



## The Customer is Always Right, Right? A Look at How Yelp Has Taken Hold of the Boston Restaurant Industry

Rachel DeSimone

Formal restaurant reviews made their debut back in 1941 when Duncan Hines, known today for his boxed-cake mix, put out his first restaurant guidebook, *Adventures in Good Eating*. The intention was, “to guide travelers and protect them from eating poisonous food from unsanitary places,” according to his biography by Louis Hatchett.

The network of reviewing is much more complex today, as the Internet has managed to become an integral part of the restaurant scene, as well as every second of many people’s days. “@RamseyMichel you wouldn’t know a good meal if it sat on your

face.” This is the fictional Tweet that started a war between feisty Chef Carl Casper and pompous critic, Michel Ramsey, in last summer’s hit movie *Chef*. Using the Internet to amplify one’s voice is not a far-fetched concept for the Commonwealth. After the incident at Harvard Square’s Best of Boston restaurant, Alden & Harlow, burst into Boston’s food media this past February, the clash between restaurant and Yelper was ripe.

In response to two women who sat themselves in the restaurant, sans reservation and commenced to exploit the staff, Chef-Owner Michael Scelfo captured an im-

age of them and posted it on his Instagram with the hashtag “wedontnegotiatewithyelpers.” As the pair remained perched in their spot, threatening to “Yelp” about the situation, Chef Scelfo and his staff decided to kill them with kindness until they left, according to Eater’s account of the event. But what’s the real issue here? Is it the women? The chef? Or even the platform?

Yelp and other online review systems such as TripAdvisor and OpenTable became popular after the new millennium with Yelp launching in 2004, TripAdvisor in 2000 and OpenTable in 1998. These systems, all unique in their approach, shared one collective goal—guide the customer in the right direction and truthfully inform them about what they are getting. That being said, online reviewers are cut from many different cloths, each writing with different lenses and preferences.

Although reviewers are encouraged to speak candidly, the threat of using online review systems as a tool for malice does not align with the values of these companies. The tension, posing review site against restaurant, is just not how it was meant to turn out. Yelp has become the forerunner in this issue, as the threat to “Yelp” has become legitimate.

Yelp was founded with one purpose in mind, “to connect people to great local businesses by allowing folks to read and write reviews of their consumer experiences,” according to Damien Smith, Marketing Director for Yelp Boston. “We wanted to enable folks to make smart purchasing decisions, on anything from fish tacos to a chiropractor, and I think we’ve done a pretty good job.”

Yelp’s reach is growing, currently spanning across 29 countries. They reported 135 million unique monthly visitors to their site at the end of 2014 as well as 71 million cumulative reviews on the site since they began. The first thing most people do

when they search for a new restaurant to eat at is check out the Yelp page, and it is hard to avoid as Yelp usually comes up first or second when a restaurant is searched on the Internet. Many times, people will put their trust in stranger’s opinions rather than just taking their friend’s word.

The majority of Yelp’s reviews are five and four star reviews, 42% and 25% respectively. Since most people are inclined to write positive reviews, the negative ones have a tendency to stick out like sore thumbs, maintaining the ability to bring down the overall average star rating of an establishment. Several well-known Boston restaurants, with Yelp ratings spanning from 3.5 to 4.5 stars, some of which can be found on Boston Magazine’s 50 Best Boston Restaurants of 2014 list, have shared their sentiments on the matter. They are all aware of Yelp reviews to varying extents, both positive and negative, that are written about their restaurants and the management teams deal with them primarily, sharing them with their staff when necessary.

“We are very much aware of Yelp reviews,” says Tom Borgia, Executive Chef of Russell House Tavern, “I have the app and use it as part of my morning routine. I don’t get overly excited or bummed about any of them. We really just look for trends; if someone says the tuna tartar is flavorless, we don’t pay much attention. But if we see that three or four times in a week we know there’s a problem.”

The goal for most restaurants in responding to Yelp reviews is to improve the overall experience for guests and to give them the sentiment of wanting to return. “Our General Manager actively responds to both positive and negative feedback,” says Jody Adams, Chef-Owner of Rialto and Trade, “we find all reviews help us to improve our overall experience for the guest. Their feedback is very important to us.” Ad-

ams does feel however, that reviews “would be more beneficial if we could actually have a conversation with the reviewer to get more detail about their experience and develop a relationship with them.”

It is important to keep in mind that all Yelpers are not created equal. “I don't like being lumped in with the bad apples when a chef goes on a social media tear after being threatened with a bad review, but I hope that restaurants do appreciate the positive posts and are able to take constructive criticism when warranted,” says Emily G., a member of Boston's Yelp Elite Squad since 2009.

Yelp's Elite Squad is a specially recognized group of their most credible and frequent Yelpers. The perks of being in this group are that members get a special Elite badge on their Yelp profile along with getting frequent invites to free private events. Anyone can nominate themselves or their friends to be a part of this, “Exclusive in-the-know crew,” according to Yelp's Elite homepage.

Emily joined with the intention of being able to “give some love to businesses that maybe would have gone unnoticed...I like giving shout-outs to places that are doing what they do well. I don't really find it fun to talk about the bad places, they'll probably go away on their own if my negative experience wasn't an anomaly.”

Emily has written negative reviews before but admits that they aren't much fun. “There have been occasions when I decided to write a negative review after management was given the opportunity to rectify the situation, either at the time of dining or with a follow-up email, and they chose not to. I don't think it's fair to slam a place if you don't give them a chance to make it right.”

Boston restaurants certainly do take these opportunities to grow from Yelp reviews they receive. “For positive reviews, we love to print them out and use them as teach-



*Left, Tom Borgia, Executive Chef of Russell House Tavern*

ing tools for the servers and cooks,” says Dan Raia, Chef de Cuisine of Sweet Cheeks Q. “Positive reinforcement works wonders for the morale of the staff. Pointing out specific things that a Yelper will write is great for them to see why we go the lengths we do to make our guests happy.”

On the opposite side of the spectrum, “for the negative reviews, we try to use them to better ourselves, to better serve our customers, but sometimes people have unrealistic expectations. An example of a directly helpful negative review would be people complaining about our fatty brisket. In Texas, fatty brisket is king, but when we first opened, we received a lot of uneasiness with the amount of fat we left on our brisket, that we changed the way we butchered our meat raw, and even trimmed it after it was cooked.”

This seems like a pretty good system—reviews are written, positive ones make everyone happy and negative ones provide opportunities to improve the relationship with the guest. However, when things



*Right*, The bar at the Russell House Tavern in Cambridge, MA



get out of hand is when concern might arise.

The question must be asked, are Boston restaurants and Yelpers on the same team? Or are they on completely different teams? The glue that holds the two together—“Mutual curiosity,” says Smith. “Yelpers want to discover new and buzz-worthy restaurants, and restaurant owners are curious to hear about their customers’ experiences. That said, Yelp is a platform for candid reviews, and while almost 80% of them are three, four and five stars, the constructive criticisms can draw an emotional response. At the end of the day, Yelp exists to shine a light on Boston’s best businesses.”

Some Yelpers even write with a conscious effort to balance negative reviews with positive ones. “I’m very open with what I write,” says Nick Barber, IDG New Service’s Boston-based multimedia correspondent and casual Yelper. “After spending \$25-100 a person I feel like you have the credentials to write an honest opinion of service, food and atmosphere. I also try to be even-handed in my reviews. If I write a bad one I make sure to write a good one of another restaurant at some point. I wrote a one-star review just last fall. I did it with the expectation of receiving nothing in return. I wanted to help fellow diners avoid a bad experience. In ad-

dition when I read bad reviews, I take them with a grain of salt. I know people are more likely to complain than praise on online forums.”

In the hospitality industry the age-old motto, “The customer is always right,” has been echoed repeatedly. With online platforms in the mix, the customer may always have a public voice, but the accuracy of them always being right yearns to be examined.

“The customer is not always right, but the business is not always right either... what matters is that you take care of each situation and get the job done,” says Sara Fetbroth, General Manager of Oleana. “It is very difficult to handle this notion in our industry, and I imagine it is the same for any industry that centers around people...we try to make people feel happy and taken care of.” Fetbroth finds the review sites at fault, “I think some online sites are looking to create drama by trying to make it about being right or wrong. But it is not just the sites, a lot of people do. The sites just give them a platform to do so.”

“The customer is not always right, at least not outwardly,” says Borgia. “Online review platforms give people who firmly believe in this notion an amazing opportu-



*Left, Oleana features an open kitchen where guests can watch their meal being made*

nity to make complete fools of themselves.” He followed up with an example of a recent Yelper who complained about missing ingredients in a dish they were recently served at the restaurant. As it turns out, the ingredients in question were not even a part of the dish originally.

“That sentiment has always meant that no matter what, we will always do as much as we can do to make the customer happy, to an extent. It drives me crazy to read something that just isn’t true,” says Raia. He refers to times when someone has blatantly written a review about the wrong restaurant.

“The customer is not always right,” says Adams, “but we listen to make sure we are catering to the guests’ needs before all else. We work to find a solution for whatever they are looking for; 99% of the time the guest is open and we are successful. Every person who walks through our doors has their own personal expectation of what kind of experience they are looking for and who they think we are. When their expectation of who they think we are does not remotely

match who we are, there can be a problem. If they view this kind of experience as a failure on our part and they rate us on Yelp, we suffer.”

“The customer is usually right unless they are rude or mean,” Says Ana Sortun, Chef-Owner of Oleana and Sarma. “I think that people who use Yelp as a resource to measure a restaurant’s quality of experience need to remember that the credentials are random...you have to search more within to be able to filter the constructive criticism or compliments.”

Yelp has been working hard to maintain reliability in their reviewers, making a concerted effort to check reviewer credentials. “We have some of the brightest minds working tirelessly to ensure the recommendation software is effective so our site stays useful and reliable as possible,” says Smith. As well, Yelp actually provides a two-way communication system through their Yelp Business Page ([biz.yelp.com](http://biz.yelp.com)), giving users access to a suite of free tools, which is something that most are not familiar with.





*Above,* Two featured menu items from the Greek-inspired restaurant, Oleana



“Business owners can respond privately or publicly to reviews, upload photos of their business, flip on check-in offers, ensure seasonal hours are correct, and other goodies, including a completely free reservation system.”

Another solution to improve customer-restaurant relationships that have been set askew by online reviews comes in the form of an online survey tool created by Strategic Business Communications (SBC). SBC is a San Diego Based company that strategically helps organizations obtain their own visions through meeting and event planning, training and consulting, and consumer, employee and market research. They have brought Ooze it to the market, which stands for: Optimizing every opportunity with zealous enthusiasm. This tool essentially removes the need for online review platforms at all. “This unique survey tool focuses on consumer, employee and/or market research,” says Lisa Malmgren, one of SBC’s Regional Account Managers. “The biggest factor in growing any business is actual customer loyalty, re-

ferrals and as of most recently, positive online reviews.”

“A very recent poll that was featured on Good Morning America established that 86% of consumers make their decision by reading online reviews,” Malmgren shares. “Our solution is to manage, measure and improve your online reviews with our satisfaction survey that typically has four to five simple questions, which are based on how the customer feels.” The survey only sets customers back about 60 seconds and makes a big impact. “Should a customer have a problem with the food or service for example, the complaint goes directly to the appointed manager of that business establishment so that it can be addressed immediately and discretely, instead of being posted on Yelp and other review pages.” Negative reviews are addressed immediately with personalized contact, closing the gap for a disgruntled guest to be left stewing.

“Customers become promoters and promoters are the best advertising platforms for your business which ultimately breed

customer loyalty,” says Malmgren. She believes in the power of the positive online review and that in a city where there is extreme competition it is imperative for restaurants, “to manage their online reviews, as too many negative reviews can actually ruin a restaurant’s reputation for a very, very long time.”

These tools can be put in place, but it is hard to avoid those reviewers that just want to vent, and sometimes even take it too far. It is not just about maintaining business but also keeping morale at an establishment up. “Some of my partners and staff had followed Yelp in the past, taking the feedback pretty seriously,” says Sortun. She has seen “a lot of devastation and creative interruption,” come from some of the more scathing reviews. “It’s hard to have filters for the feedback and not try to be everything for everyone.”

It is important for these seasoned chefs to maintain a tough skin as they constantly face scrutiny. “As artists and craftsmen we put ourselves out there to be criticized every day,” says Borgia. “It’s the nature of what we do and you can’t have thin skin.” It is also imperative to keep things in perspective as a restaurant staff member. “At the end of the day these reviews are opinions. You have to look at them in a broader context and try your best to sort through useful

feedback and individual preferences,” says Fetbroth.

These days so many aspects of every day life are digital. Technology has even encroached on what the hospitality industry has prided itself most on—face-to-face interactions and communication. “As a front-of-house professional, I take pride in our talent of communicating with people,” says Fetbroth. “But when we are not able to use that talent what do we do?”

Social media has played a significant role in digital interaction taking command, and with more and more apps and technology being developed, this trend does not seem to be going anywhere any time soon. “I think social media has changed restaurants more than review platforms, but maybe restaurants are more customer feedback friendly now,” says Raia. “I think some people are proud that people don’t like them on Yelp, and that they stick to their guns on certain menu items or policies. Others feel threatened and feel the need to change to make every customer happy. I think there has to be a middle ground where you realize you need to bend sometimes, but overall sticking to what you believe your restaurant should be.” ■

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**Rachel DeSimone**, a native New Yorker, is passionate about unique food and it fuels her writing. She is currently Editor-in-Chief of Spoon University, an online food resource for college students made up of over 1,800 contributors at more than 50 campuses. Rachel is a senior at Boston University in the School of Hospitality Administration and minoring in journalism. After graduation, she hopes to participate in the BU Gastronomy Masters program.