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Under the table with Angie Wong

A Hong Kong publication once sent a writer to review a brand new Japanese restaurant in Causeway Bay. The reviewer wrote that the portions were very small, the flavours very light, the pricing very expensive, the service too fussy and the lighting too dark. The publication ran it and the restaurant closed down two months after print.

What the readers didn't know was the review was done by an intern. Someone who was new to the city, had little experience in critical writing and didn't have the budget to spend much time comparing fancy restaurants. The consequence was a \$2 million project, the owners' life savings, down the tube.

In Journalism, what you say comes with responsibility. This story came to mind when New York University recently held a forum asking: Are restaurant reviewers still necessary? The floor was divided: professional reviewers on the panel enthusiastically nodded yes while food bloggers, in real-time, blogged no. And the imagery of celebrated food journalists on an elevated stage nodding their heads versus bloggers angrily challenging the journalists' every thought on their keyboards is a good illustration of where we are today. What was really being asked during this forum is this: Should opinion writing be democratised? After a quick scan of food blogs around Hong Kong I have to side with my fellow journalists.

Many blogs fall into one of three categories: the ego-driven nobody who power-trips with his iPhone, writing negative, knee-jerk reviews if they are not fawned over at restaurants; the "I took my mom to ___ and we liked ___ very much" variety; or the worst of the breed, the marketing spiel disguised as a personal blog.

The last category is harder to spot if you don't do the due diligence. Some of the most respected food bloggers keep their identities hidden for anonymity, but if you cover the food beat, then you'll know instantly which ones are blood relatives of people running various restaurant groups. One recent blog post lambasted a new restaurant in Central but did not state that its author was the marketing manager for the restaurant right next door to the one he was slamming. Disclosure, in this case, is your friend.

When I used to take press meals – that is, free meals paid for by restaurants in the hope of generating press coverage (a good time to mention that *Time Out* reviews anonymously and pays for meals) – tables would be filled by freeloading journalists and bloggers awaiting a king's feast. What I

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didn't understand then, but clearly see now, is that the acceptance of a free meal creates the classic journalistic conflict of interest: how do I judge a restaurant when they're on their best behaviour?

I asked Vicki Williams, associate editor of *WOM Guide*, whether food bloggers should be allowed to receive free meals. Her response: "No. Nor do I think they should be invited to press conferences and events. For me a blog is a personal way to share thoughts on subjects that interest, which is totally different to the writings of a professional lifestyle journalist."

Before you cry foul, this is no

scare tactic to steer readers away from food blogs and put their trust in professionals like me. Food bloggers are not the bad guys in this write up. "You are more likely to trust your friend's opinion than a professional's," says Winnie So, author of the blog *Little Cream Life* (littlecreambook.com). And with food blogs these days turning into six-figure book deals, such as *This Is Why You're Fat*, or a Hollywood movie (*Julie & Julia*), you might think: why not give it a go? Even in this over-saturated market of food blogging, there will always be room for more prose and praise. Everyone eats therefore everyone can use puffery to sing to the masses. Right?

But let me play devil's advocate for a moment and examine the advantages of blogs, the main ones being they don't have to be physically printed or distributed. Print media have lag time between collecting the information and when it is released, potentially months after restaurants have opened. Bloggers have instant publishing tools. In fact, all they need to do is whip out their iPhone tableside. This of course has its problems as well. Often the outcome is spontaneous, unedited, hasty opinions. In this day and age, a restaurant critique is not just a record of having been there, ate that, but also a reference book, a history lesson, a travel log, a celebration of food vernaculars, all while conveying delight or disdain. There is a baseline standard that comes from understanding and investigation. That only comes from years of disciplined eating, travelling, tracking talents and maybe even the odd bout of food poisoning in the line of duty. Not something that should be left to the novice. Though no one's stopping you.