

# Good or Bad, Restaurant Reviews Require Careful Handling



*Rise & Shine Restaurant Group's Breakfast Republic*

It's happened to virtually all chefs and restaurateurs. Service concludes. Staff members go home. The kitchen is closed for the night. Just one last glance at social media before bed and there they are – reviews of your restaurant. In the age of instant opinions, when everyone is an expert and comments go live the moment someone posts them, a review can help or hurt an establishment in the blink of an eye.

Some choose to ignore reviews while others address them directly. In some cases, reason is absent when users are just in it to vent. The outcome varies, but one thing is for sure. More often than not, how restaurant management responds to reviewers can reverse a diner's poor opinion, and a simple "thank you" for a positive review can go a long way in cementing diner relationships.

Case in point: Daisies, a vegetable-driven and pasta-focused restaurant in Chicago's Logan Square has everything a diner could want in a seed-to-fork eatery that works in tandem with Frillman Farms, owned by Daisies executive chef and owner Joe Frillman's brother Tim. The sibling pairing of fresh ingredients with creative preparation has resulted in early success for the yearling restaurant, which won a Jean Banchet Awards for Culinary Excellence as best neighborhood restaurant and *Chicago* magazine's list of 2018 Best New Restaurants. Despite mostly glowing feedback, the Daisies' general manager, Keith Whitten, knows firsthand how responding to negative reviews can end up being a positive experience.



Keith Whitten of Daisies

"I reached out to one reviewer who gave us a bad online write-up because they felt another table near them got more special attention, so I was very precise in my response to their complaints,"

Whitten says, explaining to the disgruntled guest that one of their vegan regulars was at the other table, plus it was their wedding anniversary.

The message came through loud and clear, that regulars are more than just customers, but are considered friends at Daisies. Whitten also used the opportunity to query the guest about the rest of their dining experience. The guest removed her negative review and praised Daisies for its passion and caring enough to politely confront the situation.

Whitten does have to handle less reasonable guests, but he has a plan for that, too.

“I’m not a fan of canned messages. Really pay attention to what the guest is upset about, or what truly disappointed them and talk about that directly, because people who are genuinely aggrieved can tell if you are being genuine back to them,” says Whitten, who invites guests back to the restaurant, usually offering a gift card or percentage off the bill. “Never fire back out of anger or in a heated mood, rather, take pride in your team, your work, and your reputation but don’t be prideful or hastily defensive, because if the reviewer is just taking potshots at your business, it’s probably best to leave it alone and let the good reviews speak louder.”

San Diego restaurant owner Johan Engman is the founder and owner of 10 restaurant locations around the city operating under his umbrella consortium, Rise & Shine Restaurant Group. The rise of consumer sites like Yelp educated Engman on productive ways to handle negative feedback.



Daisies

“We respond to all negative online reviews with an understanding attitude and the mentality that the customer is always right, so ultimately we hope to transform it into a positive impression, based on our personable approach and receptiveness to feedback,” says Engman. “People write many negative reviews in the heat of the moment and sometimes exaggerated so it doesn’t pay to fire back since, in some cases, responding adds fuel to the fire even with an apologetic response.”

Trolling is a big problem in the world of reviews, when a commenter simply becomes fixated on a restaurant and hopes the chef or manager will hop into a hot debate. Avoid being combative with those kinds of posters, says digital marketing manager Nick Renna of Lessing’s Hospitality Groupon Long Island, New York. His food service division feeds more than 40,000 guests throughout the Northeast every day.

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Renna notes the importance of timing and positive turnaround when responding to negative reviews as soon as they go live.

“I found after responding, it’s likely the poster will amend or remove the review completely and in my response, I offer for them to share their contact information, which I pass directly to the manager of our restaurant to contact the customer,” says Renna. “I thank each one of our positive reviews. No matter how positive or negative the comment, the customer is expecting a response from the business, but I always take the high road, no matter if the situation is our fault or not.”

Heated responses, says Renna, can aggravate the situation and lead to further trolling from the customer.



### **Nick Renna of Lessing's**

Timing is a theme in productive responses. Jennifer Brantley, director of marketing and guest relations for The Cowfish Sushi Burger Bar in Charlotte, Raleigh, Atlanta and Birmingham tries to reach out to guests within 24 hours. More so, she and her staff use reviews as a training tool and lessons in good business.

“Years ago, we thanked a guest for their five-star review on Yelp and he ended up telling a friend of his, who was a journalist, about The Cowfish, so that small thank-you resulted in a huge mention in a national restaurant trade magazine,” says Brantley.

The Gilmore Collection is a group of restaurants in the West Michigan area, but they also own a nightclub, comedy club, several wedding and special event venues. Handling nearly two dozen distinct brands, social media manager Katrina Danko fields heaps of reviews, good and bad.

“The BOB is our downtown Grand Rapids location that features three restaurants, comedy club, nightclub, a couple of bars and special events venue all in one building, so this location receives the most reviews and the widest variety of reviews,” says Danko. “We like to acknowledge all



reviews, both positive and negative, as online reviews have become one of the best ways to advertise your business, so I highly recommend encouraging your customers to leave reviews.”

When Danko sees a negative review, she apologizes for the experience and asks them to reach out to the restaurant’s or bar’s manager, even if the customer doesn’t follow through. Danko cautions managers about thanking good reviewers with rewards or incentives to leave a review, to avoid penalties from some sites who oppose such practices.

“Positive review experiences are ideal, whether it’s a nice exchange with someone who is looking forward to revisiting your restaurant or someone turning a two-star review into a five-star review because you were able to fix their issue,” says Danko. “On the other hand, I’ve seen other businesses firing back at negative reviews, and it always looks like a trainwreck and it’s tragic – but you can’t look away. So unless you’re like Wendy’s or Taco Bell, who can get away with snappy replies for the laughs, I find that fighting negativity with more negativity doesn’t help you or your customer in the end.”