

THE BUFFALO NEWS

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Restaurants must earn their stars

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By JANICE OKUN

Sometimes stars can be complicated. Especially when you have award them, like I do every Friday in Gusto.

And that's what sometimes confuses readers. The problem lies in the fact that assigning an iconic rating is a type of shorthand, nothing more.

You can use any cute little picture you like - pennies, chairs and yes, stars. Doesn't matter - the symbols stay on the surface of the experience. They are the essence of something condensed into fast reading form, for a

fast-moving world.

No wonder the star system is often called into question. Why, people ask, would you say negative things about a restaurant but still give it three stars? Or, conversely, give a restaurant so few stars when you obviously enjoyed your time there?

Good questions, and not easy to answer. So here goes - I'll try to explain what goes into The News' star-rating system, at least when it comes to the dining feature in Gusto.

As it stands, one star signifies poor; two fair; three - good; and four - extraordinary. But for clarification, we will now include this small paragraph with every Gusto restaurant review I write:

"Stars reflect the overall dining experience at the time of The News' visit - including service, ambience, innovation and cost - with greatest weight given to quality of the food."

Good service, ambience, innovation and value for the money are, of course, the things people look for in restaurants. But we're also hoping to emphasize how good the food actually tastes.

Western New Yorkers are hard-headed and not easily fooled. If the food isn't good, forget the Architectural Digest surrounding - that's it. Goodbye, restaurant.

Of course, the other factors do come into play. Food can be wonderful, but eating it is no fun if you have to lasso a server to take your order. Food can be terrific, but that doesn't help if the table keeps tipping to one side.

And for some people like me, a clever chef is important, too. Thinking outside the same old, same old box deserves recognition.

A recent review of a popular chain restaurant received a three-star rating because the food was reasonably good and reasonably innovative; the server was well trained, the place was handsome. Unfortunately, it also resembled Times Square on New Year's Eve - a guaranteed headache after a bad day at the office.

I awarded three stars to the place, but there wasn't much more room in the box to explain the bad vibes. So I spent a lot of space in the review telling readers what they were getting into.

Let's take another, hypothetical, case: A mom and pop restaurant with tasty food on a menu that hasn't changed in years; comfortable, slightly dowdy surroundings; well-trained service and reasonable prices. That should be a solid three stars, the way I look at it.

But what if another more upscale restaurant has all of the above - and more? What if it is beautiful and exciting to look at and boasts a carefully constructed contemporary menu that changes with the seasons? I would give that one $3\frac{1}{2}$ stars.

That half star acknowledges that somebody back in the kitchen is thinking.

Truthfully, to get a clear picture, you have to read the entire review.

Meantime, I'm taking up brain surgery.

It's easier.

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