

Columnist compares food critics' opinions

Any guidebook worth its salt will note the following characteristics about Eugene: A mishmash of people, full of hippies, students, former loggers and runaway teens amidst a graying retirement set. To those guidebooks, the Eugene restaurant scene is no different. Eclectic, they say.

Two restaurant critics spoke about the state of Eugene restaurants with the Emerald. Like the restaurants themselves, these two critics could not be more different in style.



John Liebhardt
Higher Education Editor

Lance Sparks admits with a sigh that he is a fourth-generation "restaurant" (his daughter also works in town, at Marché), who just happens to hold a Ph.D. in psycholinguistics. In his columns, now found in the Eugene Weekly, Sparks writes long, liquid sentences. Take for example, this story on Poppi's Anatolia:

"Newcomers might not know her name, but long-time residents, especially lovers of good food, place Poppi prominently in their pantheon of benevolent genies. Those who have loved her and her work have been enduring for a decade on the lingering remnants of her creativity."

Deep Dish Dinah is nearly Sparks's altered ego. A mother of two, Dinah has been writing for the Comic News since 1996.

"I don't really review restaurants as much as spread breaking news about them," she told the Emerald in an e-mail interview to keep her anonymity intact. Whatever Dinah calls her reviews — newsy gossip, endorsements — her writing goes straight to the point. While Sparks writes leisurely about one restaurant at a time, Dinah's columns are known for the sheer breadth of topics. She rarely gives a restaurant more than a few paragraphs before moving on to, say, a pet store that sells cigarettes. But, in that precious paragraph or two, she goes straight for the jugular. In a recent column, she wrote:

"Kurt Falkenstein has opened his latest attempt to strike the note that makes the neighbors sing. River Road Grill opened last week and so far, the chorus from the locals is: 'We can't sing that high.' Nine bucks for a Caesar salad is a tad much for people who have bad feelings about dead rulers in general, and portraits of them on paper in particular. Kurt is a professional; he'll adjust."

Like her writing, Dinah's opinions are quick, incisive.

"Students should not be allowed to make their own food choices," she told the Emerald. "They should have coupon books that must be validated by restaurants and then mailed off to worried mothers as proof their children are getting their vegetables every day."

Like Dinah, Sparks talks about restaurants in the same vein he writes about them: even-paced and earnest. Sparks gave the state of Eugene's cuisine scene a big thumbs-up.

"Overall, the restaurant scene in Eugene is rather remarkable for a town of this size. There are a number of good restaurants of various

kinds," he said. "I am amazed. There are ten outstanding restaurants in this town."

Sparks went on to list eight, nine, 10 restaurants that he thinks are perfect, top-tier establishments in town.

Prodded, he could not cut his list to three restaurants, even if he had to write a three-restaurant overview for a guidebook. It was a trick question, and he let the interviewer know. At first, Sparks hemmed and hawed about the fact he was given three, only three, restaurants. But he soon picked up his pace and changed the topic.

"In this list, I look for imagination, skill in the kitchen, a real strong sense of what they are doing and what they want to do," he said.

"The restaurants I have to exclude," he said, still talking around the question, "are good, but they don't quite reach the plateau of a great restaurant."

Sparks started his list, to which he continually returned to throughout the interview. The list included: Poppi's Anatolia, the Downtown Athletic Club, Chez Ray's, Taste of India, Maple Garden, and for those looking for a drive, the Vida Cafe on Highway 126. "I almost don't like mentioning that, because it is already hard enough to get a seat," he said. He went on to desserts at the Excelsior and a few BBQ joints in Springfield.

Dinah was equally unimpressed with the three-restaurant limit. "Only three? Yikes! I better not think too much on this one," she wrote. Her list, which was only three, included Poppi's Anatolia, Bellizzi's Pizza & Pasta and the Koho Bistro.

Dinah also gave the restaurant scene in town high grades. "Like so many things, it is better than we deserve for a town our size."

Like any town this size, the Eugene restaurant scene must be missing something, right? Yes, our reviewers nodded. So what is Eugene missing? They both provided quick and similar answers.

"We are missing a truly outstanding Vietnamese or Thai restaurant," Sparks said. "We are doing pretty good, but we don't have what Portland has in terms of restaurants."

Dinah agreed. "We don't have any Afghani restaurants, no Russian cuisine," she said. "And why is it there's 'no such thing' as Canadian cuisine?"

But she was soon back to students, lambasting them to eat better and eat more often, a topic she has grown used to as a mother of two.

"Beer has more nutritional value than a fast-food burger or whatever they are heating on a spit at the corner convenience store," she said. "They should lower the drinking age and raise the fast-food age."

It was a topic that Sparks picked up, also. Teaching at Linn-Benton and Lane community colleges, Sparks said he meets 100 new students every term. "Their palates are very narrow. They are very reluctant to risk encountering new flavors, new colors, new ingredients."

Sparks took his argument full circle, back to what Dinah calls second- and third-tier ethnic restaurants. "You need a certain critical mass of people to sustain small ethnic places."

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