

IN WRITING, "FOODIE" SEEMS TO BE USED BY EITHER WANNABE GOURMANDS OR BY JOURNALISTS WHO ARE TOO LAZY TO FIND A CORRECT TERM

the trend of infantilizing or dumbing down any activity or interest in order to make it more inclusive. Imagine: "The Idiots Guide to Being a Foodie."

The problem is, now that we have The Food Network, everyone's a foodie. It used to be that you talked about dry-aged beef and vintage Barbaresco to someone at a party and she'd look at you sidelong and say, conspiratorially: "So, you're into food." You could get a nice date out of it. But round-the-clock televised food porn and ridiculous competitive cook-offs have changed all that. Now, if you bring leftover homemade shepherd's pie to work, someone from accounting will call you a foodie and tell you breathlessly about the great meal they had at The Keg. ("Such big portions!")

I thought I was alone in hating the word until the first issue of *City Bites* hit the streets. Savvy readers understood right away, and wrote in to say so. We sent out a press release about the magazine, explaining our stance against "foodies" and in favour of smart, respectful, irreverent (even sassy) discussion of the culinary arts. A small story ran in *The Globe and Mail* (Saturday, March 26, 2005). "Fodder for Foodies" read the headline. The article nicely encapsulated what our magazine was about, but completely missed the point.

Then I stumbled onto the editorial credo at the delightfully anarchical website called chowhound.com. "Foodies eat where they're told; they eagerly follow trends and rarely go where Zagat hasn't gone before. Chowhounds, on the other hand, blaze trails, combing gleefully through neighbourhoods for hidden culinary treasure. They despise hype, and while they appreciate refined ambience and service, they can't be fooled by mere flash."


"Flash." That's the state of much food writing today. It's about the writer, not the craft. There is too much first person, verbal shtick and self-referencing, and not enough genuine scholarship in the service of the reader. Most articles include empty descriptions of dishes "cooked perfectly" or desserts that make the reviewer "swoon." The power of the food critic has born a monster of childish petulance, who will spend half a review complaining that no one hung up her

coat or that the waiter failed to keep a water glass full or that the other diners are too blonde and too skinny. Accuracy is relegated to the side plate. I read a review in which the critic complained that the Morue Noire d'Alaska en Crêpinette was not the expected cod crepe, rather it was "an eggroll-sized miso-infused sausage stuffed with black Alaskan cod wrapped in glutinous rice paper and layered with more foie gras." Crêpinette, had the reviewer bothered to check, has nothing to do with a crepe; it is in fact a flattened sausage traditionally wrapped in pig's caul fat.


The power to evaluate should go only to those who can do so objectively and with a clear sense of criteria, commitment and sincere joy. British-born James Chatto writes for many Canadian publications, always bringing an encyclopedic knowledge of the culinary arts, served up in respectful prose. His writing barely hides a childlike excitement and awe in the presence of great cuisine. Chatto reminds me of the wonderfully named Waverley Root, a foreign correspondent in Europe for the *Washington Post* and the *Chicago Tribune*, who painstakingly researched and published *The Food of France* (1958) and *The Food of Italy* (1971). These are the works of a reporter in the purest definition of the word.

The legends of food literature are many: Elizabeth David, Edouard de Pomiane and M.F.K. Fisher. Here at home, our best-kept secret is Anita Stewart, the first Canadian to achieve a Master of Arts in Gastronomy from the University of Adelaide in Australia, whose many delightful and delicious books include *The Flavours of Canada*, which will be reprinted in the spring. Another home-grown treasure is Gina Mallet, whose deeply researched *Last Chance to Eat* is as original as it is entertaining. The book won a James Beard award last year.

These writers set high standards for food literature. They check their egos along with their coats when they enter a dining room. They approach the business and the pleasure of food with respect, generosity and humour. I suspect that if you called any of them a "foodie," they'd punch you out. ■



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