

A PLEA TO RESTAURANT REVIEWERS

Hong Kong is a minefield for restaurants, but one of the least expected hurdles they face is restaurant reviewers, writes SARAH ENGSTRAND



Left: The entrance to Rhoda in Sai Ying Pun
Right: Chef and owner Nate Green relaxes at a booth in Rhoda before its closure in September

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THERE'S NO SHORTAGE of challenges facing restaurants in Hong Kong. Though most are quick to cite high rents and labour costs, there's one issue that's far more insidious: the media. Food reviewers and bloggers, the influential people who are out of the kitchen but in the restaurant community... we have a lot to answer for.

I've been very lucky to have worked on both sides of the restaurant coin. For a time, I worked for them, and more recently, I've written about them. Because of this, I know that I'm complicit in a system that doesn't always subscribe to honesty, but rather convenience.

PHOTOS _ CHRISTINA TANG

Writers and bloggers exist in a tit-for-tat culture, though we are loathe to admit it. We like what we do and we want to keep doing it. For many, especially those without the independent means or the company card, that means playing nicely with restaurants to get invited back. On top of this, publications are also pressured to stay ahead of trends by writing about new restaurants, new bars, new everything.

Here's the problem: this helps no one. Followers get biased reviews, writers lose credibility and restaurants (even good ones) quickly go out of favour. In a city with this

much competition, if you're not the first on people's minds, quite frankly, you're not on their minds at all.

Before I became a journalist, I got some good advice from an old boss. He told me that food is subjective, and most people don't know the difference between technically brilliant and mediocre. They only know what they like, so you have to find writers whose tastes align with yours – and ignore the rest.

But what happens when a whole ecosystem is afraid to criticise? In Hong Kong, if it's not a rave review, it's not a published review. And if it's not a new restaurant, it's

not getting a review – because we've created a self-perpetuating system that fetishises the new and forgets the old. Just a few months ago, this weird, backwards system contributed to the loss of a great restaurant: Rhoda.

Opened in 2016 as a collaboration project between chef-owner Nate Green and the JIA Group, Rhoda was hailed as the ultimate new opening in Hong Kong. Nearly every publication and blogger in the city waxed lyrical about its merits, so as a result, reservations were nearly impossible. This, in a nutshell, is Hong Kong hype culture. Unfortunately, hype can be poisonous.



From left: Green prepares his kitchen team before evening service; the chef prepares for one of the last services at Rhoda, which was known for its nose-to-tail philosophy

“I think it can affect the longevity of your business,” explains Green, now the executive sous chef at The Ritz-Carlton Hong Kong. “When Rhoda first opened, everyone came in expecting us to be a fine-dining restaurant because of all of our rave reviews.”

For months, expectant diners needed to call weeks in ahead. But when they finally sat down, they were disappointed. Because, in fact, Rhoda was never a fine-dining restaurant; it was a casual spot that served honest, nose-to-tail flame-cooked food. Rhoda closed this September, after months of empty tables. “People only want to go when you are the new place,” writes Green in an email. This is another very real hurdle that writers and bloggers do nothing to mitigate: short attention spans.

Though the scientific jury is still out, it seems our attention spans have never been shorter. Readers always want something new to consume, so the media always finds something fresh to celebrate for a day or two before something else comes along. We’ve created a cycle – and it’s a hard one to break out of.

According to Green, it can sometimes take a restaurant up to year to fully develop,



but most media only show up in the first month or two (often invited for a complementary meal as guests of the restaurant). After the reviews come out, the paying customers come in – once or twice. But inevitably, the bookings thin down as

journalists and bloggers celebrate other newer restaurants. “Everyone likes to be the centre of authority on restaurants and they have to have been to the newest place,” says Green. “It’s a bragging right.”

It may seem ridiculous to place so much importance on honest reviews about food. After all, even Anthony Bourdain once quipped that everything he made turned to shit a few hours later. But it has a real impact. “I see less and less people wanting to take the risk to set up a new place here because the market is so fickle,” says Green. “People only want to come in the first six months – and you can’t run a business that way. That’s why you will never see me open another restaurant here.”

When you’re dealing with people’s livelihoods, it shouldn’t be about what’s cute or good for the ‘gram. It should be about what’s good – period. Food that tastes good deserves to be celebrated. So please, go back to that spot for a second visit and then go back again a year later. Support the places that deserve it, find new ways to talk about old restaurants and celebrate the way a menu can evolve. Restaurants change and develop – and that’s what makes them so exciting. #

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