



Association of Food Journalists' Code of Ethics

Food journalists serve their communities by stimulating more informed conversations about what we eat and why. Our primary responsibility is to share news, ideas and opinions as fairly, accurately, completely, independently and honestly as possible.

We strive to honor our readers' trust by always upholding the highest ethical standards. To that end, the Association of Food Journalists has developed the following set of standards to protect its members' integrity and preserve their credibility. These principles should be considered supplementary to the codes of ethics presented by leading journalism organizations or a journalist's employer.

The following principles are applicable across media, and Association of Food Journalists members are expected to adhere to them in all professional situations. While the Association does not actively police its members, it reserves the right to review and potentially revoke membership in connection with code violations.

The 5 Core Principles

1. We take pride in our work, and respect the work of others.

(1) Food journalists should write under their real names, and make their contact information available to the general public.

(2) Food journalists should use their bylines only in conjunction with material that they have produced. Food journalists should not attach their names to reprinted press releases or articles provided by publicists.

(3) Food journalists do not plagiarize content. Material from other sources should be credited, and actively hyperlinked if presented online.



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(4) Originators of unique information or opinions should be acknowledged in any work indebted to them, and the source material actively hyperlinked if presented online.

(5) Food journalists should always honor copyright laws, including those pertaining to recipes and photographs.

(6) To assure accuracy, press releases and material from other sources should be substantiated. Secondhand information, such as rumors published by a competing publication, should not be presented as fact.

(7) Factual errors should be corrected promptly and prominently.

(8) Expression of opinion, editorials and articles devoted to the writer's own views should be clearly labeled as such and thus easily distinguished from news reports.

2. We do not abuse our positions.

(1) Food journalists should not flaunt their titles in hopes of securing favors for themselves, their friends or their relatives. Favors could include restaurant reservations; desirable tables; party invitations or free food or drink.

(2) Food journalists should not accept gifts valued at more than \$50, whether sent to them directly or distributed at an event. Exorbitant gifts should be returned to the sender or donated to charity.

(3) Food journalists should very carefully weigh invitations to participate in media dinners and other invitation-only events at which attendees will be feted with food and drink. It is worth remembering that only the most financially-fit



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organizations are situated to host such affairs, and journalists risk creating the perception of bias by participating in them.

(4) Food journalists should refuse samples of food, drink or any other product which they don't intend to evaluate for publication.

(5) Food journalists should not sell or otherwise profit from samples they receive in the course of their work.

(6) Food journalists attending events for personal pleasure should not use their position to gain access, discounted or free admission.

3. We avoid conflicts of interest.

(1) The Association is committed to the absolute separation of editorial responsibilities and advertising interests. If an article or publication receives sponsorship, it must be clearly noted.

(2) Food journalists should not make deals in exchange for access, special treatment or discounts. They should not vet story angles with publicists, allow sources to preview coverage or make promises concerning story placement.

(3) Food journalists should not enter or vote in commercially-sponsored contests which involve the promotion of a specific entity, person or product in the food-and-beverage sphere.

(4) Food journalists should not cover food-related organizations which have employed them, or with which they are politically or financially involved.

4. We recognize and respect diversity.

(1) While pure objectivity is impossible, food journalists should aim to acknowledge and examine competing points of view.



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(2) Food journalists should present opposing viewpoints fairly and accurately.

(3) Food journalists should avoid perpetuating stereotypes and prejudices through their story angles, source selection and outdated language, such as the phrase “ethnic food.”

(4) In the many cases when a story is not explicitly concerned with gender, race, religion or other identity, food journalists should strive to include a variety of voices in their coverage.

5. We are committed to total transparency in our work.

(1) If food journalists accept anything for free, including a meal or product sample, it should be acknowledged in coverage of the item or experience.

(2) If food journalists write about current or former employers, co-workers, friends or relatives, they should not conceal the nature of their relationship.

(3) If food journalists suspect they received special treatment in the course of reporting a story, they should share their suspicions with their readers.

Putting the Principles to Work

While ethical principles are fixed, the world is ever changing, so it's impossible for the Association of Food Journalists to anticipate and assess every potential moral quandary. Instead, it is incumbent upon members to recognize situations that require careful consideration from an ethical standpoint, and to



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determine a course of action based on their truthful responses to the following three questions:

- Am I being fair and rigorous in my reporting process?
- Am I being honest to my sources, editors and readers about the circumstances surrounding the production and publication of this piece?
- Am I putting the public's needs first, or am I making this decision with an eye toward personal or professional gain?

In previous generations, when food writing was a full-time job and newsrooms were flush with cash, the vast majority of journalists had seasoned editors, lavish expense budgets and instincts honed by years of experience to help them overcome or avoid the thorniest ethical dilemmas. The Association of Food Journalists recognizes that is no longer the case in the current media landscape, and so encourages its members to consult the ethics committee in moments of uncertainty.

ADDITIONAL GUIDELINES

ANONYMITY

All food journalists should endeavor not to overshadow their subjects, but restaurant reviews in particular should be conducted as anonymously as possible.

The goal of restaurant criticism is to experience the restaurant just as ordinary patrons do. However, true anonymity is often no longer possible. In that case, critics should engage in the practice of anonymity: Ideally, that means not having



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one's picture taken; restricting public appearances and declining introductions to chefs and other industry players.

If a critic decides to forsake anonymity, the reveal should be subdued and properly justified, so as not to create the impression that the critic now expects special treatment.

Even when total anonymity is impossible, restaurant critics should make every attempt to arrive at restaurants unannounced and maintain as low a profile as possible during their visits. Reservations should be made in a name other than that of the reviewer and meals should be paid for using cash or credit cards in a name other than the critic.

Installing caller ID blocking on one's phone; maintaining a separate email account for communication with the restaurant and maintaining one or more identities on restaurant reservation sites is recommended.

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Because food journalists' skills are valued by a range of people and businesses, it is likely that they will receive job and gig offers from companies other than independent media organizations. Teaching cooking classes at grocery stores; managing a food bank's Facebook page or proofreading a craft distillery's newsletter do not inherently conflict with food journalism, although all such affiliations should be scrupulously reviewed for their ethical implications.

In addition to not writing about current or former employers, food journalists should keep in mind that they court the charge of favoritism if they choose to write about the employer's sector. For example, if a food journalist collaborates with a burger joint owner on a cookbook, her negative review of another restaurant that specializes in burgers might come across as pandering to her co-author, while a positive review of the same could seem like a plea for another paid assignment.



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If a food journalist's employment situation changes so he or she is no longer eligible for his or her current Association of Food Journalists membership category, it is the member's responsibility to alert the Association.

COMPED MEALS AND TRAVEL

It is always preferable for an employer to foot the bill for food-and-drink experiences, including the travel that facilitates them. To that end, a journalist should make every effort to compensate providers for whatever they receive, ranging from a slice of apple pie to a zipline tour of a coffee-making region.

But the Association of Food Journalists understands that many full-time and contract employers aren't financially equipped to absorb the costs associated with assignments, and few journalists have the wherewithal to pick up the tab. In other words, the occasional media comp – particularly when it involves an access opportunity that wouldn't otherwise be available to the journalist – is not expressly forbidden.

Still, all comps must be held to the highest level of scrutiny: A journalist should not accept a comp if he or she does not firmly believe it's essential to his or her reporting or broader culinary education.

Additionally, a journalist should never guarantee coverage in exchange for a meal, trip, bottle of liquor, kitchen appliance or any other gift from an interested party. All work arising from the comp should disclose the payment arrangement.

Finally, journalists should avoid single-source stories based on comped experiences. In other words, independently verify a sponsor's claims before repeating them. And if at all possible, eschew comps supplied by a company or brand in favor of those underwritten by associations, regions or other multimember organizations.



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The practice of asking for freebies is ethically dubious at best. If in the course of a comped experience, the food journalist receives material goods that exceed the dollar amount stated in the ethics code -- or serve no discernable journalistic purpose, such as clothing or art -- he or she should refuse them.

INDUSTRY RELATIONSHIPS

Although the Association of Food Journalists strongly discourages romantic relationships between food journalists and members of the industry they cover, including restaurant owners and publicists, it's inevitable that journalists will forge close relationships with people whose livelihoods involve the preparation of food or the promotion of food-related entities. In these instances, food journalists must be vigilant about not securing special access or favors for their friends or partners.

READER ENGAGEMENT

Food journalism -- and food criticism in particular -- is largely a mystery to those who don't practice it. While food journalists are not compelled to explain their work, they should aim to engage in healthy and productive dialogues with their readers and social media correspondents.

RESTAURANT REVIEWS

Good restaurant reviewing is good journalism. Reviewers should subscribe to the same accepted standards of professional responsibility as other journalists.

The goals of a critic should be to be fair; to be honest; to understand and illuminate the cuisine about which he or she is writing and to look beyond specific dishes and experiences to capture the whole of a restaurant and its intentions



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The Association of Food Journalists recognizes that many critics are also tasked with reporting on restaurants. Critics should discuss with their editors which role is most important, since a critic's position precludes him or her from participating in the food community as a reporter might.

Critics should avoid functions that restaurateurs and chefs are likely to attend, such as grand openings, restaurant anniversary dinners, wine tastings or new product introductions. Critics should also avoid in-person meetings with publicists, and strive to conduct interviews with restaurant owners and chefs by phone.

REVIEW PROCEDURES

Within the constraints of time and budget, critics should visit a restaurant as many times as is needed to properly assess a restaurant. Two or more visits to a restaurant are ideal for the purposes of full-length reviews. Service, food quality and atmosphere can vary, sometimes quite dramatically, from day to day. Multiple visits give the critic a better understanding of the restaurant, helping him or her to more accurately gauge its rhythm and spirit.

When only one visit is possible, it is best to attempt to have the most typical experience diners will be seeking out at a restaurant. Do not visit at lunch to write about a restaurant specializing in dinner. If writing a full-length review on the basis of a single visit, acknowledge the situation in the review.

Reviewers should sample the full range of the menu, from appetizers to desserts.

Reviewers must taste everything ordered, or at least all the items they mention in a column. Bringing guests along helps the critic by allowing the table to order a greater variety of dishes, but guests should be properly prepped in advance on review meal protocol.



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Order dishes that involve different cooking techniques (steamed, deep-fried, sautéed); different ingredients (one orders fish, another asks for beef); different styles (something traditional, something eclectic). Is there something the restaurant is known for doing well? Order it. In general, guests should avoid ordering the same thing. If the critic returns for a second visit, it may be worth again ordering a dish that was particularly wonderful or terrible to see if the experience is consistent.

Reviews should reflect the full range of a region's restaurants, from neighborhood haunts to luxury venues. Offer readers dining choices in a variety of price ranges, cuisine, neighborhood and style. If your publication has eligibility policies prohibiting the review of chain restaurants or advertisers, for example, they should be shared with readers.

NEW RESTAURANTS

To be fair to new restaurants, reviewers should wait at least one month after the restaurant starts serving before visiting. These few weeks give the fledgling enterprise some time to get organized, and helps distinguish the professional critic's opinion from online chatter.

If, however, a restaurant must be visited because of timeliness, enormous reader interest or journalistic competitiveness, consider offering readers "first impressions." This piece should be more descriptive than critical, avoid labeling it as a review if possible. The emphasis of such a sneak preview could be on the fledgling restaurant's clientele, its decor and maybe the chef's background rather than a blow-by-blow account of the menu (though food would, of course, be mentioned.)

In recognition of the diverse and changing opinions on waiting periods, it's ideal to acknowledge in your review when you visited the restaurant. Did you go on the first day? Did you wait three months? Say so.



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Some restaurants get better, some restaurants get worse. A critic should have some sort of mechanism in place to make note of these changes. A full-blown re-review is appropriate if the restaurant changes hands, wins or loses a high-profile chef or moves to a new location.

NEGATIVE REVIEWS

Negative reviews are fine, as long as they're accurate and fair. Critics must always be conscious that they are dealing with people's livelihoods. Negative reviews, especially, should be based on multiple visits and a broad exploration of the restaurant's menu. Following a consistent reviewing policy without deviation may protect a critic from charges of bias or favoritism, while providing a platform from which to defend the review.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media should be treated as an extension of the food journalist's work, meaning he or she should strive to be as transparent, honest and fair as the platform allows (and the FTC requires.) For example, if a journalist has received money from the banana promotional board to post a picture of his banana bread on Instagram, the text should reflect his relationship with the association. Social media is not a refuge from the expectations of exemplary conduct.