

From: ken@newtons.net.au
Subject: OBSERVATIONS AND CRITICISMS ABOUT RESTAURANTS

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To: andrew@cuisine.co.nz

Hello Andrew

Found your name on the Cuisine site, and it seems to be my only appropriate point of editorial contact. However, by all means pass it on to a more applicable person.

I felt moved to write to Cuisine Magazine on a couple of issues, not necessarily to stir the pot or unnecessarily criticise. However, there is a rather important matter about NZ food which I think deserves a closer investigation by Cuisine. While we are not subscribers to Cuisine, I must advise that we buy most issues and have cancelled our subs to the Australian Gourmet Traveller because we feel that Cuisine is closer to our taste, and we like your presentation and ideas.

More importantly, we use Cuisine as our constant travel guide on our many trips to enjoy NZ scenery, food and wines. To further cement my bona-fides, I am a journalist by profession, though not a food or wine writer, and my partner and I have spent our Christmas vacation in New Zealand for the past four years or more...including Stewart Island (superb, but I believe we got there in time before the big corporates ruin the place), Wellington (loved the food, waterfront and shopping), Auckland (just another city), touring the South Island (brings back the joy of motoring) and we have just returned this week from a restful and fantastic 23 days in the Hawke's Bay and Bay of Plenty areas.

We used Cuisine Wine Country (your 2007 guide) as our main reference on where to dine and visit. We chose to have a long lunch daily, usually at a leading winery with restaurant.

In Tauranga, where good vineyards are few, we chose top restaurants, some of which we found ourselves.

Now to the main point.

In our visit to at least 23 high-end restaurants in these areas over this period, we must report that far too many of these establishments are LYING (by omission of information) to their customers about the source of their food, and with probably three exceptions, all menus were boring, lacked innovation and some were downright disappointing. One famous winery near Napier with a reputation much bigger than it deserves (happy to supply names if you want them), served up a Caesar salad which I doubt Woolworths would have been game to sell for \$3 in a plastic box for fear of ridicule. We paid \$23 for an entree plate, and it was a sham.

But the BIG CON in far too many NZ restaurants (and this includes the cooking school at the famous Auckland seafood market where I attended two cooking courses pre-Christmas in 2006) is that they are passing off cheap, tasteless imported seafood from the cesspools of Asia as being New Zealand produce. Even worse, the wait staff at 90% of the restaurants we visited knew precious little about the food they were serving and when asked where the seafood came from, they looked us straight in the eye and said "New Zealand of course - doesn't all the best seafood come from New Zealand". However, as a journalistic cynic, I pressed the point in every restaurant, until my standard approach to every menu became "Before I order anything from your menu, would you be good enough to check with chef on the origins of all seafood on the

menu - and I would appreciate the truth." Sometimes reluctantly, the waiter would return to the kitchen and again, in 90% of the instances, the news they brought back was not good.

Here's a classic case in point and here I am prepared to name the restaurant because I feel they are doing a great disservice to New Zealand's food reputation. We booked two months ahead from Australia for a set-menu Christmas day lunch (at \$90 a head) at the Harbourside Restaurant right on the water at Tauranga in the CBD.

We had a very friendly waitress, and she happily sped to the kitchen with our questions on the origin of their menu seafood. When she returned, she was long-faced and shocked, informing us that the squid, scallops and prawns all came from parts of Asia. In one of the set dishes, the menu clearly said it was made from NZ seafood. THAT WAS A LIE. It contained scallops from China, the most polluted country in the world, and the subject of many bans on their food production because they are the great imitators - even of food. And even if the seafood was produced in hygienic conditions, which most is not and I'll provide evidence shortly, everyone knows that farmed produce bears no relationship to food caught in the wild. I'm sure Cuisine understands this better than most, so I won't rabbit on about this point.

The waitress was shocked because she then admitted to us that she had been lying to customers for some time, naively believing that such a fine restaurant must be serving local seafood. On examining the menu, this admission meant that 50% of the dishes containing seafood comprised cheap imitation ingredients and not produce from New Zealand waters, as most diners would have expected.

The people at the next close table, overhearing the conversations, were also horrified and their

conversation was clearly an indictment of any NZ fine food establishment needing to resort to imitation seafood from Asia. One can only conclude that most diners in the top restaurants don't question the origin of the food, believing that no fine dining restaurant would have the gall not to serve fresh New Zealand produce. If it's not in season, take it off the menu - at least be honest about it. This practice is a con for one main reason...the restaurants are still asking us to pay up to \$30 a plate for this cheap product which most thinking people would never put on their plates at home, so in the process, the restaurant owner is boosting his/her bottom line through imitating prime NZ seafood.

As a documentary maker and script writer (www.newtons.net.au), I have filmed many aspects of Asian life, culture and industry, and I have directed filming at seafood farms in the Straits of Malacca. Believe me, you would not want to eat the fish which comes from these polluted waters. It is common throughout Asia for the tourist-trap restaurants on the waterfront to direct toilet waste through a straight pipe into the water under the restaurant. Tourists then marvel at the huge nets they then winch up a few metres away, and watch in awe as the small fish in the net are transferred to the cooking pot. I worked on assignment for state governments in Malaysia who were concerned about industrial waste upstream from massive prawn and fish farms and newspaper stories of seafood pollution were very common in that country.

Restaurants might argue in defence that if the food from Asia was that bad, why do the authorities allow it into the country. China and Vietnam in particular are very skilled at cleaning up food with chemicals to scrape past the gate keepers. Look for the big BASA (Vietnamese catfish) con on any number of authoritative websites.

China is a horror story, and if you check my website, you will see I have inserted stories from various media which only demonstrate that the Chinese will resort to any subterfuge to sell a product, food or otherwise. And if you've ever tried to find a clean toilet in Asia outside a five star hotel, forget it.

The other major question for both Australia and New Zealand (Australian restaurants are no more honest than yours) is that by law now, even Woolworths or your own supermarkets are obliged to label the source of their seafood. Why do restaurants get away with not having to own up to the origins of their produce? Restaurant owners would prefer not to be included in this welcome legislation, because it's easier and more profitable to imitate good food and hide it under interesting sauces, than to do a bit of work and seek out and serve up well prepared local fresh produce.

And we also found absolute confusion in most of the restaurants and seafood markets we visited recently, about the origin of prawns, most of which in NZ restaurants come from farms in India (and I've been there too and you take your life in your hands with most of their food). Nobody in any restaurant seems to know whether NZ produces any prawns at all, so I'm still none the wiser. One waitress said their prawns came from the west coast of NZ, another was adamant that while NZ produces probably the purest seafood in the world, there's never a prawn to be found. Another restaurant admitted they buy their prawns from Australia. What is the truth?

In the Auckland Fish market last year, my partner and I went to a cooking course conducted by a leading chef...the Tuscan night I think it was. While some of the best seafood in the world was sitting in the fish market downstairs, this chef declared it was fine to use pre-packaged crab flesh in little plastic tubs.

The resulting dish we all prepared was bland and reflected that it had been made with second rate, brown, stringy and dry food that might have been crab. The next day, I went back to the market, and found they did indeed sell these tubs of food from some mob in Asia, and the packet declared "from the clear blue waters of Asia - or similar"...but didn't say where. In all my travels through Asia, with the exception of some offshore islands, I didn't find any clear blue waters, and the 'sand crab" meat in the tub bore no similarity to the sand crab meat I am familiar with, and I eat a lot of them from our Queensland waters.

So in summary, we (and most thinking people I speak to), are getting heartily sick and tired of restaurant food, at the prices they are demanding, on the basis that most food is overpriced for what it is, lacks innovative use of local produce and as this story shows, contains imitation seafood which I wouldn't serve at home at any price. With rare exceptions you could be excused for thinking that all the menus are prepared by one person, with variations to the sauce to distinguish between them. If a restaurant can't produce food better and more exciting than I can produce at home, I believe they have failed in their mission. Alas, 90% of the restaurants we left our good money with over the 23 days from 8 Dec to 1 January, fall into that category.

As a result, future trips to NZ, or anywhere, will require a more detailed investigation of food origins than we have accepted blindly in the past and I would be exhorting all thinking diners in New Zealand and Australia to start asking more questions about the origins of the menu ingredients.

From Cuisine's point of view, it makes one wonder whether all the entries in the annual guide are paid advertisements, or does Cuisine simply take a restaurant's claim to fame on face value. Interesting

questions? ... and if you feel inclined to set me straight on any issue, I would be pleased to hear from you.

Coincidentally, fuel was added to my fire by my holiday reading of Jim Harrison's "The Raw and the Cooked" which vividly exposes the restaurant practices of America. Google Jim Harrison and you will find he knows what he is talking about.

Kind regards - and we like the magazine regardless. We'll just be more wary in future.

Ken Newton