

# **Journalist Integrity or Arbiters of Taste: The Case Study of Restaurant Critic**

**Peter Calder**

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## **Abstract**

It is generally believed that the power of popular media is such that restaurants can be both positively and negatively impacted by the restaurant critic. With the growing public interest the opinions of critics are deemed important because they sidestep the opinions of friends, advertising and marketing, and yet can convince potential consumers to either participate voluntarily as customers, or avoid a potentially bad dining experience. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to discuss the perspective of Peter Calder, one of New Zealand's most well-known restaurant critics, concerning establishing reviewer reliability, credibility and validity. The paper also discusses the style of review adopted by Calder and his purpose for reviewing. As the study reflects the views and opinions of a single research participant, Peter Calder, this research was undertaken by applying a qualitative research methodology and case study approach. It was found that Peter's work is fuelled through his journalistic integrity rather than a preoccupation with dining or the

hospitality industry. This makes Peter's perspective and approach to his work unique. Consequently this paper distils how Peter creates his narratives that have over time created a loyal readership. This insight adds to our understanding of the importance of restaurant critics, and within this case study, how the critic views themselves.

Keywords: Restaurant review, Critic, Journalistic integrity, Peter Calder

## 1. Introduction

*'Sir, I am seated in the smallest room in the house. Your review is before me. Shortly it will be behind me.'*

German composer Max Reger responding to a critic. (Dukore, 1994)

The power of popular media is such that restaurants can be both positively and negatively impacted by the restaurant critic. Reviews are assumed to have the potential to promote or hinder business opportunity and, as a result, the ability to engender strong emotions in business owners, media and consumers (Blank, 2007). Nevertheless, awards, recognition and rankings promoted by restaurant critics are highly sought-after by many restaurants. For most restaurants, the highest accolade is to be awarded a Michelin star, with progression to the 'gold standard' of three Michelin stars. Conversely, the potential downgrading of Michelin star status can be perceived as catastrophic, as the recent suicide of chef Bernard Loiseau of La Cote d'Or attests.

Competition for recognition and customer attention has increased also in New Zealand as restaurant dining has undergone major changes in the past fifty years (Rowland, 2010). Where once dining out was infrequent for the majority of people, it has now become a major type of entertainment for a wide cross-section of New Zealand society (Sietsema, 2010; Rowland, 2010). The marketplace now offers a wide variety of establishments and cuisines where, Sietsema (2010) suggests, dining out has become a fixation for many who regard themselves as 'foodies'.

The development in food consumerism has also been mirrored by a significant growth in food-related media (Sloan, 2004). The growing media attention and public interest in restaurant reviews sits within a paradigm of rapidly escalating cultural attention to all things culinary (Williamson, Tregidga, Harris and Keen, 2009). In this environment, the opinions of critics are deemed important because they sidestep the opinions of friends, advertising and marketing, and yet can convince potential consumers to either participate voluntarily as customers, or avoid a potentially bad dining experience. To achieve this influence Blank (2007) suggests that the validity of the restaurant reviewer is obtained by building a relationship of credibility with their audience.

However, despite these media influences, the sociological study of public food and eating remains a minority interest with most research being conducted in the domestic and nutritional arenas (Wood, 1996; Williamson, Tregidga, Harris, Keen, 2009). Specifically, research on restaurant reviews appears limited to the criteria that reviewers use to reach their conclusions (Schroeder, 1985; Barrows, Attuca, Bosselman 1989; Clark and Wood, 1998; Steintrager, 2002; Titz, Lanza-Abbott, Cruz, 2004; Williamson et al., 2009) and therefore leaves discussion of the social impact of such reviews largely unexamined. Moreover, there appears to be a misconception about, and little academic research on, the structure, function, role and power of restaurant reviews and reviewers.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to discuss the perspective of Peter Calder, one of New Zealand's most well-known restaurant critics, concerning establishing reviewer reliability, credibility and validity. The paper also discusses the style of review adopted by Calder and his purpose for reviewing. Accordingly, this research bridges the gap between the restaurant critic, who is perceived as the purveyor of aspirant taste, and the realities of journalistic integrity. Such an examination is missing in current literature.

## **2. Background**

### **2.1. New Zealand restaurant reviews**

The New Zealand media produces a number of restaurant reviews for public interest, including those published in magazines, and on online review sites and blogs. Peter Calder critiques restaurants for the *New Zealand Herald*, one of three of the four main daily New Zealand newspapers which publish restaurant reviews for their readers. The other two are the *Christchurch Press*, and the *Dominion Post*. Only the *Otago Daily Times* does not currently feature restaurant reviews for the reason that, as the wine and arts feature writer explains, ‘Dunedin [the main city of the region] is too small to carry serious restaurant reviews and we don’t consider the “my wife’s chicken was very tasty” school of reviews worthwhile for our readers.’ (C. Smith, personal communication 7 May 2013).

The *Christchurch Press* obtains weekly or fortnightly reviews from five different reporters. Ewan Sargent (C. Smith, personal communication 7 May 2013) noted that these reviews are written as ‘connoisseurial’ narratives, which do not include a rating due to the number of writers and the subjective differences in their reporting styles. Wellington’s *Dominion Post* produces a restaurant review (penned by David Burton) in every Saturday edition of the paper. Additional to this is a café review on the paper’s Wednesday *Life* tabloid supplement. Finally, Auckland’s *New Zealand Herald* provides restaurant reviews from five different reviewers in three main publications: *The Weekend Herald*, *Viva*, and *The Herald on Sunday*. Of these restaurant reviewers, Peter Calder is the most prolific with almost 600 published reviews.

### **3. Literature Review**

#### **3.1. The Restaurant Review**

Food, wine and restaurant criticism can be said to have begun with Grimod de la Reynière (1758–1837) and his publication entitled *Almanach des Gourmands* (Cordon Bleu, 2004; Newton, 2004). La Reynière’s work was different from previous private food writing in that it was specifically written for a public audience and concerned itself with defining what effective food criticism should be. From this earliest inception, food and restaurant writing has been concerned with placing itself in the wider social context, establishing the ‘laws of taste’, and engaging in savage

social satire by entertaining and informing readers in equal measure (Brillat-Savarin, 1994; Newton, 2004).

However, Sietsema (2010) claims that by the late 1970s, reviews in American newspapers were regarded as something not to be trusted by readers because they were deemed to be little more than self-serving restaurant marketing strategies. Craig Claiborne, the legendary *New York Times* reviewer, addressed this issue by establishing a structured framework for restaurant reviewing and maintaining strict anonymity. Claiborne believed that if the public were to take restaurant reviews seriously, the critic should adhere to guidelines that granted trustworthiness of their conclusions (Sietsema, 2010). As Blank (2007, p. 50) notes, Claiborne maximised his own culinary knowledge as a chef to bring 'a sense of integrity and advocacy' to restaurant reviews that readers found credible. This set the ethical standard for the reviewers of today, by requiring multiple visits, independent financing (previously reviewers ate at the restaurant's expense), and review anonymity.

More recently, as diners have become more interested in the subject of gastronomy and all things food-related, their expectations of professional reviewers have increased. Consequently, reviewers have had to take on a new role with readers expecting critics to give details of the context where food consumption occurs, while at the same time making it sound mouth-watering (Sietsema, 2010).

This transformation was noted when Ruth Reichl joined the *New York Times* in 1993 and changed restaurant reviewing by bringing a playwright's approach to evaluating restaurants (Sietsema, 2010). Reichl's approach of reproducing bits of dialogue and speaking of fellow diners as if she were a travel author has greatly influenced restaurant reviewing ever since. Over time, restaurant critics have progressed from merely informing the dining public of their opinions on food and restaurants to something much more. Vaughan (2008) suggests that not only are reviewers now viewed as trendsetters, but gastronomy programmes like *MasterChef* have made the critics the centre of attention, and with that, it appears, many people now aspire to become a critic (Mirosh, 2010).

The changing nature of restaurants, consumption and 'food' media has occurred within a cultural shift from values and beliefs based on industrial mass production and common patterns regarding taste, to one that is focused on personal tastes and inclinations (Williams, 2002). Bocock (cited in Williams, 2002 p. 186) states that 'the question "Who am I?" is as likely to be answered in terms of consumption patterns as it is in terms of an occupational role by many people in Western capitalism'. Earlier, Warde (1997) suggested that the subject of food consumption is a cause of anxiety and confusion in modern society. Drawing on the work of French sociologist Claude Fischler and British writer Steven Mennell, Warde (1997, p. 30), describes contemporary consumers as being 'faced with a multitude of conflicting advice regarding food consumption. "What to choose" becomes a tormenting, invasive and occasionally insurmountable question.' This anxiety is exemplified by the vast choice of food Western consumers enjoy, which Bell (2004) suggests results in overload, causing personal dilemma and difficulty in assembling a self-identity. Furthermore, according to Bell (2004), dining out has become an activity of endless trial and error with the potential reward of culinary-cultural prestige and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984).

From this perspective restaurants can be considered as sites that reflect the identity, social status and lifestyle of their diners. Morgan, Watson and Hemmington (2008) believe that consumers select specific restaurants in terms of how they fit with, or boost, their real or ideal self-impression. In terms of lifestyle, Sloan (2004) suggests that commercial hospitality spaces, restaurants included, are crucial points for exhibiting lifestyles, along with learning lifestyle conventions. Thus, consumer behaviour indicates a shift toward postmodern values whereby the quest for lifestyle is a common fixation (Sloan, 2004). Randall, (2000) also suggests that with the array of choices available, modern cultural life has caused consumers to become restless and therefore turn to the media for assistance in reinforcing identity constructs.

Consequently, the media plays a large part in influencing consumer attitudes towards food consumption in modern society. Sloan (2004) believes consumers' outlooks on food and beverage-related matters are influenced by mediated messages from a variety of genres. He also states that the increasing popularity of food/dining-related media is very much concerned with the attainment of appreciated

lifestyles, in addition to the genuine concern in cuisine. This is evidenced in the increasing number of television food programmes and resulting celebrity personalities they promote.

The function of the media is not only to advertise goods, but also to provide and promote information and knowledge that allows the consumer opportunities to gain symbolic capital (Randall, 2000). Symbolic capital refers to the meaning gained by individuals through participation in such activities, for example, honour or prestige (Seymour, 2004). Bourdieu (1984) also argues that considering the right choice brings individuals an outcome which is deemed fitting, but, most of all, it authenticates their taste as well as their social standing (Williamson et al., 2009). Sloan (2004) claims that the media contributes to the growth of our symbolic culture by mediating the use of space (for example, the time and space required to watch food-related shows) as an environment where lifestyle and individual identity can be developed and presented.

### **3.2. Review Methodologies**

When it comes to restaurant reviews, Williamson et al., (2009), assert that their primary function is to provide evaluations that are dependable, along with broader information regarding the restaurant which reveals whether it is the correct pick. Blank (2007) notes that critics generally engage 'connoisseurial' and/or 'procedural' evaluation methods when writing reviews. These models respectively mirror social science methodologies, specifically, qualitative enquiry and quantitative enquiry. Like social science research, restaurant critics often combine the two approaches which Blank (2007) suggests is the mark of a 'real' review.

### **3.3. The Connoisseurial Review**

For Blank (2007, p. 29) the connoisseurial review engages its audience because the reviewer presents themselves thus: 'Believe my review because ... I am a particularly well-informed, experienced, and knowledgeable person. I am a connoisseur.' Key to the success of this style of review is that its audience accepts the expertise of the reviewer. This is encapsulated in the definition of the word 'connoisseur' in the

*American College Dictionary* (Barnhart 1970, p. 256) as ‘one competent to pass critical judgments in an art, esp, one of the fine arts, or in matters of taste’. The etymology of connoisseur derives from the Latin *cognoscere*, ‘[to] come to know’ (Barnhart, 1970, p. 256). This suggests that readers ‘come to know’ something through the expertise and knowledge of the critic. Yet this new knowledge and, indeed, the critic’s review are subjectively interpreted by the reader.

Key to this interpretation is the style in which the critic writes their review.

Recognising that connoisseurial reviews are written in a similar style to both novels and essays, Blank (2007, p. 30) suggests that they are ‘measured by the criteria of good writing’ and that, as such, ‘their first goal is to interest and hold their readers’. While literary style is a central characteristic of all connoisseurial reviews, Blank (2007, p. 45) also identifies a number of other key themes specific to restaurant reviews. These include the assessment of the environment, service and food, all embedded in a narrative that enables the reader to feel that they have ‘already been to the restaurant’. Further, restaurant reviews typically contain an overall assessment of the experience and a summary of the review, often including symbols representing an overall rating (Table 1 refers).

Table 1: Characteristics of Connoisseurial Restaurant Reviews

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>
Literary style	Succinct, interesting and personal narrative that has a plot.
Environment	For example, the synthesis of ambiance, décor, music, lighting, and design, which could expressed as mood.
Service	Including aspects of interaction with staff, speed, style and efficiency of service.
Food	What makes it good? Recommended dishes. Dishes to avoid. Food descriptions.
Embedded narrative	The review has a plot, as well as informing and educating its readers on food, service and atmosphere.
Summary and symbols	This provides an easy-to-read summary of important



	information (e.g., price \$\$\$, star ratings ★ ★, accepted credit cards, the noise level of dining room, etc.)
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(Adapted from Blank, 2007)

The widespread popularity of the connoisseurial reviews by critics reflects this format's flexibility. Connoisseurial reviews open up the narrative for readers, revealing the 'complexities and nuances of the restaurant environment' (Lin, 2004, p. 169) and of the food. Consequently, this review type enables the critic not only to discuss the restaurant, but also to contextualise it within wider hospitality constructs.

As Blank (2007, p. 32) suggests, the potency of connoisseurial reviews are their ability to 'have some sort of impact ... to illuminate and transform our lives'. This potency is held within the critic's writing ability and their status as 'all-knowing media critic'. Yet writing a connoisseurial review is mediated by relationships of power. This includes the author's own power struggle to write in a manner that, while illuminating the topic, also creates literary credibility with their readers. In doing so and by adding the reviewer's own personal perspectives the final review will, as Blank (2007, p. 33) reminds us, either 'offer readers an opportunity to read a sophisticated evaluation and match their response to the response of someone who is widely respected ... [or] ... descend to [a] one-sided, biased evaluation'.

### **3.4. The Procedural Review**

Unlike connoisseurial reviews, Blank (2007) notes that procedural reviews do not rely on subjective judgements but rather obtain credibility through performance measures and the reporting of scores. Like quantitative enquiry, procedural reviews are based on measurement that produces a score for key areas of the dining experience. As this type of review uses impersonal processes to provide objective assessment, Blank (2007) suggests the critic's perceptions, emotions, and biases hold less influence. Further to this, Blank (2007, p. 36) asserts that 'unlike connoisseurial reviewers ... [procedural reviewers] are not authors in the literary sense; they are more like technicians'. However, while procedural reviews are less subjective in their approach, they nonetheless still promote the importance and relevance of food over and above other factors, therefore the weighting of scores

may still hold some bias. For a comparison of connoisseurial and procedural review features, refer to Table 2.

Table 2 Connoisseurial versus procedural reviews

<b>Features of the review process</b>		
<i>Reviewer</i>	<i>Connoisseurial</i>	<i>Procedural</i>
Objective	Entertaining and informative	Informative
Knowledge	Subjective	Objective
Communication	Personal narrative	Impersonal account
Method	Expert intuition	Measurement
Outcomes	Unique	Consistency
Identity	Known and consistent	Unknown and variable
Credibility	Experience and talent	Explicit procedure

(Adapted from Blank, 2007)

Irrespective of the type of review used the consistency of any critic's work is compromised not by the method they use, but by how their readers interpret it. For connoisseurial reviews this is compounded because, unlike procedural reviews, they rarely use 'a consistent set of standards' (Blank, 2007, p. 110). Atop this, and unless a franchise restaurant style is reviewed, most restaurants offer a highly customised guest experience, which is reflected by the subjective experiences of both guest and reviewer. Therefore, in choosing which style or blend of review to write, reviewers need to consider their audience and the form of measurement most suited to it. As a generalisation Blank (2007, p. 121) suggests that connoisseurial reviews are best suited for 'unstable product categories' [like contemporaneous hospitality products and services that are singularly reviewed] whereas procedural reviews may be more suited to 'stable, well-established [product] categories'. However, Blank (2007) asserts in his comparative study examining the connoisseurial reviews of *Chicago* magazine against the procedural reviews of the Zagat food guide books, both review typologies display remarkably similar review outcomes.

Yet there is more to audience acceptance of a review than its single or blended methodological format. Blank (2007, p. 134) asserts that 'typically, readers repeatedly read the same reviewers in a daily, weekly, or monthly publication. At the same time they have personal experiences with some of the products [and services] being reviewed.' Within this amalgam readers compare and contrast their own experiences to those of the reviewer/critic. Importantly for the connoisseurial review, Blank (2007) suggests that this iterative process helps to develop a relationship based on trust between the reader and the critic where the readers associate credibility with consistency of the review process, the author and the narrative.

#### **4. Methodology**

As this paper seeks to discuss the perspective of one of New Zealand's most well-known restaurant reviewers, a qualitative research methodology and case study approach best suits this research. Qualitative research was appropriate because it enables rich descriptions and experiences to be gathered (Marshall and Rossman, 1999) while also facilitating in-depth and detailed study of issues (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). While case studies are often used to describe research focusing on 'a location, such as a community or organisation' (Bryman, 2008, p. 53), the study here reflects the views and opinions of a single research participant: Peter Calder. The study of a single case within a contemporary real-life context is referred to by Yin (2003, p. 48) as a 'representative and typical case'. Consequently, through the use of semi-structured and conversational interviewing, this research reflects Bryman's (2008, p. 691) 'intensive analysis of a single case'.

A conversational approach was used for the semi-structured interview to generate extended discussion of the research topic (Given, 2008). The interview with Calder was digitally recorded and then transcribed. Data analysis of the transcription was guided by the theoretical orientation of the literature review (Yin, 2003), which enabled patterns and themes to be established (Creswell, 2007). Moreover, direct interpretation of the data also allowed emergent themes to be developed (Creswell, 2007). The transcript and initial data analysis was reviewed independently by each of

the authors to ensure that all possible interpretations of the data had been explored and to enhance the reliability of the findings (Yin, 2003).

## 5. Findings/Discussion

### 5.1. The role of the reviewer

The role of the restaurant reviewer has been described as developing from a trustworthy, structured, anonymous reporter of the facts, exemplified by Craig Claiborne, through to the literary 'play-writer' approach of Ruth Reichl (Sietsema, 2010). Mirosh (2010) goes so far as to suggest that reviewers themselves now seek to be the centre of attention, rather than humbly reporting on the ability of the service staff or rise of the newest culinary star. However, with Peter Calder, we find a restaurant reviewer who sees himself as a journalist first and a reviewer second. Rather than seeking the attention of the restaurateur, celebrity chef or hospitality industry elite, Peter Calder is happy to maintain separation from the operators he is writing about so that he can inform his audience with integrity. Calder has a background of twenty years' experience as a journalist for the *New Zealand Herald* before becoming a freelance writer. With the start of the *Herald on Sunday* (2004) Calder was offered the restaurant reviewer's position where he clearly sees himself as a journalist first:

*What drew me to it [restaurant reviewing] was the offer of a job. I've done a lot of reviewing in my time, films, theatre, a little bit of books, a little bit of television — I see the word 'review' as being much more important than the word 'restaurant' in that phrase. I see the deployment of a critical perspective as not necessarily negative, as being an important role, but not the only role of journalism.*

Recognising the limitations of the restaurant review genre, Calder acknowledges the 'elite' nature of food writing and the implied complexities of social status that encompass the post-modern 'consumer-based identity' (Bell, 2004; Randall 2000; Williamson et al. 2009; Sloan 2004):

*I have occasionally fielded comments or emails from people who say 'What a lot of wank [pretentious rubbish] you write about, poached duck so on and so forth, when us people out here can't even afford to do a scrambled eggs or mince on toast'.*

However, he also recognises that while some may be excluded, there is a valid need to inform the segment of society that his work caters to:

*I am aware there is a kind of a cultural elitism that is implicit in the very idea of restaurant reviews, but, on the other hand, so there is too when writing about the share market.*

Acknowledging that he shares the cultural capital of his audience, Calder positions himself and his writing at the level of interested 'foodie', rather than expert chef or experienced restaurateur:

*The person I see in my mind's eye when I am writing knows a bit about food, but is not going to be an expert chef so I will not define the word 'braised' for them but I will define the word 'sous vide' or 'molecular gastronomy'. I see myself as writing for a particular audience that goes out to dinner and even a smaller subset of that audience that likes reading reviews.*

Seeing himself as representative of the 'average middle-class foodie', Calder assumes a responsibility to his audience where the role as restaurant reviewer includes being a consumer advocate:

*I see myself as being in the consumer protection business. I'm a reviewer, I report on my experience of something and very much in the interests of the diner. ... There is a certain level of public duty to the reader. I think my job is to look out for new places, or places that people tell me have gone downhill [as opposed to the French Café because everyone knows it is good]. Serve the reader ... look after their needs.*

Here the relationship is with his audience, rather than with the restaurant/restaurateur. His duty is not to the restaurant, but rather to the 'interested foodie' whom he seeks to advise about establishments worthy of their attention.

## **5.2. Reviewer Reliability, Credibility and Integrity**

Reflecting on the conclusions of Blank (2007) and Sietsema (2010), Calder considers the key role of the reviewer as being a voice for the consumer and a reliable judge of quality. However, unlike the industry experts highlighted in Blank's (2007) discussion of connoisseurial reviews, Calder has minimal hospitality experience:

*As for a hospitality background [I have] virtually zero ... I am an enthusiastic and pretty confident home cook. I have always eaten out, at least once a week on average, but in terms of an actual hospitality background, none whatsoever.*

While a lack of industry experience could be detrimental to a critic's credibility (Blank, 2007; Schroeder, 1985), Calder believes that his reputation as a reliable and impartial judge of restaurants is enhanced through deliberately separating himself from the social scene and interests of restaurateurs:

*My relationship with the [hospitality] industry is virtually zero. I like it that way. I no longer get invited to restaurant openings because I think everyone knows that I routinely decline these invitations. I have never been to openings.*

Calder strongly feels that the credibility and reliability of his reviews depends on maintaining a professional distance from those he is reviewing:

*[I] never go to industry functions because I don't believe that I should have any personal relationship with anyone in the industry. I don't believe I should be on first name terms with or shaking hands with the proprietor ... I believe I go in [to a restaurant] as a representative of the public. I book under my wife's name, and am seldom recognised.*

*People invite [me] to come and eat at their expense and I never do that, but thank them for alerting me to their restaurant ... and I'll be along sometime soon.*

Moreover, as a journalist there is a clear concern for maintaining his integrity:

*Journalistic integrity is about not accepting inducements and trying to remain anonymous ... I have seen people who were reviewing an opening night party but they were writing like they were reviewing a restaurant, and I think that's an utter disgrace. To be there partaking of the restaurant's hospitality (for nothing [free]), eating their food for nothing, and then writing a review of it, how can it [the review] be credible?*

The concern for journalistic integrity along with the development of reliability and credibility aligns with Blank's (2007) discussion of reviewer ethics. It is evident that Calder is concerned for the experience and wellbeing of the consumer rather than the restaurant. Validation of his role as restaurant reviewer is obtained from his reader, the 'average middle-class foodie', rather than through approval of the restaurant owner or industry. Whereas Calder has the interest of his readers in mind he believes that the expectation of restaurants are quite clear regarding reviews:

*... they [restaurants] don't see reviews as reviews, they see them as a link in the chain called publicity... a golden link.*

Recognising this desire for positive reviews and publicity serves to highlight for Calder the importance of maintaining a distance from the industry and from pressure from restaurateurs regarding the effect of his reviews:

*Yes, I have felt the pressure one way or another. People write in and say the restaurant is going to go to the wall as a result of your [review]. And that's part of the reason why I don't do this industry hobnobbing, because I don't want to know that you have mortgaged your house, or that your children aren't eating, and it's teetering on the precipice and one bad*

*nudge from me and your whole life has gone down ... I don't want to know that. Our concern is that we report fairly, honestly and accurately.*  
*If you have got yourself in a position of running a restaurant and one bad review is going to push you off the cliff, then you've got a bad business model or you've got a bad restaurant.*

The impression of Calder as a restaurant reviewer is far from the 'co-creator of elitism', suggested by Williamson et al. (2009). The argument that reviewers are keen to rub shoulders with the newly crowned culinary elite and create a space for themselves as 'superstar' arbiters of taste (Williams, 2002; Sloan 2004; Williamson et al., 2009), is not supported by Calder's determined aim to position himself outside the social world of those whom he reviews. While Calder may be participating in the media driven co-creation of symbolic cultural capital, suggested by Bourdieu (1984), Bell (2004), Sloan (2004) and Blank (2007), he very much sees himself as a consumer advocate and protector, rather than a creator of social advantage.

### **5.3. The power of reviews**

While there has been plenty of anecdotal discussion in popular media regarding the power of reviews to revitalise or destroy restaurants (see, for example, Tenore, 2012), little empirical research has been undertaken to quantify the impact of restaurant reviews. Calder provides a crucial perspective on this topic, as the voice of the reviewers themselves is often missing when the impact of their work is discussed. Calder believes his reviews have the potential to be powerful in a positive way:

*A little Japanese place at the beginning of Great South Rd in Epsom  
someone alerted me to ... I wrote them an ecstatic review ... They wrote  
me an email about two weeks later saying 'We were about to close the  
business, and now we are full every night. Thank you.'*

However, he does not feel he has the power to negatively affect an established business:



*The thought that I could put a nick in the success of The Engine Room or Euro [very successful local restaurants] is quite preposterous. Those things are behemoths that succeed because they are superb. There's no way I can do them damage.*

*If I had a lot of power, Portofino [a cheap and cheerful Italian restaurant chain] would not exist anymore. Have a look at the two reviews [on Portofino] they are both excoriating. You go down to the Portofino at Mission Bay or the Viaduct, the two that I went to, any night, and they are absolutely heaving [full of customers].*

The contradiction that Calder highlights here is an interesting one. If his reviews have the positive power to rescue a business from closing, why do they not have the negative power to harm a successful operation? On this subject the literature is remarkably silent. Instead, research is concentrated on the criteria that reviewers use to reach their conclusions (Schroeder, 1985; Barrows, Attuca, Bosselman 1989; Clark and Wood, 1998; Steintrager, 2002; Titz et al., 2004; Williamson et al., 2009) and the socio-cultural meanings of reviews for consumers (Bell, 2004; Blank, 2007; Sloan, 2004). This highlights a clear opening for further research concerning the impact reviews have on restaurants. While leaving the contradiction of positive and negative impacts largely unresolved, Calder feels the power of his reviews to influence the public comes from the particular following he has:

*I have a following; the people who go to Portofino probably don't read restaurant reviews, whereas the customers of the Japanese place probably do. They are two entirely different audiences.*

He goes on to state that 'a reviewer's power to influence public response is in direct proportion to his demonstrated reliability'. Here reliability is viewed by Calder not as an 'objective virtue', but as a subjective quality that is determined by 'the eye of the reader'. The credibility of a reviewer is also seen as a quality that must be fostered over time. For Calder, who has no culinary or restaurant background, credibility is established through the development of his relationship with the audience/readership. As Calder states:

*The reader has to get to know [me] and come to terms with [my] themes and tastes. I don't believe that you should take any notice of any reviewer until you have read them for at least a few weeks.*

It is evident that building a relationship based on trust established through journalistic integrity along with reliable and credible reviews is important to Calder. However, as judgements are made and reviews written after just one visit to the restaurant, the development of this relationship with the reader becomes even more important. As Calder states:

*Larissa Dubecki [of The Melbourne Age] ... has a virtually unlimited budget. Frank Bruni [of The New York Times] goes to a restaurant three times before writing the review of it. There's no way that I get the budget to do that.*

As indicated by Blank (2007), this indicates a possible limitation within review processes restricted by limited budgets. The variability of service is well documented (see, for example, Zeithaml, Bitner, and Gremler, 2013) and, therefore, it is conceivable that a critic could experience an anomaly at the time of their visit. As the review provides a 'snapshot' it is difficult to make generalisations from the results of a single restaurant review.

#### **5.4. Approaches to reviewing**

Blank's (2007) typology of reviews suggests that connoisseurial and procedural approaches to reviewing match different product categories, with connoisseurial reviews being best suited to 'unstable' stand-alone restaurants. For Calder, the balance between 'qualitative', narrative-based connoisseurial reviewing and 'quantitative', star-based, procedural reviewing is not strongly related:

*I put the number of stars before I start writing ... I shut my eyes and breathe deeply and think, yes, that's the right number ... very much an*

*intuitive feeling. Whereas the narrative is the place where I play, where I try to have fun and I just try to write something that I would like to read.*

Calder's position indicates a clear preference for the connoisseurial review over a procedural or blended review approach. As Calder emphasises, the narrative gives the reader an impression or flavour of the establishment without getting bogged down in details required to make an assessment that arrives at a number:

*I aspire to give a feeling, a flavour of the place without plodding through the place ... a shopping list kind of approach [rather than a chronological listing of events and food]. I could draw up a chart and then calculate it on a little computer, and it comes out to 3.7 stars, but I never will. Stars plug into our whole hurried mentality, but I really hate them because I write for people who read, not for people who count stars.*

Again, Calder's approach and attitude reflect the importance of the relationship between reader and reviewer. In respect to Blank's (2007) construct of trust-building conditions for reviewing, the choice of reviewing methodology is less important than the iterative process of trust-building that occurs when the reader finds congruence between what the reviewer writes and what they experience in a restaurant visit. Calder follows his instincts when assigning stars. He is not concerned about objective measurement, as he feels the reliability and validity of his judgements are determined by his audience over a sustained period of time and justified by the audience's congruent experience in the same restaurants.

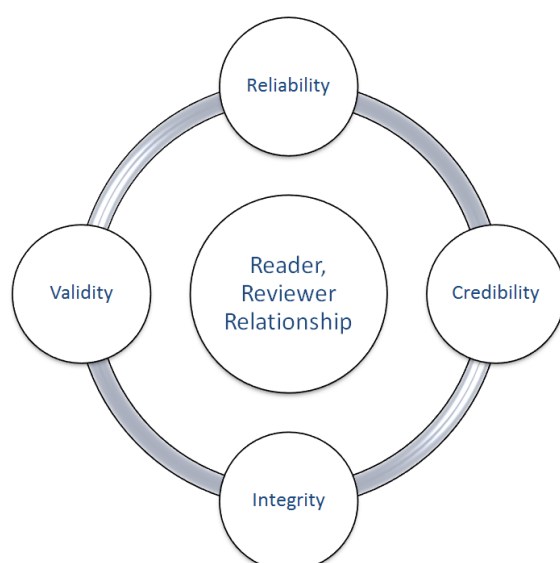
## **6. Conclusion**

Peter Calder adds a unique perspective to the role that restaurant reviewers play within socio-cultural and commercial hospitality constructs. Calder, like many other reviewers, subscribes to an ethos founded by creating themes of trust and credibility with his readers. Calder facilitates this through writing consistent review narratives and by aligning his perceptions, taste and integrity to his readership. These attributes have facilitated Calder's reviewer status longevity in a media marketplace of village

proportions, compared to, say, the metropolises of London or New York. Yet unlike many other restaurant reviewers, Calder does not perceive himself as an arbiter of taste, promoter of cultural capital or advocate of the hospitality industry. Calder's review style is not about placing himself as the centre of attention; rather, he is driven by the integrity he associates with being a journalist first and a reviewer second. This is evidenced by his fixation on being a consumer advocate.

It is evident that the success and validity of Calder's connoisseurial style of review relies on developing a relationship with the reader. The components of this relationship are depicted in Figure 1: Developing the reader, reviewer relationship. Calder's sole focus is on developing a relationship with the reader of his reviews, the 'average middle-class foodie' and potential consumer of the restaurant under review. His reliability is established through consistently writing reviews reflecting his expectations of the style of restaurant, thus providing his readers with a benchmark for their own perceptions and assessment of the same. Credibility is achieved through knowledge of restaurant food, service and experience, not as an industry expert but rather as a well-informed 'foodie' and experienced diner. Moreover, Calder's integrity as a journalist and reviewer is maintained through separation from the restaurant industry and the establishments under review.

Figure 1: Developing the reader, reviewer relationship



Calder writes with the aim of entertaining his audience and informing them of his experience. Peter Calder's validity as a reviewer is obtained from the reader who understands his viewpoint and appreciates his comments.

Consequently, we suggest that Calder's professional distance from the industry he writes about is a sound strategy and one that many other reviewers could benefit from considering. Rather than rushing out to review the latest and most 'trendy' eateries, in contrast to other reviewers, Calder's metered approach facilitates a breathing space for both the reader and restaurateur. Accordingly, a visit from Peter Calder and a review by him is more about the consumer's dining experience than the reputation and survival of the restaurant.

## **7. Future research**

While this paper has illuminated the role of the restaurant reviewer, we also note some interesting fields for further enquiry. The literature review highlights that while there has been significant discussion in the popular media concerning the power of restaurant reviews, there is virtually no empirical research exploring the degree to which a review can influence (if at all) the long-term success of a business. Comments by Calder also suggest that the intensity of a reviewer's power to influence a business is directly linked to the level of perceived reviewer reliability, as judged by the target audience of that particular review. This reveals a complex and subjective interplay between writer and reader that would be a fascinating subject for further research. This position raises interesting questions regarding the impact of online reviewing sites versus traditional newspaper and magazine-based 'personality' reviewers. Lastly, Calder perceives himself as a consumer advocate and protector, rather than a creator of social advantage. This position invites further research through content analysis of Calder's work to examine the extent to which his reviews reflect the 'consumer protection' stance, as opposed to being a post-modern creator of symbolic social capital.

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