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THE PROBLEM WITH FOOD CRITICISM

Jonathan Nunn, founder of newsletter Vittles, tells **India Lawrence** why it's time to challenge the food writing establishment

Food journalism is facing a reckoning. In 2020 *Vice* published a study that showed less than five black-owned restaurants were reviewed by national newspapers in the UK that year. Meanwhile in the US, *Bon Appétit* faced allegations of discriminatory behaviour towards writers of colour, and chef Alison Roman was accused of white-washing daal by rebranding it as “gentle lentils”.

As different cultures and cuisines merge, the word “decolonise” has crept into the food writing discourse.

London has one of the best food scenes in the world, with plenty of authentic and immigrant-owned restaurants spanning cuisines from across the world – isn't it time someone challenged the food writing establishment and celebrated this abundance of different cuisines more? Enter Jonathan Nunn.

The 32-year-old is softly spoken and comes across as shy at times, but a browse of his social media accounts will show you otherwise. Many know him for his sardonic tweets; he's not afraid to publicly call out other writers and chefs. He's aired his grievances with everyone from Giles Coren to celebrity chef Gizzi Erskine – he's even dedicated an entire (now deleted) Twitter thread to “why Giles Coren is the worst person in the food industry”. And, although this has landed him in hot water before, he thinks it's worth it. “My idea was to just lob a bomb in there and see what happens. And I did burn all these bridges, but then it got me noticed,” he says, with an entirely straight face.

Nunn isn't your typical restaurant critic: you won't find him frequenting the restaurants of Soho, Mayfair and Chelsea (unlike the majority of restaurants reviewed in national newspapers). Instead, he walks the outskirts of London, documenting the eccentricities of the city's cuisine – from chow mein samosas to masala battered fish and chips, he will eat it all.

Growing up in London, Nunn is of British and Goan heritage. Around a decade ago, freshly graduated from university and feeling aimless, Nunn started wandering the streets of London. He would go from restaurant to restaurant, trying everything he could fill his stomach with. That's when he began to notice the relationship between food, place, race and class.

“Food writing has a tone deafness to race and class”

Nunn only started food writing in 2018 after he was approached by an editor at *Eater London* who spotted something he had tweeted about mangoes. He was working in a tea shop at the time, but this serendipitous twist of fate would help him fulfil his secret ambition of becoming a writer.

He has been gaining notoriety over the past two years, most notably for his work on *Vittles*, the food newsletter he launched in March 2020. Although not the most fruitful time →



Image credit: (left) Jonathan Nunn; (right) Reena Makwana

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for restaurant reviewing, *Vittles*'s frank journalism, which is more chip shops and less Michelin stars, has gained a loyal following of over 20,000 subscribers.

But why give such scrutiny to a genre of writing that is supposed to be light and frivolous? For Nunn, food is a lens through which to see the world. After all, everybody eats.

"Restaurant writing is the most commonly consumed form of urban writing," says Nunn. "People don't necessarily read urban writers, but they will read restaurant criticism every week.

"If your only experience of somewhere like Peckham comes from reading about it in newspapers, and they're talking about stabbings and areas as if they're culturally irrelevant wastelands until these new restaurants come in, that is an incredibly serious thing," he explains.

"I have spent almost my whole life in London. And the food media is very London centric, so it should be catering to someone like me and yet what I was seeing was a version of London which had no relevance to anything that I have experienced," Nunn says.

He felt that reviews were "lying about London" by presenting a picture that was aspirational and just out of reach, instead of focussing on food that readers could actually afford.

These reviews, in Nunn's eyes, also have a "tone deafness to race and class".

According to Nunn, areas that were deemed

irrelevant or unsavoury by the media are suddenly resurrected by the arrival of a usually white-owned, hip new restaurant that's worthy of being reviewed. But he wants us to question – what gives critics the right to decide which cuisines are superior? And why do they keep getting away with writing about places like Peckham in an "incredibly racialised and classist" way?

When it comes to actually decolonising cooking, he says: "Most people assume that just means diversity, hiring more diverse writers or covering more diverse cuisines. But this isn't actually meaningful decolonisation in any way, it's just making the status quo a little bit more diverse."

"Dismantling the power structures which colonisation is putting place" is central for Nunn. He explains restaurant reviews have a historic hierarchy: first favouring white and Eurocentric cuisines, like Italian and French, then countries that were a part of the British Empire, like Indian, and then everything everywhere else.

"You have to look at why we have these very Eurocentric ideas of what the best cuisines are and where our notions of which cuisines are culturally meaningful come from?"

"If you look at all the restaurants which are reviewed in

London, you find the same cuisines popping up again and again, and they often mirror patterns of colonisation within the British Empire. So Indian cuisine gets reviewed. But why does Pakistani and Bangladeshi cuisine get ignored?" he says.

However, decolonisation is more complex than simply throwing the phrase cultural appropriation into the conversation; in fact, Nunn finds the term overused and lacking in nuance. He gives the example of the controversy at Som Saa, when a chef was fired from the British-owned Thai restaurant in 2018 for posting YouTube videos that mocked Thai people. "The word cultural appropriation got brought up, and I think people switched off. Because at its least nuanced it's implying that you can't cook food from another culture, which no one really wants that to happen," he says.

In the case of Som Saa, Nunn asks: "Why has the food media given these white-owned Thai restaurants such a huge amount of space and publicity, at the expense of restaurants owned by Thai people within this country? And why were they allowed to position themselves as more authentic than the Thai restaurants which were already here?"

But in the time of cancel culture and keyboard warriors, Nunn recognises social media's waning power when it comes to having a productive discourse. "There's only so long you can just be critical about things, especially on social media. At some point you actually need to shut up and show someone," he says.

And above all, Nunn sees the frivolity of food writing as part of the fun. "[Food is an] inherently joyful, pleasurable thing," he says. "If *Vittles* was solely about issues of race and gentrification and class, and it was relentless every week, it would get boring very quickly, and people would switch off."

"The ultimate goal is pleasure. It's not survival. ❌



Image credit: Reena Makwana

JONATHAN NUNN'S TOP 5 NON-ZONE 1 LONDON RESTAURANTS



Image credit, clockwise from left: Singburi, Chishuru, Aladin's Kebabish, Bake Street, Jonathan Nunn



Image credit: Ruby Warner

IN PODS WE TRUST



Forget grisly murders and dating dilemmas, *Pippa Kelly* discovered XCity's favourite podcasts – presented by journos, for journos

THE TIP OFF

If you've ever read dramatic tales of cover ups, scandals and espionage and wondered 'how on earth did they get that scoop?', then you'll love *The Tip Off*.

Presented by Maeve McClenaghan of The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, each episode takes a behind the scenes look at one extraordinary story. Joined by the journalists who broke them, McClenaghan explores the detective work, the clandestine meetings and of course, the tips offs, that have uncovered stories of fraud, exploitation and even exorcisms.

Since 2017, McClenaghan's guests have included Holly Watt, who played a key role in the Panama Papers investigation and Ellie Flynn, whose series *Ellie Undercover* exposed the UK's 'rent for sex' market. Each interview provides a demystifying look at the often-opaque world of investigative journalism.

PPA 30 UNDER 30 PODCAST

It's always intriguing to hear from well established journalists on how they've achieved their success - but what about the industry's up and comers? Well, they have plenty to say too.



Since 2020, the *PPA 30 Under 30 Podcast* has celebrated the successes and futures of journalism's freshest faces. Presented by Sorcha Mondon,

staff writer at the Professional Publishers Association, the once yearly series features conversations with recipients of the *PPA 30 under 30* awards - rising stars across journalism, publishing, editing, videography and design.

Episodes examine fashion journalism in a climate emergency with *Who What Wear*'s Shopping Editor, Joy Montgomery; discuss the role of reporting pandemics in a globalised world with Elisabeth Mahase, clinical reporter at *The BMJ* and delve into the rich world of food writing with Liberty Mendez, recipe developer at BBC Good Food.

If you're looking to stay in the loop on what the industry's newest talent is up to, or get a head start on the future of consumer and b2b titles, then, at just half an hour per episode, you won't do much better than this bite size podcast.

LONGFORM

This podcast was born in the same way that so many others are. That is, from the conversations of three men in a bar, who believe their insights are interesting enough to be shared with the world. Thankfully, in this instance, those three men were right.

Ten years later and hosts Aaron Lammer, founder of podcast production house Treats Media; Max Linksy of New York-based Pineapple Street studios and Evan Ratliff, CEO of longform narrative magazine, *Atavist*, have created over 450 episodes. The trio have interviewed everyone from Tavi Gevinson, founder of independent teen magazine *Rookie*, to Pulitzer Prize-winning



New Yorker journalist, Elizabeth Kolbert.

Every episode explores a combination of each journalist's biggest stories and career choices, with the latter often making for the most engaging listen. While the story behind the story is always fascinating, hearing some of the industry's biggest names discuss their journeys to success, and often their on-going anxieties around their work, makes for an enlightening – and reassuring – experience.

IN WRITING WITH HATTIE CRISELL

Freelance writer and contributing editor at *Grazia*, Hattie Crisell, has been producing and presenting *In Writing* since December 2019.

As the name suggests, this podcast's guests are not only journalists, but writers of all kinds – novelists, comedians and poets all share their reasons and recommendations for writing with Crisell

Often providing writing advice that's as philosophical as it is practical, *In Writing*'s guests have included restaurant critic Grace Dent, comedian James Acaster and self-described storyteller, Jon Ronson. Alongside discussing career highlights with each of her guests, Crisell also shares their writing routines, weird and wonderful writing locations and varied creative processes.

Whether journalist, historian or essayist, one thing all writers share is their fear of the blank page – the dreaded writer's block. Whether you're trying to overcome this, or simply want reassurance that it happens to the best of us, *In Writing* is a great place to start. ❌

