

## **‘We had someone who poured baked beans all over themself while running into a window’: Inside the absurd world of Facebook food rating groups**

When you request to join Rate My Plate, a notification flashes up with a user warning: “This Group has allowed posts that violate our Community Standards. Review this Group before you join it.”

A cloak and dagger affair, to gain entry to the group I have to read a long list of rules and answer some very cryptic questions. Not what you’d expect from your average foodie forum.

“Do you understand the terms and conditions?” Yes, I click with shaking hands, singing off my fate to the Rate My Plate admins. A few hours later a notification comes through. I’m in. I know what I’m getting myself into. But if I was an innocent user who hadn’t read the fine print, looking for a friendly community to share pictures of delicious food, I’d be in for a nasty surprise.

Rate My Plate is one of Facebook’s notorious food rating communities. Although a place where strangers come together to talk about food may sound wholesome, the premise is rather more nefarious. Groups like Rate My Plate, Rate My Meal Deal and Wetherspoons Paltry Chip Count are where users have their meals critiqued, and often are abused, by strangers online. They have been growing in popularity over the past few years – Wetherspoons Paltry Chip Count now has over 264,000 loyal members, while Rate My Plate has amassed almost 100,000.

Kathryn Poole is one user who joined the group by accident, thinking it would be a helpful support forum.

Poole tells *VICE*: “I go in there because I like sharing my food, I follow a flexible diet, tracking my food intake and I like to reassure people that they can still eat fun, flexible foods while dieting.”

Fortunately Poole has been spared from the harshest criticisms, but she often sees comments that make her uncomfortable. “Just yesterday there was a lady getting abused and being called a man simply because she’s got short hair,” she says.

“One of the main reasons I don’t use it very often is because the ‘banter’ kind of outweighs the food content in the group.”

Jim DeBarker is an admin of the Fry Up Police (FUP). He assures *VICE* jokes about disability and homophobia are off the cards, as is anything personal. But where do you draw the line? FUP are infamous for their use of the word “cunt”: offensive to many but the bread and butter of this community.

DeBarker laments that their overzealous use of the word has left the group in hot water, as the original forum was permanently deleted, or “zucked”, by the overlord of Facebook himself. For DeBarker, Zuckerberg’s skewed censorship has ruined FUP’s very essence.

“People are spreading misinformation about people eating the blood of virgins and spreading that on pizza and that’s okay on Facebook, but calling a subject a cunt isn’t. They need to grow a pair. Americans need to gain a sense of humour,” he says

[Getting off on being humiliated by strangers](#) on the internet isn't a new concept, but why bother over something so trivial as a plate of fried breakfast food? Marc Smith, a sociologist specialising in online communities, explains: "Receiving the comments is a dopamine fix, even if they're negative, maybe especially if they're negative. Now you're going to get into a rage spiral."

He adds: "We live in an attention economy, and that means there's a scarcity of attention. If you can't get good attention, you'll take the negative."

As for the psychology behind the criticism, he says: "There are abusive people who look for targets, and then there are people who are, if not looking for abuse, looking to show that they can overcome it, that they cannot be subject to it because they're superior to it."

Smith compares these groups the r/RoastMe forum on Reddit, where users come to be verbally attacked by strangers about their life choices. He explains some people might actually seek this out as a means of introspection, when mental health care might not be accessible.

"There are an abundance of feelings of shame in our society, so some people may feel there are psychological risks and rewards to participate in this environment of roaster and roastee," he says.

On the flip side, Smith suggests these "fight clubs for foodies" may also be a form of political commentary. A way of talking back to austerity and reclaiming class identity. "People are not showing their truffles and their foie gras, they're showing their mushy peas ... and this is a way of transmitting class identity or solidarity," he says.

DeBarker recalls FUP raising £80,000 in a GoFundMe for one user in need. And Ashley Davies, Rate My Meal Deal admin, agrees. He sees the humble meal deal as a great leveller – something people from all backgrounds can bond over in their shared love, or disdain, for.

Davies says: "It kind of unites everyone, especially because they haven't really increased in price, whereas everything else has. You can get a meal deal for the same price you did six, seven or eight years ago. It's something everyone can participate in, regardless of what food you like, which is really quite rare."

The cultish nature of the groups, where admins rule with an iron fist, is also part of the draw. A recent post in Wetherspoons Paltry Chip Count reads like this: "We are beginning to cull the remaining cretins out of this group. You may think this is a democracy but I can assure you it isn't, it is a brutal dictatorship, you can refer to us as Chip Korea and Chris Allen is our supreme leader. We are already discussing making one of 15 haircuts mandatory to retain membership,"

Failure to follow the rules results in members getting the boot. DeBarker says that people who have been banned from FUP will go to extreme lengths to get back in. But the rules are simple, if you've been banished for say, using a "cunt filter" and want to get back in, there's only one thing to do: cover yourself head to toe in baked beans.

“We had someone who poured baked beans all over themselves while running into a window,” he recalls. While another ex-member “sang an entire Westlife song while they were continually pouring beans over their head.” And not to mention other oddballs who wooed the admins with a freshly birthed fried placenta, or an entire battle helmet out of bread. Some members even try to get banned on purpose, so they can experience the thrill of making their own “grovelling apology” video.

Whether it’s sordid debasement, or a noble attempt at reclaiming class identity, it’s safe to say these groups show a humour that is quintessentially British. What other nation would enjoy being told the cheese sandwich in their meal deal is shit?

As for the faint-hearted who wander in by accident? DeBarker says: “It’s just comedy basically. It’s just ludicrous, isn’t it? It’s such a stupid concept.” He adds: “people post knowing full well that they’re going to get harshly criticised.”