

The Restaurant Critic

CONFESSIONS OF A SOMMELIER #234

By Jamie Drummond

One of the most sacred rules of the hospitality industry is to treat each and every customer equally. A few years back I learned this the hard way.

Even today, restaurants still often live and die by the pen of the restaurant critic. A seasoned sommelier can lose a lot of sleep over a reviewer criticizing his food/wine matches as being too heavy-handed.

In Canada no restaurant reviewer is more revered than the Globe and Mail's venerable Joanne Kates. Her erudite commentaries are the first thing that so many in the restaurant industry rush to read. One of Kates' strengths as a reviewer is her anonymity. She has quite successfully managed to keep her identity hidden over many years, and this adds a certain cache to her pieces, since she theoretically receives the same level of service as everyone else in the room.

And so to my story of how I learned my lesson.

It was one of those typical December Friday evenings in the Wine Bar. There was about a week to go until the holidays, and the place was buzzing from 5:30 p.m. onwards with holiday shoppers pouring in. It was already obvious that this was going to be a bloody busy night.

I was working the floor hardcore, fluffing the folks seated at the bar, giving out tempting little tastes of some of my new vinous treats, just doing what I do, when all of a sudden our hostess tapped me on my shoulder, rather urgently. Our hostess, who knows

everyone, swiftly informed me that none other than Joanne Kates had just been seated at table 18 with a party of six. Oh crap...

Now, having once been caught with my trousers down (figuratively this time) by esteemed UK restaurant critic A.A. Gill, I was determined to make up for past misdemeanors. Add to this that Ms. Kates had previously reviewed our establishment in a very favourable light, but had slammed the service aspect of her experience. "Not tonight Joanne, not tonight... not on my watch!" I decided with a Shackleton-like determination. Action stations!

After informing the kitchen and front-of-house of our just-seated guest, I approached the table as confidently as I could. Surveying the table en route, I swiftly identified the lady herself, seated betwixt a gaggle of immaculately dressed Rosedale ladies and tweed jacket-clad Annex academics. Looking back today, I realize just how ridiculous I must have appeared, anxiously rubbing my palms together as I introduced myself to the party as "The other Jamie" like some ginger-haired Basil Fawlty.

What transpired over the following three hours was a glorious comedy of errors: a guest who asked for a dry martini with Tanqueray gin, as all other brands "made her instantly sick" (cue a food runner dashing up the street to the local LCBO and back in record time); more esoteric allergies than one could shake a big peanut-butter-smear stick at; requests for a wine that "tastes like

a man" (seriously); and a debate with one of the guests regarding the correct serving temperature of vintage champagne, culminating in the line "I'll have you know, I have a house in France."

Needless to say the entire team ensured that Ms. Kates' table had an altogether spectacular experience. When I did my final quality check at the end of the evening, the entire party seemed happy and satiated to the extreme, with one of the more eccentric gentlemen appearing to have fallen asleep inside his own extravagant beard with a huge grin on his face.

As I thanked Ms. Kates for her patronage, I noticed something rather odd. I could swear that she was flirting with me... in fact, she was coming on "hammer and tongues" as the UK vernacular so sweetly describes it. She asked me for something to write on as she had no cards on her person, and proceeded to inscribe her details on the back of one of my cards, telling me that her evening had undoubtedly been one of the finest dining experiences ever. As Joanne said her final farewell she pecked me lightly on the cheek and slyly winked at me! Oh my!

Now, dear reader, you may wonder how I painfully learned my lesson that each and every customer is to be treated equally? Well... after stepping back into the office with a small glass of wine, feeling quite chuffed with myself and quite sure that any future writings by Ms. Kates would be of the most positive nature, I pulled out the card upon which she had written her details and examined her elegant handwriting. It read "Call me, Elizabeth Dunn, 416.555.5234, XXXXX." **CB**

Sommelier Jamie Drummond oversees the wine program for Jamie Kennedy's various establishments. Names (and telephone numbers) in this story have been changed to protect the guilty parties.

The collage features four distinct images: a modern restaurant interior with a bar and tables; a portrait of a man with his hands clasped, identified as 'PROFESSOR CHEE-BEAD LONG'; an outdoor courtyard area with tables and chairs; and a menu card for 'Veritas LOCAL FARE'. The menu card highlights 'SEASONAL FARE FROM LOCAL SUSTAINABLY HARVESTED INGREDIENTS' and lists 'BISTRO, LOUNGE, COURTYARD.' with contact information: '234 King Street East | dine.to/veritas | info@localfare.ca | 416.363.8447'.

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