

Growing up, dining out: A life in (restaurant) review

Everyone assumes the life of a food critic is eating at one glamorous restaurant after the other. Seattle-based freelance writer Leigh Haddix sums up the pluses and minuses of such a life from the vantage point of her childhood at the critic's table with her mother, the food editor of Good Eating at the Chicago Tribune.

BY LEIGH HADDIX
Special to The Seattle Times

All my early crushes were on busboys and waiters.

I found something compelling in a masculine wrist protruding from a white sleeve as it filled a water glass or set down a plate. My mother was a restaurant critic for a Chicago newspaper, and we went out to eat almost every night.

It wasn't until my teen years that chefs became the target for my schoolgirl affection. Chefs were perfect crush objects: distant, uniformed, vaguely authoritative and creative. The ultimate providers.

I merely used what was around me. From the time I was 10, I was supremely comfortable dining out. After all, I grew up in restaurants.

Every occasion was celebrated in a restaurant. Any important decisions were made while dining out. Big family news was given in restaurants: my parents' divorce, the news that I would be changing schools.

It got to the point where eating at home became a novelty, even a treat. I was sick of going out. Eating in front of the TV became the ultimate decadence. I would beg, "Mom, can we just open a can of beans or just make noodles?"

The job of a restaurant critic sounds glamorous, I know. But it could be very hard work when the food was awful or the cockroaches

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came too close to our soup. Particularly difficult were the situations where the ambiance was appealing, the mom-and-pop owners supremely lovable — and the food inedible.

Even then, we had to go at least twice. Those were the rules. We couldn't judge by one visit, when the mom and pop or the trendiest new chef might have been having an off night.

The absolute worst was the

"research" Mom had to do for those pesky "best in the city" articles. The paper would do a story on the best salmon in the city, or the best barbecued ribs, and for at least two weeks, we had to choke down the same food night after night.

On the eighth straight night of burger-tasting, I vowed to never eat another. My burger-battered body tried to warn me with nausea and other handy tactics, anything it could to avoid eating more of the same.

Years went by before I could look at anything on a bun.

Cooking, on the other hand, was a strange and mysterious skill to me. Lazy and spoiled in terms of food, I preferred to be awed and sustained by what others could do with food, rather than try to cook for myself.

About all I could do was boil a mean pot of water.

After moving out of Mom's house at 18, my first few apartments had refrigerators full of stereotypical college-student fodder. Pizza boxes stacked shelves, Chinese takeout cartons became the perfect vessels — no need for bowls — no dishes to do, more time to study! Friends would open the refrigerator and start laughing.

My poor mother, in hopes that I would soon enjoy cooking, persisted in giving me cookbook after cookbook. It

wasn't until I hit 30 that I finally opened these and managed to feed myself and others without injury.

My foodie upbringing has been both a blessing and a curse. A blessing because I love good food, but a curse that has led to a variety of problems: a tendency toward pudginess, an inability to eat just anywhere, a disdain for the preposterous idea that food is merely a fuel.

I have become a food fascist. While I'm not overly authoritative in other areas of life, I become a tyrant in restaurants.

Pity my dining companions, who can't necessarily order as they please but must placate me by ensuring that no two entrees are the same. How can you tell how good a restaurant is without a variety of dishes?

There's also the sad truth that eating out frequently is often expensive and creates an uncomfortable gap between what I desire and what I can afford.

I still feel annoyance when waiters talk down to me, thinking I don't know what bouillabaisse is or how pinot noir should taste. I also can't ignore

the rage I feel toward diners who treat wait staff with disdain or cruelty, to make themselves feel self-important.

I freely admit that I'm a food snob, but now at least I feel a modicum of shame about this.

I still could talk about cheese for an hour to a captive audience. I also struggle with an abhorrence toward most chain restaurants.

Otherwise, I am dealing with my affliction. I do dine out often, but not excessively, and I mostly refrain myself from flirting with the waiter. Mostly.

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