a particular “journalism culture” as being the reason for heavy drinking among those in the field. Romano writes that “journalists have a strong sense of social identity, so that there is commonly a uniformity of opinion among them about their role in society” (2003, p. 9), and he even goes so far as to suggest that journalists audit the appropriateness of their own behaviors and actions through their interactions with other journalists. This notion exemplifies Bandura’s theory of modeling and the influence of a collective agency.

Not only did journalists drink in each other’s company, but often, according to Australian journalist Mungo MacCallum, hitting the bar could be a means of newsgathering. Before the age of constant connection via the Internet and social media, journalists would spend time at popular bars in the hopes of bumping into police and government officials (Vine, 2010, p. 21). Similarly, restaurant critic and food writer Gael Greene wrote about time she would spend at Elaine’s in New York City in the 1970s, chatting up restaurant industry bigwigs and fellow writers alike (2007). One need only look at the numerous articles touting journalists’ favorite bars from New York (Lincoln, 2012) to New Orleans (Welch, 2014) to Washington, D.C. (Scott, 2013) and even London (Howells, 2015) to establish the connection between journalists and a drinking

culture predicated upon often conflicting desires to unwind or to seek inspiration in a meeting of minds or at the bottom of a bottle.

In his article, “Why do writers drink?” published in *The Guardian* (2013), Blake Morrison quotes Kingsley Amis, British novelist and critic and self-described drunk, who compares writers to actors and suggests “displaced stage fright as a cause of literary alcoholism.” Through Amis, Morrison touches upon the idea that alcohol can be used as a creative stimulant, quelling writerly doubts and enabling words to flow more freely. Adam Gopnik addresses this same notion in *The New Yorker* article “Writers and Rum” (2014), noting that, while actors, painters and other artists have a physicality to their work, writers must make the act of writing physical — “take the drug or drink and hope that it helps to ‘physicalize’ the work, move the pedals, and start the breathing...or else make the transition from mind to hand sober, knowing that the exhaustion it engenders will call for an antidote.” Gopnik admits “this is false reasoning, of course,” but based on accounts of drinking habits of early journalist-literary figures chronicled in Olivia Laing’s *The Trip to Echo Spring: On Writers and Drinking* (2013), it seems to be the preferred excuse of many.

Underwood lays out additional reasons for journalists to imbibe, including erratic schedules, transient work culture and “the demands of a professional activity that tends to put the needs of the present above worries about the future. He points to the research of Lichter, Lichter and Rothman (1986), which gave personality tests to a group of journalism graduate students and practicing journalists and determined that much of the energy behind things like investigative reporting comes from the tendency to project inner struggles to the outside world, ultimately leading to unhealthy psychological

tensions. More recently, researchers have shown correlations between alcohol use and psychological disorders among journalists involved in war coverage (Feinstein, Owen & Blair, 2002).

Of course, most food and drink writers are far removed from the life of a war correspondent, and the stereotype of the hard-drinking journalist à la Hemingway has largely faded away in favor of a more professional comportment both on and off the job. Still, as Jack Shafer notes in *Slate Magazine*'s "The Whiskey Rebellion" (2008), "every profession needs what academics call an 'occupational mythology' to sustain it, a set of personal and social dramas, arrangements and devices...as hard drugs are to the hard-rocker and tattoos are to the NBA player, so booze is to the journalist — even if he doesn't drink."

The Role of Food Writer/Restaurant Critic

Scholarship regarding the functions of food writers or restaurant critics is noticeably lacking, as most education in this area seems to come from on-the-job experience. There is no one food writing code of ethics to look to when determining how best to comport oneself, as there is for the general journalist, and food writers often find themselves in circumstances that a city reporter, for instance, would not.

In her autobiography, Gael Greene writes about one particularly decadent trip to France with fellow food writers and chefs: "Never quite sober on our seven-day mission, we groaned as the small corporate jet's fridge was opened to reveal fresh bottles of Moët every morning before lunch...and drank it anyway" (2007, p. 140). Similarly, alcohol writer Dan Dunn wrote in his autobiography, "My job is alternately wonderful, brutal, glamorous, reprehensible, dangerous, hangoverific, toxic, deadly, a gift from the lipid

solvent gods, and the best excuse for pretty much any horrible behavior you can think of” (2011, p. 8-9). Of course, there is a difference between alcohol writing and food writing, but many food writers are expected to cover all aspects of dining — from the valet service to the wine list — so drinking on the job is often unavoidable. Still, the role of a food writer is unique in that journalists on this beat are generally expected to participate in behavior, like drinking on the job, that would otherwise be considered a breach of journalistic ethics.

Back in the 1950s, Craig Claiborne, the first male to hold the title of “restaurant critic” for the *New York Times*, did establish what Robert Sietsema referred to as “an ethical and procedural framework for restaurant reviewing.” In an article for the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Sietsema described Claiborne’s rules as such:

Reviews would be done by a single individual. The reviewer would set his own name to the work. He’d visit a restaurant at least three times, and each visit would involve a table of at least three or four diners, with an eye to covering the menu as completely as possible, eating some dishes more than once to test for consistency. The publication would pay for the meals, and no free meals would be accepted. Most important, perhaps, was the stricture that the restaurant critic remain anonymous. Thus, the reservation would be made under a false name, and the critic and his party would do nothing to call attention to the fact that a review was in progress (2010).

A more recent code of ethics developed by food bloggers for food bloggers (Greenstein & Burton, 2009) touches upon similar ideas as those put forth by Claiborne, but it, too, fails to mention anything about drinking on the job or the ways in which food writers are expected to handle such dilemmas. Even the very detailed code of ethics put forth by the Association of Food Journalists doesn’t touch upon alcohol consumption, other than to note that food writers should not accept free food or drink if at all possible (AFJ, 2017).

Another ethical gray area for food writers and critics is their relationship with people in the hospitality industry. Often, critics are expected to remain completely anonymous, negating the possibility for any interaction with chefs, bartenders or servers outside of the immediate dining experience. Food writers, on the other hand, are expected to maintain a level of familiarity with people in the restaurant industry in order to knowledgeably write about them. Where some food writers—and even critics—have come to embrace the need to hobnob with folks in the restaurant industry, others, like Peter Calder, former critic for the *New Zealand Herald*, flat out refuse to maintain relationships in that area. “My relationship with the [hospitality] industry is virtually zero,” he notes in an interview. “I like it that way...[I] never go to industry functions because I don’t believe that I should have any personal relationship with anyone in the industry” (Goodsir et al., 2014, p. 131).

If one is prone to imbibing to excess, Calder’s rule is a good one, as evidenced by Dan Dunn’s propensity to overindulge in professional arenas: “Occasionally on booze junkets...I get wasted (my hosts’ fault entirely for overserving me, you understand) and wind up behaving in a manner polite society deems inappropriate or — as a former editor of mine at the Tribune Company observed moments before firing me — ‘completely and utterly assholeish’” (p. 37). Again, Dunn is a unique case as a writer whose beat is specifically alcohol and whose job requires he attend press events. Still, many food writers and critics not known for drunken antics, from Gael Greene to Alan Richman (Richman, 2004) to Craig Claiborne (McNamee, 2013), have admitted to overindulgence in drink while on the job, while still more, like A.A. Gill (Gill, 2015), Giles Coren (Hampson, 2014) and Anthony Bourdain have become known for their drinking.

Reasons for Alcohol Consumption Among Food Writers

If the primary reason for journalists to drink is the glamorization of the hard-drinking journalist, as many have claimed (Ehrlich, 2006; Pressé, 2015; Shafer, 2008), and the “relationship between the tradition of alcohol consumption and journalism’s cultural norms and practices” (Vine, 2010, p. 9), the justifications food writers and restaurant critics give for alcohol abuse are myriad and ill-defined. Through my research, I hope to provide greater insight into the drinking culture among food writers, but, in the meantime, rationales for alcohol consumption and abuse among this population can be divided into four categories: job stress, creative stimulus, nature of the work and proximity to restaurant industry habits.

Job stress and creative stimulus are notions that most journalists — and writers, more generally — throughout history have given for turning to the bottle. In 2015, the *British Medical Journal* published a study that found that working more than 55 hours a week (par for the course for many journalists, including food writers, who generally count time spent eating out at restaurants as “work”) increases the odds of “risky” alcohol use, defined as more than 14 drinks per week among women and more than 21 drinks per week among men (p. 2). According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, numerous studies have confirmed that stress — be it general life stress or something that stems from a catastrophic event — tends to lead to an increase in alcohol consumption (Keyes, et al. 2012).

More romantic is the notion that alcohol somehow serves as a means of inspiration, breaking down the walls of writer’s block, an idea touched upon above

during the discussion of journalists' and writers' romanticizing of alcoholism as an "occupational mythology." Goodwin expanded upon the interaction between writing and alcohol:

Writing is a form of exhibitionism; alcohol lowers inhibitions and prompts exhibitionism in many people. Writing requires an interest in people; alcohol increases sociability and makes people more interesting. Writing involves fantasy; alcohol promotes fantasy. Writing requires self-confidence; alcohol boosts confidence. Writing is lonely work; alcohol assuages loneliness. Writing demands intense concentration; alcohol relaxes (1992, p. 425).

Christopher Hitchens, notorious boozing journalist, wrote, "Alcohol makes other people less tedious and food less bland, and can help provide what the Greeks called entheos, or the slight buzz of inspiration when reading or writing" (Buckley, 2013).

A 1992 study by Brunke and Gilbert sought to prove in a somewhat scientific manner whether drinking alcohol does truly facilitate creative writing through examining the use of figurative language among test subjects who were given enough alcohol to bring their blood alcohol level to at least 0.09 (above the legal limit in the U.S.). The study found that while those who were given alcohol before writing (as opposed to the control group, who received a type of placebo beverage), did not use more figurative language, implying a higher quality of writing, they did indeed write more, suggesting that alcohol could serve as a first aid for writer's block.

Again, the notion of drinking to spur inspiration common to all types of journalists, not just food writers, but the idea behind booze as a muse is the same. The tendency of journalists to drink at all times and show up to work hungover seems to be shifting, though, in this "age of lawsuits and enforced workplace decorum," writes Jared Keever for *The Richest*. "Today, newspapers are on the financial ropes. Cigarette smoke

in the newsroom is as rare as a typewriter...showing up drunk at the office is frowned upon more than it once was. People just don't consider it cute anymore" (2014).

Unique to food writers, I would argue, is the necessary role that alcohol plays in their work. Yes, some writers might claim to *need* drink to write, but many food writers and restaurant critics literally must drink in order to write about a restaurant or bar. The world of food writing has seen its share of sober journalists, but, by and large, a food writer or restaurant critic is expected to be able to drink and write knowledgeably about what they've imbibed. Critic Julia Sexton reinforces this point, noting that while alcohol consumption is often a necessity, moderation is key: "As a restaurant critic, drinking is part of my job...When I'm reviewing, I drink moderately. Imbibing too much can blunt my palate and memory. That said, It's important to drink a little when I review; a restaurant's beverage program is as important as its food" (Sexton, 2011). On each of her many magnificent European food tours, Gael Greene found herself confronted with the opportunity to drink to excess, and often welcomed it, either out of the desire to taste something special or out of concern for offending the host. "Rude to resist" (p. 104), she writes of one particularly decadent night, and countless other food writers have echoed this conundrum.

In a 1985 profile of restaurant critics based on their experiences and habits, one critic who was polled noted that even though drinking is often a necessity of the job, "a reviewer must know his limits and hold to them...A reviewer drinking on the job can make restaurateurs feel the review has been clouded by spirits" (Burry et al., p. 403). It would seem that critics recognize the effect drinking can have on both their ability to remain sharp and their public persona, but it is not always true that a restaurateur would

judge a writer negatively for having too much to drink. “Alcohol is inextricably tied to the restaurant industry,” notes chef Mike Randolph in an interview for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. “It is part of the tradition and pleasure of dining out” (2016).

Indeed, if any group is acquainted with drinking on the job, it’s chefs. Because the job of a food writer is so closely linked to the restaurant industry, it can be difficult to separate the professional critic from the writer who spends time with chefs and industry insiders to aid in the completion of stories. Gael Greene wrote frequently about her moments of overindulgence at the behest of chefs who were either serving her or spending time with her off the clock. Anthony Bourdain, first a chef and now a renowned travel journalist can be seen on television at least once a week drinking to excess with a cook in a foreign country as a means of gathering information.

This proximity to the heavy drinking culture of the restaurant industry creates a toxic cocktail in which social modeling again plays a factor. A 1995 study of heavy drinking in the restaurant business by Kjaerheim et al. “confirmed very strongly the influence by co-worker modeling on the risk of heavy drinking” (p. 1493). Looking at alcoholism in the workplace, Fillmore summarized the work of Roman and Trice (1972), noting that they put forth a “stress hypothesis,” which “emphasized the importance of stressful work roles,” and an “availability hypothesis, focused on drinking around the workplace with co-workers” (1984, p.55). Both of these factors — stress and availability — seem to play a prominent role in the drinking lives of restaurant industry professionals, as well as food writers and critics.

Alcohol Use Among the General Population versus Journalists

In order to determine if heavy drinking is indeed an issue for the food writers and critics who I intend to interview, we must first look at drinking norms in the U.S., where all of the interviewees live. I have previously defined “risky” drinking, based on a study by the *British Medical Journal*, and the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) defines “binge drinking as “a pattern of drinking that brings blood alcohol concentration (BAC) levels to 0.08 g/dl (NIAAA, n.d.). This typically occurs after four drinks for women and five drinks for men — in about two hours”. The NIAAA considers anything below seven drinks per week for women and 14 drinks per week for men “low-risk drinking,” as it pertains to Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD), so it stands to reason that women who consume more than seven drinks or men who consume more than 14 drinks per week are at risk for developing AUD. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) defines heavy alcohol use as “binge drinking on five or more days in the past month” (SAMHSA, n.d.). According to the 2015 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 56 percent of Americas age 18 or older report that they drank in the last month, while 26.9 percent reported engaging in binge drinking and 7 percent in heavy alcohol use (NIAAA, n.d.).

A 2017 study on “the mental resilience of journalists” found that of the very low number of respondents (21 people out of a pool of 90), those who drank reported an average of 16 drinks a week. Forty-one percent of the respondents reported drinking up to 18 units a week, putting journalists in the top 20 percent of Americans for alcohol consumption (Swart, p. 7). It should be noted, however, that this was not a peer-reviewed

study, and further scholarship into the drinking habits of journalists is necessary to draw more accurate conclusions.

Method

Because this is a look at a delicate topic that affects the personal and professional lives of journalists, I will be gathering information via the journalistic approach most likely to garner intimate disclosures: interviews. By reaching out through the Association of Food Journalists and the James Beard Foundation, as well as using my contacts in food journalism to connect to writers across the country, I hope to interview a minimum of fifteen food and drink writers about their drinking habits. The interviews will ideally be conducted via phone or Skype, but I am open to an email question and answer session if some subjects are unavailable through other avenues.

I will be asking each writer a series of questions (see Table 1), beginning with their preconceived notions of journalists and food writers (i.e. If you could have described a journalist in general before you became one, how would you do so? How would you have described food writers?) and moving on to how they started their journalism careers and their early experiences learning the business of food writing (i.e. Did you have a mentor in the food writing world? What did you learn from him/her? How did your life experiences prepare you to be a food writer?).

Each of the areas of influence that comprise social cognitive theory should have a profound effect on a journalist's behavior as it relates to alcohol consumption. As such, I will be discussing the observed behaviors of each interviewee's peer groups in addition to the aforementioned questions about their early ideas of what a journalist should be and their mentors.

Finally, I will be asking each food writer about the role alcohol plays in his or her life. I want to know how often each writer drinks, what he or she drinks, when he or she drinks and how much is consumed. After establishing a pattern of consumption, we will examine the motivations behind it. I imagine that, for many, the motivation will be to try something new or to enjoy a beverage with dinner. I am curious to know how often those who drink do so for other reasons, like the influence of peers, stress of the job, pursuit of creative stimulus or desire to connect with subjects (chefs, restaurateurs, bartenders).

I will also be reaching out to a few of the writers I have discovered during my review of relevant literature, including Doug Underwood, author of *Chronicling Trauma: Journalists and Writers and Violence and Loss*, who wrote a very insightful chapter about the drinking habits of famous “journalist-literary figures” and the intersections between alcoholism and creativity.

During my research, I have found a number of organizations that publish statistics on alcoholism among the general population and among those in specific occupations, so I will be using this information to either bolster or refute the findings from my interviews. I will also be using statistics from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism and Gallup Polls to compare the average number of drinks individuals consume per week to my findings among the interviewees.

It is important to note that I arrived at this topic through my own experience as a food writer and restaurant critic. I feel I need to be completely transparent about my unique interests and biases; I believe that my time as a restaurant critic contributed to my propensity to drink to excess, and I expect the writers I interview will confirm this belief, but I could very well be mistaken. I will make every effort to be unbiased in my

interviews in an attempt to keep my personal background from influencing or affecting my findings.

Once completed, this research could potentially be published in *Alcohol*, a journal devoted to “systematic studies in the various fields of alcohol research” (alcoholjournal.org). Recent articles from *Alcohol* include: “Working memory over a six-year period in young binge drinkers”; “Quantifying the contribution of alcohol to cardiomyopathy: A systematic review”; and “Convergence of central pain and stress signaling in alcohol dependence.” Many of the articles in *Alcohol* are very scientific in nature, but the submission guidelines note that the editors also accept qualitative research that relates to sociology or anthropology.

A better fit might be a journal or magazine that focuses specifically on journalism and media, like *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *Journalism & Communication Monographs* or *Media, Culture and Society*. Many of the articles I used in my research on this topic came from these or similar journals.

Perhaps the best option — and my goal — would be publication in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, which states its mission as follows: “CJR's mission is to be the intellectual leader in the rapidly changing world of journalism. It is the most respected voice on press criticism, and it shapes the ideas that make media leaders and journalists smarter about their work” (Columbia Journalism Review). I feel my research will best fall in line with the intersection of human interest and media studies that CJR does so well.

Table 1

Questions for interviews with food and drink writers*

1. Before you became a journalist, what was your perception of journalists?
Describe what you thought the typical journalist was like.
2. Before you became a food/drink writer, what was your perception of them?
Describe what you thought the typical food writer (or, more specifically, restaurant critic) was like.
3. How did you get into food writing, specifically? What experiences in your life led you to choose this area?
4. Did you have a mentor? What did he or she teach you?
5. Describe a typical day (or week) in your life. Where do you go? Who do you spend time with?
6. How much time do you spend outside of work with other journalists? How much time do you spend outside of work with chefs or people in the restaurant industry?
7. Do you drink alcohol?
8. If yes, on what occasions do you drink?
9. If yes, what alcoholic beverages do you drink, and how much would you guess you drink weekly?
10. Are there any factors/events that always lead you to have a drink or, at least, to want a drink? Stressed about work? Writer's block?
11. Have you ever classified your own drinking as problematic?
12. Do you ever have to make a concerted effort to keep your food or drinking to a minimum? If yes, how?
13. Throughout your career, have you ever encountered other journalists — food writers or otherwise — who you could tell had problematic drinking habits?
Describe them.
14. In your opinion, can the work of being a food or drink journalist lead to excessive drinking? Why?
15. What can be done to ensure journalists just beginning their careers as food writers practice the self-care needed to maintain their careers?

*These may change as interviews get underway and more information/feedback becomes available.

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