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Charles Schumer and his apprentice Kirsten Gillibrand are owning Washington these days. So who needs Harry Reid's fancy title anyway? By Jason Horowitz, p. 16

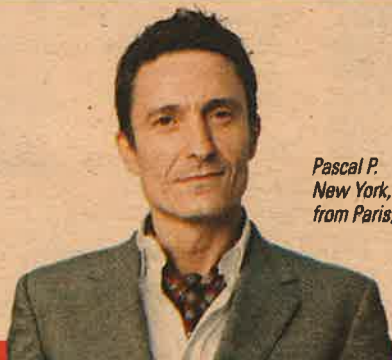
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Lament for the Old-Fashioned Restaurant Critic

Can The Times restore ultimate power to its restaurant reviewer and continue to keep itself out of the culinary-media complex?

BY JOHN KOBLIN

Sometime in the next week, *The New York Times* plans to name its newest restaurant critic.

"I hope to announce something by the end of the week," wrote executive editor Bill Keller in an email to *The Observer* on Tuesday, Aug. 4. "That could slip, but it's my hope."

A well-placed source said that *The Times* has generated a shortlist of about four people—two or three from within the Times Tower, one from outside—but that editors will select someone from inside the building to take over from Frank Bruni, who is leaving the Dining section to write features for the *Sunday Magazine*.

When this new critic walks into the new job, what exactly can he or she expect?

"You become this strange kind of celebrity," said William "Biff" Grimes, *The Times*' food critic from 1999 to 2003. "There's a mystique since the days of Craig Claiborne about occupying the critics' chair and pronouncing life-or-death judgments on restaurants. In New York, they follow it the way some people follow sports in other cities."

Especially today, when everyone from your 19-year-old intern living in Bushwick to your Upper West Side-dwelling 83-year-old grandfather seems to care an awful lot about restaurants and food. Yet, over the past few years, New York diners have been reading Mr. Bruni's columns as much to argue with them as to find out where to go. ("That \$24 tomato and basil spaghetti sauce Mr. Bruni loves so much at Scarpetta? I can make that at home!") An entire blog world has popped up, too, to deconstruct Mr. Bruni's reviews, yes, but also to worship at the altars of various chefs, to promote home cook-

ing, to rant and rave over everything from brunch to bratwurst. In this world of ubiquitous foodies, where everyone's a fan or a critic, it seems that the post of *Times* restaurant reviewer has lost some of its power in the eating game.

"If by 'power' you mean the ability to make or break a restaurant, that has probably been diminished by the profusion of critical voices," said Mr. Keller.

"I look at the selection of a new critic as a chance to revisit our conventions and think about what makes sense in the world we live in now. That's about as much as I want to say on that right now," he continued.

In other words: it's a critical moment for *The Times*' restaurant critic. "From the time of Craig Clai-

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borne—who basically invented the genre—there has been a waning power among each *Times* restaurant critic," said Ruth Reichl, *The Times*' restaurant critic from 1993 to 1999 and the current editor of *Gourmet*. "Claiborne could make or break restaurants. Mimi Sheraton wielded that power with more glee than anyone before or since and she, too, could make or break restaurants. But over the years, we've seen decreasing amounts of power. ... I think people read the column with interest especially when it's a good writer,



Frank Bruni.

but whether people take that word as gospel? That has really changed. There are so many knowledgeable people weighing in!" she said.

Mr. Grimes elaborated. "The Internet has made power more diffuse and it certainly has changed the conversation from the pontificating critic to all kinds of people writing," he said. "It's so balkanized."

Just look at the names: Serious Eats, the Amateur Gourmet, Midtown Lunch, the Foodista, Restaurant Girl ... the list of blogs goes on. Without a doubt, the *Times* food critic remains influential (this very paper, two years ago, wrote about the "Bruni Effect," which argued that indeed the food critic at *The Times* still wields considerable weight). But the food-writing landscape has changed quite dramatically from five years ago, when Mr. Bruni began his professional eating odyssey.

And even with all these food crazies out there, no one seems to be clamoring for Mr. Bruni's job.

Food bloggers have been here for years, but in the course of Mr. Bruni's tenure, some of the media power has actually shifted their way—enough, perhaps, to make a rigorous, highbrow job like the *Times* restaurant critic seem less like something to strive for than to avoid. As more food fetishists have taken their lusts to the Web—pecking out loving descriptions of their meals, posting luscious photos of every dish and amuse bouche and petit four, gushing over the hotness of a certain male pastry chef (Johnny Iuzzini!)—they've captured the eyes of gluttonous readers who gorge themselves vicariously. They've also garnered the respect and even friendship of chefs and

restaurateurs themselves, something that a *New York Times* critic is bound by law never to do. This makes for a juicy media circle-jerk, where chefs get great publicity, and, in turn, bloggers get fame and free friends, meals and drinks.

These food bloggers are actually adhering to a program that outgoing *Times* spokeswoman Catherine Mathis considers an imperative for the paper's most successful reporters. Take Andrew Ross Sorkin and David Carr, two high-profile *Times* writers: By their example, if you want to be on top, you need some combination of a weekly print column, a Web platform, appearances on television, a Twitter. Meanwhile, the *Times* critic stays on the down low, always. Disguises—as Ruth Reichl, Mimi Sheraton and Biff Grimes used to do—could be necessary. Television isn't part of the game plan. There is no party circuit. And being pals with the people you cover is never, ever allowed.

Ms. Sheraton, *The Times*' food critic from 1976 to 1984, said one time she was invited to a Christmas party at her friend's house, where Elaine Kaufman and Faith Stewart-Gordon from the Russian Tea Room would both be in attendance.

"I wouldn't go," she said. "I didn't want them to recognize me! I found it difficult to be sociable and smile and be polite and then six months later, I'm going to give them a terrible review."

"I never went to a food event, I never went to a press party," she continued.

"I want to be famous," said Josh Ozersky. "When I was born, I was anonymous, and I aim not to die in that position."

Mr. Ozersky is the 41-year-old restaurants editor for Citysearch who blogs at the Feedbag. Before that, he was an editor for *New York* magazine's food-focused blog, *Grub Street*, where he made his name in the new-media world.

After a scattered career—he attended grad school and spent time writing restaurant reviews of Queens restaurants for *Newsday*—Mr. Ozersky now wants to be a food personality. He wants to be a judge on *Iron Chef*. He wants to host his own television show. He wants fame. He said he's 55 percent there. And, he said, even though the *Times* restaurant critic holds an incredibly

powerful position, it's the last thing he would want to do. Not in a million, zillion years, he said.

"The *Times* critic can't go on TV!" he said. "What would you do with that power? You can't go to the restaurants you like, you can't shmooze with the chefs and writers you like. You can't go on *Top Chef*!"

"As far as I'm concerned, you have to be on television," he continued. "You can win the National Book Award and you can write on the front page of *The Times* every day, and you're still not as famous as some busy tramp on *Tough Love* on VH1."

Mr. Ozersky is part of an army of writers who don't profess to be critics, or to do what Mr. Bruni does—he, instead, is trying to do something entirely different, he said.

"I get criticized for being friendly with a lot of chefs," he said. "I don't care about what anyone says. There is no way that you can really know



Ruth Reichl.



Josh Ozersky.



Johnny Iuzzini.

the current state of gastronomy just by going around and eating meals. You need to talk to chefs and find out what they're thinking about and what turns them on."

But besides fame, or being close to the demigods of the food world, there are actually journalistic payoffs in following a path like Mr. Ozersky's: scoops.

"Being chummy with the chefs helps our reporters get stories," said Ben Leventhal, the co-founder of Eater.com, a popular, and news-breaking, food Web site. "On Eater, certainly, there are no reviews being filed, and all the writers need to have relations with those chefs so those chefs can come to us first with stories. When a restaurant opens, the chef is going to give the story to the person he or she trusts. The writers are certainly fully aware of that."

It's true, though, that the line between critic and enthusiast can be blurred. Just as a description of bad service at a given restaurant might influence whether a reader decides to eat there, a rant about being snubbed by a host or ignored by a waiter on a blog can generate a list of vows by commenters to never patronize a certain place again. It can also result in a redo—something a food critic would never entertain. A few years ago, Adam Roberts, who writes the Amateur Gourmet blog, described what he felt was mistreatment at the hands of Sirio Maccioni at Le Cirque and found himself, and his entire family, comped to a second meal (his write-up of that appeared on Serious Eats under the title "The Power of Food Blogging").

(Mr. Roberts, who is traveling in Barcelona, recently ate at elBulli, the Ferran Adria restaurant that is nearly impossible to get in to. "And oh-my-God it was amazing," he wrote in an email to *The Observer*. "But I

don't want to spoil anything because, yes, I did photograph it—every single course!—and it's going to be a killer post. Right now I'm thinking of doing the post in a comic book style, as I did for a post I wrote two years ago about Alain Ducasse that caused something of a sensation." That's another thing a food critic can't do!

The chefs, meanwhile, are pleased with these new, cozy relationships—and the diminishment of *The Times*' critic's status.

"To me, *The Times* still means a lot, but I don't think people will fall over each other like they did in the past to secure a star review," said Mark Ladner, the chef at Mario Batali's *très* opulent Del Posto. "It doesn't carry as much weight as it did in the past." As he put it: "There's so much other shit out there."

On the red carpet of the premiere of *Julie & Julia*—the A-list film starring Meryl Streep and Amy Adams that's based on a book that's based on a food blog, if you can follow that—former Les Halles chef and gastro-explorer Anthony Bourdain proclaimed it's "a whole new world" in the food business.

"There's so many more people to co-op and coerce and bribe and suck up to!" he said, in his signature matter-of-fact not-quite-deadpan. "I think there's a lot of bloggers getting private tours of the kitchen and an advance look at next season's menu. But I think it's a good thing. I think it's the future."

And about Mr. Bruni, what does he make of this changed landscape? "I can't really tell you," he said. "I have only lived this life and lived these years and I can't tell you what it must have been like for predecessors. But if the *Times* critic's power is diminished, it seems, from what I see and what comes at me, that restaurateurs seem to get extraordinarily worked up over reviews. If the power has been lessened, it still seems to have a great deal of force."

The Times' decision for his replacement is imminent. Sources at the paper said that internal contenders have included the L.A. bureau chief, Jennifer Steinhauer; the Dining section's Pete Wells and Julia Moskin; and *T Magazine* food editor Christine Muhlke. Ms. Steinhauer told *The Observer*, "I am not a candidate." Similarly, Mr. Wells and Ms. Moskin said that they weren't going to be Mr. Bruni's replacement.

But whoever is chosen, what preparations will be made? Is there a hurried closing down of, say, a Twitter account and Facebook profile to ensure some anonymity? Or, on the flip side, will the critic be a public persona in order to embrace this new-media, and new foodie, world—the future, as Mr. Bourdain put it?

Whomever it may be, we're guessing that Mr. Ozersky, with his lust for attention and dreams of television, wasn't that unnamed outside candidate. We have a hard time picturing *The Times*' food critic on *Top Chef*.

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—Additional reporting by Sharon Barbour.

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