

Get a meal!
Hanging Out with the Virtual Foodies

There's a plethora of fancy-food-related sites on the Internet (at last count, a Google search on "gourmet restaurants" got 44,700 hits; "gourmet recipes", 21,800), but the really serious aficionados seem to be attracted to two culinary lodestones: www.chowhound.com and www.eGullet.com. The Chowhound has been gnawing away for years on a variety of bones and is the more widely known and accessed of the two, but eGullet has, in only a year, become the bitch in heat that has drawn some of the more serious studs away from the faithful old pooch.

eGullet is densely populated with anonymous chefs, journalists and high-rollers who publicly debate the finer points of cuisine, décor and finance. "Art" is invoked so frequently and so fervently that fine food often becomes an object of devout contemplation. Some correspondents are awe-inspiring in the breadth of their restaurant experience and the zeal and diligence of their reportage. One prolific contributor who recently went for a meal at New York's hottest new property was recognized by name and soon joined at table by the chef, who had prepared three pages of notes on his guest's detailed analysis of his restaurant! Amidst such burgeoning notoriety, the site tends to become a mutual admiration society in which a few of the active participants spend a lot of time massaging each other's egos.

Not surprisingly, their disposable income appears to be stratospheric. These are big spenders who discuss in detail the culinary delights they have sampled in their treks to a whole galaxy of Michelin-starred restaurants – the fruits of a NASA-like expenditure. For example, Albert Adrià's celebrated I Bulli is located inaccessibly high in the hills north of Barcelona and is virtually impossible to book; but a recent discussion included detailed accounts from several correspondents covering the entire history of its scientifically conceived, extravagantly futuristic culinary inventions. Impecunious foodies can save themselves a great deal of time and money by vicariously devouring its copious menu through these closely documented descriptions.

Nor are these the reports of official inspectors whose tab is picked up by an indulgent publisher; the correspondents are, in old fashioned parlance, paying guests. And so, whenever a topic veers in the direction of politics (which is often), it tends to enforce the reassuring American dogma that those who can afford to blow a small fortune on a single meal are so blessed because of their "merit". In an echo of Horatio Alger's rags-to-riches evangelism, we were recently informed by a correspondent that "... a large percentage of people who are eating [at XXXX] are people like me. Sons of immigrants who are self-made and ... are children and grandchildren of immigrants whose ancestors came here as peasants or the lower classes and now they themselves can earn upwards of \$1,000,000 a year for their efforts." "Show me that phenomenon in any other country in the world," he patriotically concludes. A few replies suggested that this take on his fellow-diners might be a trifle Utopian, but eventually the discussion got back to basics: "Merit, schmerit. Enjoy your food! [chuckle]"

Steven A. Shaw ("The Fat Guy"), one of eGullet's gurus, is a successful lawyer who has written a history of Britain's BSE crisis ("[Mad Cows and Englishmen](#)") in which he condemns prissy scientists' devotion to the precautionary principle and proposes that protecting the environment should be left to cost/benefit analysis – a position so far out in right field as to locate him comfortably between the covers of Irving Kristol's reactionary *Commentary Magazine* (and get him a nomination for the James Beard Award). But it would

be a mistake to write him off. His other Beard nomination, which rightly won first place in the Internet Column and Feature Writing category, was for [“A Week in the Gramercy Tavern Kitchen”](#), a diary of his hard time spent at the sharp end of one of New York’s most distinguished restaurants. This meticulously detailed record tells us more about what really goes on behind the swinging doors than a whole shelf of sado-masochistic Kitchen Confidential.

Most eGullet correspondents are contemptuous of published restaurant guides. The reader may deduce that the standards set by these publications are simply too plebeian. With rare exceptions, eGullet is not the place to go in order to discover, in the words of Jane Grigson, “a better standard of ordinariness”. One active and respected participant has privately confessed to me that “[A] problem I have with eGullet is the heavy emphasis on 2 star and 3 star restaurants. It seems that few are interested in a reasonably priced bistro or restaurant with regional cuisine.”

But if you’re about to blow your wad in a strange city, you’d be well advised to visit the relevant eGullet geographical “board” and make enquiries. Chances are that the information you get will be more detailed, discriminating and up-to-date than the guidebooks, with their space restrictions and long delays in editing and printing. Years ago a dog-eared Blue Guide handed down from your grandfather might contain useful suggestions as to where to dine, but today the restaurant scene is so volatile that a fantastic new beanery may go belly-up before the reviewer’s ink is dry.

I DON’T wish to belittle the accomplishments of our greatest modern chefs, but there is a growing tendency for the world’s most splendid restaurants to resemble each other to the point where, from internal evidence, you might be unable to deduce exactly where (or what) you were eating. Russ Parsons of *The Los Angeles Times* wrote recently on the eGullet site, “[T]he thing that troubles me about fusion cooking (whatever you take that to mean) is the growing uniformity I find in restaurants around the world. It gets to the point that I sometimes can’t tell which city I’m in – Paris, London, Alba, LA? Roughly the same ingredients prepared in roughly the same way.”

This is particularly the case in those countries which lack a coherent native cuisine. Britain (which destroyed its culinary traditions by means of the enclosures and the industrial revolution) and the US (which could never make up its mind which tradition to expropriate and so seized them all) are both fertile environments for these deracinated hothouse hybrids. France may be losing its culinary traditions at an alarming rate, but Mary and I are always happy to return to a country where we can order from a menu and be reasonably certain that we will recognize what is placed before us. In such a reassuringly stable environment one is more likely to exclaim “Wow!” after eating a meal than before.

THIS, I suggest, is what good food is really about, no matter what its ethnic origins. I hope I have convinced you that the time consumed in following eGullet’s tortuous threads would be better invested in attentive reading, cooking and tasting. Good. Now if you’ll excuse me, there’s an argument currently simmering over whether restaurant reviewers should remain anonymous, and I must get back and add a dollop of chili sauce. . .