

THE EVOLUTION AND DEMOCRATIZATION OF FOOD CRITICISM

BY JAMIE VALENTINO



Lady with an Ermine, Leonardo da Vinci, 1489-1491



o matter where you look online, opinions about food, the places serving it, and the people eating it are unavoidable. Yet, the line between expertise and criticism has become increasingly blurred, if not erased. The internet may have democratized food criticism, but social media has granted even the emptiest opinions the power to influence millions. The profession of food reviewing is vital for patrons swimming through a sea of comped influencers, Karen-esque Yelpers, and relentless trends and virality. The restaurant critic's job is to separate merit from hype, taste from glamour, and, most importantly, answer the age-old question: Is it worth it? However, the craft has been overpowered by the machine, leaving the industry at risk of extinction. While the desire for guidance on the best places to dine remains timeless, nearly everything about how people decide on their next restaurant meal has changed.

Food critics rose to prominence with the rise of newspapers, mostly catering to affluent tastebuds. Grimod de la Reyniere, often credited as the first professional "restaurant reviewer," published the *Gourmands' Almanac* in early nineteenth-century France—widely regarded as the first restaurant guidebook. Before taking the helm of French gastronomic writing, he was a lawyer with bold, biased hot takes and a craving for public recognition. During this time, criticism was reserved for art, literature, and drama. Reyniere created a space for epicurean criticism to be taken seriously and showed its appeal to the masses. Naturally, the institutions renowned for criticism took note and claimed their own seats at the table.

But the inception of food criticism cannot be discussed without also acknowledging *The New York Times*, which published mainstream media's first restaurant review, "How We Dine," with the anonymous byline "Strong-Minded Reporter of the Times" on January 1, 1859. The author explored various restaurants

in the city, focusing more on how he landed the assignment and sharing anecdotal observations about the establishments rather than the food itself. Still, it marked the beginning of the newspaper ushering in what would become the golden age of food criticism.

Newspapers eventually pivoted away from using anonymous bylines to marquee names that validated dining choices. The job elevated food critics to local celebrity status in their cities—Henri Gault in Paris, Mimi Sheraton in New York, Egon Ronay in London—and inspired many eaters to broaden their food horizons. By the middle of the twentieth century, critics framed dining out as a lifestyle, making restaurant reviews a key, if imperfect and often elitist, guide for exploring a city’s culture and influences. As restaurateurs quickly understood, a single voice could now reshape an entire city’s culinary scene.

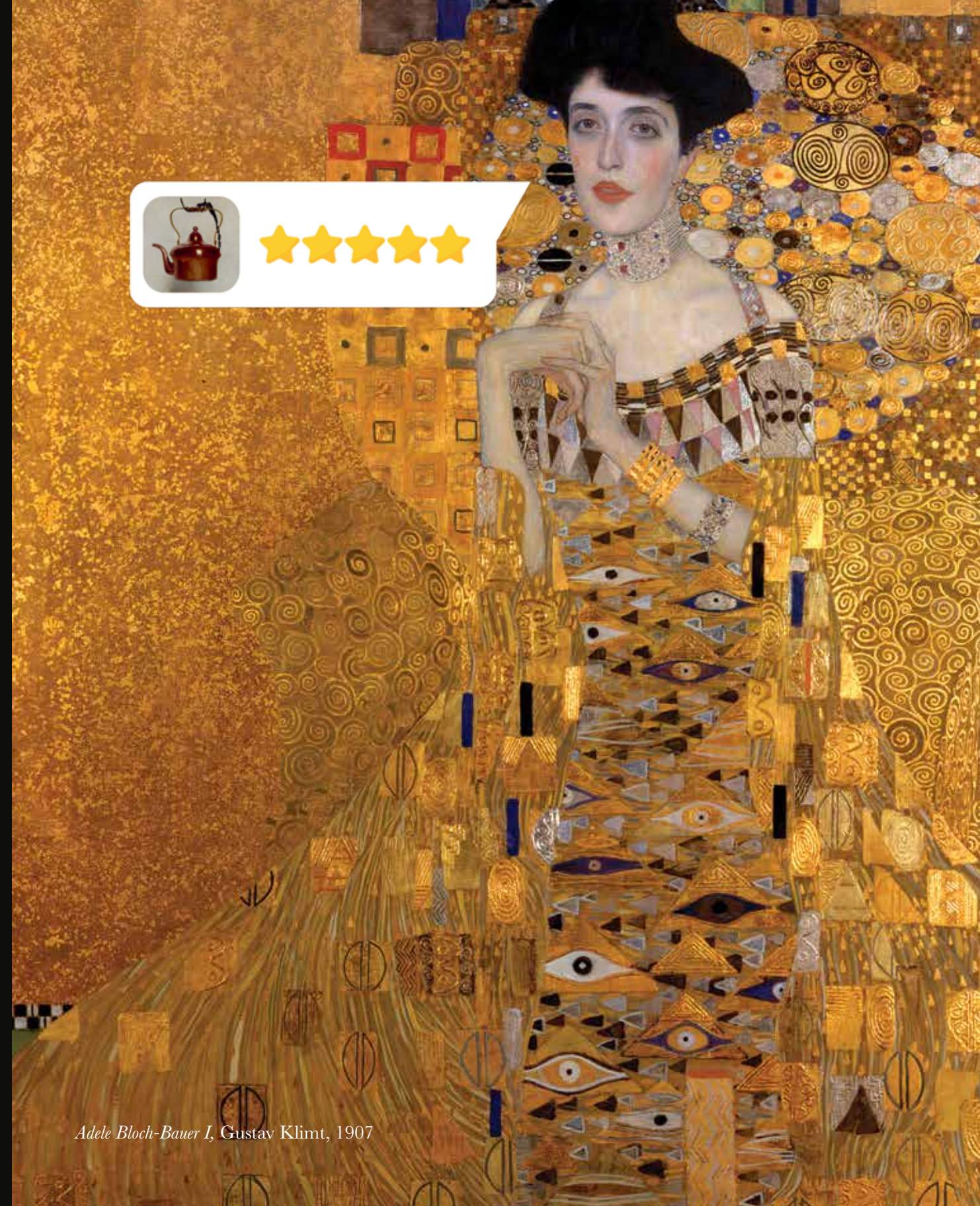
World-acclaimed food critic Matt Preston says that the job’s longevity depends on readers’ experiences aligning with a reviewer’s feedback. The former *MasterChef Australia* co-host and judge

stresses that the industry’s survival hinges on genuine criticism rather than puff pieces. He recalls that the best review he wrote was one where half the readers thought it was a brilliantly positive review—they went and loved the place—while the other half hated the sound of it.

“It was a raucous fun place where the kids waited tables, and the food was rustic flavor bombs,” he says. In other words, some readers thought the restaurant sounded, “noisy, unsophisticated, and with no professional service.”

Preston stopped working as a food critic in 2010, just before social media empowered everyday diners to feel they could take over his role. After all, what’s so complicated about liking or disliking a meal? According to the best critics—at least if you ask Preston—it’s about picking your battles and delivering judgment. For example, he’d reserve warranted critical reviews for places with a famous chef or big PR budgets as opposed to hidden gems or mom-and-pop shops.

“You needed to resist the temptation to write a brutal takedown,” he says. “These



Adele Bloch-Bauer I, Gustav Klimt, 1907



takedowns might make the critic look tough, but they benefit no one. Reviewing should never be a blood sport. Oh, and never include every bad thing you experience in the review! Save a few to bring up, with photos, when the owner or chef claims they don't believe you."

Of course, the landscape of food criticism has shifted into entirely new realms, far from the singular one Preston inhabited. He loves the democratization of food criticism that blogs and social media have brought, as long as this new generation of reviewers approach criticism with passion and integrity rather than regurgitating what everyone else is saying.

Yet, the true disruptor of how people choose where to eat arrived with Yelp's invention in 2004. The website was the first to provide crowd-sourced reviews of businesses, empowering consumers to make informed decisions about where to dine. Not long after its launch, Yelp cultivated a community of reviewers through the "Elite Yelp Squad," a program that rewarded its most active contributors with exclusive membership cards and local perks.

While professional food critics managed to retain control over the restaurants at the cultural zeitgeist, anyone with internet access could now praise or critique dining. The first iPhone was invented in June 2007, and Yelp introduced their mobile app in December 2008. Popular restaurants were suddenly inundated with hundreds of star-ratings and comments from everyday diners acting as critics. Not all of them had Preston's sense of restraint, leading many restaurateurs and chefs to wage war on Yelp because it placed their livelihoods in the fickle court of public opinion.

Still, Yelp's Senior Vice President of Community, Andrea Rubin, says that the democratization of food criticism through their app has ultimately shown that most people are not hard to please or, at the very least, are more likely to review positive experiences. Today, there are 287+ million cumulative reviews on the app, with restaurants being the second most reviewed entity after local home services.

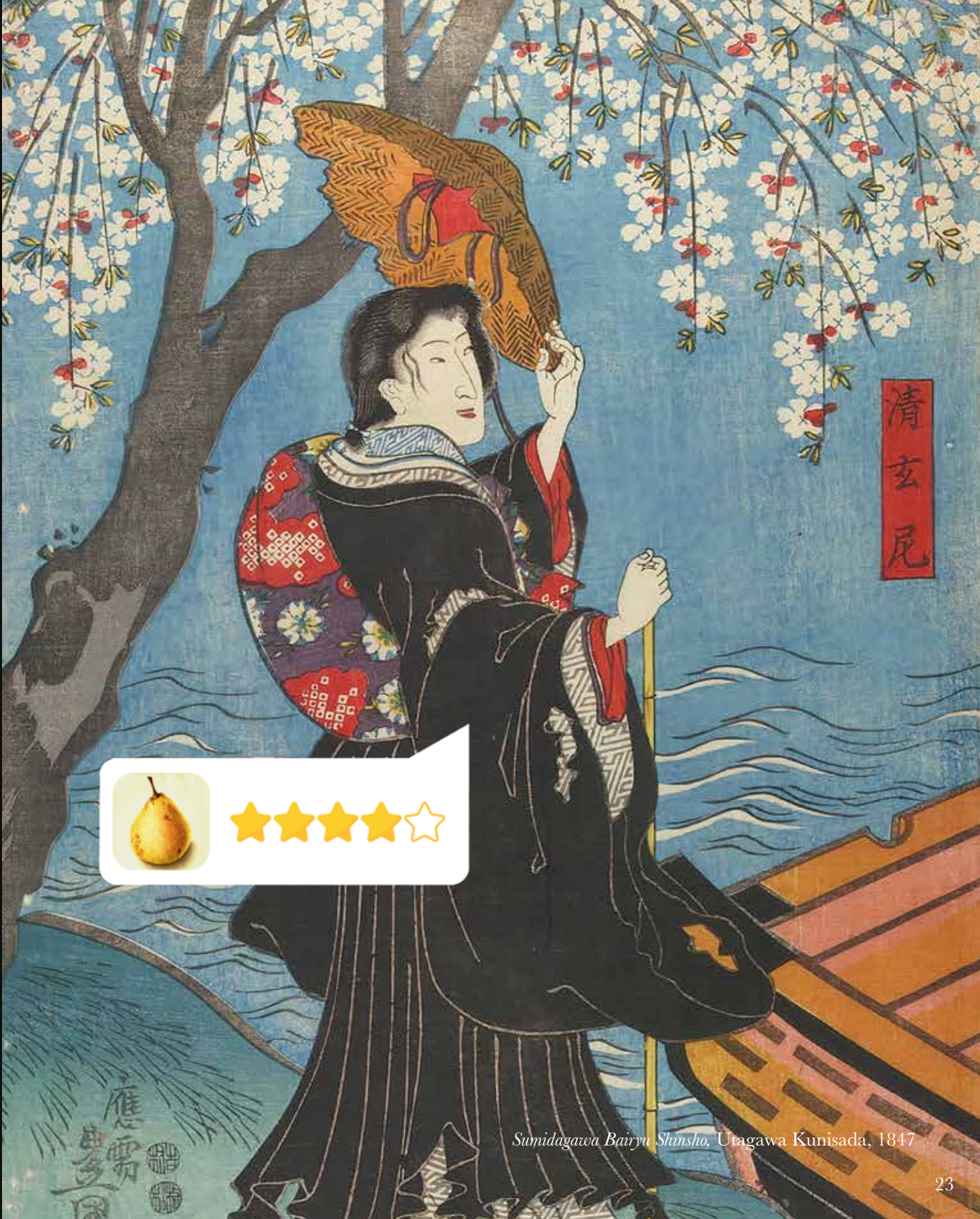
"About seventy-six percent of Yelp reviews are three stars or higher, so overwhelmingly, people come to Yelp to

share neutral to positive experiences,” says Rubin. “There are more five-star reviews than one, two, and three-star reviews combined. The rating distribution also mirrors what we experience in real life. For example, in a week, most of your experiences are likely to be average to good, with maybe one or two outstanding experiences and occasionally a poor experience.”

The democratization of restaurant reviews, however, did not bode well for legacy media. In May 2013, the food section in the *Chicago Sun-Times* was replaced by an advertising supplement featuring largely non-local, syndicated, and sponsored content, making Michael Nigrant the paper’s last food critic. Reporting on Nigrant’s layoff, Grub Street commended him for sticking to the old guard way of reviewing—being impartial, authoritative, and anonymous—but blamed the new reality: “It’s a bad time for newspapers, but it’s an especially bad time for newspapers doing what anyone can, at least in theory, do, which is publish their personal opinions.”

Fast forward another decade, and every food critic’s job was put on hold or eliminated when the hospitality industry shut down due to the pandemic. Influencers took hold of the spotlight when humanity had nothing else to do but watch their content online. Many niche journalists joined them, and that’s when Nigrant launched his local food reviewing Substack, *The Hunger*, but this time, he fully infused his own style into the mix. He has since acquired over one thousand paid subscribers and now makes more from it than he ever did as a newspaper employee.

Of course, journalists-turned-independents couldn’t have known the media wouldn’t return to normal like the rest of civilization. A rapidly evolving shift in how consumers seek information left general-interest newspapers struggling to stay relevant. Nigrant says Substack gave him the kind of influence that is no longer available in most newspapers. “I think ultimately people just aren’t consuming traditional media anymore,” he says. “I pay [restaurants] literally with my own money. And so I think people are like, well, if you’re paying with your own



Sumidagawa Bairyu Shinsho, Utagawa Kunisada, 1847



Portrait of a Man in a Red Suit, 1757-1761

money, your judgment is clearer because you know that this hurts your wallet.”

Nagrant says that while media outlets cater to the masses for viewership, independents like him have found success by breaking from the status quo and providing a reliable voice not constrained by a corporate ladder, advertising dollars, or comped meals. Food criticism hasn’t just been democratized for the masses; professional critics themselves have gained control and monetization over their palates.

“I always think about the term negative review . . . it’s not what I aim to do,” says Nagrant. “I want to provide constructive feedback about the experience if it wasn’t good, so it can improve both for diners and it can improve for the restaurant itself.”

Constructive criticism is not as easy when it comes to saving the role of the food critic in traditional media, a job in steep decline except for in the hallmark papers. The industry’s fiery collapse might seem like doomsday to some, but it has also been a phoenix

rising for others, one free of gatekeeping for creators and culinary visionaries.

At the basis of both these visions is the fact that there are no longer any guardrails for what merits a review, who gets to give it, or how it’s delivered. Food influencers with millions of followers can rack up more views in one video than the *New York Times* gets in a good week, and all they’re doing is a TikTok of themselves eating their favorite fast food order in their car. It might sound dystopian to some industry experts, but TikToker Keith Lee amassed sixteen million followers by doing just that. He says before he had a platform to capitalize on his passion, he was a “quiet Yelper.”

“I wouldn’t necessarily say TikTok [is the future], but more like everyday people,” he says. “In my eyes, the voice of the people is becoming the focal point of food opinions.” Social media created a pathway to be an influential voice in the food industry without rhyme or reason, a visual platform for the weird, random, or niche to thrive, which newspapers catering to a mass audience couldn’t replicate.

Of course, if you ask someone like Max Miller, host of the YouTube series *Tasting History*, which he created after being furloughed in 2020, the dominance of social platforms gave him a new lease on life and a career in an industry he'd never have been able to enter otherwise. Miller recreates ancient or historical recipes and explains the history around them, including how they taste. But he doesn't consider himself a chef or a critic, which hasn't deterred his 2.6 million subscribers.

"I used to recreate the baked goods I'd seen made on *The Great British Bake Off* and bring them to my coworkers, sharing the histories featured on the show," says Miller. "They discontinued that historical component, which eventually inspired *Tasting History*."

Miller says he would never have done it had YouTube not been available, as he knew he wanted to create something on the platform before he came up with the idea. Nothing merges passion with entrepreneurship quite like necessity, and in a way, the evolution of food

criticism is the waning of one foodie's dream and the rise of a million others.

"It's more about the history than taste," says Miller. "For God's sake, I ate boiled leather. I wanted to talk about the history of people eating leather when they were starving. This happened a lot to travelers and explorers up in the Arctic."

Whether Miller's reaction to eating leather qualifies as food criticism is unclear, but readers are free to create and rate it for themselves. And perhaps that's the point. ■

JAMIE VALENTINO
is a Minneapolis-based restaurant consultant for his family's business, and his writing has been published in *Business Insider*, *Metro UK*, *Fast Company*, *Vice*, and 100+ more.

The Arnolfini Portrait, Jan van Eyck, 1434

