

Unmasked

The new face of criticism



Photo by Andrea Schier

Marcia Gagliardi

Marcia Gagliardi is not your everyday food critic. In fact, she won't even call herself a critic. As the *Tablehopper*, she straddles that disappearing line between tradition and innovation, between the critic's role as impartial judge and its future as local gadabout. Gagliardi reviews restaurants for an influential circle of industry insiders, and an expanding circle of city foodies, but she remains a very public fly on the wall, connected and visible to the very folks she writes about. We sat down with her for a quick chat about the future of food reviewing.

Q: How important is anonymity?

GAGLIARDI: As the *Tablehopper*, a large part of my insider's perspective depends on my relationships with people in the industry. So I am who I am. It's how I get the good gossip, and steer my readers toward the best about a place—the best table, the chef's story, the background on a particular dish, even a dish that's not on the menu.

The big-name critics are so recognized, and their palates so well known, that nothing's really anonymous anymore. I think the power that critics have at big dailies is diminishing. People want to hear more than one opinion.

Q: Ten years down the line, what role will today's critic play?

GAGLIARDI: I see critics becoming more of a moral compass, guiding and educating readers about the evermore complicated decisions we make as diners. Which fish are raised sustainably and which should we avoid? How do we eat well and stay healthy? The critic should point out restaurants that use local producers, and apply pressure on the others to step up a little.

Q: Where are we not heading?

GAGLIARDI: There are so many places doing bad things to small plates. I'm really tired of this communal dining format with kitchens sending out tiny dishes that are hard to share, and overpriced to boot. And they don't replace your plates often enough. If I see one more variation of crème brûlée, or a trio of crème brûlées, I'm gonna holler. And foams are abused. For an experimental restaurant, it fits, but to have foam turn up at an Italian trattoria is just plain weird.

For more prognostications and local food happenings, visit www.tablehopper.com.

Ad Space Holder