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How food television is changing the way we dine



With more people cooking—or at least watching it on TV—those who frequent restaurants aren't afraid to give feedback.

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Vancouver chefs and restaurateurs speak on the shift in local diners from unaware customers to discerning foodies-armed with opinions.

By [Michelle da Silva](#), March 22, 2012

With files from [Craig Takeuchi](#)

When Michel Jacob, owner and chef at Le Crocodile, opened his French restaurant in downtown Vancouver over 25 years ago, the term “celebrity chef” was reserved for people like Julia Child, speciality food channels on television didn't exist, and customers certainly weren't blogging about their dining experiences.

“In the old days, you'd tell somebody you were a chef, and nobody would talk to you... Chefs were not very highly regarded,” Jacob told the *Georgia Straight* in a phone interview. “Because of the food channel, chefs are now like movie stars.”

Jacob notes that the rise in popularity of cooking and dining television shows over the past few years has affected both chefs and diners. Not only are customers now interested in what's on their plate and how it's made when they dine out, but cooking—whether as a profession or a hobby—has suddenly become hip.

“I know a lot of guys, on the weekend, they go to Granville Island market for two hours, buy some nice vegetables and ingredients, go back home, open a glass of wine, and cook,” Jacob said. “So when they go to a restaurant, those guys have a really high knowledge about food. If it's not good, they'll tell you right away. In the old days, they'd never know.”

Jacob isn't the only chef noticing the shift in diners from unaware customers to discerning foodies. When *Straight* staffers called more than 100 restaurateurs, chefs, and floor managers and asked them how diners' tastes have changed, many talked about how food-focused television has affected Vancouver's restaurant scene.

“Everything from the Food Network to the people who get the notoriety—chefs and the

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food are absolutely the number one reason why people go out for dinner,” Simon Cotton, co-owner of the Reef, told the *Straight*.

Catherine Introligator, co-owner of French Made Baking, voiced a similar sentiment. “I think people are more educated when it comes to food, like they’ve been watching the Food Network, and everyone’s out and about, discovering more, travelling more, and bringing their experience from travels.”

Meanwhile, Raffaele Aiello, owner of Frankie’s Italian Kitchen & Bar, has noticed customers asking more questions about the menu at his Southern Italian eatery.

“I believe they’re more interested in what they’re eating and more concerned about what the ingredients are,” he said.

The Food Network has not only changed the way that people dine out; but those who work in the restaurant industry also believe that over the past decade, Vancouverites have become better home cooks as well.

“Vancouver clientele is very different than many other large cities,” Francis Regio, co-owner at Gastown’s Cork & Fin, told the *Straight*. “They’re much more finicky, I think. I’ve attributed it to the lifestyle in Vancouver. It’s one of the only major cities where people love to cook and be a part of the culinary industry.”

Mark Taylor, owner and sommelier at Cru and the newly opened Siena, also spoke about the rise of the hobby chef, saying, “Now, with the Food Network and magazines and everything else, and the stuff you can buy at Whole Foods, people cook like that at home. So my theory at Cru is that people go out because it’s hard to cook eight things at home.”

While many restaurant owners and staff agree the effect of food programming on diners has largely been positive, not everyone is happy with how it has transformed customers. Some restaurant owners and staff have encountered diners who believe that they know more about cooking than the professionals.

“They’ll say, ‘Well this is not a proper cioppino,’

media:

“During Dine Out was the weirdest experience of my life. It was like going to a U2 concert or something like that, where everyone’s got their cameras out and taking pictures of the food.”

—Chris Bisaro, executive chef at Brix Restaurant and Wine Bar

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and I'll say, 'Well what's your concept of a cioppino?'" Cork & Fin's Regio said. "Just because they've watched this week's episode of [Gordon] Ramsey or *Top Chef*, they think that's what it is, but everyone has their own interpretation....What makes Vancouver restaurateurs' and chefs' jobs challenging is today, everybody believes they're an expert when they don't have enough background."

Chris Bisaro, executive chef at Yaletown's Brix Restaurant and Wine Bar, had a similar response. "I think a lot of people are educated on food, but I think also a lot of people think they're educated on food," he told the Straight.

Educated or not, diners are now able to make their opinions on restaurants known to the public using social media, blogs, and restaurant reviewing websites. "Every single person that comes through your restaurant is a food critic," Baru Latino co-owner René Lefleur said. "They're either on their phone, they're either Tweeting it, or they're on their Facebook."

While Matt Osborne, executive chef at the Charles Bar, notices that many diners voice their opinions online rather than in person, he and many other restaurant industry insiders believe that at the end of the day, restaurants thrive on trying to please customers and are excited by the challenges that come with serving Vancouver's sophisticated diners.

"Everybody has opinions about restaurants, and they always say that they'll help shape the restaurant they're going to—for the good or the bad," Osborne said. "I definitely think that we are a foodie city, for sure."

I think we're really lucky in Vancouver. You'll see a lot of restaurants that'll pop up and they'll be really popular for the first three to six months and then you really have to kind of either change your identity, change your name, or redo your entire restaurant concept in order to keep the customers coming."

—*Benn McGuire, manager at Lucy's Eastside Diner*

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