

The art of fine whining

How should one deal with a dodgy dining experience? Food writer Vicki Williams spills the beans on the etiquette of eating out

Restaurant critiques – much like the reviewers who write them – come in all shapes, sizes and temperaments, ranging from the positively glowing to the downright pernicky and even scathing. Often, the worse the food, the funnier the review as the writer revels in piercing culinary pretensions.

However, complaining in person is another matter entirely and, like many diners, food writers usually prefer not to confront the manager for all but the most egregious of offences; instead, silently vowing never to return.

People are often too timid to confront, but, equally, dining etiquette offers few avenues for complaints. Some people may choose not to say anything for fear that, in a fit of pique, the chef might do something unmentionable to their dinner. Of course, even a timid customer might feel the restaurant's behaviour is so outrageous that complaining is the only option.

On one such occasion, I wanted to do a Gordon Ramsay when, for a third time, my lamb main course was served rare, rather than medium as I had requested. I kept my head, but only because it was meant to be a romantic dinner, not a review. I did have a chat with the manager, but was told that the chef (from a two-star Michelin

restaurant) was unwilling to cook the lamb to my satisfaction and would I prefer to have the veal instead. Seriously?

Of course, letting the chef decide on the dishes can work in your favour; the logic being that by giving them some creative freedom you will see them at their best. On one occasion when I did defer to the chef, the friendly but clueless server looked at us like we were stupid when we asked what the soup was. She said, confidently: "Soup".

Contemporary Siberian – that's how my dinner companion described our degustation menu of dishes that mostly tasted like they had been dragged through a salt mine. I regret not saying anything, as there were two dishes we left largely uneaten. I was surprised that no one asked about them. Perhaps they were afraid of what I would say.

"It is acceptable to complain when food which is supposed to be warm or hot arrives cold, when those at the table receive their main courses at staggered times, and if the menu description is completely misleading," says Annabel Jackson, who teaches dining etiquette and is a wine and food educator, consultant and author.

Jackson recently made an exception to those rules when she complained about waiting. "I ordered two first courses and

specifically asked for the first one to arrive at the same time as my son's order. We waited a long time and I complained three times; apparently they were being cooked in different kitchens."

While Jackson says she didn't complain in a forceful or loud manner, she thought that, "My body language told the story".

"I never complain," says Vicky Cheng, executive chef at Liberty Private Works, Liberty Exchange Restaurant and Bar, and Liberty Stone Oven Pizza. "As a chef I understand stuff happens and, sometimes, is unavoidable. I try to analyse what happened and still appreciate their effort, and have the best time I can with those I am dining with. We will talk among ourselves, but not necessarily complain to the restaurant."

A similar view is shared by Blue Butcher head chef Daniel Chaney. "I don't normally complain about food when dining out; as a chef I know how extremely hard chefs work. So, whenever I choose to eat out, I always remind myself I'm in the same industry and to stay humble and respectful. If it's really bad then I simply wouldn't go back."

That view is shared by Paul Seaman, a public relations professional. "I would complain about the wrong bill, but if I don't like the experience I just don't go back. I might give a place a second try. If things don't go well in a normally great restaurant, which can happen in the best of places, my protest is always through the tip."

But Chaney draws the line at steaks. "If it's undercooked I will say something. The problem is everyone has a different opinion of what medium rare is. If it's overcooked



Illustration: Jonathan Jay Lee