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1989 IN THE NEW YEAR, RESTAURANTGOERS HOPE TO SEE LESS OF CERTAIN THINGS

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Hello, my name is Jim, and I'll be your waiter this evening . . ."

Is this abhorrent greeting the worst thing on the contemporary restaurant scene? No, say the critics, there are many, many offenses.

If critics and foodies could start off the new year by rewriting menus and retraining staffs, if they could redesign dining rooms to exclude all the uncomfortable elements, what would they get rid of? Some answers are: hard chairs, tables so close that your neighbor can hear what you're saying, ear-splitting noise, music turned up to disco decibel levels, cheap wine by the glass, waiting interminably at the bar, burnt coffee, and being interrupted, just as conversation is beginning to flow, by a waiter asking, "How is everything?" Thirty years ago, when most American restaurants prepared a kind of homogenous Continental cuisine in settings that looked pretty similar, there was nothing to get excited about, poke fun at, or wish away. "There was nothing at all," says Jennifer Josephy, a cookbook editor at Little, Brown. But American cooking in general is emerging from a tumultuous decade. Restaurateurs left Continental cuisine behind for classic French cuisine. They abandoned that when nouvelle cuisine swept France, and chefs here did wholesale nouvelle imitations (some went to France and copied what they saw; some copied each other). Then came the era when anything American and regional was all the rage. Finally, a cross-pollination of regional dishes produced combinations such as Southwest chilies in New England chowder.

Now, says Merrill Shindler, restaurant critic for the Los Angeles Herald Examiner, we are in an era of "lunatic trendiness." Restaurants are trying to out-innovate one another, and they're coming up with some mighty ridiculous dishes and practices.

An example of such pointless trendiness, says Shindler, is the Cabernet mayonnaise that accompanied a kung pao chicken he was served in a restaurant that specializes in Chinese food with a California touch. Shindler asked the waiter what the mayonnaise was and what it was for. "The waiter couldn't tell me what to do with it," Shindler says. "It just seemed like they thought the plate should have something else on it."

Even in the culinary fast lane, where surprises are expected and foodies beg to be thrilled, where sea urchins and arugula salads flourish, critics find themselves bewildered, shaking their heads and wondering what they just ate and why. Merrill Shindler recently ate guacamole with raw clams hidden inside. "I looked at it and said, 'This is very creative and very disgusting.'"

L. A. restaurateurs, says Shindler, can do some pretty absurd things with food, and when the fashion dictated large plates with small portions, they celebrated what Shindler calls the "Look-Under-Your-Lettuce-Leaf-to-Find-Your-Steak" school of eating. He thinks we're nearing the end of that era.

"It's wonderful if you're dieting," says Brenda Shapiro, a food writer from Chicago, who dislikes being served too little food. "There is a restaurant here that serves a risotto pancake," she says. "It's divine, but there's one of them -- four inches in diameter -- and it's not enough."

Shapiro dislikes long descriptions of the daily specials recited tableside -- as many as five dishes may be mentioned, she says, complete with mispronunciations of French and Italian words. Few people can concentrate enough to remember everything, and by the end of the last special you can't remember a thing about the first one. Then someone in the party invariably asks the waiter to repeat part of the list, so everyone is forced to listen again.

"Everyone wants the specials to stop being announced at the beginning. As you get older, you can't keep all that in your head; it's exhausting," says Shapiro.

She has given up on restaurants that will not accept reservations. "You wait an hour or an hour and a half, you're expected to drink. I'm just too pooped." In Chicago, she says, people get up early and go to bed early, and she considers waiting at the bar a waste of time.

Shapiro longs for the day when food becomes simpler. She thinks it may happen soon, but still there will be fads.

The fashion for underdone foods has gone so far, says Jennifer Josephy, that she has been served "al dente vegetables that have hardly seen the steamer, they're so crunchy they're a step above raw." Also, she cites "fish that's been seared, but is still raw, and underdone poultry. I'm too much of an American to enjoy it."

Another fad that seems to be invading the Boston restaurant scene is Tex-Mex food, which Josephy considers a "fake cuisine" by the time it's prepared here. "We're too far away from it to do it right. It's too alien; we don't have the right ingredients." But, she says, it has all the satisfying elements: it's new, it's salty, it's fattening. She wonders if the people preparing it have ever been to the Southwest.

A fad that originated in New Orleans that everyone would like to see the last of is blackened foods. "I was in a fairly nice place the other day and they had blackened meatloaf on the menu," says critic Merrill Shindler about a Los Angeles restaurant. "Out of a perverse sense I ordered it." Blackened meatloaf, reports Shindler, "tastes like an ashtray."

But everyone, even cooks in the backward Northeast, knows that blackened foods were so scorned last year that they were practically hooted off menus. Clark Wolf, the New York food and restaurant consultant, says that by the end of '87, "we wanted to see a public flushing of blackened everything."

This year, says Wolf, who consults to restaurants around the country, he's tired of baby vegetables and "infant chefs."

"Infant chefs" are inexperienced chefs, mostly in their mid-to late-20s. Many of the restaurants that opened in the last five years are run by these young chefs and they have received a lot of press. Merrill Shindler also wonders why so many restaurants have young chefs at their helm. "When did chefs suddenly become 19?" he asks, "Where did the old chefs go? I guess they all work at country clubs, taking the crust off the white bread."

Both men are annoyed by the noise in trendy restaurants. Some new restaurants have acoustical problems that the owners can't correct because no one anticipated the problem and the cash flow prevents them from changing anything once construction is finished. Other restaurateurs, claim the consulting architects, ask for dining rooms with an alarming noise level. Noise is exciting and the place will feel lively, they're told.

Clark Wolf says that "ear-melting noise levels" are not exciting, they're annoying and prevent people from having good old-fashioned conversation. Shindler says that in Los Angeles there are restaurants that are so noisy, he can't taste the food. "I've had to step outside to taste what's in the dish," he says.

The noise problem, says Shindler, is aggravated by restaurant design that doesn't take the customer into account, "decor in which we're not important at all." Los Angeles is known for restaurant designs that use industrial materials with space age elements and ornamentation from theatrical sets. On second thought, adds Shindler, now that everyone in Los Angeles is wearing black for day and evening, "you can't see the people anymore, so the restaurant might as well look interesting."

Clark Wolf is "tired of architecture of the moment, so weird, so terribly exciting this minute, that we're bound to get sick of it." There is a stretch of new Manhattan restaurants between 10th and 23rd streets decorated in a style Wolf calls "Faux Ho" because so much of it is trompe l'oeil. "We don't want restaurants that look like something else," especially, he adds, since "we're recovering from a brief, painful relationship with raw concrete as a design element."

"We're moving into real surfaces." The new year, Wolf hopes, will bring restaurants with "real rooms for real people."

About a year ago, the restaurant industry was so abuzz with customer gripes, says Tim Zagat, publisher of the popular Zagat Restaurant Surveys, that one of the restaurant trade magazines published its own alphabetical listing of annoyances, based on complaints from Zagat's guides. The list, says Zagat, began with A for arrogance, B for baby vegetables, C for cigarette smoke, D for dirty bathrooms, E for "Enjoy!" F for four dollars for a tonic and lime, G for going home hungry, H for waiters who say "Hi," I for "It's not my station," and J for jamming us in like the IRT . . . to Y for yard-long peppermills and Z for zero courtesy to diners sending dishes back.

SIDEBAR: 1988 KIWI AWARDS: A NOT-SO-FOND FAREWELL TO THE YEAR'S EXCESSES

The top Kiwi Award -- given to the most abused, overrated, overdone dish of the year -- in 1988 goes to cold pasta salads. They are everywhere, and most are poorly made pastas in puddles of oil. It is rare indeed to find superior pasta bathed with top-quality oil, tossed with garnishes and properly served at room temperature. Cold pasta salads will die of natural causes, most critics pray. Ban them forever and ever, says food writer Paula Wolfert.

Kiwi Award runners-up are white beans, potatoes and risotto cooked al dente. These three staples taste good only if they are completely cooked through, and they are inedible when they're not.

Honorable mention Kiwis go to sun-dried tomatoes, grilled vegetables not grilled long enough, roasted game birds still rare at the joint, any other poultry (except for duck breast) served rare, warm goat cheese, inferior bread, white chocolate (particularly if tinted with food coloring), carpaccio of tuna or any raw marinated fish, bitter-tasting undercooked eggplant, watery vegetables on a perfectly decent pizza crust, tiramisu (the Italian trifle dessert), too many edible flowers on the plate, weak cappuccino. Some critics think that radicchio, which is borderline this year, will earn a Kiwi Award by the end of '89.

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