



## with *Bon Appétit's* Tanya Wenman Steel

For eight years, Tanya Wenman Steel has served up features on fine dining for the country's largest epicurean magazine — the venerable *Bon Appétit*. Many a DiRöNA restaurant have been scrutinized in her regular column, "Restaurant Reporter: Around the country and around the world — where to go now." A 17-year veteran of the publishing industry, she has written for *Diversions*, *Food & Wine* and a number of other publications including *The New York Times*, *New York Magazine* and *Travel & Leisure*. She recently won the prestigious James Beard Foundation Journalism Award for Magazine Restaurant Review or Critique, 2003. Tanya Steel knows fine dining. We caught up with her after lunch early in February. Here's a recap of our conversation.

**DiRöNA:** I just snarfed down the macaroni & cheese portion of a "veggie plate" from across the street. What did you have for lunch?

**Steel:** Frozen vanilla ice cream covered with 50 billion chocolate sprinkles. I get these food obsessions. When I was pregnant with the twins, I had to have a Black & White cookie every day. For three years, all I wanted for breakfast was oatmeal.

**DiRöNA:** How far back can you trace your obsession with food?

**Steel:** I was raised in an English household. My mother was (is) a terrible cook. We moved to the States when I was six years old and I started watching Julia Child. Two years later I started cooking for the family. Honestly, my first cooking lessons were from Julia. I had the honor of dining with her a few years ago.

**DiRöNA:** Did you tell her how important she was to you and your family's well-being?

**Steel:** I did. And I love her. She is just a wonderful person, a national treasure.

**DiRöNA:** DiRöNA inspectors use a 75-point criteria for assessing whether or not a restaurant qualifies to receive the DiRöNA Award of Excellence. They look at four basic categories: Environment/Décor; Cuisine; Beverages; and Service. What are your criteria for an excellent dining experience?

**Steel:** From the moment I make a reservation I begin to form an opinion based on how I'm treated. I never tell them I'm with *Bon Appétit*. I give them someone else's name. One thing I cannot stand is when a restaurant tries to build a false hype by pretending they only have seatings available at 8:30 and 10 p.m. and then once you arrive, you find no

one else in the restaurant. It's all hype. The people that meet me at the door set the tone. As Danny Meyers says, "Restaurants are about hospitality." I agree. I'd say food comes first with service following close behind.

**DiRöNA:** Do you review all the restaurants covered in *Bon Appétit*?

**Steel:** In my column I try to cover five cities in every issue. I can't be everywhere, nor should I be. I, happily, cover New York restaurants. And since I travel to LA often, I also cover restaurants in that city. Otherwise, I rely on local critics because I believe it's better to look at a restaurant in the context of their city. Only a local can do that. If you fly a New York critic to Dallas, they will compare their experiences there to New York experiences. That wouldn't be appropriate.

**DiRöNA:** How does a restaurant get the notice of a prestigious magazine such as *Bon Appétit*?

**Steel:** I read magazines from several major cities to stay on top of what and who's out there. At *Bon Appétit*, we work very hard to cover the country coast-to-coast. Not just first-tier cities, we look at cities like St. Louis, MO, and Louisville, KY. PR people will contact us. But the first and most important way to get noticed is to do a good job consistently well. That will trigger all of these things.

**DiRöNA:** Have you seen any emerging trends that you think have staying power?

**Steel:** The small plate, amuse bouches. A few restaurants have begun to make appetizers more interesting than their entrées. The chef may even take a dish you might expect to see as an entrée and shrink it down so that the flavors burst. A couple of restaurants in LA and Detroit come to mind. At the same time, they're offering extensive wines by the glass to allow for more experimentation with each dish. You might have a Provencal Rose with one appetizer and a Spanish Priorat with another. You can explore the world from a small plate.

**DiRöNA:** During a panel discussion at the Montreal conference, several restaurateurs mentioned the "dressing down" of fine dining. Some have even suggested that casual dining may be taking away some of fine dining's share. Do you see this as a trend?

**Steel:** There's no doubt that fine dining has been impacted by the recession and the decrease in travel since 9/11. Restaurants have

responded by offering more humble cuts, wines by the glass, things that make their menu more approachable. The days of "jacket required" dining are dwindling. At the same time, I've seen a healthy spring of restaurants that are more luxurious than ever in New York, Chicago, where elegance still reigns.

**DiRöNA:** Have you seen any misguided trends in fine dining?

**Steel:** Well, I will say that I decry the "cloning" of restaurants. A chef will succeed with a concept and then open five like it across the country. What that says to me is he or she doesn't have any more original ideas and that somewhere along the way, he stopped being a chef and became a businessman. How you can be in all these places at once? In this age of the celebrity chef, I still believe that the best restaurant chefs are in the kitchen.



**DiRöNA:** How do you stay on top of the trends?

**Steel:** *Nation's Restaurant News*. *Chowhound.com*. *eGullet.com*. City magazines. And I talk to my correspondents and to PR people.

**DiRöNA:** What do you think of FDA's proposal last year to require restaurants to include nutrition labeling on their menu?

**Steel:** People talk the talk. But they don't walk the walk. It's not a bad idea to offer meatless options and lighter dishes and note that on your menu. But restaurateurs shouldn't worry too much about it.

**DiRöNA:** What can a sommelier do to put an inexperienced diner at ease in selecting a wine?

**Steel:** The waiter might offer to send the sommelier over to answer any questions. Recommendations should be made in three different price categories. One thing that creates loyalty is offering a sample glass of wine or an aperitif on the house. Same is true of new dishes. "Gifts from the chef" go along way with customers.

**DiRöNA:** The readers of *Distinguished Dining* are North America's finest in fine dining. Anything you'd like to say to them?

**Steel:** Hmmm. I'd say the same thing that I'd say to Britney Spears if I were her mother. When it comes to accessorizing, always take one thing off before you leave the house. Today's dishes have way too much going on, fusing 50 different flavors in one dish. Before that plate leaves the kitchen, try to take one thing off, one ingredient out.

I'd remind them to be good to their staff, all the way to the coat check girl. If you take care of them, they will take care of your customers.

## Ten Simple Ways to Promote Your Restaurant!

**1** DiRöNA's public and marketing program.

is voluntary public and marketing aims to create of the DiRöNA the consumer, and trade sectors. al: Bring more s to participating member restaur- contributors have been contacted for phs and potential opportunities for onjunction with

**2** Create a cooperative advertising campaign with other DiRöNA restaurateurs in your community.

Partner with other DiRöNA restaurants in your city and place an advertisement in the local newspaper or magazine. You'll save money and highlight the fact that your restaurants are elite members of an organization with only 750 mem-

**3** Display your DiRöNA award plaque prominently in your restaurant.

Each year, frame the special award certificate we send to your restaurant signifying your status as a DiRöNA award-winning restaurant. Or, better yet, order a beautiful metallic award plaque, crafted by Artisan Graphic Group directly at (631) 673-8800 to display on your wall. Show customers that they have come to an establishment

**4** Incorporate the DiRöNA brand wherever you can in your restaurant.

Tastefully incorporating the DiRöNA logo on your table linens, cocktail napkins, wine lists, menus, check presenters or gift certificates lets your customers know they have eaten in an elite, award-winning establishment. If all DiRöNA member restaurants do this, it will help increase consumer recognition of the

**5** Educate Your Front-End Staff about DiRöNA.

DiRöNA award recipients represent the best in North America. A simple way to achieve brand recognition of your DiRöNA award is to provide each of your staff members with a DiRöNA lapel pin and ask them to wear it proudly. Tell them about the uniqueness of the DiRöNA award so that when customer ask, they'll be armed with answers. Pins are available

**6** Include the DiRöNA logo on your Web site and in all of your marketing communications.

Whether you have your own Web site, run an ad in a local newspaper or in a newsletter to your regular customers, include the DiRöNA logo next to your restaurant name as a sign of distinction and another wonderful accolade to tell consumers to dine at your establishment.

**7** Notify your local press when you receive your annual DiRöNA award.

You've worked hard to make your restaurant one of the best in North America. Celebrate it by sending press releases to your local press announcing that your restaurant is a DiRöNA award winner year after year. A sample release is available from Headquarters. The DiRöNA Guide also makes a wonderful

**8** Invite your local media to "Dine With DiRöNA."

Invite food editors to experience a complimentary night of "Dining Where the Chefs Dine" and ask them to cover this in one of their upcoming publications. Educate them about DiRöNA, your restaurant and why you are one of a family of only 750 restaurants that truly embody the essence of fine dining.

**9** Mention your DiRöNA award in media interviews and other publicity opportunities.

The DiRöNA award represents your commitment to excellence in dining so don't forget to mention your status as an award recipient when promoting new menu items or a special event at your restaurant to the media. Toot your own horn!

**10** Request an article from DiRöNA for inclusion in your newsletter.

Many DiRöNA restaurants publish their own newsletter for their repeat and VIP customers. Let us write an article highlighting your status as an award recipient.

Order the DiRöNA lapel pin for your wait staff! We're averaging close to 500 pins a month! Present your