THE ENGINES OF DISTINCTION: DISCOURSE FOR MAIN COURSE IN RESTAURANT REVIEWS

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ABSTRACT

Through a study of a set of restaurant reviews, this paper examines forms of knowledge constructed within such reviews and considers their potential effects. It examines 200 restaurant reviews published by New Zealand magazine Cuisine over a five year period, 2003-2007. We find that the reviews narrowly focus on food, wine and ambience over other categories such as service, chefs, cost/value, and owner/operator. We note that through such focus and the language used, the reviews demonstrate an extreme level of exclusion; ignoring a vast field of possible criteria for judging an establishment and experience. Furthermore, through focusing on areas that both allows

and creates specialist knowledge and mutual elevation (i.e. food, wine and chef/owner worship) we argue that restaurant reviews are engaging in an escalating discourse of class distinction. Potential effects of this discourse noted include the identification that the celebration of distinction and exclusion perpetuated in the restaurant reviews analysed here stands in contrast to understandings of hospitality as inclusive practice. We suggest, and note concern that, in the attempt to create new levels of refinement and distinction, the core idea of hospitality is becoming lost.

Keywords: Restaurant Reviews, Discourse, Distinction, Hospitality

INTRODUCTION

While restaurant reviews appear almost daily in most city newspapers and are widely read as part of a growing cultural interest in all things gastronomic, academic studies on restaurant reviews are limited (Titz et al., 2004). Indeed, as identified by Wood (1996), the sociological study of *public* food and eating is a minority interest with most research being done in the domestic and nutritional arenas. Extant research on restaurant reviews appears limited to the criteria that reviewers use to reach their conclusions (Schroeder, 1985; Barrows el al., 1989; Clark and Wood, 1998; Steintrager, 2002; Titz et al., 2004) and therefore leaves the social impact of such reviews largely unexamined.

Through a study of a set of restaurant reviews, this paper examines forms of knowledge constructed within such reviews and considers their potential effects. We argue that the reviews analysed, despite engaging in the rhetoric of mutual criticism, are in fact complicit in maintaining a discourse that mutually elevates both the roles of the reviews (and arguably reviewers) and also the chefs and restaurant owners in terms of cultural value. This dual process of elevated cultural/class distinction becomes an unholy

trinity when aspirant *foodies* join the fray by consuming and adopting the language and concepts of the review product. We further argue that there is a great danger in the ever escalating discourse of class distinction exhibited in restaurant reviews. In the clamour to create new levels of refinement and distinction, the core idea of hospitality is becoming lost. Will the role of restaurants become more about the display of class distinction and refined taste at the cost of 'true' hospitality and rejuvenating social interaction?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Restaurant Reviews: Their History and Purpose

Food, wine and restaurant criticism can be said to have begun with Grimod de la Reyniere (1758-1837) and his publications titled *Jury Degustateur* and *Almanachs des Gourmands* (Cordon Bleu, 2004; Newton, 2004). Grimod's work was different from previous private food writing in that is was specifically destined for a public audience and concerned itself with defining what effective food criticism should be. It is important to note that the writing of Grimod occurred during a time of great change in France, including the rise of the modern restaurant and the radical change of social structures that occurred in the wake of the French revolution. From this earliest inception, food and restaurant writing has been concerned with placing itself in the wider social context, establishing the 'laws of taste', engaging in savage social satire in entertaining and informing in equal measure (Brillat-Savarin, 1994; Newton, 2004). Both the balance of these components in food and restaurant writing, and the intended impact on the wider social audience have only come under scrutiny more recently.

Warde (1997) suggests that the subject of food consumption is a cause of anxiety and confusion in modern society. Warde (1997), drawing on the work of French sociologist Claude Fischler and British writer Steven Mennell, 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" (Warde, 1997, p. 30). This social need would seem to call the restaurant review into existence.

Blank (2004) examines the role the restaurant review plays in providing information for the modern anxiety-ridden consumer. Drawing on Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984), Blank (2004) argues that 'hierarchy' and 'status' are central to reviews, whose function is to provide a map to access 'desirable things' and access knowledge of desirable things. Blank (2004) contends that it is a key role of restaurant reviews to provide this knowledge – appropriate criteria, direct evaluations and broader information about what is the 'right' restaurant to chose. It should be noted that the 'right' choice not only brings the individual the 'appropriate' product, but more importantly confirms their taste and social position (Bourdieu, 1984).

Wood (1996) and Fattorini (1994) develop this argument by noting that restaurant reviews are aimed at a specific audience, namely the adventurous middle class, and are part of a process that both reflects and constructs 'symbolic struggles' surrounding 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1984). Wood (1996) suggests that most of the 'quality' press that produces food writing make strong assumptions about their target audience - generalizing the audience as middle class, professional, wealthy and stylish. We argue here that such 'quality' press also works to construct the audience and plays an essential role in the construction of knowledge and social relations. There has been a significant growth in recent years in media interest in culinary taste and dining. In postmodern society it is, to a large extent, mediated messages, from a range of genres, which influence our perceptions of food and drink related issues (Randall, 2000; Sloan, 2004).

Wood (1996) and Fattorini (1994) accuse food journalists and commentators of creating a fantasy world, full of semiotic devises designed to "encourage aspirant readers to identify with and believe in, the possibilities of participating in haute gastronomy in their own domestic contexts" (Wood, 1996, p. 7). Wood (1996), like Blank (2004) above, draws heavily on the work of Bourdieu (1984) and describes a class-based hierarchy of values that provides a dynamic social arena where restaurant reviews play a key part. Bourdieu (1984) postulates that certain cultural beliefs and values accrue to the dominant class in society and these values have to be defended against the aspirant members of the lower classes in that society. This battle is often over cultural symbols that represent the various values and beliefs. Over time, the dominant class can loose these symbols and values to the lower classes – that is the lower classes achieve their aspirations and claim the cultural trappings of the elite. This forces the dominant class to adopt new and 'unusual' beliefs and values in order to maintain their distinctiveness. This defense of hegemonic beliefs and values gives rise to two engines of distinction: 'excessive refinement' and 'ease' (Bourdieu, 1984).

Wood (1996) argues that 'excessive refinement' is exemplified by an extreme asceticism and austerity, a highly refined sense of culture and propriety verging on what one would find in a monastery. 'Ease' is described as the ostentatious representation of freedom from the cultural and financial constraints of ordinary people. It is with these two engines of distinction that Wood (1996) contends that restaurant reviews act as agents in the 'symbolic struggle', even going as far as to suggest that "[t]he main aim of food commentators is to deride and denigrate popular taste" (Wood, 1996, p. 8).

APPROACH AND METHOD

Our aim in this analysis is to examine the knowledge constructed within a set of restaurant reviews and consider the potential effect of that knowledge. To do so we take a discursive approach to the study of texts.

The term discourse in this research signals a theoretical and analytical approach which recognizes the productive nature of discourse. As Wetherell et al. (2001, p. 16) states, discourse "is constitutive of social life. Discourse builds objects, worlds, minds and social relations. It doesn't just reflect them". Thinking about discourse in this way we begin to consider how restaurant reviews actively construct knowledge and social relations.

As Fairclough and Wodak (1997, p. 258) state:

> Discursive practices may have major ideological effects: that is, they can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations between (for instance) social classes, women and men, and ethnic/cultural majorities and minorities through the ways in which they represent things and position people... Both the ideological loading of particular ways of using language and the relations of power which underlie them are often unclear to people.

We attempt here to make more visible some of these aspects of discourse within a set of restaurant reviews. To do so we focus on the productive and performative nature of discourse and consider the construction of objects, concepts and subjects (Hardy and Phillips, 1999) within the texts analysed. We explore representations and 'truths' constructed within the texts analysed and identify potential implications or effects of these representations on social relations and the concept of hospitality. First however, we outline the selection of the texts and method of analysis.

Selection of texts

In defining a research site we follow Phillips and Hardy's (2002) notion of "important texts". Important texts are those that are widely distributed, produced by the most

influential actors, associated with changes in practice or produced in relation to particular events. As such we chose Cuisine Magazine (Cuisine hereafter) as the site of analysis for this study. Cuisine is the premiere gourmet magazine in New Zealand and has been published bi-monthly since January 1987. Described as 'top of the gastroporn puriri' (Broatch, 2007) Cuisine has established itself as one of the dominant voices in New Zealand's culinary culture and has published over 1300 restaurant reviews. Cuisine is a successful and arguably influential magazine and was judged the best food magazine in the world at the prestigious Le Cordon Bleu World Food Media Awards in 2007. Cuisine's high readership (377,000 in 2006; Broatch, 2007) and influential status makes it an ideal site of analysis from which to investigate production of knowledge.

A total of 200 restaurant reviews from Cuisine Magazine were selected for analysis. These 200 reviews represent all restaurant reviews appearing in Cuisine over the five year period from 2003 to 2007. A longitudinal sample of 200 reviews was taken so as to allow a substantial, yet manageable data set from which to base findings. The longitudinal sample also allows the additional advantage of enabling any changes over time to be identified.

Analytical Method

Discourse analysis is the investigation of the constructive effects of discourse through the systematic and structured study of texts (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). We conducted our analysis of the reviews in three stages.

First, we sought to identify what was being said and how much attention was being given to the different aspects featured in the reviews. This step involved the coding of review content into categories. The process for 'choosing' categories was an iterative one. From researcher knowledge of reviews some categories were pre-determined or obvious (e.g. food). Other categories were added during the process of coding the

review content (e.g. owner/operator). While we do not claim to include all categories discussed in the review, effort was made to ensure the main, or most common, categories were included in the analysis. Content was coded primarily by one of the researchers; however, the researcher was in close contact with other members of the research team and checked anything they were unsure about. This, the first stage of analysis, identified what was talked about in the reviews and how often. Both a count of the number of times a theme was featured as well as a word count was conducted. It also resulted in a spreadsheet listing all statements/sentences from the reviews for each category.

While this first stage of analysis was useful in determining what was being talked about and how often, it did not uncover 'how' objects, concepts and subjects were being talked about; that is, the knowledge constructed and the potential effects. The second and third stages of analysis sought to address these issues.

The second stage of analysis sought to identify themes that appeared in the reviews, that is how each of the content categories was being talked about. This stage of analysis was carried out by multiple members of the research team and involved a reading and re-reading of category spreadsheets resulting from stage one of the research process. During this stage of analysis the researchers identified common themes (i.e. common ways each of the categories were talked about) and coded statements under each category according to what theme or themes they referred to.

The third and final stage of analysis involved the entire research team as we sought to 'make sense' of the data. During this phase we discussed each of the categories and key themes as we sought to address the question 'what is the knowledge produced and what are its potential effects?' Drawing on stage one and two of the analysis we considered how concepts, objects and subjects were represented and portrayed, along with absences and silences. This phase of the research involved drawing on the

hospitality and review literature and concepts from discourse analysis. Results from this analysis are discussed below.

FINDINGS

Findings from the analysis are presented in two parts. First we discuss the findings from the coding of the reviews. This focuses on how much is being said on the various criteria identified. Second, we examine how these themes are being presented. We identify potential effects of these representations in the discussion that follows.

How much is being said – the construction of knowledge categories

From our readings of the reviews we identified seven different criteria which we subsequently coded. The results of this coding can be seen in Table One.

Table One

Theme	Comment Count	Percentage	Word Count	Percentage
Food	406	41.6%	9028	42.1%
Ambience	171	17.6%	4565	21.2%
Wine	143	14.6%	3243	15.1%
Service	108	11.4%	1862	8.6%
Chefs	69	7.3%	1407	6.5%
Value/Cost	41	4.2%	586	2.7%
Owner/Operator	39	3.3%	821	3.8%
Totals	**977**	**100%**	**21512**	**100%**

Table One clearly shows that the criterion of *Food* clearly predominates the reviews, coming in at 41.6% of all comments and 42.1% of all words in the reviews covered – over twice the volume of the nearest other category. *Ambience* and *Wine* come in second and third on the number of times they are commented on, followed by *Service, Chefs, Value/Cost* and *Owner/Operators.* It is interesting to note, however, that when comparing comment count percentage to word count percentage, the categories of Food,

Ambience, Wine and Owners all have a higher word count percentage than comment count percentage. Conversely, Service, Chefs and Value are all discussed with fewer words per comment. Essentially, not only do reviewers refer to food, beverage and ambience often, they also use more words when discussing them.

HOW IS IT BEING SAID - THE CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

Food

Food, and its description, is clearly considered by the reviewers as the most important part of a review. The fundamental role of food in the review is demonstrated not only by the large amount of word count dedicated to food (42% of total word count), but also the way in which it is described.

Positive comments on food pervade the texts and there are few critical comments. Furthermore, when criticism is made it is mostly confined to the explanation of technical mistakes such as food being "undercooked", "overcooked", "under seasoned", "not crisp" or "not tender enough". More general criticism is limited to comments like "unimaginative", and the only noticeable critical theme is in relation to the "over-complexity" of flavors.

It is in the description of food that review writers 'let loose' and use their most 'literary' descriptions. One reviewer writes:

> A finely textured corn mousseline with chervil broth, to a little white demi-
> tasse of unctuous smoked salmon and saffron consommé, deep golden and
> clear.

Language drawn upon to represent food involves a noticeable departure from the utilitarian simplicity of language use when discussing other aspects. Descriptors of food include "stunning", "sublime", "masterful", "elegant", "luscious", "clever" and "wondrous"! Some reviewers draw on the metaphysical in their descriptions using words like "divine" and "heavenly" frequently. We also find the review language drawing on concepts from music and the arts, including statements on "virtuoso performances", "harmony", and "yin and yang balance". This drawing from the language of the arts should perhaps not come as a surprise, as one reviewer identifies:

> But to come to Bisque and find yourself murmuring "brilliant" and
> "amazing" with each course is to be reminded that for chefs at the top of
> their profession cookery is art.

The food sections are heavily focused on product, and at times read like a very up-market and exotic shopping list: "a purée of chick peas, haricots and borlotti, perfumed with mustard aioli"; "gnocchi with wild boar Genovese sauce"; "duck prosciutto with parmesan and truffle'; "Caprese alla Felice, bocconcini, vine-ripened tomato, basil, Parma ham and Toscana salami". Associated with this aspirant product list is the idea that the audience is already knowledgeable about these products and processes. The review writers assume that "everybody has tasted baklava" and that all readers are familiar with "the famous mole poblano sauce".

One of the strongest themes in the food sections of reviews is the representation of simplicity as the most desirable attribute of modern food. Menus that are short are considered appropriate, they are usually described as "tight", "clean", and "tightly focused". Conversely, a common criticism is that menus are too big:

The sheer number of dishes on offer and the somewhat hard-to-navigate six-page menu can make ordering daunting. Extensive menus concern me. I think the larger the menu, the more chances for things to go wrong.

This stands in interesting contrast to the wine list discussed below where bigger is always considered better.

The food itself is subject to this 'simple is best' approach with statements like: "well focused flavors"; "simple, fresh, clear flavors, crisp and precise, not at all prissy"; "subtle, understated flavors"; "flavor combinations are cutting edge without being outlandish"; "simple and varied not at all over pretentious and the flavor generally well balanced". Criticism is strongest when food is judged to be pretentious, "the food, which although nice enough, was often over-fussed".

There is a clearly stated emphasis that for food, and by association chefs, to be taken seriously the appropriate approach is serious and traditional simplicity:

Because culinary 'innovation' in this country has been valued over tradition for the past 20 years, the boundaries of good taste have become so blurred that some chefs now think anything goes.

At first glance the menu irritated. Cute titles such as O Salad and Holy Quail suggested a chef with a frivolous approach to food – worse than chefs who can't spell.

The effects of this continual reference to notions of simplicity, alongside the reviews assuming and often flamboyant use of language is discussed after the remaining findings are presented.

Wine

In stark contrast to the food menu, the quality of a wine list is strongly associated with its size. Quite clearly, what constitutes a great wine list is its extensive size and ability to offer rare and expensive wines.

> The wine list is outstanding. More than 20 choices each of Pinot Gris and Sauvignon Blanc, 68 Chardonnays, more than 40 Pinot Noirs and many others that indicate a serious commitment to fine wine.

> It's one of the only restaurants I have been to listing Providence red wine ($300 a bottle) but then this is a place for the adventurous and for the serious food lover.

Criticism is leveled at wines lists that are small, dominated by one supplier, or feature only 'popular' vintages. One review states:

> All the varietals are there, but in very limited choices. One example of each is available by the glass: seriously limiting for diners who are true wine aficionados.

Criticism of wine, outside of the wine list, is generally limited to statements regarding failures in service. It would seem that, like with many of the faults in the restaurants reviewed, the problems often lie with the server and their abilities (or inabilities).

> Both local pinot noirs we ordered by the glass were served too warm.

Wine service started badly – the waiter failed to appreciate our irritation at the cumbersome wine list in its sturdy wooden covers.

Ambience

While ambience is discussed often in the reviews, references to ambience do not pervade the text in a way that positions it as an area of expertise or elitist knowledge in the same way that representations of food do. Statements regarding ambience and décor are invariably positive or neutral – there is very little criticism. However, what critical comments that are made are limited to generalized claims such as "things don't quite gel" or "the décor is a little 1990's".

The most positive and common statements refer to restaurants that can demonstrate a subdued, intimate and sophisticated elegance. These attributes are often associated with detailed descriptions of starched Damask linen, highly polished crystal, silver wear and branded china. Lighting is usually referred to as a positive, most commonly adding to the soft, subdued and elegant atmosphere in the evening. Comments regarding how the ambience of the restaurant help or hinder social interaction among those within the dining party, among dining parties, and with restaurant owners and workers, are limited to celebration of anything that allows "intimacy" between diners. This, in itself, contains the assumption that there are only diners in very small groups who want this intimate experience.

Service

Statements made in relation to service in the reviews were predominantly positive. Traits of the service staff were often noted such as friendly, helpful, professional, attentive, efficient, welcoming and polite - all constitute a positive representation. Prompt and fast service was a common representation of service, however, where there

was a long wait for food this was attributed to service (rather than to the chef as one might assume as 'controller' of the kitchen). The most common representation of service is 'servers as knowledgeable'. However, in the small number of instances when negative or critical comments are made these are often associated with the servers lack of knowledge (e.g. incorrect glass use for wines). Furthermore, the knowledge of the servers was mostly related to the server making 'successful' recommendations to the customer – a less objective view of knowledge than one may have thought.

Noticeably, no server was mentioned by name (despite common practice being for the server to introduce him/herself at the beginning of service). In fact, the only names mentioned in service comments were of front of house managers, hosts or owners. A result of this anonymity is that front line service providers remain a collective and un-named mass. This is particularly pertinent when we consider these findings alongside those of other subject groups such as chefs and owner/operators.

Chefs

Representations in the category of chefs were entirely positive or neutral, no critical statements are made. The main aim of the reviews appears to be to establish the chefs pedigree (indeed, the word pedigree itself is used in association with chefs numerous times). Common practice was to link chefs with other famous chefs, well known operators, or overseas experience. Such representations work to establish a sense of prestige and importance. Chefs are commonly represented as talented, masters, experts and accomplished. Additionally, and in stark contrast to the findings above regarding the nameless service staff, in a majority of instances where chefs are mentioned they are named. We would suggest that this naming of chefs reflects their status as new media 'stars' and emerging celebrities.

Owner/Operators

There are several similarities in relation to the way chefs and the owner/operators are represented within the reviews. Like chefs, owner/operators suffer from no critical comments. Descriptors of owner/operators include "perfectionist", "visionary", "warm and giving", and "enthusiastic". In addition, the act of naming the owner/operator is similarly commonplace. Establishing the owner/operators pedigree is also undertaken through linking them to previous well-known restaurants, famous operators or overseas experience.

Value/Cost

Cost here refers simply to the price of products. Reviews refer to cost frequently, listing prices of individual menu items and wines. Value, on the other hand, refers to a judgment made by the reviewer as to whether the price of individual items or the overall meal represents "value for money". Value is an important measure in reviewing as it allows judgment on various types and levels of establishment, e.g. "It may only be a ten dollar noodle hall, but the flavors are great"; "For a supposed top rank restaurant charging forty dollars a main, one would expect better presentation".

Cost was often addressed simply by listing the prices of various components of the meal - but made no specific comment as to whether these prices demonstrated 'good value' or not. When value was raised the majority of comments were positive. The very few critical comments noted included references to: "not cheap"; "small portions"; and "expensive bread". Statements about value were very perfunctory, including "large portions", "good/excellent value", "not pricy", "affordable" and "reasonable". While cost is briefly addressed in the majority of reviews, the theme of value is noticeable by its comparative absence rather than its complexity.

DISCUSSION

If we take the number of mentions and word count as a proxy of criteria importance, our findings illustrated in Table One largely support the research of Schroeder (1985), Barrows et al., (1989), Clark and Wood (1998), Steintrager (2002) and Titz et al., (2004), regarding the criteria that reviewers use to judge restaurants. These researchers conclude that food, followed by service and ambience are considered the most important criteria by reviewers. Our findings broadly support this idea, in that they clearly place food at the top of the reviewers concerns, but differ in that ambience is considered more often than is service. Value/cost clearly receives the least attention when one looks at the percentage of total words used in this criterion – a finding that again supports the work of Titz et al (2004).

Our findings support the contention of Wood (1996) and Barrows (1989) that food writers have an obsession with food that excludes or marginalizes the heterogenic criteria that consumers bring to their restaurant choices. Consumers make restaurant choices based on a plethora of criteria; time pressure, convenience, hunger, decor, service, relationships, recommendations, habit, desire for company, music, product, and chance. Yet reviews narrow the field of discussion severely, concentrating on food, wine and ambience to an absurd level. These three categories account for almost 80% of the reviews total word count. This demonstrates an extreme level of exclusion; the reviews ignore a vast field of possible criteria for judging an establishment and focus on areas that allow specialist knowledge and mutual elevation to be practiced – food, wine and chef/owner hero worship.

The way food is constructed within the reviews can also be related to the key 'engines of distinction' - 'excessive refinement' and 'ease'. Through the discourse used the reviews provide the necessary vocabulary for the aspirant readers to participate in the 'foodie-ness' whilst also restricting access to this resource. Access to the resource

required to participate in this class of 'foodies' is mediated by the context within which the reviews are located – that is, they are situated within Cuisine which, as can be seen through their own description of readership above – is middle to upper class. Thus these reviews construct knowledge for a particular social group whilst defending this knowledge through keeping hidden the resources needed to engage from the 'ordinary people'. Therefore the way food and knowledge about food is represented within the reviews works to achieve a highly refined sense of culture and propriety and thus works to construct excessive refinement.

The findings provide excellent examples of Wood's (1996) two 'engines of distinction' – 'excessive refinement' and 'ease'. Excessive refinement contains the ideas of austerity and asceticism, an extreme sense of propriety and refined culture. We see this reflected clearly in the reviewer's celebration of simple, clean, minimalist menus. The reviews strongly favor the application of seriousness, restraint and traditional skills, while frivolousness and an 'anything goes' approach is considered 'bad taste'. This excessive refinement is also demonstrated in the reviews obsessive focus of rare food products and 'unusual' wine vintages. It is right here that the aspirant middle-class 'foodies' get what they really want, a vocabulary of distinction and exclusion, a readymade 'recipe' for social status.

Reviews talk simultaneously of simplicity and 'uncommon' (or at least what could be considered 'non everyday') food items. By talking of simplicity and using statements such as "as all readers are familiar with" in relation to food the reviews are drawing the audience into the perceived social class of the reviewer and the press in which they are featured. Blank (2004), Wood (1996) and Fattorini (1994) all comment of this assumption of an educated, adventurous, middle-class audience that is central to restaurant reviews. It is this process that Wood (1996) and Fattorini (1994) describe as a mutually elevating fantasy, where food writers draw the aspirant classes into an easy-access

'haute gastronomy' club, that allows the restricted members; chefs, owners, writers and 'foodies', to escape the gravity of everyday popular taste.

The absence of discussion of value is a clear example of 'ease' as an 'engine of distinction'. The absence of value could be interpreted as signaling that this aspect of the restaurant experience is not important. This also works to construct class divisions as it leads to the representation of a group which does not need to consider finances, and thus alludes to the group having no financial constraints. This too, we would argue, works to separate the review audience from 'ordinary people'. The application of 'ease' in reviews allows the writers to ignore comparing 'like with like' and avoid difficult questions around value for money (is a $300 bottle of wine discernibly five times better than a $50 bottle, to the average diner?). Implicit in this silence around value is a warning to aspirant 'foodies' not to mention price or question value. This application of 'ease' has advantages for participants in the 'distinction' club – including the owners as it can help keep prices high.

The overall impact of the reviews construction is to create a language of exclusion and social separatism. Readers are encouraged to enter an elite club where members can discuss excessively refined notions of food and wine preparation and presentation within clearly delineated rules of 'good taste'. By participating in this paradigm, all members of the club can distinguish themselves from the 'other' classes. The reviews themselves outline the *current* rules of good taste (keep reading, they always keep changing!) and rigorously exclude anything that might be popular, common, convenient or communal. Intimacy and reserved exclusion are the hallmarks of the 'best' restaurants. Particularly concerning to us is that this discourse of exclusion is entering the wider mainstream media – an article in the New Zealand Herald recently took great glee in pointing out that the 'best' restaurant in the world refused bookings to over 750,000 people a year! (Donovan, 2008)

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Chefs, owners, food writers and service staff are generally considered to be operating in the hospitality industry. Hospitality is, by history and philosophy, an inclusive practice. Hospitality itself has been defined as "A contemporaneous human exchange, which is voluntarily entered into, and designed to enhance the mutual wellbeing of the parties concerned through the provision of accommodation, and/or food, and/or drink" (Brotherton, 1999, pg 168). Other common definitions of hospitality include the concepts of turning strangers into friends; of welcoming all guests as if they were family; of providing safety, food and beverage, rest and entertainment; of coming together in mutually beneficial social interaction.

Hospitality is 'social cement' that can bring diverse people together in a paradigm that encourages the formation of new social bonds. The restaurant can be the social space where this creation and re-creation of social networks can be enacted. Hospitality exists in a variety of settings. Views on the definition and content of hospitably often vary depending on the environment in which it is being discussed (Lashley & Morrison, 2000). However, if the 'discourse of exclusion' discussed in this paper on restaurant reviews is allowed to become dominant, the restaurant space could become nothing more than a Romanesque arena for class struggle, where exclusion and snobbishness are the mark of success.

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