

# Questions to ask in evaluating your restaurant

Reviewing a restaurant is much more than gathering a group of friends, ordering different items on the menu and then telling readers what you liked.

A committed critic has dozens of checkpoints. These help determine the star rating used by The Chronicle. And after the first visit, there are at least two more. Each has to be considered before the final stars are awarded.

The first -- and most important -- evaluation a critic makes is of himself. If a critic is going to review restaurants as objectively as possible, he has to know his own culinary likes and dislikes, prejudices and mood. These cannot be allowed to color the evaluation.

Then the critic has to be able to separate the elements that go into a dining experience -- something a casual diner would probably never do -- and then tie them all back together.

Here's a checklist of questions to help you evaluate your dining experiences.

## Calling for Reservations

- How are you treated on the phone? It's surprising how many times the attitude of the receptionist foreshadows what is to come.
- When you ask for a reservation, are you interrupted and given the standard line: "We can seat you at 5:30 or 10"? Or do they listen and try to work with you?

## At the Door

- How are you greeted?
- How long do you have to wait for your reserved table? (My feeling is that you should give the restaurant the same latitude they give you. Most restaurants will hold a table 15 to 30 minutes for late arrivals. If you have to wait longer than that, the restaurant should offer a drink or a round of desserts.)
- Does the host escort you to the table or race ahead and let you play catch up?

## After You're Seated

- Are you greeted promptly by the waiter?
- Does he maintain a professional and cordial attitude?
- Does he seem happy to have you there?

- Are you told the specials before you've made up your mind?
- Are you allowed enough time with the menu so you don't feel you're being rushed?

### **Checking Yourself**

- How do you feel? Are you tired or in a bad mood?
- Has bad service influenced your attitude toward the food?
- Have the opinions of your dining companions swayed your attitude?
- Even if you're having a particularly good time, are you still paying close attention to the food?

### **Scoping Out the Food**

- Look around the room and ask yourself: Is everyone having a pleasant time?
- Is everyone being treated equally well (or as poorly as you are)?
- Do the food presentations at each table look pretty much the same?
- Are others enjoying their food?

### **Determining Professional Service**

- Does the waiter know the menu and wine list and explain them in an articulate way?
- Is he well groomed and at ease at the table?
- Does he answer questions completely or find out the answers promptly?
- Does he remove and replace plates and utensils between courses?
- Does he put the plates in front of the right person?
- Does he wait until everyone is finished before removing the plates?
- Does he check in periodically to see if you need anything?
- Does he perform his duties in an unobtrusive manner?
- If there is a delay in the kitchen, does he communicate what's going on?
- If you complain, does he listen and act accordingly?

- Is the waiter able to "read" your table and adapt his behavior? (Some people want lots of interaction, others don't. The best waiters are adept at determining that).

### **Surveying the Menu**

- Can you easily read the type?
- Does the written description reflect what's on the plate?
- Do the choices in each category seem well balanced so you can easily put things together for a meal?
- Are the prices reasonable, given the surroundings and service?

### **Evaluating the Wine List**

- Is the type large enough to read?
- Is the list logically organized?
- Does it go with the food?
- Are there selections in each price range?
- Are there both familiar and unfamiliar labels and varietals?
- Does the list have a personality that distinguishes it from others?
- Are the prices reasonable compared to the price of the food and other wine lists?
- Does the restaurant offer anything special for those who don't drink alcohol?
- Does the wine selection and presentation enhance the theme of the restaurant?

### **When the Food Arrives**

- Do the plates have a consistent style?
- Is there an attempt to make the food visually appealing?

### **Evaluating the Food**

- Is everything properly cooked? (Are sauces curdled? Is pasta overdone?)
- When you take your first bite, what's your immediate reaction?

- Are the flavors balanced? (This question is appropriate with all styles of cooking, whether the secondary ingredients are meant to complement or contrast the main ingredient)?
- Are the flavors bright and integrated? (No dish, even a long-cooked item, should be dull or flat.)
- Is the dish what it should be? (Even if you don't like liver, for example, you still need to know the good from the bad).
- How does this dish compare to similar dishes you've had at other restaurants?
- If the dish is exciting, what is it that makes it so? If it's mediocre, why?
- Check your attitude, once again: Are you sure it's the food that's the problem or are you in a bad mood or frustrated by poor service?
- Is the food worth the price?

### **Analyzing the Ambience**

- Quick, what's your first impression?
- Are you excited to be there when you look around the room?
- How does the decor compare to those of other restaurants?
- Is there an attention to detail in the design?
- How does the place smell?
- Are the tables large enough?
- Are the seats comfortable?
- Is the look of the table -- flatware, napkins, etc. -- consistent with the price?
- Regardless of the amount spent on the interior, is there an attempt to make things pleasant?
- Check out the bathrooms -- the quickest way to determine a restaurant's sanitation habits. Is everything clean and tidy?

### **When You're Ready to Leave**

- Does the waiter make himself available so you can ask for the check? (Technically, the host should ask for the check; if the waiter brings it unsolicited, he should at least make some comment that he's not trying to rush you -- unless you've occupied the table for longer than normal).

- Does the waiter or someone at the door acknowledge you as you leave?

### **After You Leave**

- What is your overall impression of the evening?

- Are there any dishes that you can't wait to try again?

- What stands out as the strongest and weakest aspects of the evening?

- Does the restaurant achieve its stated or implied objectives?

- Would you go back? If so, why? If not, what would need to be changed?

### **After Your Third Visit**

- Do you still want to go back?

- Was the food and service consistent?

- Can you see patterns that will help you project whether the food or service will improve or get worse?

- Do you feel comfortable with your evaluation?

- Will going back another time or two help you find the answer?