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

Kaitlin Steinberg

Prof. John Fennell, Project Supervisor

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 outs 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’Rorke (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
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,
glamourous, 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 assholish’” (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.
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*

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, 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 workingshopping 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.
Chapter Six: References


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


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


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.
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 if 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/