2019-5

The Development of Newspaper Restaurant Criticism in Ireland, 1988–2008

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A dissertation presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of MA in Gastronomy and Food Studies, School of Culinary Arts and Food Technology, Technological University Dublin

by Claire O'Mahony

May 2019

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Declaration

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the development of newspaper restaurant criticism in Ireland from 1988 to 2008. This era was a time of considerable economic change in Ireland. It was also a period that saw changing attitudes to food and dining out, as well as a more varied restaurant landscape. This study aimed to determine how the format and focus of newspaper restaurant reviews changed over this time frame. It also explored the role of the restaurant critic, and how reviews reflected developments in Irish food culture and the economy. Using a mixed methods research design, a sample of reviews from the *Irish Independent*, the *Irish Times* and the *Sunday Tribune* was quantitatively analysed. A smaller sample of reviews was also thematically analysed, and interviews were conducted with three Irish restaurant critics and one commissioning editor. The results indicated that restaurant reviews changed significantly from 1988 to 2008, with reviews given greater prominence in newspapers. The results also showed that restaurant critics framed individual dining decisions as indicating good taste, and critics extolled qualities such as authenticity and simplicity. The provenance of ingredients became increasingly important over time, while critics rejected faddishness. A changing Irish restaurant scene was indicated and critics acted as educators about new foods and restaurants. Price was a consistent feature of all reviews and as the country became increasingly prosperous in the mid-nineties, concerns were expressed in reviews that a greater choice of restaurants did not always result in a better meal experience.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Context

The purpose of this research is to examine the development of restaurant reviews in Irish newspapers from 1988 to 2008. Restaurant criticism can be regarded as both food writing, and as a form of specialist journalism and its primary function is to provide informed guidance for the dining public, while also serving as a culinary record for posterity. Reviews can offer a pleasurable reading experience for those who like to eat in restaurants, as well as those who enjoy dining out vicariously through the written word. The restaurant review is also "a space within which the boundaries of metropolitan and good taste are policed and conveyed to others" (Jones and Taylor, 2013, p.116).

Recent years have seen the amplification of all forms of food media. According to Rousseau (2012, pp.33-39), the presence of food media has grown in the decades since the 1940s; concurrent with advances in media itself. As such, food media now encompasses magazines, television programmes, and websites. Surprisingly, despite all this, few studies look at food content and its evolution in the printed mass media (Fusté-Fornéa and Masip, 2018). Thus, while restaurant reviews can be considered a source of information about the restaurant landscape, academic research into restaurant criticism is still limited (Titz *et al*., 2004).

Previous studies have highlighted the significance of restaurant criticism (Davis, 2009) and how it helps to shape what we think of food, chefs, and restaurants today. In her study of Australian restaurant criticism in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, Vincent (2018) argued that the study of restaurant criticism contributes to an understanding of what is regarded as good taste. In an Irish context, food representations in women's magazines have been explored (Keating and Mac Con Iomaire, 2018; Hickson, 2018). However, neither Irish newspaper food content nor restaurant criticism has been the focus of in-depth investigation. As such, this current body of research hopes to address this gap in knowledge.

In choosing to examine newspaper restaurant criticism over any other form of food writing, this research also highlights the severe competition print media faces from

digital media. McCombs (2004), writing during the timeline of this study, suggested that print media was still an important social driver. The growth of online media had begun to impact upon the newspaper industry during the period from 1988 to 2008, although not to the same extent as seen today or for predicted circulation levels over the next decade (McHugh, 2017). To put these declines in context, using the past and current circulation figures for the three newspapers, the sharp drop in sales is evident. In 1990, the daily July to September circulation figure for the *Irish Independent* was 151,927; the *Irish Times*'s circulation was 94,058; and the *Sunday Tribune*'s was 101,660 (Horgan, 2001, p.203). The July to December 2018 daily circulation for the Irish Independent was 83,000, and for the *Irish Times*, the figure was 58,131 (Newsbrands Ireland, 2019). The *Sunday Tribune*, which had struggled financially for several years, finally ceased publication in 2011 (Ó Cionnaith, 2011).

Tovey and Share (2000) posit that newspapers have a long history in Ireland and a study from the European Newspaper Publishers Association found that newspaper readership did not change dramatically between 1988 and 1994 (Foley, 1996). Another study, the 2004/2005 European Social Survey of newspaper reading from 23 European countries, found that Irish people spent more time than any other nation in Europe reading newspapers (Elvestad and Blekesaune, 2008). These figures indicate that during the period from 1988 to 2008, print newspapers still had a significant role. The 1980s was also when restaurant criticism began to appear (more) regularly in Irish newspapers (Mac Con Iomaire, 2009) and, according to Mac Con Iomaire (2009, p.333), from 1985 onwards, there was a sharp growth in newspaper column inches dedicated to food.

The twenty-one year period from 1988-2008 represents a distinct era in Ireland, both economically and in terms of a changing restaurant landscape. During the 1980s, Ireland was in recession but was beginning to show signs of recovery by 1987 (Geary, 1992). The period from 1994 to 2008 saw the economic boom known as the Celtic Tiger era (Bonner, 2011). However, in September 2008, the country was officially declared to be in recession again (O'Brien, 2008a).

These economic fluctuations were reflected in changes in the Irish restaurant scene, highlighting the early 1980s as a difficult time for the restaurant industry (Mac Con Iomaire, 2009), but then showing a rebirth of Irish gastronomy and a more vibrant

restaurant scene coinciding with the Celtic Tiger years (1994 – 2007), as well as an increase in Irish people's knowledge about food (Mac Con Iomaire, 2018).

An analysis of restaurant reviews indicates how this period of significant culinary and economic change was represented in the Irish media. It also provides an insight into the evolution of Irish food tastes, as framed by restaurant critics, who helped Irish diners navigate the wider choice of dining establishments. Finally, this study offers an overview of food journalism, as a form of food writing, as it has developed in recent years.

1.2 Research questions and objectives

The aim of this research is to examine the development of restaurant reviews in a selected sample of Irish newspapers from 1988 to 2008 to further the understanding of this period of Irish culinary history. Taking a mixed methods approach, it documents changes in Irish restaurant criticism and Irish culinary culture over 21 years by addressing the following questions:

- What is the history of restaurant criticism and what are its functions?
- Did changes occur in either the format or focus of newspaper restaurant criticism in Ireland from 1988 to 2008?
- What was the role of Irish restaurant critics during this period, and how was this role articulated?
- Was newspaper restaurant criticism reflective of changes in Irish food culture and Irish dining habits?
- How did restaurant reviews reflect the economic climate?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Restaurant reviews are an established component of food media and are defined by Jacob as providing "analysis of the food, ambience, service and appeal. Their authors are thought to have superior palates and their judgement wields power" (2015, p.150). While reviews are currently disseminated via print and the internet, their genesis lies in medium of newspapers (Davis, 2009). Although restaurant reviews, as noted by Titz, *et al.* (2004), appear daily in newspapers around the world, it has also been suggested that they constitute a somewhat neglected area of research (Williamson *et al*., 2009). It has also been noted that the social impact of reviews has been largely unexamined (Goodsir *et al*., 2013), with previous research largely focusing on the criteria that critics use to assess a restaurant experience (Barrows *et al*., 1989; Williamson *et al*., 2009).

The literature discussed is divided into three areas that influence the purpose of this study. In the first section, an overview of food writing is provided, situating restaurant criticism in the overall taxonomy of food writing. This section also provides an outline of newspaper food journalism and discusses the emergence of lifestyle journalism, a journalistic field in which food journalism and reviews are most commonly domiciled (Hanusch, 2013). Food journalism in an Irish context is also examined. This section also discusses the historical antecedents of the restaurant review, as well as important contributors to this area of food writing. The second section provides an overview of the role of the restaurant critic. It begins with a discussion of a series of developments that underpin the role of a critic such as the rise of the 'foodie', a term that began to gain currency in the 1980s (Barr and Levy, 1985). Cultural omnivorousness is also explored, a concept that emerged in the late 20th century and can be described as a taste profile, where both the highbrow and the low brow are embraced, with a move away from exclusion (Peterson and Kern, 1996). The role of the restaurant critic is then subsequently considered concerning how they can help consumers navigate anxieties about dining decisions, with Warde's (1997) antinomies of taste highlighting the anxieties associated with food consumption. How restaurant critics serve as arbiters of 'good taste' (Davis, 2009); their role as cultural intermediaries; and their involvement in the framing of certain goods restaurants as legitimate choices (Smith Maguire and

Matthews, 2014) are also discussed. The final section briefly outlines changes to the Irish restaurant scene from 1988 to 2008 to contextualise this study.

2.2 Restaurant criticism

2.2.1 An overview of food writing

Food studies as an academic field have only seen a noteworthy expansion of scholarship in the last three decades (Albala, 2013). In that time, it has become more widely recognised as a legitimate object of study, with the growth of the interdisciplinary field of food studies (Bell and Valentine, 1997; Counihan and Van Esterik 1997; Warde 1997; Ashley *et al*., 2004; Belasco, 2008; Miller and Deutsch, 2009; Albala, 2013; De Solier and Duruz, 2013). An interest in various forms of food writing, which comes under a broad umbrella, has emerged concurrently. It has been suggested that writing about food has its antecedents from when people first started to write and wanted to share or record their experiences (Gilbert and Porter, 2015). According to Jacob (2015, p.3), food writing at its most basic includes recipes and restaurant reviews and that any topic or form can be about food, including history, politics, chefs, news and trends, essays, memoirs, travel, novels, and science. Ferguson (2014, pp.52-53) suggested that writing about food has existed since records began but that it was only in the 19th century, and especially in France, that "a consciousness of food writing as a distinct genre born in response to the conditions of contemporary society" emerged. Ferguson (2008) has also defined the 19th century as the era when culinary arts moved into the public space and became a gastronomic and cultural field. A cultural field, as defined by Bourdieu (1993), denotes an autonomous domain of activity, subject to specific rules, which responds to rules of institutions specific to that field and these define relations among agents.

Ferguson (1988) has further posited that culinary texts were key in the creation of this gastronomic field. According to Mennell (1996, p.266), gastronomic writing as a distinct genre began to appear after the French Revolution (1789-1799). Mennell (1996, p.267) positions the food writer, or gastronome, as "more than a gourmet – he is also a theorist and propagandist about culinary taste." In addition, several genres of gastronomic writing that laid the foundations for the gastronomic field are outlined by Ferguson (1998), who cited Alexandre Balthazar Laurent Grimod de la Reynière (1758-

1837) as being a direct contributor. The author of culinary guidebook *Les Almanach Des Gourmands* (1803-1812), Grimod is considered to be the first gastronomic journalist (Ferguson, 1988), as well as being popularly credited as being the first restaurant critic (Vincent, 2018).

Mennell (1996) identified a gastronomic literary text as being concerned with one or more of four concerns: that it sets out rules of etiquette; that it provides dietetic information; that it gives "a brew of history, myth, and history serving as myth" (1996, p.270), and that it evokes memorable meals. While restaurant reviews can theoretically encompass some of those concerns, and although Grimod's body of work saw restaurant reviews being initially positioned within gastronomic literature, this is, arguably, not where they remained. Davis (2009, p.130) asks whether restaurant reviews might be considered as "a subset of the field of journalism, a product of the field of gastronomy or a tool for the formation of mass opinions that lead to collective tastes." That the qualities and nature of a review can be wide ranging is substantiated by Mallory (2015, p.1213), who argues that "restaurant reviewing runs the gamut from performing a primarily consumerist function – should the reader eat at the restaurant in question or not – to achieving the status of a kind of literature in and of itself." Nonetheless, it is generally accepted that restaurant reviews are now firmly entrenched in journalism (Davis, 2009; English and Fleischmann, 2019). Thus, while categorised as food writing, they are less frequently defined as gastronomic literature.

2.2.2 Food journalism and the development of lifestyle journalism

Like food writing, food journalism also sits under a broad umbrella. According to Rosner and Hesser, food journalism can be historical, investigative, instructional, critical, inspirational, memoir-driven, or even humorous (2013, p.89). Jones and Taylor (2013) state that this area of specialist journalism falls into the three categories of trade publications, magazines, and newspaper-based journalism. Most newspapers publish features devoted to food, including regular restaurant columns and restaurant reviews. Within journalism studies, it has been suggested that scant attention has been paid to the food sections of newspapers, where restaurant reviews were usually found, and that "journalism historians have largely ignored soft news like food", instead focusing on "the news found on the front pages of newspapers" (Voss, 2014, p.2).

Food journalism is considered to have emerged from the women's pages in newspapers (Bell and Valentine, 1997), with Marzolf (1977) arguing that, until the 1970s, the subject of food was relegated to newspaper pages specifically aimed at women, where the content could be summarised by the 'four Fs' – family, furnishings, fashion, and food. The pages also included news on society, and weddings, as well as advice columns (Harp, 2006). These sections can be regarded as the forerunner of what is now broadly referred to as lifestyle journalism, defined as "the part of journalism that primarily focuses on audiences as consumers, providing them with factual information and advice, often in entertaining ways, about goods and services they can use in their daily lives" (Hanusch, 2013, p.1). The re-categorisation of the women's pages in the 1970s allowed newspapers to present these pages as gender-neutral, giving the content a broader appeal (Harp, 2006). Hanke (1989, cited in Jones and Taylor, 2013, p.115) notes that by the 1980s, a greater emphasis was placed on the enjoyment of food, with the cookery column moving to the lifestyle sections of papers or in weekend national newspapers. Lifestyle journalism was, and is still considered to be, attractive to advertisers because of its consumer focus and also because of its link to the public relations industry (Hanusch *et al*., 2017). However, the same research also found that lifestyle journalists are not "a mouthpiece of companies but are taking their role to evaluate and advise seriously" (Hanusch *et al*., 2017, p. 155). These issues are therefore relevant to discussions of a restaurant reviewer's credibility. Bell and Hollows (2006, p.1) have noted the explosion of lifestyle media in recent years, and Voss (2014, p.70) observed that "the popularity of culinary or food journalism is a recent phenomenon". A suggested reason is that technological advancements, which enabled newspapers to increase pagination and introduce more sections, fuelled the rise of lifestyle journalism and features, as there were more pages to fill (Cole, 2005, p.33). The growth in food journalism specifically has also been linked to an increased interest in culinary matters. Writing in an American context, Brown (2004, p.51) stated that "the transformation of food journalism from five things to do with cream of mushroom soup to the subject of an entire issue of *The New Yorker*, long time food writers say, has a lot to do with changing attitudes about food."

According to Hanusch, discourse in lifestyle journalism, therefore "offers emerging concepts of reality and a wider spectrum of representations and life (style) concepts" (2013, p.15).

2.2.3 Irish food journalism

While food studies continue to gain strength as an area of research in Ireland, the area of food journalism has not been the focus of in-depth attention, and, as such, a comprehensive study of Irish food journalism has yet to be undertaken. According to Keating and Mac Con Iomaire (2018), women's magazines, as a source of culinary information, have remained largely unexamined. Academic consideration of Irish newspapers and media (Horgan, 2001; Breen and O'Brien, 2018) has tended to focus on issues such as ownership, controversies, and the major stories, whereas the area of food coverage has received scant attention in comparison. Breen and O'Brien (2018, p. 22) have suggested that, in Ireland, it was only in the second part of the 20th century when a five-day week became the norm and the idea of the weekend took root in Ireland. They posit that this was an important development for newspapers published on Saturdays and Sunday, with the latter in particular becoming more conscious of leisure-based features such as travel and wine (Breen and O'Brien, 2018, p.22). Indeed, the period from the 1980s onwards can be viewed as a time where food journalism began to gain more momentum. According to Mac Con Iomaire (2009, p. 256), this is when restaurant reviews began to appear as regular features of daily or Sunday newspapers, whereas, previously, restaurants were mentioned in gossip columns or social diaries. The establishment of the Irish Food Writers Guild in 1990, whose objectives include high professional standards among writers about food, nutrition, and food history, reflects the growing importance and prevalence of food writing in Ireland. The dozen founding members of the Guild were all working as freelance food writers at the time and viewed the formation of the Guild as a way of pooling their knowledge and expertise (Irish Food Writers Guild, 2014).

Thus, food journalism in Irish newspapers in the 1980s, while not absent, was not prioritised. Many Irish newspapers had a tradition of publishing recipes, although recipe columns in the *Irish Independent,* for example, did not begin until July 1975 (Hickson, 2018). In general, features about food and dining-out were infrequent. An example is 'Eating out: Is it really that dear?' (Bright, 1985, p.6), an article published after Ireland was dropped from the *Good Food Guide*, with the publication issuing a statement explaining the reasons why and describing the Irish restaurant scene as "deplorable". In the news story, the journalist interviewed restaurateurs including Patrick Guilbaud and

Colm O'Daly of the Park Restaurant in Blackrock, both of whom noted the crippling VAT rate of 23 per cent at the time as the primary driver of high restaurants prices. As such, the main focus was on economics and not the restaurant experience.

With changes in editorial policy and technological developments in newspaper printing, came the possibility of increased food coverage in the late 1980s. Horgan (2001, p.151) notes that the *Irish Times* new colour press in 1986 allowed the paper to have colour in editorial and advertising and that the size of the newspaper increased. According to O'Brien (2008b, p.232), the new press facilitated the introduction of specialist supplements including 'The Weekend' section on Saturdays, which featured elements such as recipes by Theodora Fitzgibbon, fashion, and gardening. Conor Brady, who was appointed the editor of the *Irish Times* the previous year, was responsible for the paper's shift towards increased specialist reporting, including the areas of media, food, and entertainment (O'Brien, 2008b). During this period, the *Irish Independent* carried its 'Weekender' section on Saturdays, where the food components included restaurant reviews and a wine column. The *Sunday Tribune* differed to the other two newspapers in that it was a weekly and not a daily paper and had incorporated a magazine since its launch in 1980. In 1983, it carried a separate 16-page lifestyles and features magazine (Brennan and Trench, 2018), which included food coverage.

The *Irish Independent* and the *Irish Times* introduced their weekend magazines several years later, in 1997 and 2000, respectively. Before this, restaurant reviews were frequent but not always a consistent element of newspapers at weekends. For example, the *Irish Independent* did not publish reviews in its 'Weekender' section from 1991 to 1997. It did, however, run features about food, with examples including an article celebrating the demise of dainty morsels called 'Nouvelle cuisine is dead, thank God' (McWeeney, 1993, p.50). From March 1995 to October 1997, the *Irish Independent* published a weekly supplement called 'Dubliners', which was exclusive to the Dublin area and regularly carried a feature called 'Take me to your Chef' (McWeeney, 1995, p.39). Here, journalist, Myles McWeeney, interviewed an Irish chef and featured recipes, but this was a restaurant profile as opposed to a review. Similarly, during much of the mid to late 1990s, the *Irish Times* ran restaurant reviews, but restaurant coverage often took the form of news snippets in the 'Megabites' section on Saturdays, which was written by John McKenna and Sandy O'Byrne, and then solely by McKenna. Examples of

restaurant coverage included a round-up of the best places to eat *al fresco* in Dublin (Mulcahy, 1993, p.38) and a feature about Roly's Bistro with quotes from the chef, but which again could be regarded a profile more so than a review (McKenna, J., 1994, p.42). The *Sunday Tribune*'s restaurant reviews were a regular feature in the newspaper's magazine. The launch of the *Irish Independent* and the *Irish Times* Saturday magazines gave restaurant reviews a permanent home. On the 15th of November, 1997, the *Irish Independent* launched 'Weekend', a colour supplement with its Saturday edition (Horgan, 2001). *The Irish Times* followed with a Saturday lifestyle magazine three years later, launching in October 2000, in what was perceived to be a move to boost its circulation figures (Weston, 2000). As a result, restaurant reviews have appeared every week in both the *Irish Independent* and the *Irish Times* weekend magazines hereafter.

2.2.4 The origins of restaurant reviews

The genesis of the modern restaurant review is regarded as stemming from *Almanach des Gourmand*. Published in France just after the French revolution, there were eight issues of this gastronomic guide book printed. It has been "commonly identified as the founding text for French gastronomic writing, while its author was an avatar of today's food critics" (Abramson, 2003, p.103). Spang (2000, p.109) meanwhile called its author, Grimod, as "one of the founding fathers of modern gastronomic discourse" and, although the *Almanach* is no longer in print, its legacy is still acknowledged. Grimod's work was instrumental in introducing the concept of food criticism. According to Vincent (2018, p.100):

> Grimod's guide was addressed to a bourgeois audience and provided advice on what to eat, where to eat and how to eat, along with musings and philosophising on topics ranging from indigestion, cutlery and its uses and the importance of invitations, to the distinctions between the gourmand and the glutton.

It has been proposed that there has been a continuous line of development linking *Almanach des Gourmands* to restaurant guides today (Mennell, 1996, p. 266).

One of the first known examples of a newspaper restaurant review appeared in the *New York Times* in 1859. Titled 'How We Dine', it carried the byline of 'The Strong-Minded

Reporter of the Times' and presented a fascinating account of a selection of New York restaurants (Rosner and Hesser, 2013, p. 90). The journalist recounted the "novelty" of being issued a command to "go and dine" by his editor-in-chief. Embarking upon a culinary tour of the city, the writer was more descriptive about the dining establishments than he was about the food. The offerings at a "second class eating house" included "a perfectly cooked steak or a bit of roast beef and an excellent sausage roll"; however, he warned that diners would only enjoy the bill of fare "if you don't object to take such food in a badly-lighted cellar, with a saw-dusted floor, and in the company of a series of big casks which are supposed to contain beer" (The New York Times, 1859).

While not the focus of this research, the introduction of the *Michelin Guide* in the year 1900 represented a significant development in restaurant reviewing. The French tyre company launched its restaurant review guides around France, and subsequently other countries in Europe and North America as a means of encouraging road travel, with its 'star' award system first introduced in 1926 (Mallory, 2015). In the United States, travelling salesman Duncan Hines made notes of the restaurants in which he ate and his short, food-focused reviews were published in a booklet in 1936 titled *Adventures in Good Eating*, which was published in 46 editions (Voss, 2014).

Newspaper restaurant reviews did not become regular features until the mid-twentieth century. For example, in the *New York Times*, weekly restaurant reviews first appeared in 1963 under the title 'Directory to Dining', as critic Craig Claiborne spearheaded a new direction for the paper's restaurant coverage, with his focus primarily on the food (Davis, 2009). Davis notes that the name, size, placement, tone, and format of the reviews changed over time (2009, p.148) and argued that Claiborne's appointment to the *New York Times* "led to an important shift in the cultural importance of food and restaurants and initiated a process that would end up professionalising restaurant reviewing … across the United States" (Davis, p.124).

2.2.5 Individual critic's contributions

The identity of the restaurant critic has been established as integral to restaurant reviewing, with Ferguson noting that "we want to know what a particular critic has to say about the food world today. In short, the personality of the reviewer counts for a

great deal" (2014, p.123). The contribution of several influential critics has been acknowledged, including Ruth Reichl, Mimi Sheraton, and Raymond Sokolov (Sonnenfeld, 1996, p.xvi). Craig Claiborne, the *New York Times* food editor and intermittent restaurant critic for 29 years, is especially noteworthy. According to Sietsema (2010), before Claiborne, reviews had been looked suspiciously upon as a reflection of the newspapers' advertising aspirations rather than any analysis of a restaurant's merits. McNamee states that "'Restaurant critic' had not been a job at all before Craig invented it" (2012, p.283). His initial reviews for the *New York Times* were short and unsigned; it was only in 1966 that Claiborne's byline was added to the reviews, consolidating his authority over the New York food scene (Davis, 2009, p.148). Claiborne was the first male food editor at the *New York Times,* and he introduced a code of practice for reviewers (Sietsema, 2010). This code dictated that one person would conduct the review, that the reviewer would visit the establishment several times, that the publication would pay for the meal, and that the reviewer would remain anonymous (Sietsema, 2010). Many of these tenets are recognisable as being practised by Claiborne's contemporary counterparts, although a critic's anonymity is no longer a key feature. In the main, whether in Irish newspapers such as the *Irish Times* and the *Irish Independent* or British newspapers like the *Observer* a restaurant critic's photograph accompanies their reviews now. An exception is Marina O'Loughlin, who currently reviews for the *Sunday Times* and whose byline includes a photograph of her holding a plate over her face. The *Sunday Independent*'s restaurant review also does not feature a photograph of its reviewer, Lucinda O'Sullivan.

Ruth Reichl, who reviewed restaurants for *The New York Times* from 1993 until 1999, when she left to edit *Gourmet* magazine, is another writer whose contributions were, and continue to be significant. Reichl's almost novelistic approach to reviews and her use of evocative prose has, as Goodsir *et al.* suggest, greatly influenced restaurant reviewing alongside Claiborne (2014, p.128).

In an Irish context, several writers and journalists can be considered as influential in this sphere. Theodora Fitzgibbon wrote a column on food and cookery in the *Irish Times*, beginning in 1969, which continued for 20 years. Although she did not write restaurant criticism, O'Sullivan (2003, p.21) notes that Fitzgibbon's views on both food and restaurants became "the set opinions of many middle class matrons of Dublin." Citing

the contributions of restaurant reviewers, including Willy Clingam, T.P. Whelehan, Sandy O'Byrne, Hugh Leonard, and Myles McWeeney, Mac Con Iomaire (2009, p.333) suggests that "the genre of restaurant reviewing was transformed by the appearance of Helen Lucy Burke writing for the *Sunday Tribune* in 1985. Her acerbic style in exposing mediocrity attracted public attention and the wrath of restaurateurs." Contemporary critics contributing to Irish newspapers, and who were reviewing at the time of this research's focus, include Tom Doorley, current restaurant critic for the *Irish Daily Mail*; Lucinda O'Sullivan, who has been the *Sunday Independent*'s restaurant critic for 27 years; Ross Golden Bannon, who became the *Sunday Business Post*'s restaurant critic in 2000; Katy McGuinness, the *Irish Independen*t's current restaurant critic; and John McKenna, who has written about food for almost 30 years and who is the curator of the annual *100 Best Restaurants in Ireland*, published since 1992. In addition, there is also Paolo Tullio, who became restaurant critic for the *Irish Independent*'s 'Weekend' magazine in 1997, a position he held until his death in 2015.

It has been noted that there is no particular qualification required to become a restaurant critic (Voss, 2014). Claiborne himself believed that the only credentials necessary were "the ability to write and converse with food" (Claiborne, 1982, p.146), while Ruth Reichl thought that a critic should spend time working in restaurants in order to train for the job, as she had done (Voss, 2014, p. 140). In general, there is a lack of research into the professional orientation of restaurant critics. In a study of critics in a US north-eastern city, Schroeder (1985) found that the majority of reviewers had journalism training and extensive journalistic experience before becoming a restaurant critic and many had worked in restaurants in a variety of positions. In any case, the particular expertise of an individual reviewer may not be as important as the reputation of the publication in which he or she is published. Blank (2007, p. 138) asserts that, in judging the credibility of a review, readers will first look to the quality of the publication and writes that "even readers who read reviews carefully and critically usually assume that reviewers for major publications are qualified professionals" (2007, p. 138). A lack of journalistic background or food background is not always even required, as indicated by the appointment of film director, Michael Winner, as restaurant critic for the *Sunday Times* in 1993. His reviewing career spanned twenty years and White observing that "the story of his rise to culinary power is instructive. It proves that anyone can become a restaurant critic" (2006, p.98). Restaurant reviewing has also been a predominantly

male-dominated occupation, and Jones and Taylor (2013, p.115) have noted that restaurant reviewing has tended to provide a vehicle for male commentators "to enter the world of the restaurant and to proclaim publicly and authoritatively on matters of taste" (Jones and Taylor, 2013, p.115). Mallory (2015) has suggested that restaurant review writing in France has been dominated by men, as it has been since the days of Grimod. However, Ruth Reichl, Mimi Sheraton, Gael Greene, and the *London Evening Standard* critic, Fay Maschler, are notable exceptions. In an Irish context, important female critics include Helen Lucy Burke, Lucinda O'Sullivan, and Katy McGuinness.

2.2.6 The anatomy of restaurant reviews

The reviews from the *Irish Independent*, *Irish Times*, and *Sunday Tribune* analysed in this research fall under the category of connoisseurial reviews. This type of review is defined as a particular method for producing reviews, the key to which depends on "the ability of a person – a reviewer – who because of unusual talents, extensive experience, or special training, has developed a refined sensitivity with respect to a certain product genre" (Blank, 2007, p.29). These contrast with procedural reviews, where performance is measured based on a series of mechanical operations applied to the product to evaluate its performance (Blank, 2007, p. 35). Blank also identifies several elements common to connoisseurial reviews, namely that they are text-based; that they are written in the style of a novel or an essay; that they are flexible and adaptable, which has led to their prevalence; and that their first goal is to interest and to hold the reader's attention. He singles out Ruth Reichl as explicitly linking connoisseurial reviews and other forms of literature in some of her early reviews for *New West Magazine* (Blank, 2007, p.30). The path of a connoisseurial review has several stages (Blank, 2007). These include how the restaurant is chosen (chain restaurants rarely receive any attention and new restaurants are often selected after a short delay); who pays for the meal (invariably the publication to avoid conflict of interest); how to record notes (speaking into a recorder after the meal is common); selecting designated eaters to accompany the critic so that a wide range of dishes may be sampled; and writing the review, which will generally use the criteria of food, décor and service (Blank, 2007, pp.46-60).

The tenets established by Craig Claiborne regarding the practice of restaurant reviewing have been previously outlined. Lang (2014, p.572) has suggested that the reviewers do more than solely list the adjectives that might describe a restaurant's character and that reviewers "look for those qualities that have become most salient and account for how and why these qualities matter."

A limited number of studies have carefully examined newspaper restaurant review content. Schroeder (1985) stated that reviewers categorise their critiques in the areas of food, service, and environment, with food being the most important. In a content analysis of five American newspapers, Titz *et al.* (2004) found that critics focused on food and attempted to recreate the restaurant's atmosphere for readers. Areas such as quality of service, price and value, menu variety, professionalism, and other customers, were only discussed in the body of the review if they fell below or exceeded critic's expectations and were otherwise depicted in a symbolised rating scale accompanying the review (Titz *et al*., 2004).

2.3 The role of restaurant criticism

In evaluating the literature concerning restaurant reviewing, the interlinked questions arise of why reviews are read and what precise role does restaurant criticism play for the reader? From a sociological perspective, Blank (2007) offered various reasons why people gravitate towards reviews including that they can be considered a broad and unbiased source of information. Blank also argued that reviews (restaurant and other) are relatively recent cultural innovations, situating restaurant review's contemporary genesis as being the 1960s with Craig Claiborne and the popularity of which surprised publishers, who were then driven to make reviews a permanent part of their publications framework (2007, p.11).

There are numerous reasons why restaurant reviews are read, apart from learning more about a particular dining establishment. Reviews can potentially entertain and inform, and reviews can also provide access into a culinary world that some readers may never visit, except through the pages of the newspaper. Vincent (2018, p.33) stated that the significance of restaurant reviews cannot be underestimated and because they are

"widely disseminated via mass media and through social interaction, it is often the review which is more broadly experienced than the food itself."

Consumer culture theories position restaurant reviewers within the category of opinion leader, defined as "someone who acts as an information broker between the mass media and the opinions of an individual or group" (Hoyer and McInnis, 2008, p. 391). They fall under the category of gatekeeper and are generally regarded as a non-marketing source of influence.

Ferguson suggested that, for some readers, the quality of the writing was an important appeal and that others "enjoy a good polemic" (2014, p.124). According to Barrows *et al*. (1989), while most restaurant patrons read reviews, they did not use them as the only selection criterion, with reviews less influential than a friend's recommendation, the restaurant's reputation, menu and price. This study also identified a significant distinction between readers and non-readers of reviews. The data suggested that those who read reviews eat out 20 per cent more than those who do not read them and that they spend 42 per cent more money on each meal (Barrows *et al*., 1989). However, in the 30 years since this research was published, there have been significant changes in both dining out patterns and attitudes to eating out (Paddock *et al*., 2017) and in food journalism (Johnston and Baumann, 2015).

The focus of this research is the function of restaurant criticism for the reader. However, a restaurant review's other readership, restaurateurs and chefs, is also noteworthy. As Blank (2007) noted, reviews can play an invaluable service for those who work in the industry and who may find it difficult to view their business through the customer's lens. It was said that Craig Claiborne could make or break restaurants (Martin, 2011) and, more recently, critics appointed with the title of "most feared" included *Le Figaro* critic François Simon (Lander, 2010) and the *Observer*'s Jay Rayner (Clarke, 2017). The impact of reviews was questioned after the death of Bernard Loiseau in 2003 when a newspaper report suggested that he might lose his Michelin star, whereupon the French chef subsequently committed suicide (Chelminski, 2006). While a poor review may have harmful consequences for a restaurant, Blank (2007, p. 63) observed that, paradoxically, a good review could also negatively affect an establishment. For example, if it results in such an upturn in business that the kitchen is unable to cope and regular customers are then sidelined due to a restaurant's newfound popularity.

2.3.1 Changing attitudes and changing tastes

A discussion about changes in attitudes to eating out and a shift in what is deemed legitimate food choices helps contextualise the role of restaurant criticism. Both of these developments underpin why restaurant criticism continues to serve an important function for its readers, who look to reviews to provide them with guidance on where to eat out and what to order. Dining out has become an increasingly normalised behaviour in the last few decades (Paddock *et al.*, 2017), and it has been suggested that contemporary consumer life emphasises individuality and the construction of a consumer identity. Morgan *et al*. (2008) posit that particular restaurants are selected then because they enhance consumers' real or ideal self-concept. In an analysis of the relationship between restaurant dining and identity formation, Finkelstein asserts that dining out is "instrumental in the construction of personal conduct suitable for life in the specific circumstances of a cosmopolitan society" (2014, p.32). Consumers arguably have more dining options available to them than ever before and the critic's role in facilitating decision making, and helping consumers choose what is legitimate can be considered necessary.

The emergence of the "foodie" is also significant. Generally used to describe someone with a strong interest in culinary practices, the rise of the foodie-demographic is concurrent with the significant growth in food-related media observed by Sloan (2004). According to research by Johnston and Baumann (2015), the educational dimension of foodieism and connecting food and knowledge is an important part of the confessed foodie identity, writing: "Concomitant with this understanding is the expectation that they seek out this information" (Johnston and Baumann, 2015, p.56). Foodies interviewed by Johnston and Baumann (2015) referenced newspapers as one of the primary sources of such information. While the remit of a foodie's interest in food can cover the bases of production, techniques, history, quality and more, an understanding of a restaurant scene forms a part of the foodie's knowledge domain. De Solier (2013, p.86) posited that foodies acquire information about restaurants as part of a broader gastronomic education and writes that "in dining out, serious consumption does not simply involve the deployment of knowledge and skill in the restaurant; it also involves the acquisition of knowledge and skill before visiting the restaurant." This desire and social need for knowledge fuels an appetite for restaurant reviews and, as Ashley *et al*.

(2014, p. 149) observe, “restaurant reviews provide a fruitful site for understanding the construction of the foodie.”

2.3.2 The era of the omnivore

The concept of omnivorousness has become influential in examinations of culture and consumption. The term references a form of cultural consumerism characterised by diversity, as opposed to exclusion and refinement (Peterson and Kerns, 1996). Foodways, the social, economic and cultural practices related to the production and consumption of food, have typically been associated with distinct social classes, with Belasco (2002, p.2) suggesting that “to eat is to distinguish and discriminate, include and exclude. Food choices establish boundaries and borders.” Food omnivorousness presents the idea that cultural sophistication is represented through the knowledge of a broader range of culinary culture rather than being associated with exclusivity and that it may encompass food and cuisines that may have been previously considered low-brow. While this suggests the omnivorous era supports a more democratic notion of what represents good taste, Peterson and Kern (1996) have noted that social class distinctions still exist. The concept of omnivorousness does not mean the end of food snobbery, and a key point is that omnivorous consumption “does not imply that people are equally apt to like everything” (van Eijck, 2001, p.1180). As such, then, omnivores are still driven by status, but this is sought out in newly selected ways (Johnston and Baumann, 2015, p.34).

According to Johnston and Baumann (2015), two ways in which omnivores legitimise food choices are if they can be framed as being authentic or exotic. Several dimensions contribute to the categorisation of food as authentic. These include geographic specificity, where food prepared in a specific location is valued. Simplicity, which is commonly associated with small scale producers, freshness and rusticity, are also prized and in food settings as well as in food itself (Johnston and Baumann, 2015). Food is also authentic when it is personalised by being linked to an individual chef and when it has a historical tradition, such as a handed down family recipe. Finally, food is deemed authentic if there is an ethnic connection (Johnston and Baumann, 2015).

Foods, meanwhile, that are considered exotic are often rare, and while exotic foods can be from distant countries, foods that break the norm in some way and represent a

departure from the traditional food culture of a country is another dimension of exoticism (Johnston and Baumann, 2015). However, exoticism does not necessarily remain constant, with Johnston and Baumann (2015, p. 110) using the example of sushi as a food that was strongly exotic at one point in the United States before becoming weakly exotic over time and therefore no longer conferring distinction.

In her study of Australian restaurant reviews from 1970 to 1995, Vincent (2018) presented a changing restaurant landscape where French cuisine was no longer the only legitimate marker of good taste. Vincent argued that there was a movement away from a preference for "fine dining" in Melbourne and Sydney, replaced by "displaying connoisseurship through acknowledging and valuing a broad range of different cuisines and different restaurant experiences" (2018, p.10). To this, Vincent (2018) suggested that Australian restaurant critics in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s thus promoted omnivorousness. This thesis aspires to use a similar argument in an Irish context, presented in Chapter 5.

2.3.3 Anxiety and food

The critic's role can be construed as particularly helpful when it comes to assuaging food fears and indecisions. It is acknowledged that consumers inhabit an information-saturated world and as Ferguson has observed:

> The spread of dining venues of every sort and on every level, from the neighbourhood diner to the destination restaurant, has produced a remarkably mixed and often chaotic food world. Today the staggering array of possibilities complicates dining decisions immensely (2014, p.150).

Current food consumption creates anxiety and confusion, according to Warde (1997). The tension that exists between the desire to try new foods and the distrust of the unknown was identified by Rozin (1976), and explored by Fischler (1988), who presents this as the *omnivore's paradox*, where the contradictory characteristics of the inclination towards innovation and exploration are countered by conservatism. Thus, restaurant reviews can potentially provide a navigational tool in a society where "'What to choose?' becomes a tormenting, invasive and occasionally insurmountable question" (Fischler, 1993, p.391).

Warde's theory of consumption (1997) is an appropriate framework with which to anchor restaurant reviews as being critical in helping consumers navigate food anxiety. Here, eight principles of recommendation that give meaning to food are presented. These four antinomies of taste are presented as the following: tradition and novelty, health and indulgence, convenience and care, and economy and extravagance (Warde, 1997). In Warde's *sociology of consumption*, these are contradictory appeals that represent the social pressures on food choice and "make selection a difficult, anxiety-provoking and under-regulated activity. They are the context of cultural deliberation about what it is proper to eat" (Warde, 1997, p.49).

According to Warde (1997), the category of *novelty* is exemplified by the valorisation of the new, the exiting, and the exotic, while the positive value of *tradition* is captured by framing food as old-fashioned, well-loved, a regional speciality or famous. *Health* is typified by Warde (1997), with terms such as light and non-fattening or where food is explicitly referred to as healthy. *Indulgence* makes nods to luxury and treats, and sees food described as tempting or rich. The category of *economy* commends food that is budget-friendly and uses food that is in season, whereas *extravagance* is associated with special occasion food that is elaborate and extravagant. Warde's (1997) final antinomy *of convenience* and *care* sees the first recommending time-saving, quick food, with the latter depicting food as home-made and comforting. Here, quality, freshness, and goodness are implied.

According to Warde, these are "irreducible and irreconcilable oppositions which frame the central dilemmas of contemporary consciousness and experience. People regularly make use of each of the eight categories of judgment as guides to practical conduct and aesthetic appreciation" (1987, p.56).

While Warde's research was based on an analysis of recipes in women's magazines, Vincent (2018) proposes that these antinomies can also be applied to the recommendations made by restaurant critics writing in newspapers. In an exploration of how restaurant critics shaped Australian tastes from 1970 to 1995, Vincent (2018) presents numerous ways in which reviewers helped readers to balance the tension between the eight principles of recommendation and states that "their reconciliation is not a straightforward question of direct choice but rather one of balance and negotiation" (Vincent, 2018, p.275). In relation to the category of novelty, Vincent

(2018) argues that, without new restaurants, chefs, ingredients, and techniques, critics would have little to tell their readers and that by promoting exoticism via encouraging readers to try unusual and foreign foods, critics prioritised novelty over tradition. Indulgence and extravagance, as Vincent (2018) suggests, can be rationalised as a justifiable expense in the acquisition of cultural capital, which is accorded by visiting the restaurants recommended by critics. To this, Warde (1997) proposed on a similar point that while the antinomies' poles are familiar to people, this does not mean that they are helpful in the decision-making process, as they become a source of anxiety about what the best course of action is. By valorising one or other of the principles or recommendations or presenting them in ways in which they can be balanced, critics can guide their readers to make what they consider to be the best choice and thus assuage some of this tension (Vincent, 2018).

2.3.4 Reviewers as tastemakers and cultural intermediaries

It has been suggested that the significance of restaurant critics lies not in how they shape consumer choices, but in their role as "taste makers and cultural intermediaries with the power to shape a shared symbolic environment for producers and consumers" (Vincent, 2018, p.363). Restaurant reviews can guide readers to a dining decision that reflects their social position and taste. Bourdieu (1984) posited that food is one means whereby the elite social class expresses such 'distinction'. Critics of this theory may point out that Bourdieu's data has more application to France and that, in other countries, food has lower cultural significance. However, Warde (1997, p.41) has suggested, giving the example of Britain, that "food is becoming a more significant cultural marker, an effect of greater media attention, more eating out and wider exposure to foreign cuisines". Drawing on Bourdieu's work and theories on the relationship between different types of capital including economic, cultural, social, and symbolic (1986), Naccarato and LeBesco (2012) have explored the concept of culinary capital, whereby various foods and food-related practices are associated with and confer power. Culinary capital, they suggest, can be acquired in varying ways and this could be the person who eats moderately, and locally, and sustainably, but equally it could be the person who is acquainted with prestigious restaurants and who is knowledgeable about wine. Both are thus accorded status and power because of this culinary knowledge base. Including newspaper reviews alongside restaurant guides, magazine articles and radio

programmes, they posit that "the voices of culinary experts are easily accessible to those who value their opinions and seek their recommendations in order to establish their own credibility and acquire their own share of culinary capital" (Naccarato and LeBesco 2012, p.49).

However, the role that restaurant critics play in confirming taste and status has been viewed negatively by some authors. Wood (1996) suggested that food commentators in broadsheets, as well as upmarket food magazines, presume its readership is middle-class and professional. He argued that this is reflected in the range and style of coverage, with the restaurant review being a food commentator's mainstay. Wood posited that food commentary in the quality press – both newspapers and magazines – almost entirely involved the commentators "talking to themselves". The vast majority of food writers write about what is of interest only to a minority (including themselves), thus actively and consciously distorting public discourse on food (1996, p.9).

The concept of cultural intermediaries is also relevant to any discussion of a restaurant critic's role. The term cultural intermediary was introduced by Bourdieu (1984) in his work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. He defined cultural intermediaries as "the producers of cultural programmes on TV and radio or the critics of 'quality' newspapers and magazines and all the writer-journalists and journalist-writers', who have assigned themselves the role of 'divulging legitimate culture" (Bourdieu 1984, p.326). Smith Maguire and Matthews (2012, p.552) have argued that cultural intermediaries identify who and what is not legitimate in a cultural field. They stated that critics "construct value, by framing how others (end consumers, as well as other market actors including other cultural intermediaries) engage with goods, affecting and effecting others' orientations towards these goods as legitimate" (Smith Maguire and Matthews, 2012, pp.551-552). According to Smith Maguire and Matthews (2012), the practice of cultural intermediaries is situated in the framing of goods as legitimate and worthy of attention and that the position of a cultural intermediary is substantiated by their varying degrees of expertise, which can also be an outcome of their work. Negus (2002) suggested that, as new products, celebrities and services are created – or in the case of restaurants, when new ingredients or trends come to the fore – cultural intermediaries are necessary to explain why we might want or need these new commodities, and what their relative market worth is. Lane (2013), citing Shrum

(1996), posited that, like art critics, gastronomic critics are not objective judges of what is the best or worst in their field, because they do not stand outside the field, but are instead "participants in a stream of discourse that defines the social hierarchy, established by their evaluations" and that "criticism interacts with the ranked cultural objects (restaurant and their cuisine) either through the performers (the chefs) or the audience (diners)" (Lane, 2012, p.247). Warde (2009, p.168) based on a study of the *British Good Food Guides,* stated that it is not the restauranteurs and chefs nor the diner but critics as intermediaries "who are central to the task of creating a symbolic and esthetic (sic) code which permits attribution of meanings to particular styles which become shared among relevant parties". As such, restaurant critics define what good taste is in all things culinary by clearly delineating what are status-enhancing and sophisticated dining choices.

2.4 The Irish restaurant scene, 1988 – 2008

To examine restaurant criticism in Ireland, it is necessary to contextualise it within developments in the Irish restaurant scene and socio-economic changes during the period 1988 – 2008. The era can be regarded as one of great economic flux. Ireland's economic stagnation in the 1980s was marked by emigration, high unemployment, and a significant amount of public debt (Ó Gráda, 1996). The unemployment rate in 1988 was 16.3 per cent and continued to rise until the early 1990s (Bielenberg and Ryan, 2013, p.171). The years 1994 to 2008 were one of economic prosperity, the so-called Celtic Tiger era. However, by 2008, although the unemployment rate in Ireland had dropped to 5.7 per cent, it would increase sharply thereafter in the post-2008 economic downturn, with significant rises in unemployment in the hotel and restaurant sectors as a consequence (Bielenberg and Ryan, 2013, p.171).

Mac Con Iomaire (2009) noted that the early 1980s had been a difficult time for restaurateurs because of prevailing economic conditions and factors, including the abolition of tax relief on business entertainment and a 25 per cent VAT rate on meals. Mac Con Iomaire (2009) further observed that many young Irish chefs and waiters emigrated during this time, with some of them returning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, bringing their new experiences home with them.

The reduction of VAT from 25 per cent to 10 per cent, introduced in the budget on 1 July 1986, represented a significant development for the Irish restaurant industry. The Restaurant Association of Ireland reported that the vast majority of its 300 member restaurants had implemented the 15 per cent reduction by November 1986 (Foley, 1986). In October 1986, it was reported that Irish restaurants were included once again in the annual UK-published *Good Food Guide*, which had previously cut its Irish section to just three pages of recommendations on the grounds that eating out had become so expensive and that few people were making reports about good Irish restaurants (Irish Independent, 1986). Deleuze (2012) highlighted the 1988 Intoxicating Liquor Act as also being significant. For the first time in the history of the State, this Act set out a procedure for the full licensing of restaurants whereby "good quality" restaurants could obtain a full liquor license for an annual payment of £3,000 (Irish Independent, 1988).

The Irish economy began to recover sharply from 1987 onwards (Geary, 1992), and this period onwards also saw a revitalised restaurant scene, with Restaurant Patrick Guilbaud awarded a Michelin star, the first Dublin Michelin star since the closure of the Russell Hotel in 1974 (Mac Con Iomaire, 2009). Mac Con Iomaire (2011, p.540) posited that "the late 1980s and early 1990s saw the opening of exciting new restaurants such as The Wine Epergne (Kevin Thornton) and Clarets (Alan O'Reilly). It also witnessed the opening of Dublin's first Japanese, Thai, and Malaysian restaurants". He also observed that "the 1990s was an exciting time for Dublin restaurants, particularly the latter half of the decade" (Mac Con Iomaire, 2009, p.397).

The period of rapid economic growth in Ireland, the Celtic Tiger era, from 1994 to 2008, significantly affected the restaurant scene. Deleuze (2012) noted that, predictably, as the economy strengthened, the number and variety of restaurants consequently soared. During the Celtic Tiger years, dining in restaurants became a regular occurrence rather than just an occasional treat, with the media reporting on a new and dynamic Irish cuisine, which was also influenced by the changing tastes of Irish people, who were becoming increasingly well-travelled (Mac Con Iomaire, 2009, p.397). While a new culinary openness was at play, this is not indicative that this attitude towards food was universal, as suggested by a letter to the *Irish Times* in 1996, where the author complained about John McKenna's "foodie" column, which listed ingredients available

in Chinese grocery stores. On this, she wrote that "I am fairly certain that there are no such purveyors of exotica in Galway, and I suspect that they're difficult to find even in cosmopolitan Dublin" and concluded that a recipe with such ingredients "smacks of an elitism which I find genuinely uncomfortable (O'Fegan, 1996, p.15).

Nonetheless, the Irish dining scene can be regarded as having changed considerably over the 21 years. Mac Con Iomaire (2011) identifies 1994 to 2008 as the era of the rebirth of haute cuisine in Dublin, with chefs such as Johnny Cooke returning to Ireland having worked in the United States and bringing with him new Californian food ideas. The positive aspects of the Celtic Tiger years included "growth in the number of restaurants, and an improvement in the quality of cooking, as well as an increase in the general awareness and knowledge of the average Irish person about food and dining" (Mac Con Iomaire, 2018, p.69).

From 2008, the recession in Ireland saw a sharp decline in the number of people eating out, although the casual dining sector fared better, as casual dining was perceived to offer better value and was more closely aligned to the lifestyle requirements of a younger demographic (Bord Bia, 2011). However, the restaurant vista that existed in Ireland in 2008 was a very different one to that which had existed in 1988 and even by the late 1990s, the evolution was by then remarkable. Critic Paolo Tullio, writing in 1997, presented his overview of the developments that had taken place:

> When I first started eating in Dublin restaurants in the late sixties, menus had a uniformity: you could always find prawn cocktail, steak Diane and crêpes Suzette. All wine lists contained Barsac and Graves and not much else. Good restaurants like Jammet's tried for a French feel, others simply offered steak and chips. How times change. Gastronomically Ireland is hardly recognisable from those dull, unimaginative days. There is now an eclectic streak running through our restaurants where Italian, French and Tex-Mex dishes frequently sit side by side on the menus (Tullio, 1997, p.60).

2.5 Conclusion

The literature review focused on three areas relevant to the objectives of the thesis. The first area positioned restaurant reviews within the fields of food writing and journalism, tracing its beginnings to 19th century France. The second area discussed the role of the

restaurant critic, in the context of navigating food anxiety for consumers, and how critics shape diners' tastes. The third area provided a brief overview of the restaurant scene in Ireland for the period relevant to this study. While restaurant reviews, as an area of research, has not received widespread attention, the works of authors such as Mennell (1996) and Ferguson (1998; 2004) have been central to understanding the contributions of culinary texts to the gastronomic field. Research from Blank (2007) provides a sociological perspective on reviews, in general, alongside analysis from Warde (1997) and Johnston and Baumann (2015). The work of Davis (2009) and Vincent (2018) meanwhile, although writing in the context of the United States and Australia respectively, have formed the basis for a greater understanding of the genre of restaurant reviewing overall, with Mac Con Iomaire (2009; 2011; 2018) providing an in-depth insight into the development of Irish restaurants.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Embedded design

The present study's overall purpose is to explore and document the development of Irish restaurant criticism between the years 1988 and 2008. As well as looking at changes in format and layout, the study aims to explore the role of the food critic and to consider how reviews over this period may contribute to an understanding of both Irish culinary culture and the concurrent socio-economic landscape.

To answer these questions, the study employed a mixed methods research design, predominantly qualitative, though with a quantitative data component. This type of design is known as an embedded design (or sometimes a concurrent nesting strategy), where one data type plays a supporting role in research that is based primarily on another data type, and the data is then mixed during the analysis stage (Creswell *et al.*, 2003). According to Terrell (2012), an embedded design can help gain a broader perspective than using only the predominant data collection method, and a theoretical perspective may or may not guide it. Quantitative and qualitative data can also be used to answer different research questions in the study (Hanson *et al.*, 2005). A qualitatively-led embedded design was selected for this study as the approach most suitable to address the two elements of the overall research question, namely: (1) how did the format and layout of restaurant criticism develop in Irish newspapers during this period, and (2) how might an analysis of reviews contribute to an understanding of this period of Irish culinary history. Determining variables such as changes to layout, design, position, and review authorship was gauged to lend themselves best to the adoption of a quantitative approach. The qualitative phase of the research looked to uncover themes and socio-economic trends in the reviews, and to explore the role of the critic.

3.2 Quantitative data

This quantitative phase of the research involved an initial collecting of reviews from the period of 1988 to 2008 using purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling (or selective sampling, as it is also known) is a practical necessity that is "shaped by the time the researcher has available to him, by his framework, by his starting and developing

interests, and by any restrictions placed upon him by his hosts" (Schatzman and Strauss, 1973, p.39). The three newspapers chosen for this research had a national readership and were accessible to the researcher. One review from the *Irish Independent*, the *Sunday Tribune,* and the *Irish Times* was selected during the same week of publication at each of the 63 sampling time-points across the 21 years from 1988 to 2008. The sampling time-points alternated for each year so that each month was represented from 1988 to 2008, so for example, reviews from January, May and September were collected in 1988; reviews from February, June and October were collected in 1989; reviews from March, July and November in 1990 and reviews from April, August and December in 1991. The majority of data from the *Irish Independent* was accessed by subscribing to the Irish Newspaper Archive website, with the bulk of *Irish Times* reviews accessed via its online archive. *Sunday Tribune* reviews, as well as those *Irish Independent* and *Irish Times* reviews that were not available online, were read on microfilm and subsequently printed out at the National Library of Ireland, as well as being photographed. A checklist of information required from each review was devised and this included the following: reviewer's name; if the review was accompanied by an illustration; if the review was accompanied by a photograph of the food or the establishment; if the review carried a byline photograph of the reviewer; if the review occupied more than half a page; whether or not the restaurant reviewed was Dublin-based; and whether or not the restaurant had opened in the six months or earlier prior to the publication of the review. This information was manually counted and compiled in a Microsoft Excel sheet. The potential sample size was 189 reviews. However, because reviews did not always appear in newspapers, including the *Irish Independent*, which did not publish weekend reviews from 1991 until late 1997, the number of actual reviews sampled was 155.

3.3 Qualitative data

Qualitative research methods are commonly defined as ones that rely on linguistic rather than numerical data and that use meaning-based rather than statistical forms of data analysis (Elliott and Timulak, 2005, p.147). The qualitative (and dominant) phase of research consisted of two steps. The first step was a thematic analysis of a subsection of the above-described sample of reviews used in the quantitative analysis. The second

step was to conduct semi-structured interviews with four persons considered key figures in the Irish food scene during the period under investigation.

3.3.1 Thematic analysis

While many 'brand name' qualitative research methods (e.g. interpretative phenomenological analysis or consensual qualitative research, as outlined by Elliott and Timulak, 2005) could be used to investigate restaurant criticism in Ireland, the thematic analysis method was chosen as a relatively straightforward descriptive and interpretative method suitable for this study. Thematic analysis is defined as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.6). It involves several stages, including familiarising oneself with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes and producing the report (Braun and Clarke, 2006, pp.16-23). Thematic analysis offers the researcher flexibility and, through focusing on meaning across a data set, it allows the researcher "to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences" (Braun and Clarke, 2012, p.57).

3.3.1.1 The process

The initial stage of the thematic analysis involved selecting the sample. A pilot analysis was conducted to ascertain the time necessary to thematically analyse a single review. Following the pilot, the initial plan (to analyse all reviews selected for the quantitative analysis) was revised and a decision made to thematically analyse three reviews from one sample point (month) per year from the *Irish Independent*, the *Irish Times*, and the *Sunday Tribune*. This sample was considered to be representative of restaurant reviews from 1988 to 2008 and one which was achievable within the time frame. The month per year was alternated so that all 12 months of the year were included. In cases where a review was not available from a particular publication for a particular month, a review from the next available month was chosen. From 1991 through 1994, reviews in all three newspapers were irregular. In total, 55 reviews were thematically analysed.

The next stage of the thematic analysis involved reading through the data and generating initial codes. A deductive approach was taken to this process, which is an approach "driven by the researcher's theoretical or analytic interest in the area, and [...]

thus more explicitly analyst-driven" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 12). Informed by the literature review and the specific research questions, four domains of inquiry guided the theoretical thematic analysis.

These were:

- The critic's function
- Changes in Irish food culture and restaurants
- Values prioritised by critics
- Economic references

While Braun and Clarke (2006) state that the deductive approach provides a less rich description of the date overall, it can also provide a more detailed analysis of some aspects of the data.

Coding was conducted by reading printouts of the reviews and subsequently colour coding them according to the domains of inquiry. A deductive approach meant that line-by-line coding was not conducted; rather, sections of the data that were relevant or were found to be interesting were coded. The coded data was then manually typed into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet under the appropriate domain heading. Bree and Gallagher (2016) have observed that this is a cost-effective approach to coding thematic analysis and that Microsoft Excel's colour and sorting features is helpful for organising, coding, and classifying data.

The next stage of thematic analysis was the search for themes, whereby codes were combined to form one overarching theme. A theme, as defined by Braun and Clarke, "captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set (2006, p.10). Braun and Clarke (2006) also suggest that researcher judgement is necessary for determining what a theme, adding that how important a theme is considered to be is not necessarily quantifiable but can be judged in terms of whether it captures something important relating to the overall research question. For example, in the thematic analysis of reviews, the subject of *Irish food preferences* was less prevalent than references to a restaurant's décor, but the former was deemed to be more relevant to the research question as to how restaurant reviews reflected a change in tastes. The subsequent stage

of thematic analysis was the reviewing of themes, an iterative process, and the defining and naming of themes. These themes were explored in the context of the literature review, and specifically, the framework used by Vincent (2018) that draws on the work of Warde (1997) and Johnston and Baumann (2015) was employed to explain some of the themes. The findings were also explored through the opinions expressed by Irish restaurant critics and a newspaper magazine editor.

3.3.2 Semi-structured interviews

This stage of the qualitative research included interviews with persons who played a significant role in the writing and commissioning of restaurant reviews between 1988 and 2008. This sampling was purposeful, as it involved the identification and selection of individuals who are knowledgeable about or experienced in the phenomenon of interest (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). They were also available and willing to participate, an important consideration, as noted by Bernard (2002).

The interview questions were informed by the four domains of inquiry established by the literature review and further informed by themes that emerged from the thematic analysis. Additional questions posed to the interviewees included:

- What was your brief?
- Did you have a budget?
- How were the restaurants selected?
- Did you visit an establishment more than once?
- What was your reviewing practice – did you take notes?
- On what criteria were you judging the restaurant?
- How often were you recognised?
- Did you have a particular reader in mind when you were writing the review?
- How would you describe the restaurant scene in Ireland at the time when you were writing or commissioning?
- How was the restaurant review column regarded by the newspaper you wrote for?
- Did you receive feedback from readers?
- Were there any constraints in what you could and couldn't review?

- What did you perceive your role to be?

The relatively small sample size allowed for in-depth perspectives from the interviewees. A reviewer from each of the three newspapers was identified, as well as a magazine editor from the *Sunday Tribune*, and contacted via email. With this cross-section of people working in the food media arena, it was hoped that their observations could provide richness to the thematic analysis results. Two interviews were conducted face-to-face; one by telephone and one interview was conducted via email due to the interviewee's time constraints.

Semi-structured interviews see the researcher "relying on a certain set of questions and try[ing] to guide the conversation to remain, more loosely on those questions" (Hess-Biber and Leavy, 2011, p.102). However, as also noted by Hess-Biber and Leavy (2011), the semi-structured interview approach gives respondents the freedom to talk about what is of interest and importance to them. An interview guide was constructed in advance, detailing domains of inquiry. All respondents received an email brief as to the areas to be discussed, with one interviewee asking for a list of proposed questions to be sent in advance. The face-to-face interviews, which ranged in duration from one hour to 40 minutes, were recorded using an audio device and digitally transcribed later. They were subsequently coded according to the domains of inquiry established by the thematic analysis of the reviews and then analysed.

3.4 Data interpretation

This phase involved the synthesis of findings from both the qualitative data and the archival analysis and qualitative analysis of interviews, where the data is integrated into a coherent whole. The use of data from more than one source (i.e. archival and interviews) serves as a form of triangulation, thus contributing to the creditability of findings. Triangulation can also capture multiple perspectives on social reality (Hess-Biber and Leavy, 2011).

3.5 Limitations

The period under investigation spanned 21 years, as the researcher felt this represented an important era in Irish culinary history. However, as the researcher worked alone, it

was necessary to restrict the number of reviews analysed, as well as the number of interviewees. The gathering of data took a significant amount of time, since reviewers, the title given to a review, and frequency of publication changed over time, which meant that locating the reviews was not a straightforward process. Because the *Sunday Tribune* reviews are not archived digitally, and because access to them was restricted to only being allowed to view a small number of months' publications at any given time at the National Library of Ireland, this added a significant length of time to the data collection process. Although the majority of *Irish Independent* and *Irish Times* reviews were available online, during the period when weekend magazine supplements were introduced, some of these reviews were only available in the National Library of Ireland. While snowball sampling indicated that interviews with other restaurant critics and editors would enhance this study, time constraints resulted in the number of interviews restricted to four in total.

3.6 Philosophical underpinnings

While a quantitative approach is associated with positivist paradigm beliefs and a qualitative approach with a constructivist paradigm position, these relationships are not fixed (Bryman, 2004). The pragmatic paradigm links the choice of approach directly to the purpose of and the nature of the research questions posed (Creswell, 2003). It uses both quantitative and qualitative data because they can help provide the best understanding of a research problem. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018, p.10), the pragmatist "is not committed to any one system of philosophy and reality. This applies to mixed methods research in that inquirers draw liberally from both quantitative and qualitative assumptions when they engage in their research". The authors also state that pragmatic researchers look to the *what* and *how* of research based on the intended consequences (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). In this study, a pragmatic paradigm was utilised because the quantitative data allows changes to the format and layout of restaurant reviews to be counted over time. As such, the qualitative data with its constructivist standpoint understands that the meaning of phenomena is formed though participants and their subjective world views (Creswell and Creswell, 2018, p.36).

Chapter 4: Presentation of Findings

4.1 The quantitative findings

The quantitative data obtained from a sample of restaurant reviews in the *Irish Independent*, the *Irish Times*, and the *Sunday Tribune* from 1988 to 2008 was organised using digital graphs (See Figures 1-6). This data was gathered to answer one of the research questions, which is how restaurant criticism developed over these 21 years in terms of format and size. It also determined the prevalence of individual reviewers, restaurant locations, and whether the restaurant was new, having opened in the six months before the review.

4.1.1 Prevalence of individual reviewers

Figure 1 indicates the number of reviews per reviewer from each of the three newspapers from 1988 to 2008. The majority of the reviews were written by Tom Doorley who became restaurant critic for the *Sunday Tribune* in 1994 and then joined the *Irish Times* as a reviewer in 2005. The reviewer with the second largest number of reviews published in this period was Paolo Tullio, who contributed 33 reviews, and who joined the *Irish Independent*'s 'Weekend' magazine as a restaurant critic in 1987. The next most published reviewer was Sandy O'Byrne, who wrote the 'Table Talk' column in the *Irish Times*, which ran from 1986 until the early 1990s. Helen Lucy Burke, who in the first half of 1988 was writing restaurant criticism in the *Irish Independent* before moving to the *Sunday Tribune*, and John McKenna, writing for the *Irish Times* are the next most represented critics in the three newspapers.

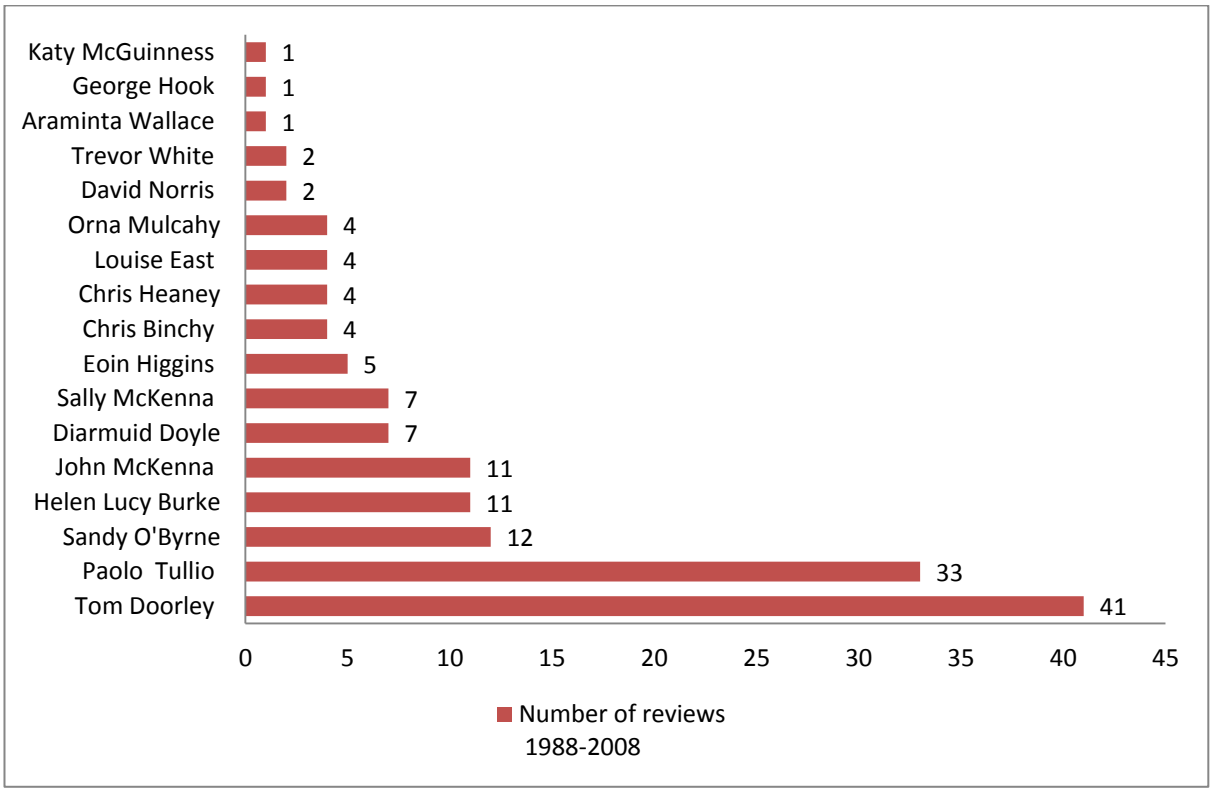

Figure 1: The number of reviews contributed by individual reviewers across three publications, the *Irish Independent, Irish Times* and *Sunday Tribune* from 1988-2008

4.1.2 Restaurant review artwork

Changes in restaurant review artwork are represented in Figure 2. In 1988, five of the nine sample reviews were accompanied by an illustration, with the remaining four illustrated by photography. Over the next ten years, restaurants reviews in the main were illustrated by photography, with an image of the restaurant, the chef, or the food. From 1996 onwards, no reviews carried any illustrations and review pages with photographs became the norm. This graph also indicates the periods when there were no reviews carried by one or some of the newspapers in this sample.

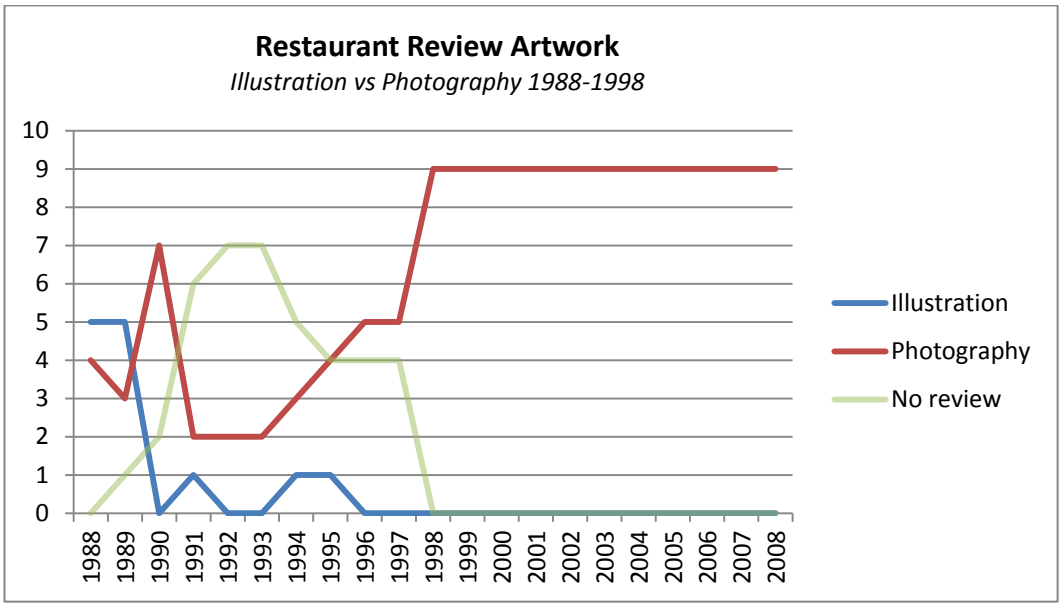

Figure 2: Number of reviews with illustrations and the number of reviews with photography of the restaurant, chef or food in the *Irish Independent, Irish Times* and *Sunday Tribune* from 1988-2008

4.1.3 Byline photographs of reviewers

Table 3 shows the frequency of byline photographs accompanying the restaurant review in the three newspapers and also indicates periods when no reviews were published. It shows that byline photographs, which might be used to identify a critic, did not begin to appear until 1995 but that by 2000 the majority of reviews carried a byline photograph.

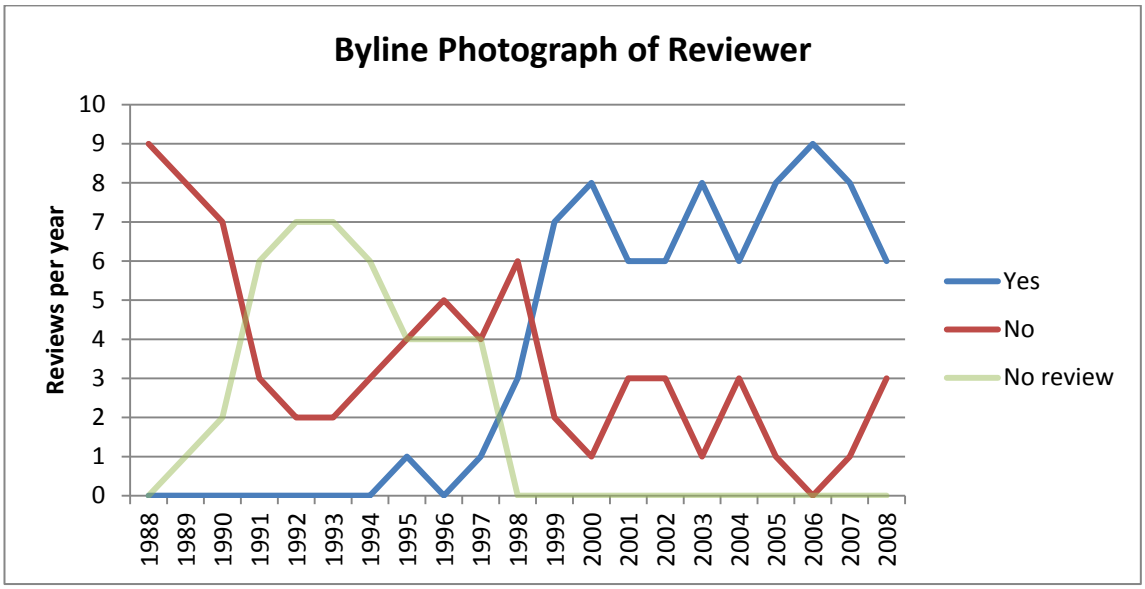

Figure 3: Number of reviews with a byline photograph of the reviewer in the *Irish Independent, Irish Times*, and *Sunday Tribune* from 1988-2008

4.1.4 Size on review on the page

Table 4 indicates the changes in the amount of page space dedicated to a restaurant review in the three newspapers from 1988 to 2008. The findings show that the majority of reviews were given half a page or less in 1988 and that the reviews began to grow in size from 1994 onwards. By 2001, all the reviews in the sample were greater in size than half a page.

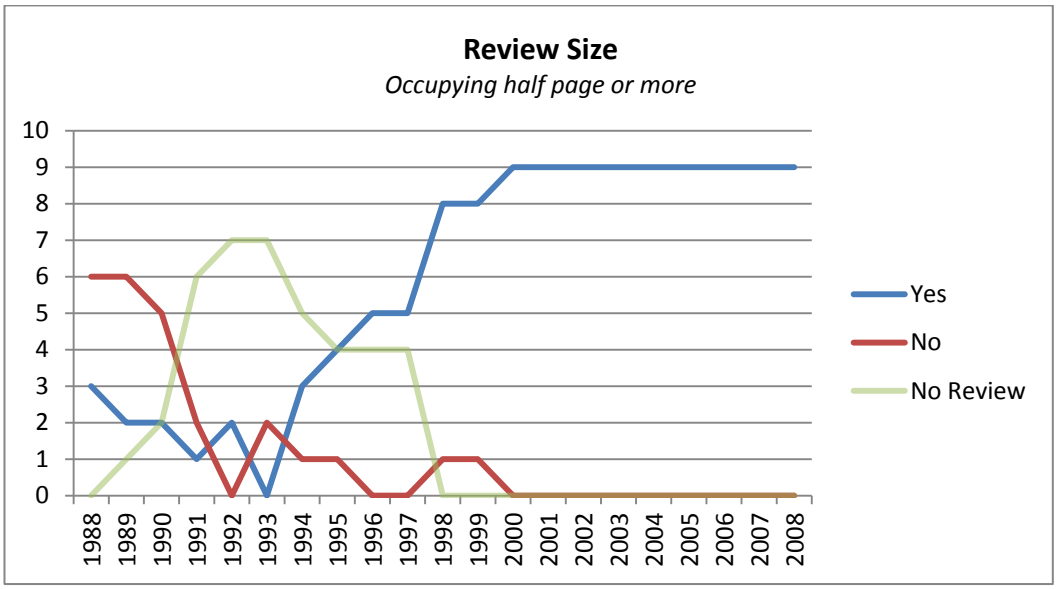

Figure 4: Number of reviews occupying a half page or more in the *Irish Independent*, the *Irish Times*, and the *Sunday Tribune* from 1988 to 2008

4.1.5 Restaurants opened in the six months before review publication

Table 6 illustrates the number of restaurants that had opened in the six months prior to the critic's visit. How relatively recently a restaurant had been opened was either indicated in the review, or it was sometimes possible to determine its opening date via research. In some cases, it could not be established when the restaurant had first opened and this variable is also illustrated in the table. The graph indicates that during the period of 1988 to 1990, a greater proportion of the restaurants reviewed had been open for longer than six months. The number of newly opened restaurants reviewed peaked in 2008. Overall, some 58 reviews were of new restaurants, and 66 reviews were of places open for business longer than six months.

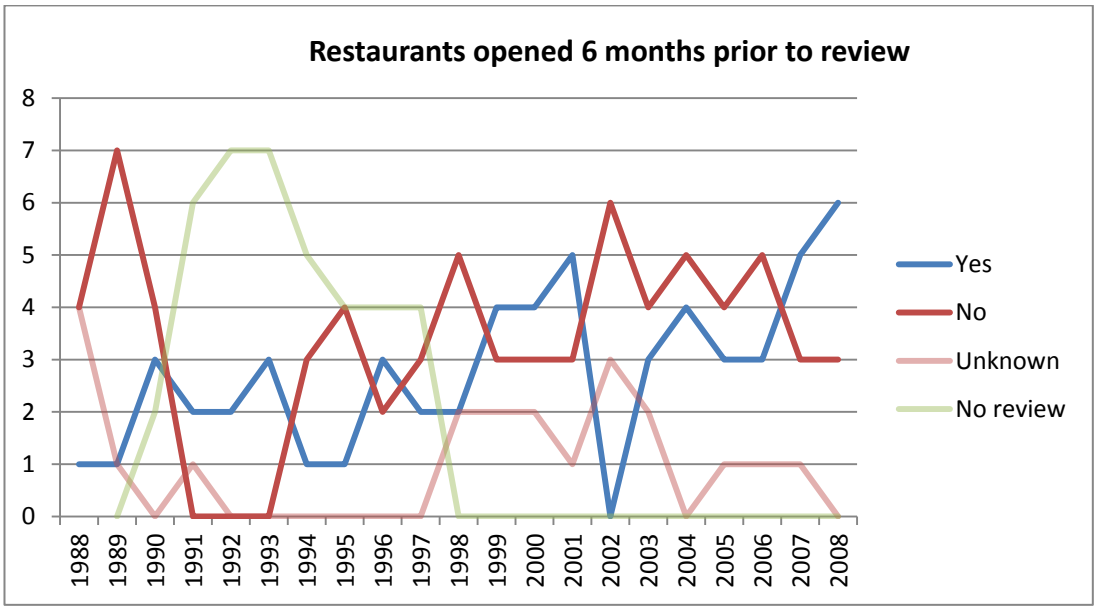

Figure 5: Number of restaurants opened in the six months before the critic's review in the *Irish Independent, Irish Times* and *Sunday Tribune* from 1988 to 2008

4.1.6 Restaurant location

Table 6 shows the percentage of restaurants reviewed that were Dublin-based and those located outside of Dublin, with Dublin defined as both the city and the county. The majority of reviews were of Dublin-based restaurants (67 per cent), while the remaining reviews (33 per cent) were of restaurants outside of Dublin

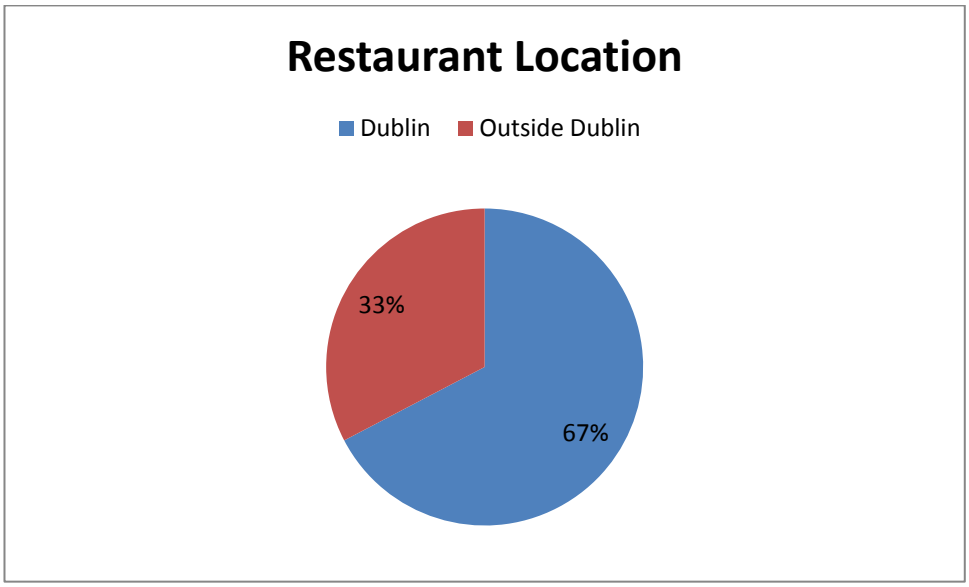

Figure 6: Percentage of restaurants reviews which were Dublin-based and outside of Dublin in the *Irish Independent, Irish Times* and *Sunday Tribune* from 1988 to 2008

4.2 The qualitative findings – thematic analysis

The qualitative aspect of this study is comprised of the thematic analysis of restaurant reviews from 1988 to 2008, as well as four semi-structured interviews with three critics and a newspaper magazine editor. All three critics wrote some of the reviews analysed, while the magazine editor commissioned reviews from 2004 to 2008.

A thematic analysis was conducted of 55 restaurants in total. This sample was taken from the reviews selected for the quantitative data, with three reviews chosen per year selected, one from each of the three newspapers. Where possible, the three reviews were taken from the same week of publication, but this was not always feasible. For example, the *Irish Independent* did not publish weekend restaurant reviews during the period of 1991 until 1997. Figure 7 illustrates the reviews that were thematically analysed.

	Sunday Tribune	*Irish Times*	*Irish Independent*
1988	✓	✓	✓
1989	✓	✓	✓
1990	✓	✓	✓
1991	✓	✓	×
1992	✓	×	×
1993	✓	✓	×
1994	✓	✓	×
1995	✓	✓	×
1996	✓	✓	×
1997	✓	✓	×
1998	✓	✓	✓
1999	✓	✓	✓
2000	✓	✓	✓
2001	✓	✓	✓
2002	✓	✓	✓
2003	✓	✓	✓
2004	✓	✓	✓
2005	✓	✓	✓
2006	✓	✓	✓
2007	✓	✓	✓
2008	✓	✓	✓

Figure 7: Reviews thematically analysed, per publication and per year

Coding the data was guided by both the literature review and by the research questions. Using a deductive approach, four main domains of inquiry were established. These domains were:

- The role of the critic
- Irish food culture and trends
- Values the critics prioritised
- Economic references

Based on these four domains, several themes in each category emerged, and these are outlined below.

4.2.1 The role of the critic

An important domain established by the literature review is what the role of the critic is. Thematic analysis of the reviews resulted in the identification of four themes within this domain.

Managing expectations and scene setting

A dominant theme emerging from thematic analysis of the reviews is critics managed reader expectations by indicating what kind of experiences awaited them at a restaurant. Such descriptors included referring to a restaurant "as fast becoming one of the city's 'in places" (O'Byrne, 1989, p.20) or differentiating between a café and a restaurant setting (Tullio, 2000, p.80), or a gastropub and restaurant (Higgins, 2007, p.20). Reviewers frequently positioned a restaurant as being appropriate for a particular occasion but not for others, and they described places in ways that made it clear to the reader what a restaurant's limitations might be. An example is *The Irish Times'* review of Chai-Yo, a *teppan-yaki* restaurant where the reviewer humorously cautioned how the "*Riverdance* dance of Japanese cuisine" may not be suitable for a first date, a business dinner, or meeting prospective in-laws (East, 2003, p.26).

Critics also provided overall guidelines as to what diners could hope of a restaurant experience in general. This was a recurring motif over the twenty-one-years. For example, one reviewer presenting her expectations wrote: "In a restaurant, there are three principle considerations: food, service and ambience. Each must reflect the prestige of the establishment and be appropriate to the price the customer pays" (O'Byrne, 1988, p.27). Tullio (2004, p.50) stated that "etymologists among you will know that 'restoring' is exactly what a 'restaurant' derives its name from and all being as it should, you should leave the table restored to tranquillity of mind." Meanwhile, Hook (2004. p.50) suggested that "dining out should be fun, test the imagination and be

in a good atmosphere." Overall, this theme encapsulated what an individual restaurant could offer diners and what a restaurant experience should universally provide.

Critic as educator

Restaurant reviews provided readers with essential information about dining establishment. However, an emergent theme from the analysis was the critic educating the reader as to what a particular ingredient or cooking method might be. This theme occurred less in the latter reviews, however. Earlier critiques included descriptions of how a *consommé* is made (O'Byrne, 1988, p.20); what a sundried tomato tasted like and where they can be purchased in Dublin; and what the dish of potato skins is composed of (Burke, 1992, p.16). This educational theme continued over time, although it diminished. For example, *baklava* is explained as a stuffed filo pastry in an *Irish Times* review in 2002 (East, 2002, p.30) and an explanation for *boudin blanc* as "lovely smooth delicious black pudding" is provided in a 2003 *Sunday Tribune* review (Doorley, 2003, p.33). However, such expositions became less common in the last five years of the reviews analysed. These elucidations only occurred with regards to what could be considered as more exotic ingredients, including *lardo* (Binchy, 2006, p.20), and *ramsons* as being the old English name for wild garlic (Doorley, 2007, p.81).

Critics' credentials

An observable theme, over time and across publications, is that restaurant reviewers established their credentials as informed, knowledgeable sources of information. They expressed this in a variety of ways, including professing a prior acquaintance with the chef and his or her work. Reviewer Helen Lucy Burke described Chef Michel Flamme as an old friend and "one of the five chefs in Ireland in which I have total confidence" (Burke, 1989, p.16). In a later review of Isaacs in Cork, she noted how "Chef Canice Stanley recognised me and, with the air of a fond parent, insisted I have at tasting spoonful of his puds on the house" (Burke, 1994, p.B10). Acknowledging his relationship with the proprietor of Bentleys, Tom Doorley wrote that "in the interests of transparency, I must confess that Richard Corrigan is a good friend of mine and someone of whom I am very fond" and that "if you wish to regard this review as being compromised by the relationship, that's fine, but I have to say that our meal was flawless" (Doorley, 2008, p.78).

Other reviewers recounted their previous experience of a chef's work, such as Tom Doorley in his 2005 review of Cooke's, where he stated: "I first ate Cooke's cooking in 1991" (Doorley, 2005, p.70). John McKenna referenced his previous visits to the Oysterhaven and demonstrated his familiarity with the restaurant's signature black plates as being an Oysterhaven trademark (McKenna, J., 1994b, p.38).

Reviewers cited their experiences of eating out abroad as a means of establishing the breadth of their experience and knowledge (Doorley, 2000, p.9; 2003, p.33). They also referred to their previous experience in the restaurant industry. Paolo Tullio, who formerly ran a restaurant, peppered his reviews with allusions to this, such as in a 2008 review where he discussed crispy beef with Chinese vegetables, writing: "This dish was very popular in my own restaurant back in the Seventies and Eighties, so I was keen to see how it was done here" (Tullio, 2008, p.24).

Critics explain their job

This theme was identified as one where the restaurant reviewers provided some insight into the practice of restaurant reviewing. They also revealed some of the tenets to which they subscribed. For example, Paolo Tullio (1998, p.100) stated that the majority of his reviews had been mid-week, a time when restaurants tended not to be full. In a later review, he explained that he generally asked his guest to make a restaurant booking, so that he did not have to use his own name, and wrote "that way when I arrive, even if I'm recognised, it's too late to change the menu, the chef or bring in extra waiting staff" (Tullio, 2007, p.28). Reviewers revealed other self-imposed regulations relating to finance, as indicated by the statement, "I broke with my usual rule of keeping the wine well below £20" (Doorley, 1998, p.27). They also mentioned how long they waited before they visited a newly opened establishment, as evidenced by the following quote: "As a rule I don't rush off to restaurants as soon as they are open to try and judge them" (Doorley, 2003, p.33), before explaining that for this particular restaurant review, he had done so at the invitation of the owner.

Reviewers were often aware of their professional reputations. Helen Lucy Burke, writing a positive review, stated: "Pigalle is a pretty good place and if anyone thinks I am getting soft on recommendations, several commendations in a row, the answer is

that Irish restaurants have improved beyond measure" (Burke, 1990, p.C16). Paolo Tullio provided an insight into his reviewing process when he wrote:

> You may wonder how it is that I rarely write reviews where the vitriol drips metaphorically off my pen. I like to think that it's all down to careful preparation, gathering intelligence, assimilating facts, reading reviews and surfing the net before choosing a restaurant to dine in. That's the road to avoid disappointment. Oh yes, that and luck. You see, although it's easier to write a review that bristles with anger, a wounded palate and a little self-righteousness, I'd much rather get a good meal in the first place (Tullio, 2003, p.150).

4.2.2 Economic references

Throughout the reviews, references to the price of the meal and the notion of value for money were customary. Price was invariably a feature of reviews, although it was not explicitly discussed in later reviews. Instead, it was often mentioned at the end of the review, and sometimes presented on the page in the form of a bill.

Validation of experience

Reviewers regularly qualified their restaurant experiences as being worth the monetary expenditure when they believed that they had an exceptional experience. This was especially true when they visited a fine-dining restaurant. They acknowledged the relative expense of their meal but contextualised the financial outlay by commending the quality of the ingredients, creativity of the food, or outstanding service. In a review of Michael's in Cork, reviewer, Helen Lucy Burke, suggested that the prices were high but, in her opinion, the food was worth it. She wrote that, "main courses range between £5.75 and £12.50 but this is seriously gourmet food" (Burke, 1994, p. B10). In his review of Thornton's, Tom Doorley stated: "I've just paid the largest bill in the history of this column and it was worth every penny" and described the chef as "a culinary genius…whose deftness and confidence have really hit their stride" (1998, p.27). Thus, although prices in these reviews are included, they are not the focus of the review with the overall experience being lauded instead. Where reviewers felt that they had not received value for money, they were then explicit about the price and the reasons why they felt the bill couldn't be justified. A review of Cooke's, in which the final bill cost

"a painful €131.70", saw the reviewer contemplating, "heavens knows what it would have been if we had ordered some side dishes" (Doorley, 2005, p.70).

Cognisance of readers' economic means

Another common theme which emerged within this domain was the acknowledgement that not all readers had the financial resources to eat out regularly. This theme was more dominant in earlier reviews. For example, Helen Lucy Burke explained that the reason for her restrained ordering at The Connacht Rooms at Ashford Castle was so that she didn't "run up a bill which would a) give readers a heart attack and b) give the impression that you had to spend a fortune" (Burke, 1989, p.16). In a review of Il Primo, the reviewer advised that "the bill does not require an overdraft" (O'Byrne, 1991, p.30), while another review of the Elephant and Castle suggested that while the experience can be expensive, "with a little bit of tailoring you could come out with a much lower bill. Next time I will skip the puds, and order one starter course with several forks" (Burke, 1992, p.16). In her review of Duzy's Café, a reviewer in *The Irish Times* makes the point that the two courses each and a modestly priced wine at £30 is "reasonable but not cheap, although maybe some people think so" (Mulcahy, 2000, p.54). References to readers' budget and spending capacity are not absent from later reviews. A 2008 *Irish Times* review of Bentley's suggests that "within reason, you can spend as much or as little as you like here" (Doorley, 2008, p.78). However, readers' budgets are not as dominant a theme in the years from 2001-2008, the Celtic Tiger era.

The Irish economic climate

A distinct theme emerged from reviews from 1998 onwards was depicting Irish restaurants as being increasingly expensive. In a review of the Transylvania Romanian Tavern, Dublin, in 1999, Paolo Tullio praised the restaurant for charging between £5.80 and £6.80 for a main course "in a city where restaurants are increasingly pitching their main courses closer to £20" (Tullio, 1999, p.81). The same reviewer writing about Dublin's Café Topolis noted that "starters, all of which cost £3.50, which these days is not expensive" (Tullio, 2000, p.80). Three years later, Tullio wrote that "you cannot say it often enough. This is becoming a very expensive country to dine out in" and concluded his review by stating "we mused that if that's the new Ireland – high priced and mediocre – it's time to take a stand" (Tullio, 2003, p.50). Concerns about the cost

of eating out were expressed in a 2004 *Sunday Tribune* review of Nosh in Dalkey, where the bill was €93. The reviewer wrote:

> In many places outside of Dalkey, of course such a sum has to feed a family of six for a week but given Nosh's location, the fact that it always seems full and the price of an average night out these days, it's by no means an outrageous sum for a meal for two with a decent bottle of wine. Newspapers like to draw attention to pricing rip-offs. Now and again, though, it's nice to point out a place that is reasonably priced (Doyle, 2004, p.24).

Reviewers indicated that not all restaurants represented good value from 2000 to 2008. Tom Doorley, praising his meal experience at Bentley's, where the bill was €168.50, wrote, "I don't need to spell it out. You can spend that kind of money on complete rubbish in Dublin" (Doorley, 2008, p.78).

4.2.3 The Irish food scene 1988-2008

The literature review indicated that 1988 to 2008 was a time of changing food culture, with new trends, more restaurant choices, and increased knowledge (Mac Con Iomaire, 2018). Within the domain of the Irish food scene of that time, several themes emerged which reflected these developments.

Irish food preferences

Several referred to Irish preferences – or perceived preferences – for types of food and portion sizes. A review of The Old Dublin described a plate of gravlax as being "presented as prettily as nouvelle cuisine but multiplied by whatever factor relates to Irish appetites" (Burke, 1988, p. 10). Another review alluded to the difference between Italian and Irish ways of serving pasta, where "maybe some allowances had been made for Irish tastes in terms of sauce to pasta ratio" (Binchy, 2006, p. 20). A common assertion was that Irish preferences are for milder tastes, expressed in sentiments, including a Thai green curry which was "was just hot enough for me (which means well-toned down for Irish tastes)" and starters which were "outstandingly good, even if they reflected our own rather tame and unsophisticated approach to Thai food" (Doorley, 1999, p.31). One reviewer recounted his displeasure at being presented with

food that he considered to have "the distinct feel of Chinese food for the Irish, and that was confirmed by not even the option of chopsticks" (Tullio, 2007, p.71).

An evolving restaurant scene

A prevalent theme throughout the reviews, and over time, is that reviewers considered the restaurant landscape in Ireland to be developing. These observations frequently related to pricing, and often negatively viewed, as indicated by a review that stated that "Barberstown suffers from a malaise too common in Irish restaurants. It is close enough to the top price category to be compared with the best; in quality, it is very far away" (O'Byrne, 1988, p.20). The emergence of restaurants offering mid-priced menus appears in reviews from the early 1990s onwards. For example, the opening of the Elephant and Castle in Dublin's Temple Bar is observed as being "an interesting place, which was set up by owners John Hayes and Elizabeth Mee to fill a perceived gap in the middle-price Dublin Market" (Burke, 1992, p.16). Dublin restaurants in the mid-1990s are presented by reviewers as being places that are often glitzy, and perhaps even ostentatious. In comparison, the restaurant, Girolles, is praised for "the sort of true Mom n' Pop 'Come in, sit down' relaxation we might have believed had vanished from city centre restaurants" (McKenna, J., 1995, p. 44). The food at Ernie's in Dublin, meanwhile, garnered the accolade of being "a bit of a rarity these days: well-executed, unpretentious dishes at a reasonable price" and "very good at what appears to be a dying art" (Doorley, 1995, p.32). John McKenna, writing three years later in the *Irish Times*, noted The Eglantine in Cork was "so understated as to hark back to a bygone age, before anyone even thought of the razzmatazz that is now so prevalent in the restaurant business" (1998, p. 50). That Dublin restaurateurs in the mid- to late-1990s faced increased competition to attract diners is evidenced by statements such as "an exemplary wine list is just not enough these days, especially in an area where a well-aimed brick will more than likely hit somewhere with good grub", in reference to a Temple Bar restaurant (Doorley, 1996, p.12). It was also discernible that diners had greater choice at this time. However, more dining options did not always translate as improved standards or a greater variety of food. In noting that work-a-day lunch spots in Dublin "have improved so much in the last 10 years, it seems churlish to complain", the writer opined that "despite the influx of news cafes, we're faced with a series of identikit menus offering pale imitations of a once good idea. Panini anyone?" (East,

2002, p.30). Later reviews indicated that reviewers still thought there was room for improvement in the Irish restaurant scene. Doorley (2007, p.81) suggested some reasons why there was a scarcity of Michelin stars in Ireland, including the relatively sparse population in comparison to the UK, adding that "standards in Irish restaurants, by and large, are pretty low."

Definitions of Irish cuisine

What constitutes Irish cuisine in the critics' opinions emerged as a smaller but still significant theme. Writing in 1989, McKenna suggested that Gallagher's Boxy Restaurant, with a menu which included Irish stew, ham and cabbage, and the traditional Irish potato dish, boxty, was "popping the myth that there is no such thing as Irish cuisine" and states that "this is Irish food as a living culture, improving and enhancing ingredients that were not available in the Emergency years when many of these dishes were at their most popular" (McKenna, S., 1989, p.37). Establishments that were considered worthy of plaudits included The Purty Kitchen, where the reviewer recommended the restaurant as "an excellent place to bring visitors for a taste of Ireland" (O'Byrne, 1993, p.38). In subsequent years, a number of reviews reflect what is perceived to be a growing pride in Irish produce and cooking, as exemplified by Tullio (1997, p.94) who, in one of his first reviews for the newly launched 'Weekend' magazine in the *Irish Independent*, highlighted a "a new-self confidence in our food", which he attributed partly to the fact that:

> There is no large corpus of national recipes to stop chefs from trying and choosing the best dishes from around the world. Freedom from the straight-jacket of a traditional cuisine has allowed choices that the French and the Italians are denied in their restaurants, bound as they are by their traditions.

4.2.4 Critics' values

As discussed in the literature review, previous research into restaurant reviews evaluated critics' criteria for assessing restaurants, with quality of food and service, ambience and atmosphere, menu variety, and value typically assessed (Titz *et al*., 2004). The exploration of critics' values in this research sought to go beyond these basic

assessment criteria and to look at other merits that reviewers prioritised in their reviews. Four themes emerged within this domain.

The use of Irish produce

While regionality is an important feature of many modern-day restaurants, it did not feature prominently in the sample of restaurant reviews from 1988 to 2008. Early references to the provenance of ingredients were infrequent and most commonly pertained to cheeses, for example, the farmhouse cheese available at The Lobster Pot, which included "a lovely lemony fresh Lavistown from Kilkenny, and the award-winning Milleens from Cork" (McKenna, S., 1990, p.12). Naming the menu's cheese and valorising local varieties was a consistency throughout the reviews and over the years. That the origins of the ingredients used were not often clarified was evident, for example when a reviewer wrote about her dish of escalope of wild salmon with chervil: "It had been caught that afternoon on a rod and line, I was told" (Burke, 1994, p.B10). Such descriptions are not usual in the earlier reviews, although provenance became more of a feature from 1994 onwards. Citing a menu of hot smoked Ummera salmon on blinis, local oysters baked with almond and parsley and Bresaola dried by the chef, the reviewer commended this "bedrock of peerless ingredients" and asserted that the "menu is among the best sourced you will find anywhere" (McKenna, J., 1994b, p.38). An *Irish Times* review praised the Red Bank restaurant for "its clear enthusiasm for, and championing of, local produce. My experience here makes me wonder why other restaurants can't follow suit" (Heaney, 2001, p.34). It is clear from later reviews in 2008 that provenance had become something more noteworthy, with native lobster, Galway oysters, Tipperary water, and farmhouse butter documented at Bentley's (Doorley, 2008, p.78). Another review applauded Dublin restaurant, Alexis, for its produce, which was "sourced locally, sustainably, organically where possible – which earns them major brownie points" (McGuinness, 2008, p.32).

Rejection of faddishness

A dominant theme throughout was the reviewers' dislike of what they consider to be overtly fashionable dishes, where following trends was prioritised over the quality of food. One reviewer, praising the fare at a restaurant serving traditional Irish food wrote, "if the food isn't fossilised, it certainly isn't modernised with gimmicks like 'nouvelle

cuisine' either" (McKenna, S., 1989, p.10). Unpretentious food was often portrayed as a positive, as a review from 1997 indicated: "It's a menu that manages to combine good, straightforward dishes, unfussily prepared with just a little of the newer food fashion so prominent in many Dublin restaurants" (Tullio, 1997, p. 60). The same review suggested that restaurants would be better served when not being dictated by what is fashionable:

> Restaurants have a high failure rate, especially the very fashionable. This is true by definition as they become very quickly unfashionable. Others, though never much in the public eye, survive by doing what they do well. The Hungry Monk is one of those. Although not impervious to fashion, it retains a sense of its own identity unswayed by passing fads (Tullio, 1997, p.60).

This sentiment was reiterated by a *Sunday Tribune* review, which decried the use of ingredients for the sake of fashionability: "Tomatoes, goat's cheese, red pepper and basil is a pretty combination these days. They are all buzz words and the problem with buzzwords is that less talented chefs than Mr Thornton sprinkle them liberally throughout their lacklustre menus" (Doorley, 1998, p.27).

What was often valorised instead is a combination of classic and modern cooking. An *Irish Times* review of Dublin restaurant, Popjoys, described the style of cooking here as "modern conservative" with a menu composed almost exclusively of classic dishes (McKenna, J., 1996, p.44). The reviewer praised the restaurant for the fact that "it doesn't want to change the world, and it isn't powered by theatrical egos or star-chasing vainglory" (McKenna, J., 1996, p.44). In a different *Irish Times* review, the critic commended the chef's work and writes "while his cooking wears many of the garlands of the modern cooking style, there is an element of rusticity which seems age-old in the food which Gary Morris is producing at Girolles, his new Dublin city centre restaurant" (McKenna, J., 1995, p.44). Restaurants were often presented in a positive way when their menus offered a blend of the traditional and the contemporary, for example, as in an *Irish Times* review where the reviewer professed to have had a "thoroughly satisfying meal", where the menu "mixes familiar classics such as Steak Diane, chicken liver pâté and smoked salmon with newcomers such as grilled sea bass with *salsa verde* and giant ravioli stuffed with celeriac" (East, 2004, p.25). Retro puddings especially found favour with critics. At Dublin restaurant, Ernie's, the dessert offerings were

described as being “true to the Ernie's tradition of solid nursery food – and where’s the harm in that?” (Doorley, 1995, p.32). Similarly, Tullio (2004, p.50) commended “a good old fashioned rhubarb crumble with cream which was precisely the kind of nursery food that we needed on the day, comforting and redolent of childhood days.”

Simplicity

Critics esteemed simplicity and extolled this virtue over the years. They regularly expressed their preference for unadulterated food, such as a review of The Purty Kitchen, where the reviewer stated that she had found “an excellent example of simple, typically Irish food done very well, with good, fresh ingredients and care and attention to detail” (O’Byrne, 1993, p.38). Simplicity was invoked when critics referenced seasonal ingredients or when agrarian references were employed. “Few cooks nowadays dare to be this rustic”, a critic commented admirably about a dish of beef with roasted celeriac served a Caesar dressing and bacon lardons, and also noted that the restaurant itself was “a welcoming little venue, understated, unfussy, homely” (McKenna, J., 1995, p.44). Another reviewer dining at The Tannery restaurant in Waterford commented favourably that “Paul Flynn's food has an earthy, rustic character despite its careful presentation” (Doorley, 2007, p.81). The same reviewer makes a powerful case for the simplicity the following year and wrote:

> There are those who object, on principle, to simplicity even if it's simplicity done with brilliance as it is here. They expect fashionable restaurants to be all bells and whistles. Good restaurants can be a bit theatrical but most of us, in our heart of hearts yearn for simply cooked food, based on that kind of excellent raw materials that we can rarely buy for home use, served with consummate professionalism in impeccable surroundings (Doorley, 2008, p.78).

This championing of simplicity was often reflected in the critics’ preference for unadorned dining spaces. For example, a restaurant décor, which drew its influence from the classic American diner, was applauded as being “simple, casual chic as restaurants go” (Doorley, 2001, p. 9).

Global food and authenticity

Reviews of restaurants serving global food increase in prevalence over the 21 years, and Tullio (2007, p.29) noted that "the number of ethnic cuisines available in Ireland seems to grow every year." Reviewers consistently expressed concerns as to how authentic this food was. Thus, a *teppanyaki* restaurant was praised as being "something rather different from your average chicken chow-mein Chinese restaurant" (East, 2003, p.26). A Peruvian restaurant found disfavour with the reviewer, who had recently returned from a South American visit, writing that "there is nothing South American about the food and the great South American atmosphere promised on the literature amounted to a tape of tango music and the convivial bloke straining to find his inner Latino" (Doorley, 2000, p.9). In another review, the critic expressed his wonder at finding what he considers to be authentic Chinese food in Ashbourne, Co. Meath and wrote: "Finding such authentic and excellent Chinese food in Ireland would be remarkable in itself but finding it outside the capital made it all the more of a surprise" (Tullio, 2005, p.32). The same reviewer in a later review referring to Irish restaurants serving global food stated: "I have a suspicion that a lack of authenticity pervades most, if not all ethnic cuisines. Since I've never lived in India or China, that feeling remains a suspicion, but it has been confirmed to me by people who do know those traditions well" (Tullio, 2007, p.28). Critics, while regularly encouraging their readers to have adventurous palates, were also keen to ensure that the difference between places serving authentic food and restaurants that were merely and unsuccessfully aping a cuisine was understood.

In summation, the thematic analysis indicated that the use of Irish produce was not widely referenced in earlier reviews, but regionality became increasingly important in reviews from the mid-1990s onwards. While highlighting trends, reviewers rejected faddishness in restaurants and championed simplicity in food, and often in décor too. Thus, restaurants that were thought to be serving inauthentic food or dishes that were toned down for Irish palates were written about unfavourably by critics.

4.3 Semi-structured interviews

Appendices A-D shows transcripts conducted with three restaurant critics and one editor, as part of the qualitative phase of the research.

Sally McKenna reviewed restaurants for the *Irish Independent* in a weekly column called 'Guest Who's Coming to Dinner' from 1988 until 1990. The column saw her bring well-known individuals, whether from Ireland or abroad, to dinner and for several months in 1990, she wrote the 'Dinner Date' column, which took a more straightforward restaurant review format. A photographer, cookery book editor, and filmmaker, she is the publisher of the *John and Sally McKennas' Guides,* which recommends restaurants, shops, and places to stay in Ireland, with a focus on food.

Tom Doorley is one of Ireland's longest serving food critics. A former wine columnist at *The Field* magazine, he was restaurant critic for the *Sunday Tribune* from 1994 to 2005. He subsequently became the restaurant critic for the *Irish Times* magazine, and he is currently the *Irish Daily Mail*'s restaurant critic.

Sandy O'Byrne wrote 'Table Talk', the *Irish Times*' restaurant review column from 1986-1996. She previously worked at Arbutus Lodge in Cork and is the author of three books.

Fionnuala McCarthy was the editor of the *Sunday Tribune* magazine from 2004 until the newspapers' closure in 2011. As part of her remit, she was responsible for commissioning and editing the weekly restaurant review column. She employed five different restaurant critics during her tenure.

All four interviewees were selected because they were involved in either the writing or commissioning of restaurant reviews during the period of focus for this research. Before the interviews, questions were prepared, such as what the reviewer's brief had been, how the reviewers perceived their roles, as well as questions about practical aspects of reviewing, including budget and frequency of visits to the same restaurant. Questions were also posed regarding their memories of the Irish restaurant and food scene at the time and how this has changed. For the interview with *Sunday Tribune* magazine editor, Fionnuala McCarthy, questions were prepared regarding the importance of the

restaurant review, what elements she considered to be necessary to a review, and what feedback readers gave.

Information gathered from these interviews enabled the researcher to gather richer and more in-depth data. For example, Sally McKenna was able to explain why the 'Guest Who's Coming to Dinner' column subsequently became 'Dinner Dates' after she told her editor that she would prefer to write a more straightforward restaurant review. Concerning the late 1990s, Tom Doorley identified this as a time of great change in the Irish restaurant scene for reasons of growing confidence and economic recovery. Sandy O'Byrne elucidated the reasons for the predominance of Dublin restaurant reviews, which she suggested were for reasons of practicality and because the *Irish Times* readership was primarily Dublin-based. *Sunday Tribune* magazine editor, Fionnuala McCarthy, explained the criteria for the selection of restaurant reviews, what she expected from the reviews that she commissioned, and who she believed the magazine's readership to be.

Chapter 5: Discussion of the Findings

5.1 Introduction

The quantitative and qualitative findings are now discussed in the context of the research questions, along with how the results relate to themes identified in the literature. The quantitative data depicts changes that the restaurant format underwent throughout the 21-year period concerning the amount of space it occupied on a newspaper or magazine page, how it was illustrated, and whether or not the reviews were carried a byline picture. These changes can be regarded as significant, with restaurant reviews appropriating more column inches in the latter part of the period under review. The qualitative findings via thematic analysis and semi-structured interviews help towards a greater understanding of changes in the Irish restaurant scene at the time and how concurrent changes in the Irish economy affected eating out. The qualitative findings also provide a greater understanding of the role of critics during this time. The findings are presented as they pertain to the specific research questions of this research in order to offer an overall account of developments in restaurant reviews published in the weekend sections of the *Irish Times*, the *Irish Independent*, and the *Sunday Tribune* from 1988 to 2008. In brief, these research questions posed were:

- Did changes occur in either the format or focus of newspaper restaurant criticism in Ireland from 1988 to 2008?
- What was the role of Irish restaurant critics and how was this role articulated?
- Were the reviews indicative of changes in Irish food culture and Irish dining habits?
- How did restaurant reviews reflect the economic climate?

5.2 Format and focus changes in Irish newspaper criticism, 1988-2008

Restaurant reviews had a regular but not consistent presence in the selection of Irish newspaper under investigation over the 21-year time frame. In the *Irish Independent*, from 1991, weekend restaurant reviews did not appear until the launch of 'Weekend' magazine in 1997. In the *Irish Times*, reviews appeared more frequently than in the *Irish Independent* during this period, but they were not always a weekly feature.

In comparison, the *Sunday Tribune* published restaurant reviews more consistently. This is not to suggest that food coverage was absent from the *Irish Independent* and the *Irish Times* at these points in time. As discussed in the literature review, recipes were a mainstay of newspapers during this time (Hickson, 2018) and they regularly carried features on chefs and profiles of new restaurants, although these were not critiques. As such, food journalism was present, but restaurant reviews became permanent features for the *Irish Times* and the *Irish Independent* at weekends when the respective papers began publishing their magazine supplements. This is reflective of Cole's (2005) assertion that the increase in lifestyle content in newspapers, including food, is related to the technological developments, allowing newspapers to produce more colour pages, and thus requiring more copy to fill these pages. It is also indicative of a growing interest in food as a topic in journalism, which Voss (2012, p.70) calls a recent phenomenon. Sally McKenna, writing the 'Guest Who's Coming for Dinner' column where she had a celebrity co-diner, from 1988 to 1990, suggested that there was no real interest in a weighty restaurant critique at that time. She stated:

> That's why I was given the guests. And I think that probably never changed and the people who were in charge were probably more interested in who was going to the restaurants rather than what the restaurant is serving. If that continued, I would say it was coming out of that experience which I had, which was they just really didn't want to know about serious restaurant criticism (McKenna, S., 2019, Appendix A).

From 1988 to 2008, all three newspapers had dedicated reviewers when they carried reviews, although the critics changed. In contrast, earlier reviews in the 1980s, which appeared in the *Irish Times* under the heading 'Table for Two', were written by members of staff, according to Sandy O'Byrne (2019, Appendix C). Tom Doorley remembered 'Table for Two' as thus: "The features editor of the *Irish Times* used to basically pay the restaurant bill for any member of staff who was prepared to write about the meal they had out, wherever it was, and it was absolutely terrible. It was like a school essay" (Doorley, 2019, Appendix B). When Sandy O'Byrne began writing 'Table Talk' in 1986, she recalled it as a time when food was becoming serious, with the advent of nouvelle cuisine. This is one suggested reason why the *Irish Times* employed a restaurant critic as opposed to a member of staff who wanted to eat out. She said:

> I think newspapers started to think “we need a restaurant column; we need to put this in with the theatre reviews, with the music reviews." Before that, I suppose restaurant columns were partly the information side of papers, they were partly a sort of hangover in a way from the old social columns or society pages… but then they became more of a sort of feature in their own right as we went into the 1980s and food became more trendy, restaurants became sexy (O’Byrne, 2019, Appendix C).

The idea that restaurant reviews were previously not taken as seriously as other sections of the paper is supported by Tom Doorley, who remembered meeting the *Sunday Tribune* editor, Vincent Browne, when Doorley had just started reviewing for the paper in 1994. The editor commended him on previous investigative journalism Doorley had written but did not realise that he was now the *Tribune*’s restaurant reviewer (Doorley, 2019, Appendix B).

The fact that newspapers began to give more column inches to restaurant reviews bolsters the suggestions that they were of increasing importance, to editors and readers alike. By 2001, all reviews were larger than a half page in size. This was accompanied by more generous and richer visual illustrations. Early reviews tended to carry illustrations of food, but from 1996 to 2008, all reviews carried photographs of the food, the chef, or the establishment. In short, reviews became more prominent in newspapers.

Another notable change is the introduction of byline photographs of the critics. These first began to appear in 1995 and, by the year 2000, the majority of reviews carried them. One of the widely observed tenets of restaurant reviewing, introduced by Craig Claiborne, was that critics should be anonymous to the staff of the restaurant (Sietsema, 2010). However, as has been noted in the literature review, this is not something that is observed in the majority of today’s restaurant reviews. The publication of a byline photograph meant that the reviewer was identifiable but it arguably also substantiated the reviewer as an authority on food. Sandy O’Byrne protested when the *Irish Times* introduced her byline photograph, stating:

> It’s not so much that you’re hiding or you’re pretending that you’re not there; it just makes it more awkward. The restaurant gets all uptight and I remember myself from the days when I worked in the kitchens, there were these phone calls saying the Michelin man is arriving and there would be panic stations for about two weeks (O’Byrne, 2019, Appendix C).

The sample of reviews indicated that they were connoisseurial in style. They can be defined as reviews that were text-based, with a prose style, and their goal was to hold the interest of the reader (Blank, 2007). This type of review dominated even while reviewers changed over time. It is notable that a select number of reviewers are responsible for the majority of reviews – Tom Doorley (*Sunday Tribune* and *Irish Times*), Paolo Tullio (*Irish Independent*), Sandy O'Byrne (*Irish Times*), and Helen Lucy Burke (*Irish Independent* and *Sunday Tribune*).

Blank (2007) proposed that a reviewer's credibility is dependent on how reputable the publication is perceived to be. All three newspapers sampled in this study were national publications, reaching a wide demographic and with large readerships (O'Brien, 2008b; Breen and O'Brien, 2018). Aligned to the respective standing of the newspapers they wrote for are the individual reviewer's reputations: Doorley, for example, was a well-known wine writer, while Tullio had previously owned a restaurant, and O'Byrne had worked at the prestigious Arbutus Lodge in Cork. Meanwhile, the "strong voice" and "contrarianism" evident in Helen Lucy Burke's reviews have been described as "an essential part of the *Sunday Tribune*'s offering" (Brennan and Trench, 2018, p. 178). In his thesis exploring the contribution of particular critics writing for the *New York Times*, Davis suggests that these critics had an important influence on perceptions of restaurants (2009). It can be similarly argued in this thesis, that the combination of recognised reviewers in respected publications carried considerable weight in terms of restaurant discourse.

In interviews, critics revealed how they came to their positions. Sally McKenna (2019, Appendix A) stated that she had an interest in food and had access to celebrities that she thought would be interesting to have dinner with. She had contacted an *Irish Independent* editor to ask if she could do restaurant reviews after Helen Lucy Burke's retirement from the paper. Tom Doorley was approached by the *Sunday Tribune* and subsequently the *Irish Times* (Doorley, 2019, Appendix B). Sandy O'Byrne had studied English and history of art in university and worked as a chef before applying for the job as 'Table Talk' columnist (O'Byrne, 2019, Appendix C). *Sunday Tribune* magazine editor, Fionnuala McCarthy, said that critics were employed for their food expertise. She explained that Katy McGuinness was signed because "she is a bona fide foodie

with good credentials as she had been reviewing in *The Gloss*. She can appreciate good food and see through any over-blown PR hype" (McCarthy, 2019, Appendix D).

The quantitative data indicated that, of the sample of 155 restaurants, and where it was possible to establish, there was no significant difference between the numbers of establishments open for six months or under, and those open for longer. An assumption might be that newspapers would prefer to review more recently opened restaurants, as this provided a news angle. The path of the connoisseurial review outlined by Blank (2007) indicated that restaurants chosen for a review are often newly opened. However, interviews with critics suggested some reasons why already established restaurants were reviewed instead. Sandy O'Byrne stated that "it was a big challenge to find restaurants that were interesting, that were doing authentic food but were competitively priced and that the family could go" (2019, Appendix B). Sally McKenna, reviewing around the same time, asserted that the restaurant scene was unbalanced and that "it was just basically a lot of swanky French, and imitation French restaurants, that people didn't generally go out to unless they were well-off. It wasn't actually a very healthy restaurant scene" (2019, Appendix A). However, *Sunday Tribune* magazine editor, Fionnuala McCarthy, stated that her brief to reviewers was that they would review a new restaurant ahead of competitors like the *Sunday Independent* and the *Irish Times*, noting that "I wanted the *Tribune* to be the first with a review, which we usually were. The *Sunday Independent* printed a week ahead of us, so they never really got to a restaurant before we did" (McCarthy, 2019, Appendix B).

The quantitative data also shows that the majority of restaurants reviewed over the 21 years were located in Dublin city and county. Sandy O'Byrne (2019, Appendix C) explained how the Dublin bias of her reviews was partly because of the newspaper's readership and partly because of her availability, although she endeavoured to cover the country as much as possible. Fionnuala McCarthy (2019, Appendix D) echoed this, stating that the *Sunday Tribune* reviews had more of a South County Dublin focus, as this was where the majority of the newspaper's readership was based. The *Sunday Tribune* carried reviews of restaurants outside Dublin when time and budgets permitted, and every fourth or fifth review was non-Dublin-based. She also maintained that during the summer months, the focus was on restaurants where people liked to holiday, namely West Cork, Galway, and Wexford. She would also sign off on a list of restaurants

before the critic visited them. She stated that "the restaurants selected said a lot about who we were as a brand and who we thought our readers were, so that is why I liked to vet the proposed list" (McCarthy, 2019, Appendix D).

To conclude, restaurant reviews published in the three newspapers showed considerable change over time. As well as becoming a more consistent feature in publications, they expanded in size and were accompanied by more lavish illustrations and subsequently photography. Byline photographs had also become the norm by the year 2000. Although the stable of reviewers changed over time, a small cohort of critics dominated the sphere of restaurant criticism. The Dublin bias of reviewed restaurants can be explained in part by the newspapers' readership and, while the broad remit of a connoisseurial review is that it features a new restaurant, the quantitative data indicated that there was no marked difference between reviews of new restaurants and those that were established for longer.

5.3 The role of the critic

One of the main objectives of this research is to ascertain how the role of the critic can be understood and how this role was articulated through the reviews. The literature established that reviews could potentially serve as determinants of what is considered to be good taste in the restaurant dining context (Vincent, 2018). In essence, they provide guidelines as to how to behave, what to seek out, and what standards should be expected in restaurants.

5.3.1 Critics as cultural intermediaries

Cultural intermediaries, as defined by Bourdieu (1984, p.326), typically include critics of quality newspapers, with Smith Maguire and Matthews (2014, p.1) proposing that they are:

> the taste makers defining what counts as good taste and cool culture in today's marketplace. Working at the intersection of culture and economy, they perform critical operations in the production and promotion of consumption, constructing legitimacy and adding value through the qualification of goods.

Restaurant critics mediate between producers (restaurateurs) and consumers, and Matthews and Smith (2014) further state that cultural intermediaries are involved in the framing of goods (in this case, restaurants) as legitimate and therefore worthy of the consumer's attention. The thematic analysis of restaurant reviews indicated clear examples of how critics frame restaurants as being worthy of consideration and contextualise various establishments for the reader. One example is the theme, *Managing expectations and scene setting*, where reviewers placed the restaurant in a context that validates that price or experience. This was important during the 1980s and the early 1990s, a time when the restaurant scene was changing. Sandy O'Byrne suggests that, in the 1990s, a small number of people were eating out regularly and when people ate out, it tended to be for an occasion or a celebration. As the restaurant scene began to develop and more dining options became available, it was sometimes a case of managing the reader's expectations so that those who were anticipating dinner to be an 'event' were not disappointed, while at the same time pushing readers out of their comfort zones. She stated: "I remember years ago writing a review of a small sort of bistro restaurant in Sandymount or Ballsbridge or some area like that, which I thought was really good for what it did. I remember getting a storm of abuse because the expectations were wrong" (O'Byrne, 2019, Appendix B). Critics, as demonstrated through thematic analysis of reviews, can frame what might have previously been considered undesirable as something attractive.

Another specificity of cultural intermediaries is their expertise, as outlined by Matthews and Smith Maguire (2012). They note that "what differentiates cultural intermediaries from other actors involved in framing goods are their claims to authority" (Matthews and Smith Maguire, 2012, p.556). The same authors also state that the basis for the performance of expertise is varied, and this expertise can be corroborated by reputation, more formal certifications, or via the interactions in their work (Mathews and Smith Maguire, 2014, p.10). As discussed in the literature review, there is no qualification required to take on the role of restaurant critic (Voss, 2014). However, even habitual readers of reviews may assume that the critic has professional qualifications as Blank (2007) asserts. What expertise Irish restaurants critics possessed is not always made explicit in the reviews. However, in some cases, it may have been widely known separately to the reviews, such as Paolo Tullio running his restaurant before becoming a critic. However, the thematic analysis reveals that reviewers regularly gave examples of

their expertise. They demonstrated their food knowledge by recounting previous visits to an establishment and by referring to the breadth of their culinary and travel experiences. These allusions denoted their cosmopolitanism and thus their competence as reviewers. For example, by writing "risotto, they will tell you in the Veneto, lies somewhere between soup and solidity" (Doorley, 2003, p.33), the reviewer demonstrated his knowledge of how the dish was made in its country of origin. In summation, reviewers act as cultural intermediaries by framing restaurant experiences. They displayed their credentials as to why they had the authority to be culinary intermediaries and legitimated certain restaurants via making their expertise apparent in their reviews.

5.3.2 Critics as arbiters of good taste

According to Peterson and Kern (1996), the concept of omnivorousness can be defined as openness to appreciating everything. In her study of how restaurant reviews shaped Australian tastes from 1970 to 1995, Vincent (2018) argues that critics promoted the idea of omnivorousness as both being desirable and legitimate. This thesis also proposes that omnivorousness was encouraged by Irish restaurant reviewers, with archival material and interviews revealing how critics encouraged their readers to try new experiences and embrace different cuisines.

Alison Vincent (2018) looks to the concepts of authenticity and exoticism, the linchpins of omnivorous consumption, as set out by Johnston and Baumann (2015). Vincent's work (2018) also explores how authenticity and exoticism interact with the four antinomies of taste, as outlined by Warde (1997) – namely health and indulgence; economy and extravagance; care and convenience; and tradition and novelty – with these eight social imperatives representing the pressures that operate on and legitimise food choice. A similar framework is employed here to explore how Irish restaurant critics, presented omnivorousness as an important principle and validated individual food decisions using a selection of Warde's antinomies of taste (1997).

Authenticity

According to Johnston and Baumann (2015), authenticity is socially constructed and not inherent. Authentic food is characterised by the dimensions of its geographical

provenance, simplicity, a personal connection to the restaurant, chef and/or producers; associated with a historical tradition and an ethnic association. Irish restaurant critics valorised some of these dimensions more than others. Foods, restaurant décor, modes of presentation described as 'simple' and therefore authentic, received accolades. This sentiment was commonly expressed in the sample of Irish restaurant reviews, for example – "In my view, simple dishes made with the finest ingredients are hard to beat" (Tullio, 1997, p.60).

Johnston and Baumann (2015, p.67) proposed that simplicity is associated with "positive values like sincerity and truthfulness" and that it emphasises food's distance from modern industrialised life. While railing against overt showiness, Irish restaurant critics praised foods that were simple and therefore 'authentic'. This valorisation is highlighted by examples such as a review which stated that "even reading the menu one is struck by how intelligently it was written. None of the clichés of menu-speak and none of that flowery verbosity which is so off-putting has been allowed" (McKenna, J., 1997, p.44).

Johnston and Bauman (2015) also framed food as being authentic when it is connected to specific personalities. In her study of Australian restaurant critics, Vincent (2018, p.297) noted that "good taste then became associated with a knowledge of particular individuals, and the experience of their restaurants and the food they produced." It is demonstrable that acknowledging the chef in reviews became then an increasingly important feature over time, whereas in earlier reviews the chef was rarely mentioned. Well-regarded restaurants featured chefs who often had signature dishes or techniques. For example, Chef Kevin Thornton is described as being known for "his ability to orchestrate flavours with dazzling balance and effectiveness" (Doorley, 1998, p.27) and Arundel's "trademark potatoes with hazelnut and kale" in John McKenna's review of The Eglantine (1998, p.50).

An ethnic connection is also deemed important by Johnston and Baumann (2015), concerning eating authentically, and this is also aligned to the dimension of authentic food as linked to a historical tradition. Irish critics framed good taste by eschewing establishments where flavours were thought to be diluted to accommodate Irish tastes and extolled places that they consider to serve food that stayed true to its origins and thus maintained its integrity. For example, in a review of a café serving Middle Eastern

food, the reviewer was reassured that "in the kitchen, the chefs look as though they're making what their mothers made rather than following Delia Smith's foreign food chapter" (East, 2002, p. 30).

Exoticism

Newspapers typically highlight new trends, cuisines and ingredients and restaurant critics communicate this. Johnston and Baumann (2015) define exoticism as being foods considered as foreign, as well as foods considered exciting or different. The championing of exoticism and presentation of exotic foods as legitimate choices is evident throughout the reviews, even while reviewers shun fads. Reviewers, for example, celebrated a starter of razor fish, which "represents something of a rarity on an Irish menu; apparently the majority of them are exported to Japan" (Heaney, 2001, p.34), or they were excited by a novel ingredient, such as East (2004, p.25) asserting that "I was intrigued by the mention of *daikon* as I have never seen this Japanese radish here".

Navigating dining anxieties

Theorists including Rozin (1976) and Fischler (1988; 1993) established that food choices are problematic, and can cause stress. The concept that modern-day food choices are fraught with difficulty and a source of cultural anxiety was further explored by Warde (1997). Warde (1997) identified four culinary antinomies comprised of the structural concerns of the current epoch and suggested that, while most people are familiar with both poles of each antimony, this does not always aid the decision-making process. Regarding novelty and tradition, or the desire for the new and the co-existing need for stability, Warde posited that both in mind and in practice, the two co-exist and that "custom and novelty are inextricably intertwined in the modern mind and in modern institutions" (1997, p.75). This was apparent from Irish restaurant criticism, which identified new and exciting food trends, while also valuing traditional cooking and cuisine. The thematic analysis indicated that restaurants combining classic and modern cooking were often valorised, thus providing a balance between Warde's antinomies of novelty and tradition. Another two principles of recommendation outlined by Warde (1997) were convenience and care. Convenience, related to the idea of time-saving and efficiency, is not an aspect that featured strongly in the newspaper reviews

from 1988 to 2008. Nonetheless, references to changes that were occurring in how people ate out during this period were found, as eating out had become more of a norm in Ireland and less of a special occasion and was no longer confined to dinner. This is indicated by examples such as: "The waiter asked if we were in a hurry – a nice touch now that the days of the long lunch are well and truly over" (Doorley, 1995, p.32). Warde (1997) highlighted 'homemade' as an adjective depicting wholesome food and also connoting personal and emotional care associated with a domestic setting. Irish critics, in the main, sanctioned restaurants where they felt they were treated with that kind of consideration. While homemade was used as a term of praise, and most commonly about desserts, Irish critics validated care most frequently in terms of a restaurant's ambience. For example, a restaurant's warm and friendly atmosphere made the critic "feel instantly at ease" (Tullio, 1998, p.100) and "a homely and welcoming atmosphere" invoked "an easy and relaxed feeling" (Tullio, 2001, p.98).

5.3.3 Critics view and explanation of their own role

Interviews with critics provided a greater understanding of aspects of the critics' role. One theme emerging from the thematic analysis of reviews was the educational aspect of reviews. It was notable that, in earlier reviews especially, reviewers regularly explained ingredients and techniques, which suggested that these terms may not have been familiar to the average reader. Critics themselves differed as to whether they considered this educational aspect as being a large part of their role. Tom Doorley stated:

> In writing the restaurant reviews, I never felt I was doing any educating because I felt the reader was pretty au-fait with what we were talking about. I did feel I was providing a kind of service in the sense that, oh gosh, there are a whole lot of restaurants out there and if you read my column, you can save an awful lot of grief by going to the ones I like (Appendix B, 2019).

Sandy O'Byrne felt that there was an educational element to her writing and says "it was talking about what was happening in the restaurants and promoting it if you like, talking about it to the reader, and also trying to get people to experiment and go outside their comfort zone in food and in restaurants and to try new things" (2019, Appendix C). She also maintained that while her first duty was to readers, she was conscious that

restaurateurs and chefs in Ireland were working against the odds, with high levels of taxation, high overheads and difficulties in sourcing ingredients. She stated that she tried to be responsible at that "bad reviews are easier to write and they're fun to read, but you can't do that, it's somebody's livelihood" (O'Byrne, 2019, Appendix C).

For Sally McKenna, who was in her twenties when she was critiquing restaurants for the *Irish Independent*, the experience was as educational for her as it was for her readers. She stated that "it was a real learning curve. I wasn't used to going to these places, I'd never been in them before and when I was going it was suddenly very public. I was trying to do my best and not make any mistakes" (McKenna, S., 2019, Appendix A).

Commissioning reviews in between 2004 and 2008, Fionnuala McCarthy suggested that the *Sunday Tribune* readership was already sophisticated in culinary matters and stated that "I pictured them eating out regularly and hosting Ottolenghi dinner parties" (McCarthy, 2019, Appendix D). This is reflective of Mac Con Iomaire's (2018, p.65) assertion that food and wine had become an important way of displaying one's cultural capital in the Celtic Tiger era.

In summation, the thematic analysis of restaurant reviews indicated that the critics operated as cultural intermediaries by framing certain restaurants as being legitimate choices and markers of good taste. Critics also promoted omnivorousness and valorised concepts of authenticity and exoticism while also helping navigate anxieties about eating out.

5.4 Changing tastes and a transformed restaurant scene

The purpose of this thesis is not to catalogue the number or the different types of restaurants in business at the time. However, the reviews indicate that this was a time of change for both Irish restaurants and diners. The variety of restaurants expanded from the late 1980s onwards. Mac Con Iomaire (2009) suggested the Dublin restaurant scene was increasingly dynamic: chefs returned home from working abroad bringing new ideas with them, and Restaurant Patrick Guilbaud won its first Michelin star in 1989. Other factors responsible for this new energy included the 1986 reduction in the VAT rate for restaurants from 25 per cent to 10 per cent, along with the country's increased

wealth (Mac Con Iomaire, 2009). Dining out became a more regular activity, which may have also been fuelled by "the changing tastes of the Irish public who were more widely travelled than any previous Irish generation" (Mac Con Iomaire, 2009, p.397). The qualitative data echoed these findings, and it can be inferred from references to food preferences that Irish diners had not been previously considered to have adventurous or sophisticated palates. In their reviews, critics increasingly alluded to a transformed Irish dining landscape and highlighted the number of restaurant options that were available. That the Irish restaurant scene and attitudes to food changed dramatically from the late 1980s onwards, was substantiated in interviews with the three critics. They posited that Irish restaurants were beginning to emerge from a style of cooking strongly influenced by the classical French tradition, with the restaurant experience characterised by formality. Sally McKenna described the restaurant scene at the time she was writing for the *Irish Independent* in the late 1980s as "…bizarre. There were no ordinary people going out to eat in the way that there is now. People now go out to eat all the time; people just didn't go out to restaurants. If you did, it was your birthday and you went to one of these places or you were a top business man" (McKenna, S., 2019, Appendix A). She also noted the absence of mid-price restaurants: "There was no brunch; it was all three-course dinners with lavish wines and that was what restaurant dining was and what people thought of" (McKenna, S., 2019, Appendix A). McKenna identified the opening of the diner-style Elephant and Castle in Temple Bar, Dublin, as marking a turning point for Irish restaurants and says that "suddenly it changed with Temple Bar and then you had democratic spaces that people could afford to go in and eat food that was not French" (2019, Appendix A).

Sandy O'Byrne (2019, Appendix C) described the 1980s as being an era of new ideas, but one still dominated by classically French cuisine. The 1990s, in comparison, saw a lighter and more casual style of food. With the early 1990s, Tom Doorley (2019, Appendix B) stated that dining options were poor but that the latter half of the decade was saw more innovation and increased confidence in Irish cuisine. Doorley (2019, Appendix B) suggested that two things were happening in parallel. One was the return of chefs from abroad, whom he posits brought outside influences and more exacting standards with them, and the other was the pioneering work of Myrtle Allen at Ballymaloe House, who advocated using quality Irish ingredients.

> I think you can't discount the effect, the influence of Myrtle Allen championing really good Irish produce because we were coming out of a time when Ireland in general had a cultural cringe, as the Australians would say it themselves and where we lacked confidence in particular in anything that was our own. You know, the plutocrats would eat French food in Le Coq Hardi. They weren't eating dry-cured Irish, free-range, organic ham or Carrageen moss puddings, and that sort of thing, and Myrtle had the ability, not just to recognise that but she could evangelise brilliantly (Doorley, 2019, Appendix B).

This quote serves to support the qualitative data theme of regionality, which only began to emerge strongly in later reviews. Sally McKenna, who noted that the first reference to Irish cheeses was found in one of her reviews from 1989, also confirmed that regionality became increasingly important in restaurants and said "we copied the French and then we learned. We felt the value of our cheese and our salmon and we changed and we became a really interesting destination." (McKenna, S., 2019, Appendix A).

The critic's role in legitimising what was good taste was paramount during this era of changing food culture. Arguably, this was a time when diners needed more guidance than before and food became a more widely discussed topic. Sandy O'Byrne (2019, Appendix C) pointed to evidence of a greater interest in food during the 1990s such as more television cooking programmes and glossy cookbooks and the birth of the celebrity chef. She stated:

> If you were invited to somebody's home you didn't mention the food, it wasn't considered to be the right thing to do. But suddenly, if you went out to dinner, everybody was talking about food and it was "Where did you find this?" and "Isn't this a wonderful sauce?" It had suddenly become part of culture, the way you'd discuss a book or a play (O'Byrne, 2019, Appendix C).

Sandy O'Byrne saw the changes both in restaurants and in people's attitudes to eating out as remarkable. She describes it as "extraordinary" the way that visiting restaurants changed, from something that was an occasion or was business related (what she called "expense account eating"), to becoming more commonplace (O'Byrne, 2019, Appendix C). Restaurant reviews from this time therefore contribute to a greater understanding of what can be considered a seismic shift in Irish people's eating habits.

5.5 Economic reflections

Ireland started to make a recovery from recession in 1988. The subsequent Celtic Tiger era was one of high consumer spending but by 2008, the country was officially declared to be in recession again (Bielenberg and Ryan, 2013). One of the research objectives was to assess to what degree Ireland's economic status was reflected in the restaurant reviews of the time. As indicated by the literature review, restaurant pricing was a consideration for restaurant critics, although its prioritisation varied. Schroder (1985) ranked 'pricing' as the fourth most important criteria of nine in restaurant reviews, after quality of food, the quality of service, and ambience. However, Titz *et al.* (2004) in their content analysis of reviews from American newspapers found that price and value received little attention in the body of reviews and that critics were more likely to comment on the prices when they were excessive. Thematic analysis showed that price was consistently mentioned in Irish restaurant reviews. From 1998 onwards, critics began to reference the cost of dining out in Ireland, while also acknowledging that there were more restaurants to choose from. One critic noted that "if the place ain't good enough, the people won't go there" (Doyle, 2004, p.25). The thematic analysis indicated that, as per the findings of Titz *et al.* (2004), the critics did not always discuss the pricing at length. However, they were prompt in noting if they thought a high price did not reflect their experience. Reviewing a mid-week meal, a critic wrote: "Our bill for two came to £89 which is an awful lot if you've just nipped out for a bit and planned to be in bed before midnight" (Mulcahy, 2000, p.118). After a disappointing meal, another reviewer lamented that "it was a perfectly adequate meal, far from cheap and far from memorable" (Doorley, 2005, p.70).

If restaurant reviews were somewhat reflective of the country's economic conditions, they could not be considered to represent the population's experiences as a whole. Sandy O'Byrne positioned the average 'Table Talk' reader as tending towards the *Double Income No Kids* category, a term that gained prevalence in the 1980s to describe childless professional couples with higher disposable incomes to spend on lifestyle purchases. Tom Doorley, reviewing for the *Sunday Tribune* in the mid-1990s, suggested that the readership was "vaguely sophisticated, reasonably well-travelled and 'cultured' as they say. I do remember saying to somebody that my typical reader is somebody who lives in Dublin 6 and goes to the Concert Hall three or four times a year" (Doorley,

2019, Appendix B). The inference was that the newspaper readership was relatively affluent. This reflects Wood's (1996) argument that newspaper food commenters presume its audience to be middle-class and professional.

Thematic analysis of reviews suggested that reviewers were cognisant that not everyone had the financial means to visit restaurants. However, it is notable that this theme was dominant in the earlier reviews but became less so from 2001 to 2008; arguably reflecting the country's economic growth. Fionnuala McCarthy (2019, Appendix D) mentioned that, when recession hit in 2008, the magazine began to feature pop-up restaurants and ethnic restaurants and stated that this "was reflective of how we were changing as a country – no one had expense accounts anymore, most of these restaurants didn't even take credit cards."

The concept of *value for money* falls within the economic domain but is distinct from how the reviews reflected the economy. That a meal should be value for money was central to the majority of reviews analysed, but what constituted value varied enormously in terms of actual monetary cost. However, as Vincent (2018) argued, the underlying premise is that a meal can be regarded as value for money if it increases the diner's cultural capital because it is a symbol then of good taste. The financial outlay was not as important as the currency that visiting a recommended restaurant gave. Omnivorousness once again comes into play here, where food choices were legitimated when framed as being authentic or exotic, and therefore a marker of discrimination (Johnston and Baumann, 2015). A review of the Michelin-starred Restaurant Patrick Guilbaud acknowledged that the meal cost the same price as a weekend in Paris but justified the expense on the basis that the meal was "some kind of perfection" (Doyle, 2006, p.25). Johnston and Baumann (2015, p.162) have noted that legitimating contrasts are often found in gourmet food writing, observing:

> To effectively distance themselves from the stereotype of the snob who is stuck in the antiquated separation of high-brow from low-brow culture, gourmet food writers are eager to explain expensive restaurants as freed from the arbitrarily rule-bound norms of a snobbish culinary past.

Restaurant Patrick Guilbaud provided a fine-dining experience, and the reviewer validated the expense of a meal here because it was extraordinary. Also, in contrast to

preconceptions about *haute cuisine* and Michelin-starred restaurants, the reviewer enjoyed a hearty meal. A terrine of *foie gras* and *ibérico ham*, served with a sorrel consommé "was top class and enormous – let no one tell you that two-star restaurants serve tiny portions" (Doyle, 2006, p.25). In another review, where the restaurant's simplicity was especially lauded, the reviewer acknowledged that the final bill was expensive but justified by the meal experience. He declared it as "the best value meal I've had in Ireland in a very long time, even if few of us would spend this kind of sum eating out on a weekly or even monthly basis" (Doorley, 2008, p.78).

In her review of the Connacht Rooms at Ashford Castle, Helen Lucy Burke urged readers to save up the money they might insouciantly spend on the pub and eat at this restaurant instead. She wrote:

> At least once in your lifetime open your palate to an experience that will demonstrate the extra-terrestrial qualities of someone who is heading for international fame. Sure, cooking is an ephemeral art, but so is ballet; would that stop you from going to the Bolshoi if you possibly could? (Burke, 1989, p.16).

In conclusion, pricing was an ever-prevalent consideration for critics and, to some degree, the reviews reflected what was happening in the Irish economy. During the Celtic Tiger era, reviewers presented Ireland as an increasingly expensive to eat out in, albeit with more choice of restaurants. Value for money was a dominant theme in reviews, although it was rarely clearly defined. However, critics justified expensive restaurants and meals, legitimating them by suggesting that they provided a high degree of cultural capital.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

This research aimed to explore the development of newspaper restaurant criticism in Ireland from 1988 to 2008. Based on a quantitative and predominantly qualitative analysis of restaurant reviews from the *Irish Independent*, the *Irish Times*, and the *Sunday Tribune*, it can be surmised that reviews changed significantly over time, with interviews with critics and a newspaper magazine editor providing valuable insights into some of those changes.

One of the main research objectives was to document the history of restaurant criticism. The literature review traced the early origins and evolution of restaurant criticism and recognised several key contributors to this field of journalism and food writing. The growth of lifestyle journalism and food journalism in the last three decades helped contextualise restaurant criticism, while also acknowledging that neither food journalism nor restaurant criticism has been the focus of any in-depth academic research in an Irish context. Therefore, this study contributes in part to closing this gap in knowledge.

Analysis of a selection of Irish newspaper reviews from 1988 to 2008 found that their prominence increased over time. Changes in format were also noticeable, and reviews were afforded more space in newspapers, with richer visual accompaniment, generally photography. While reviews were not a consistent feature of weekend newspapers for much of the late 1980s and the 1990s, the *Irish Independent* and *Irish Times'* introduction of Saturday lifestyle magazines provided a permanent home for restaurant criticism in these newspapers. The literature review and the qualitative research suggested that one of the reasons for greater food coverage in the media included a growing interest in food among the general population in Ireland. Thus, eating out became normalised, as opposed to an activity for special occasions, and food was accorded greater gravitas as a topic of discussion. This expansion of interest in restaurants and food was subsequently reflected by newspaper editorial policy. The research also showed that a small cohort of critics was responsible for the majority of reviews analysed in this thesis. These critics became increasingly recognisable when newspapers began to publish byline photographs alongside the reviews, a trend which began in 1995. It was also indicated that there was a marginally greater propensity for

reviews of recently opened establishments, and increasingly over time, which has been argued to be reflective of the fact that the Irish restaurant landscape was growing during the later period of the research's timeline. The growth in mid-price and ethnic restaurants was observed, while French-influenced restaurants were less dominant. Although the reviews sampled were from national publications, the qualitative research indicated that the bias in favour of Dublin-based restaurants was because of practical issues, in terms of reviewers' availability and time. It was also suggested that newspapers saw their restaurant review readership as being more Dublin based.

This thesis sought to evaluate the role of the restaurant critic as articulated in the reviews. Drawing on the work of Johnston and Baumann (2015) and Vincent (2018), this research found that critics promoted the concept of omnivorousness by advocating concepts such as authenticity and exoticism. Reviews provided essential information about a restaurant for readers and indicated the style of food, cost, and décor. Irish critics also championed values such as simplicity, in food and décor, and eschewed faddishness. Authenticity was valorised, and this became an increasingly important value as the choice of ethnic restaurants began to grow. Food provenance and the use of quality Irish ingredients were highlighted in later reviews. The thesis has suggested that because of changes in attitudes to dining out and more varied restaurant choices, the critic's role was crucial in helping readers navigate food choice anxieties, such as those highlighted by Warde (1997). Critics also served as cultural intermediaries and acted as arbiters of good taste, framing certain restaurants as the right ones to choose. A robust educational aspect was notable in reviews. However, the qualitative research indicated that critics themselves varied in how strong a role they believed they played in educating the reader about food, and the newspaper readership was considered to be sophisticated in culinary matters.

Situated in a time of considerable economic changes in Ireland, the thesis examined how this was reflected in reviews. It is evident that price was a routine component of reviews but what critics regarded as value for money was not always clearly defined. In the main, critics displayed an awareness of readers' financial means and were cognisant that not everyone had the budget to dine out regularly. However, it was inferred that critics believed that meals that increased cultural capital and provided an exceptional culinary experience, even if they were expensive, were worth the expense. Also, in

interviews, critics suggested that their readership were relatively affluent. Nonetheless, during the period of economic growth, 1994-2008, reviews made frequent reference to Ireland becoming an expensive country in which to eat out. While acknowledging that there was now greater choice for Irish diners, critics articulated their concerns that these meal experiences did not always provide value for money, however.

In the main, research into restaurant criticism is limited, and this is applicable in an Irish context. In tracing the development of restaurant criticism in Ireland from 1988 to 2008, this research has depicted an era in which several interlinked factors were at play. A growing interest in food; a simultaneous expansion in food journalism; increasingly cosmopolitan Irish tastes; and a rapidly developing economy provided the framework for restaurant criticism at the time. This research presented a critical moment in Irish culinary history and signified how the media articulated these changes in the national press. It has provided an understanding of Irish restaurant criticism at that time, contributing to the overall canon of Irish food studies. Contemporary debates about the role of restaurant criticisms are frequently focused on the impact of the rise of collective reviews such as the Zagat guides and what has been described as the democratising force of user-generated content in the form of online restaurant reviews (Johnston and Bauman, 2015). Such discussions underpin the strength of the position that was attributed to critics during the era of 1988 to 2008, with "the prevailing image of restaurant reviewer as established authority" (Johnston and Bauman, 2015, p.43). In lieu of the above, this thesis' focus of print journalism could provide a starting point for researchers who wish to explore the emergence of online reviews and their impact on the authority of appointed newspaper restaurant critics.

Chapter 7: Recommendations

This thesis provides several opportunities for further studies. Time limitations allowed for only certain aspects of restaurant criticism to be explored in this research, but an expanded study could look at other areas, such as the types of restaurants reviewed and elements including wine lists or service. A greater number of Irish newspapers and a larger sample size of reviews could also be considered. Interviews with more newspaper editors could also contribute to a broader understanding of how restaurant reviews were regarded within the industry and what their appeal was for readers. Reader responses could also be studied by further exploration of 'Letters to the Editor' pages, as preliminary research indicated that this content could be a rich source of information about restaurants and attitudes to food. The focus of this thesis was from 1988 to 2008, and another recommendation is a study of restaurant reviews in Irish newspapers from earlier decades. Furthermore, a comparative study of Irish restaurant criticism with international publications is a potentially valuable area of research. This could serve to indicate differences in food trends, as well as cultural and socio-economic factors.

As Irish food writing in the main is under-researched, there is much food content available in newspapers that also lends itself to further investigation. For example, an individual study of the types of food issues covered in Irish newspaper features could be revelatory. A comprehensive account of Ireland's most influential food writers from the last five decades and not limited to newspaper contributors could also prove invaluable for researchers in this area.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Telephone interview with Sally McKenna

Telephone interview with Sally McKenna, interviewed by Claire O'Mahony on 5 March, 2019, recorded using a Sony PX240 Mono Digital Voice Recorder

Sally McKenna: S

Claire O'Mahony: C

C: Hi Sally. As I explained in the email, the period I am looking at is 1988 to 2008, so I suppose in the middle of a recession, then the boom came and then we were just about to enter another recession. I know that for the *Indo* you were doing 'Dinner Dates' and 'Guest Who Is Coming to Dinner'. Can you tell me how you started doing restaurant reviews for the *Indo*? How you done work from them before that?

S: I got married to John in '82 and I came over to live in Ireland, in Dublin, and I was finding it very difficult to get a job during that recessionary time. But John was a writer for *Hot Press* in Dublin so I got a job as a typesetter, first of all for *Hot Press* and then for *In Dublin*, which was a real learning curve. I was sort of in the media world from the beginning when I first came here and I just learned that Helen Lucy Burke had retired from the *Indo*, if my memory is right and I just remember ringing up Jim Farrelly and saying "I'm young, I'm interested in food, I'd love to have a go" and he, I don't know, just from one phone call he gave me a chance. And that's how 'Guest Who Came to Dinner' started. It was basically, John was doing the books in *In Dublin* so I

automatically had a link to a lot of PR people who were promoting guests so I was able to get some quite good guests and then it kind of built up and got some really interesting people to come with me. But in those days I think I would never have been given a restaurant column as I wasn't half as characterful as Helen Lucy Burke. I was too nice to the restaurants. Nobody really wanted to talk about food that much. It was still in that climate and unless you were outrageous, there wasn't any interest whatsoever in a general restaurant review. It was just not a climate where people were really interested in food and that's why we always had to have the guest. That was the way it was at that time.

C: Did you come up with the concept yourself or did Jim Farrelly come up with the idea?

S: I think Jim said I'll give you a go but I don't want you just talking about food, sort of thing. It was because I had the *In Dublin* link and I was able to get the guests quite quickly. It was a combination of both really. It was coming from Jim really; just how are we going to make this interesting because just writing about food is not interesting.

C: That seems quite incredible now.

S: I know, it was a different time. But I suppose, jumping ahead, I remember going to Le Coq Hardi – which was the one Haughey used to go to? I'm sorry, my brain… But I just remember going up the stairs. I would have been in my twenties when I did it. There was no internet, you had no idea what was on the inside of a restaurant. I just remember those stairs and blind terror to be honest. Because you just didn't know what was behind the door. And obviously, when you did, the fronts of house were all characters and very nice and as the column got better known, it got easier. But it was such a different world. Nowadays, before you go into anywhere, you practically know what you're going to order. You know everything on the menu, you know what chair you're going to sit in because you're seen it on Google 360 degrees angle. But it was

just so different. And the restaurants I was going to, there was no sort of mid-price restaurants. There was no brunch, it was all three-course dinners with lavish wines and that was what restaurant dining was and what people thought of. You went into theses sort of palaces and not really knowing what you were going to find. I was in my twenties, I remember being quite nervous a lot of the time to be honest, but I suppose I got more used to it. It's fascinating to look back now, I must say.

C: And just in terms of the practicalities of the review, were you given a budget for example?

S: Well no, not really, and I was trying to remember. I think I paid and I was reimbursed because I would have always paid. And I remember going over to London – and I have the review in front of me and I can see the date, it was 1990 – to interview Peter Ustinov in La Tante Claire and the restaurant looks like it was just Peter Ustinov but in fact it was his wife, and there were actually four of us and it was a two-star Michelin in London and I remember thinking "Oh my God, how am I ever going to get this past Jim Farrelly?" Peter Ustinov had the *a la carte* and the rest of us had the *table d'hôte* and at the end of the meal Pierre Gagnier – no, it was Pierre Koffman – came up to me and said "Why did you not all have the *a la carte*? You're not representing my restaurant properly by having the *table d'hôte*." But I was thinking that I couldn't afford four *a la cartes*. I was in the Dunderry Lodge with J.P Donleavy and we had a bottle of Roederer, a 1976 and a Nuits St. Georges and I notice I talk about the price a lot in a lot of the reviews. Basically, I was living in a basement on Leeson Street with my bicycle and my Renault 4 car. I was pretty broke and there I was going spending £130 on dinner and hoping it was going to be reimbursed by Jim Farrelly, which it always was, he never queried it.

C: Do you think that was at odds with the economic climate of the time or was that just want restaurants cost?

S: Do you know something, I complain all the time about the price because I was so broke, but it's probably about the same, I don't know. I was wondering if it's much more expensive than it is now. In Dunderry Lodge, I think the bill was something like £133 but that includes two incredible bottle of wine. I say the wine is £36 and I was saying the Nuits St. Georges was overpriced at £40, that's a '76 Nuits St. Georges but that would be a lot more expensive now. Anytime I mention the price, even though it shocked me at the time of writing, I think well, that wasn't really so bad. I'm just looking here at Chez Beano's. That was a relatively inexpensive restaurant. Lunch for two was £33.50 so it seemed a lot at the time but compared to prices now, it probably wasn't as much as I thought it was at the time.

C: And how were the restaurants selected for the reviews?

S: Often the guest would select the restaurant. Or I would because I'd be hearing… it was never imposed. But there was a definite… you were expected to be swanky. You were expected to go to the best places. Nowadays, every restaurant reviewer is trying to find the best little corner place that nobody has heard of. That wasn't my brief at all. It was to go to Dunderry Lodge, Whites on the Green, L'Ecrivain, The Park. That was what I was required to do and possibly it was probably for people reading it, it wasn't the sort of people normal people went to, like myself. But I remember – I don't seem to have the review so I don't know the date – but I remember the Elephant and Castle opening up in Temple Bar.

C: I came across that one and you said it was the most exciting thing to happen to Dublin.

S: It was just like a breath of fresh air. It was so different. And I remember I want back that evening with John and I don't remember who I took. But it was suddenly really interesting food. I was at White's and I was there with my high hat saying, yet another *velouté* sauce. I'm been in Restaurant Na Mara, then Guilbaud's and now White's and

it's the same sauce. But I was clearly getting a bit tired of French and it was so French. When I look at it now, all the terms I used were French, all the menus are written in French. We were in completely in awe of France at that stage and that was regarded as the top dining experience. I use phrases that I would never use now like *velouté* or *demi-glace*, or *duxelles*. It's all soaked in French menu terms, but that was every menu at that stage and that was regarded as being knowledgeable. But it came back to me, I have it here, I was with Bernadette Greevy, the singer, and I couldn't for the life of me think how to pronounce Pouilly-Fuissé wine. I got her to order it because of was terrified that my pronunciation wouldn't be right. But she was a very glamorous and well-travelled lady and she knew how to pronounce everything on the menu.

C: And what was your practice? Did you take notes on the night?

S: I took notes. I remember with J.P. Dunleavy, him say "Put that in your notebook". So I took notes and I tried to quote people so I would have had the notes. I don't remember being recognised particularly, really. But nowadays everyone has a camera, and boy do I wish I had a camera at that stage. It would have been so handy to have an iPhone. But I definitely had a notebook and I took notes, but the notebooks are lost unfortunately.

C: And what criteria were you judging under? I know food, obviously, although your editor had said don't make the focus necessarily all about that food.

S: I suppose… well that's an interesting question. I was interested in… I didn't seem to like fashion. I was interested in… I notice I seem to have the first reference to Irish cheese around '89. I'm starting to look for Irish cheese when it's there. Irish cheese in Freres Jacques, I'm a little bit critical that it's past its peak. I would have been from the beginning interested in trying to find genuine, Irish ingredients. It was always an interest, rather than technique. I have never been particularly bowled over by techniques at the expense of ingredients. I suppose that was there from the beginning really.

C: When you're talking about, you know, visiting swanky places, it sounds like there's almost an element of voyeurism and that you were presenting a world to the reader that maybe they wouldn't necessarily visit. Did you have a reader in mind when you were writing the reviews?

S: My editor, Jim Farrelly. It was what he wanted really, which was the swankiness, which wouldn't have been my personal interest but that was what was required of me. He was the person I always had looking over my shoulder. He was a character – he reminded me of the editor in *Spiderman*, you know, "the only person I trust is my barber". But I enjoyed working with him. I was probably a little bit nervous and he sort of pulled things out of me that really I didn't expect to find in terms of going to these place. I've always loved cooking so I loved learning but he would have the person that I was writing for definitely and to be honest, as soon as I left the *Independent*, we started to do the *Irish Food Guide*, and we were trying to find real Irish food. I found one thing that was interesting in Guilbaud's…. let me see if I can find it now… I was there with the wonderful John Healy, who was a very contradictory character and he give me copies of his book and he says "To Sally, when you get to read it, remember alimentary exhibitionism is out". And I would agree with that. Alimentary exhibitionism was really what I was employed to do in the *Indo*, conspicuous consumption. But I have no reservations in saying that was what I was doing. It was writing about an experience that many people wouldn't have been able to have and I wouldn't have been able to have if I hadn't had the purse of the *Independent*.

C: Did you feel that your role was to educate the reader in some way, particularly if you were talking about particularly complicated dishes, or French terms or methods of cooking?

S: Yes, I was learning myself at the same time. I was only in my twenties and it was a sort of voyage of discovery for me and I hope for other people reading it. And I also interested in the characters I was interviewing and I liked to hear their stories. I just remember it was partly terror and partly fascination. When I read it now, I'm there in

Dunderry Lodge and we're the first to arrive and we're the last to leave, and I think we drank two bottles of wine and then I drove him back to Mullingar. That sort of implies someone who was quite relaxed but to be honest I was quite nervous and it was a real learning curve. I wasn't used to going to these places, I'd never been in them before and when I was going it was suddenly very public. I was trying to do my best and not make any mistakes. But yes, I was learning myself and I was hoping that people would be interested in the nuances of these quite complicated restaurants.

C: I think around 1990 – I have the dates somewhere – 'Guest' turned in 'Dinner Date'. Do you remember the reasons for that?

S: I haven't really concentrated on those and I haven't really looked at them in the last 30 years. But it was a lot of work to do the guests. And I really wanted to do more about the food, and I wanted to go out with John and my friends, rather than strangers. So I was always pushing Jim to say "Can you not just give me an ordinary restaurant review" and I think I did things for hotels and I became more of a journalist for the *Independent*. I did general pieces on food. But I think that was just me saying I can't do this anymore. I was doing it for… I don't know, three years and every single week. It was quite a lot to do. I think I basically said, if you want me to stay I don't want to do the guests anymore, I'm just going to do food. But I think it wasn't as good anymore. I think it was probably better with the guests because they were interesting people for me to meet.

C: To ask you somewhat of a general question, but your memories of the time and the food scene in Ireland in the late 1980s and early 1990s, how would you describe it?

S: Well, it was unbalanced because it was all these swanky French restaurants that were really expensive, and people didn't really understand a lot about food. People were learning, we were all learning. I remember going with Raymond Blanc – I can't find the piece I'm talking about now – but we went to Mitchells restaurant and the waitress said

“The special of the day is stuffed pork” and Raymond said “What is the stuffing”. The lady looked at him very quizzically and said “Stuffing! It’s stuffing”. It’s stuffed with stuffing, what else do you want? We were at that sort of level. I found a piece about The Wine Epergne and I was there with John Bowman. I think it was a year before Kevin Thornton took it over, or maybe I was there with Kevin Thornton. But we had Dingle lamb pie and then there was an Irish cheeseboard and it started to change. But in the beginning it was very unbalanced. I mean, Charlie Haughey was in power and Le Coq Hardi was the ultimate. I mean there were little French restaurants and there were a few nice ethnic restaurants. The Tree of Idleness I remember was wonderful in Bray and there was the Capriole Italian restaurant and those were too absolutely world class, not foreign restaurants, what’s the right word? Cypriot, and then there were a lot of French restaurants and French imitation restaurants but there were a few good Indians. Chinese is probably the one that hasn’t changed. The Chinese were probably good then and have stayed much the same, they haven’t really changed. But it was just basically a lot of swanky French, and imitation French restaurants, that people didn’t generally go out to unless they were well-off. It wasn’t actually a very healthy restaurant scene that people didn’t generally go out to unless they were well-off. It wasn’t actually a very healthy restaurant scene, it just wasn’t. It’s much more interesting now.

C: And you made reference to it earlier but you suggested that the food coverage in newspaper wasn’t given a priority or wasn’t…

S: No it wasn’t. I mean, Helen Lucy Burke was such a character. I profoundly disliked what she was doing but she was. To me, she was more of a – I hate to say it but more of a clown. She was not a serious food reviewer. She just went with an idea of how many places could she close or how much could she write about snot or, you know, that’s what she was interested in doing and it was lapped up. I don’t think it would have been tolerated now. Nowadays people have to be more knowledgeable but you could get away a lot more as a writer. I probably shouldn’t be slandering Helen Lucy Burke but she was probably the ultimate food writer at the time. And I think it’s part of the sort of unbalanced attitude to food that predominated at that stage.

C: And you think that for reviewers maybe today or fast forward to even the Noughties, that more knowledge was required?

S: Yes, I think we all got more knowledgeable and we were all starting at that stage. And now I think people are, there are some very good reviewers now who do know a lot about food. I think people like Katy McGuinness, I have a huge amount of time for her because she knows her stuff and she's very fair but she's not afraid to criticise. It's a much healthier, more balanced environment now I feel and it's much more interesting food scene because food is not linked to snobbery, where it was absolutely 100pc linked to snobbery at that time.

C: You've mentioned Helen Lucy of course but were there other critics at the time that you admired either internationally? I don't suppose there were too many in Ireland at the time.

S: There were broadcast people who were interested in food like John Bowman, who would have a good knowledge of food and who would talk about it. I'm trying to think now… I mean Georgina Campbell would have started around the same time as I did and she took over, I'm not quite sure when she took over the Egon Ronay. John went on to write for *In Dublin* about food and we would do directories about food at that stage and really try and make it more demographic and I think that was at the beginning of real food writing at that stage. We really wanted to make it really useful for people whereas the column I did in the *Independent* was enjoyable. It was a story I did about people, it was about the time and I hope there's interesting things about food because it described some of the really important restaurants like L'Ecrivain – I was quite mean about L'Ecrivain actually – but The Park and Colm O'Daly, so I hope it's a record of the very good restaurants that were around at that time and what they were serving. But it was leisure writing rather than… I was serious about my critique but that's not what my column was really about. When it became about that I think kind of died a death because I couldn't keep that snobbery up. I then moved to *In Dublin* and that was much

more interesting and it was what we wanted to do which was to write about the places that we wanted to go to ourselves.

C: What I've found quite interesting over the course of my research is that they're quite a long period in the *Independent* where they did not carry food reviews in the 1990s at all. There was Myles McWeeney doing his 'Take Me to Your Chef' section. There were profiles of restaurants and restaurant news in the social diary columns, there was pictures of launches but there was no real criticism until Paolo Tullio came along in '97. I don't know if that's related to the fact that they had introduced 'Weekend' magazine and therefore they had to provide more content, as well as the growing interest in the Irish food scene. I'm not sure what it is but I found it quite remarkable.

S: I don't know. I don't know how long Jim Farrelly would have been there but my memory of it would have been there was a lack of interest in a serious critique of restaurants and that's why I was given the guests. And I think that probably never changed and the people who were in charge were probably more interested in who was going to the restaurants rather than what the restaurant is serving. If that continued, I would say it was coming out of that experience which I had, which was just really didn't want to know about serious restaurant criticism. You had to be like Helen Lucy Burke or have the guests like myself. But that was far as it was going and they didn't really want critiques and I presume that's what continued until Paolo Tullio came around.

C: It wasn't that there was no restaurant or food coverage but that it wasn't the traditional review.

S: There was no appetite for it, if you'll excuse the phrase.

C: When you were doing it, was it considered an enviable job to have?

S: I think so. You got to spend a lot of money on interesting food. I didn't live that life. I went back to my little flat on Leeson Street where we were struggling to make a living through journalism so I didn't engage really, I didn't go to social gatherings or things like that because it wasn't my interest. At that time, I remember Keith Floyd was on the television, he'd started around then. To me, that was what was really interesting. I thought "Oh wow, this is amazing, I'd love to find Irish cheeses and I'd love to travel around Ireland and find out who was doing the stuff" and we just weren't really interested in the swank at all and we kind of got caught up in it with the *Independent* so I don't know, but I imagine. And people were nice about the column at the time and it kept going for a number of years so I imagine that people enjoyed reading it, I think, I hope.

C: And did you ever feel – I'm just looking back with the cold, hard stare of thirty years since then – but that there was a discrepancy between the swankiness and the economy at that point.

S: I would absolutely think that there was. I wouldn't be particularly proud of being swanky but that was just the job that I did. I remember when I was working in *Hot Press*, I remember we were all absolutely broke and Niall Stokes was doing the restaurant reviews there and he was the editor and he got to go to the restaurants. I remember being seriously envious so I'm sure there was an element, and I'm not defending it all but I got sort of swept up in it and I enjoyed the guests. But I was sort of terrified and I used it to learn. But yes, it was bizarre really and the restaurants were bizarre in Ireland. There were no ordinary people going out to eat in the way that there is now. People now go out to eat all the time; people just didn't go out to restaurants. If you did it was your birthday and you went to one of these places or you were a top business man. But it was unbalanced and it wasn't a healthy time for Irish restaurants I don't think to be honest.

C: You mentioned briefly there, I think you said it was in ’89 that you began to highlight Irish cheese. Do you remember any other trends creeping in that became more important to include in your copy, or was that a conscious thing?

S: Well, I remember, the vegetables were always dire. They were always just boiled potatoes and broccoli and carrots that were just boiled. And there were no interesting vegetables as a side dish. The big change for me was the Elephant and Castle, the demographic food space that had burgers and things, and pasta but they were actually good quality. At the same time, I remember the restaurant we would go to was Get Stuffed. We used to go there with Ronan O’Leary who was trying to be a film director. You’d have the fry basically, that was what everybody else did so you didn’t go to these places. You went to the caffs. It was either the really dire caffs where you had the fry all day or it was these places, or it might be a good ethnic restaurant but there was really nothing else. Suddenly it changed with Temple Bar and then you had democratic spaces that people could afford to go in and eat food that was not French basically.

C: Sally, that’s been brilliant. Is there anything else you’d like to mention that we haven’t touched on?

S: I don’t know. Oh yes, I remember one thing, Gerry Ryan. At once stage I was in Pigalle and Gerry Ryan mentions that the waiter takes off his shoes in the middle of the restaurant and starts looking at it, which I thought was quite interesting. He said “Oh look, he’s got his shoe off and he’s looking inside the sole”. I suppose, yes, that was the thing, everyone was learning. I think it wasn’t particularly in Irish nature to eat like this so we had to grow into it as a nation and I think this was part of our learning period, for all us. We copied the French and then we learned. We felt the value of our cheese and our salmon and we changed and we became a really interesting destination. But, I was with somebody from America; I think we were in Ernie’s, who was it? He was saying that the food here, you’d have to travel the world to get food as good. I think on the one hand, we were trying to be French and we were trying to be poseurs and it wasn’t really what we were about as a nation. But on the other hand, we still had these fantastic

ingredients so the food would have been exceptionally good. The fish would have been really fresh, the cream and the butter would have great. I expect I probably would have enjoyed them now as I did them. Maybe they were a bit samey. The other thing I thought was really interesting was how much offal there was in the menu, the various menus. Nearly 50 per cent of the time I would have ordered offal, when I look back.

C: The French influence?

S: I suppose it would have been the French influence but there were sweetbreads, which were huge obviously and maybe I was just looking for something that didn't have a *velouté* sauce. I think that was interesting that offal was highly regarded, obviously.

C: Just one of the things I have noticed going through the reviews, and it's just what happens, is that so many establishments that were once so important in Irish social life and the restaurant scenes are gone and arguably an entire generation will never know about that.

S: Yes, I think so. I'm just looking. La Vie en Rose, that's gone. Ernie's, that's gone. These were really… some of them are here obviously but Les Frere Jacques, is that still open?

C: That's now a pizza place

S: It lasted longer than some of them. They were huge at that time and they've gone. L'Ecrivain…White's is now Shanahan's. Guilbaud's was there from the very beginning. L'Ecrivain is still there but that's really all. The Old Dublin, I took Rebecca Storm to the Old Dublin. And Trocadero is still there. Dunderry Lodge, for me that was the highlight. That was the best of all of them and it did have a Michelin star. But I seem to

write about the simplicity of it. Again, it was ingredients first. It wasn't swanky although it was expensive. It really is a different world now, but maybe that's not bad thing. It's more demographic now and much more interesting, more culturally interesting in terms of Ireland and what we do well. We're more confident and I think this is a time when we weren't very confident. We were all just learning.

C: Sally, thank you so much for you time, it's so appreciated.

Appendix B: Interview with Tom Doorley

Interview with Tom Doorley, interviewed by Claire O'Mahony on 5 March 2019, recorded using a Sony PX240 Mono Digital Voice Recorder

T: Tom Doorley

C: Claire O'Mahony

C: Before you started reviewing restaurants for the *Tribune*, had you been reviewing anywhere else previously or what had you been doing?

T: Starting at the outset? Oh gosh. Where was I reviewing in the early days…That's actually really a very good question. I do remember when I started in the *Sunday Tribune* in 1994 I took over from Helen Lucy Burke, much to my surprise, to be quite honest. I had been Helen's eating companion occasionally for a few years beforehand because I'd been writing the wine column for the *Tribune* and thankfully my then editor, who is still my editor now in *Irish Daily Mail*, Ros Dee, saw a certain sense to combining food and wine. On a tangent, it always kind of amazed me that so few restaurant critics took an interest in wine as part of the experience that they're describing.

C: It's often a foot note, isn't it?

T: Yeah, and I've just written a review of the new revamped Ely Wine Bar. Twenty years old, believe it or not. I reviewed that in 1999 when it opened and I am sort of making that point there that if you go along there, there's a wine list of at least 500 wines, nearer 600 wines and even for somebody who writes about wine, it's much better

to close that wine list and say to the sommelier "Listen, we're having X, Y and Z. Could you give us something just a bit different do you think?" Then you have a much richer experience. Anyway, that is a tangent. So what was I reviewing in 1994…?

C: Why did Helen leave by the way?

T: There was some physical unwellness. I mean, she's still with us as far as I know. But for some reason she was getting quite frail and literally just decided that she'd had enough. None of us were really doing it for the money in the *Tribune*. When I think about what I was paid. I mean, I remember when I eventually had a row with the *Tribune* I suppose 10 years later and walked out, that if I'd actually spent the same amount of time stacking shelves in Tesco, I'd be considerably better off. However, I wouldn't have got to know the Dublin, mainly Dublin restaurant scene as well. I remember the first… I got a slipped disc the week I was appointed restaurant critic of *The Sunday Tribune* and the first review I did was of a restaurant above that famous pub in Donnybrook that Ross O'Carroll-Kelly celebrates, Kiely's. My late mother-in-law agreed to drive me and I was in extreme pain. We went to review… why I was doing there, I don't know. But I think that reflects that in 1994, we were talking earlier about choice, and is there too much choice possibly. But there was bugger all choice in those days. There must have been some reason I decided to do that and I remember the following week I was still confined to bed and we had friends over from London and I decided that the furthest I could go would be to The Purty Kitchen. We were living in Monkstown at the time. They went and borrowed a wheelchair from some neighbours, which was a Victorian bath chair and I got wheeled down along the seafront to The Purty Kitchen and we had a great lunch there. So that gave me the opportunity to write about the comedy of being a temporarily disabled restaurant critic who suddenly became very aware of access issues to restaurants. So they were the first two.

C: What was your brief, if I can ask?

T: *The Sunday Tribune*? You must be joking. I met Ros in the pub in Monkstown and she said would you like to take over from Helen as restaurant critic. I said I'll bite your hand off, yes I'd love to because of food and wine, synergy, and I said, with wild optimism for 1994, that there are so many interesting things happening. I can't remember any of them now. The brief was, I don't know, 750 words, file every Monday.

C: Was there a budget?

T: Do you know there wasn't a budget. Expenses were covered but there was no maximum. I sort of knew not to go to Guilbaud's and drink burgundy. Everything had to be reasonably reasonable. And also, I think this did come up, stuff should be relevant to our core readership. Although I got the opportunity to review a few restaurants in London when I was working for the *Tribune*, particularly if it had some Irish connection – Richard Corrigan's Lindsey House, places like that. In fact I think I reviewed Richard's previous restaurant, which was the Irish place in Mayfair. I've a vague recollection of doing that years and years and years ago. But in terms of budget, no. They were very reasonable about that.

C: You mentioned your readership. Who were you writing to, in your head?

T: I was writing for a… I suppose if I caricatured it, it would be people who lived in Dublin and in Dublin even number postcodes, if you know what I mean – two, four, six, eight – who would see themselves as being vaguely sophisticated, reasonably well-travelled and 'cultured' as they say. I do remember saying to somebody that my typical reader is somebody who lives in Dublin 6 and goes to the Concert Hall three or four times a year. But the reality was probably very different and I got a reasonable amount

of correspondence from readers for all sorts of reasons. Some of them saying “Thank you for introducing me to this restaurant, I got engaged there last week” or something, and wonderful things like that. Or “I have never been so disappointed. I don’t know how you described that as being a blissful experience. We were horrified”. So there was a lot of that and then, the most bizarre one from a chap in Northern Ireland. I was writing about how Conrad Gallagher had refused to serve me and a friend of mine who’d I got to book into the restaurant in London. He was a friend of mine who worked for the BBC and the manager came over to me. We were sitting down having a drink and he was mortified. You could see him squirm, poor man, and he said “I’m terribly sorry, I’m afraid Mr Gallagher has declined to cook for you”. I knew the story fairly well, so I said “That’s grand, we’re off” and I said, in my account of this that I don’t generally need to invitations to leave the premises. I said my companion, who clearly to believed, that the battle in lieu had been won on the playing fields of Uppingham, which was the very grand school he had gone to and said “Why?” And I got this letter from this old Belfast boy saying “Why did you mention Uppingham?” If you have to explain it kind of takes the good out of it. A lot of my correspondence was from, as I would have seen it in those days, ‘down the country’. I don’t see it in those terms now as I live down the country myself, most of the time. There were very often readers who would come to Dublin and they would eat out and they’d be quite choosy. There were a lot of people from outside Dublin who were really interested to know what was new and what was good.

C: And where they should go?

T: Yes, it was positive, it wasn’t where to avoid. I mean, I was often asked to do a kind of round-up of places where you shouldn’t eat and I said “Just like I don’t write about bad wines, I don’t write about bad restaurants”. The reason being – except in the context of review and I have to give an account of what it’s like – the reason for that, I said is that I actually like the restaurant industry, there are lots of good people in it, it’s a very hard way to make a living and I feel I should be encouraging people, giving people good reasons to eat out rather than giving people reasons to say “Oh, that’s very expensive, do you know I think we should have a takeaway instead.” I mean, I was

never under pressure to do that, it was sometimes readers who would occasionally ask what are your five worst restaurants, and I think I can probably remember them. In the very early days, I shouldn't exaggerate, it happened maybe two or three times where you get the kind of menacing phone call after the review appeared and it was a particularly bad one. A rather unlikely voice said "I eat in so and so's every week and I think it's f*cking brilliant" and so on. As you know, readers find a rave review kind of interesting because a lot of them are comparing your review to Catherine Cleary's or Lucinda O'Sullivan's and it's "Oooh, there's consensus about this" as there frequently is. Too frequently maybe. So there's an interest in that. What they really want is an absolute scorcher. They want a really, really horrendous review. But in those days, I mean, bad reviews were pretty commonplace and lousy reviews were maybe every five or six weeks because that was the reality of eating out in Dublin, there was some appalling shite, which made of course the rave reviews all the more 'ravey' and positive and noticed.

C: How did you see your role as reviewer? Obviously to inform people, to entertain them presumably. To guide them? To educate them in any way?

T: In writing the restaurant reviews, I never felt I was doing any educating because I felt the reader was pretty *au fait* with what we were talking about. I did feel I was providing a kind of service in the sense that oh gosh, there are a whole lot of restaurants out there and if you read my column, you can save an awful lot of grief by going to the ones I like. And in fact in 1998 I did a guide to the guide to the best restaurants in Dublin sort of thing. The *Sunday Tribune* guide to Dublin restaurants. I went through it recently and was thinking God, that's gone, that's gone, that's gone, oh that's still very good, you know. But I think my…. The duties if you like, to put it rather grandly, that I imposed on myself was one, well there were a few. One was to be strictly honest, even when that could be embarrassing, and to try and give a real sense of what eating in this place was like but first and foremost to be entertaining. Because if you're not entertaining you've lost your audience and so you're not going to be able to do the other things. I sometimes got into trouble about that, I could appear terribly flippant about things or cracking really corny jokes in print which is sometimes not a good idea. It was hilarious, at some

stage, around about 1995 or 1996, probably ’96, I found myself in the late, lamented Bewley’s on Westmoreland Street. I had just bumped into Kevin Myers, who in those days actually did work in the *Irish Times*. He not only worked in the *Irish Times* but he actually had a desk in the place before he vanished to the depths of County Wicklow and went quietly mad. But he was fairly mad at that stage too. Kevin and I went into have a cup of coffee and we were queuing up in the self-service and there in front of us was Vincent Browne. I started my journalistic career writing features and news analysis for the *Indo*. Kevin said “Vincent, do you know Tom?” Vincent said “Oh yeah, that was a very interesting expose you did on that scandal about Beaumont Hospital.” I said, “Thank you very much, it was a good story, it made the top story on RTÉ news on the day it came out.” “It was very good, and what are you doing now?” Kevin said “He’s writing for the *Sunday Tribune* Vincent.” “Oh, oh, features, yeah right….”

C: It kind of says it all really

T: It really does, doesn’t it? I never came to believe that I helped to sell newspapers, which my predecessor had certainly done. But yeah, I mean, in the days of Instagram you would never get any kind of elevated notion of the importance of what you were doing or how it was valued by the newspaper. It filled the back page of the magazine at that stage.

C: That’s very interesting because in the course of my research, and I’m only looking at weekend newspapers, I was actually fascinated to discover for a couple of years there were no restaurant reviews in the *Irish Independent* at all, or even for a period in the *Times*.

T: That’s right. I seem to remember if you go way back, and pre ’88. *The Irish Times* had a thing called ‘Table for Two’, which before Sandy took it on, the features editor of the Irish Times used to basically pay the restaurant bill for any member of staff who was prepared to write about the meal they had out, wherever it was, and it was

absolutely terrible. It was like a school essay, 'What I did during my holidays'. Awful shite. And then Sandy took over.

C: There's a time when both her and John McKenna are doing food stuff and suddenly there's just John. But there were sections that popped up occasionally called things like 'Restaurants' but it wouldn't be a review, maybe just a profile of a chef. And in the *Indo*, there was Myles McWeeny with a section called 'Take Me to Your Chef', which again wasn't a review.

T: I'd forgotten about that.

C: But no reviews until Paolo came in 1997 and then they became a fixture once again. But also, this was the introduction of supplements. 'Weekend' magazine started in 1997 and the *Times* magazine in 2000.

T: When did Lucinda start?

C: I don't know. I'm not looking at the *Sindo*, I thought one *Independent* newspaper was enough to cover. It's impossible to say but the re-emergence of reviews seems to be linked to the economy and increased spending power but also possibly greater confidence in Irish cuisine. You talked about the early 1990s not being a great place to eat in Ireland. What are your memories of it?

T: I suppose with all the great exceptions which are the immediately obvious ones, like L'Ecrivain and Chapter One although mind you, the first time I reviewed Chapter One, that was very funny, when Ross was cooking there on his own. I gave the nascent Chapter One a very lukewarm review but it's a different planet to what it is now. Actually, the funny thing is, poor old, he was head of corporate affairs in RTÉ, Kevin

Lawson. Kevin trained to be a producer in RTÉ and had to do a sample programme at the end of his course and he wanted to do a food one. So he got me to present his programme, so the first television I ever did which will thankfully never be broadcast, hopefully.

C: Was it *The Big Stew*?

T: No, no this was several years before. It was Kevin's own programme and I went and interviewed Ross about the terrible meal I'd had and it was quite funny. Then you had Guilbaud's was still in the absolutely classical, nouvelle cuisine phase. Derry in l'Ecrivain was being more experimental. In some ways that was the golden age of l'Ecrivain because they were kind of pushing from being a restaurant in a damp basement on Fitzwilliam Square to being what it is now. That was happening through the 1990s. I mean, in 1994, one of the great restaurants in Ireland was the Arbutus Lodge in Cork, which is now long, long, long gone. And in fact, there was a sense back in the 1990s that Cork and West Cork was really a more food conscious place than Dublin. I can understand why that feeling was sort of doing the rounds but I think it may have been a little bit exaggerated. It was still sort of the age of the business lunch and food was very much in the… dinner or lunch, it was starter, main course and pud. It was strictly demarcated and there was still very much a sense that food had to be quite heavy and substantial. I remember reviewing Bon Appetit in Malahide when it was still Patsy McGuirk when it was Charles Haughey's second favourite restaurant to Le Coq Hardi. It was all cream and cognac and reductions.

C: It sounds good to me.

T: Oh, I had no problems with this at all. And then I suppose, the epitome of that style of food was John Howard in Le Coq Hardi. I remember the first time I ate in Le Coq Hardi; it was before I was reviewing restaurants. We lived in a flat a few doors down. My mother-in-law took us to dinner, she had no idea how much it cost. It was so good.

John did everything with a real flourish but it was kind of understated at the same time. There was something very establishment about it. So that's why I can absolutely understand the Taoiseach and his mistress having dinner in the private room upstairs and drinking, what was the champagne, Cristal? Oh the vulgarity. But that's what I remember about the first part of the 1990s.

C: We were in a recession, and were you conscious of that when you were writing, that you should tailor your reviews…

T: Tailor to how people were? I suppose I was. In a sense, the restaurant scene tailored itself to that. I didn't have to do too much tailoring. There weren't very many high end places with expensive menus. Most of the openings were geared to modest incomes in difficult times. With a few exceptions, one of them would have been, maybe I'm going back too far, Colombian Mills down the quays, which would have been more early 1980s actually, most restaurants didn't seek a young clientele. Whereas now, most restaurants are more interested in their twenties and thirties than they are in their fifties and sixties. That's something that I, you know I wouldn't have seen any of that in the 1990s at all. But there was growing confidence, during the decade, there was certainly growing confidence and there were better economic circumstances as well. But I think you began in the later half in the 1990s, you'd see chefs who wanted to come home. Chefs who would have, maybe the previous generation of chefs, well, the fortunate ones would have trained in the Russell and the Hibernian and would have had the best training, they didn't tend to travel then, I suppose they didn't need to because cuisine was very French, it was very classical, it was very cast in stone. The next generation, because of what we have just been talking about, they went to London and Sydney and various places and quite a lot of them came back with a new attitude to eating. One of the first suggestions of that was when menus began to become less demarcated between starter, main courses and desserts. It was a while before we got to the small plates for sharing that we have now. Certainly nobody in those days ever said to you "Would you like me to explain the concept?" Thank God. The answer to that question is no, if it's not self-explanatory, I'm not interested. I think in the latter part of the 1990s, there was a snowballing of confidence and innovation. I think two things were sort of happening

in parallel. One, you had chefs coming back from abroad with all those outside influences, and also frankly maybe more exacting standards. I think you can't discount the effect, the influence of Myrtle Allen championing really good Irish produce because we were coming out of a time when Ireland in general had a cultural cringe, as the Australians would say it themselves and where we lacked confidence in particular in anything that was our own. You know, the plutocrats would eat French food in Le Coq Hardi. They weren't eating dry cured Irish, free range, organic ham or Carrageen moss puddings, and that sort of thing, and Myrtle had the ability, not just to recognise that but she could evangelise brilliantly. I think the combination of growing confidence, the economy recovering and the beginnings of the pride. I always loved Myrtle's story of how back in 1964 when she had just opened the restaurant in Ballymaloe, she was walking along the road towards Shanagarry and met a local farmer and they stopped and had a chat. Myrtle said you know that farmhouse butter that your sister is sending me is the best I've ever had. "He said "Oh yeah, yeah. Do you know that field always gave the best butter?" Oh yeah, I want to taste that. It's sometimes sort of forgotten because Ballymaloe is sort of seen as being Ballymaloe, sort of over there, and Dublin food is seen as rather different. Mind you, I moved to Cork in 1999 at the end of that decade but obviously I've keeping a very close eye on Dublin restaurants in the meantime.

C: So you were with the *Tribune* for 10 years, is that right?

T: I wrote on restaurants for 10 years, I was with them since '87.

C: And then you moved to the *Times*?

T: Not quite. I walked out of the *Tribune* when I had a row with the managing director, Jim Farrelly, who used to be my editor in the *Indo*. I can't really remember what we fell out over but also I was being paid ridiculously small amounts of money. So I sort of walked out of that and spent a year and a bit or two years not reviewing restaurants. Then it's very funny, I met Patsy Murphy in the *Irish Times* and she sort of interviewed

me for the job of restaurant critic. No, that would have been very shortly after I left the *Tribune*. We met in the Weston Hotel just beside the *Times*. We got on very well and had a long conversation so she basically said great, welcome on board, fantastic, I'll be in touch. Two or three weeks went by and nothing from Patsy so phoned her up and asked what the story was with doing restaurant reviews. She said "Oh it's really like the New Hampshire primaries at the moment, I haven't decided yet." And then Trevor White phones me and says "I'm reviewing restaurants for the *Irish Times*, do you want to come out next week." Eighteen months later, I'm having dinner with Trevor who says by the way, I've just been sacked by the *Irish Times*. So I said, oh dear, really. He said "I really think you should give Patsy Murphy a ring". I rang Conor Goodman who told me Patsy was away at the moment and I said I just heard you might need a restaurant critic. He said, "Oh good, you know about that. Can you do one for next week?" So I said sure. That was my appointment to the *Irish Times* which was barking mad.

C: They had a number of reviewers like Louise East and Chris Heaney as well.

T: Now, was that before Trevor?

C: I think that was just before… actually I'm not sure but I have it written down somewhere. Was she similarly hands off when it came to your brief?

T: To be fair she was. I never got any feedback from the *Irish Times* about anything. I think there was one time that Patsy said that she thought a piece I had written was very good but to be fair she never told me that anything was very bad, so yin and yang. But it was terrific in terms of response from readers. At once stage I had such an extensive correspondence that I used to have write – it was the days of snail mail, largely – and I used to hand in my letters to the *Irish Times* to be franked at their expense. Because the *Irish Times* pay was..... four hundred a month and that was regarded as star columnist pay. The relationship with the readers was great and then Hugh Linehan got me to do a

thing called ‘Megabytes’ which was very cheeky because that’s what John and Sally had called their thing but it was ‘Megabytes’ with a ‘y’.

C: A totally different thing

T: Totally different, no danger of confusion whatsoever. And this was really a blog; it was a food blog on the *Irish Times*. I think some of it is still out there on the ether and I had terrific fun with that because you could interact with readers and I moderated the comments. I think they paid me €100 a week, on the pig’s back! But then Geraldine objected to… I was doing sort of tutored tastings in restaurants, for restaurants, for a fee obviously, I was doing it to make up what I should have been paid and we fell out over that. I realised €400 a week, this really isn’t worth my while and I’m curtailed from doing other things. Then Patsy didn’t replace me for months and months. I remember *The Phoenix* rang me up and said why haven’t they replaced you? “Heartbroken, they’re just heartbroken,” I said. They just can’t face the prospect of anybody else talking on Saturdays about food.” I’ve no idea what it was all about but it was after my time at that stage. Then the *Mail* took me on as restaurant reviewer as well as food columnist straight away and yeah, I had the final confrontation with Geraldine on a Wednesday evening and I was appointed to the *Mail* first thing the next morning and they said can you file a restaurant review tomorrow? Yeah, sure. So it had a happy ending but it was an interesting time. I think that, how long was it, five or six years I was with the *Irish Times*. I think it was quite good for my career in a sense in that it added a sort of spurious credibility to just, but it’s like being by appointment by her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

C: And do you think that was linked to a greater interest in food writing?

T: You mean the *Irish Times*’ attitude?

C: I mean you started to write for them at a point coinciding where food writing was getting more…

T: It was the best possible time to be doing it in the sense that yes, that's actually a very good point. When I started reviewing for the *Irish Times* it was at the point when – I hesitate to use the words Dublin food revolution, let's call it that for the sake of argument – but that was really gaining momentum and I suppose in a way I was reviewing for the *Irish Times* at a time when there were really interesting things to be talked about. And also getting personally getting that exposure at the same time was quite useful. But it's rather funny, just cutting back *Sunday Tribune* days, in the dying days of my *Sunday Tribune* career, I was approached by an independent production company who said "we have this idea about doing a programme called *The Restaurant*. This is how it will work." I thought that's very clever and they said we would like you to be one of the critics. I thought that would be great. In those days, with television you never went how does the contract work and how about the rights and is the fee per episode. It was just, oh yeah, yeah, that's grand. They said "we're thinking about Paolo Tullio as the other one" and I thought that would be great craic, that would be fun. They said, "Well you know, fun would be important". By the time we did the first series of *The Restaurant* in 2004, I did 15 series of *The Restaurant* and the last few ones it felt like it, very much so. So I left *The Sunday Tribune* and it was "with food critics, Paolo Tullio of the *Irish Independent* and Tom Doorley."

C: Of no fixed abode?

T: I'm the restaurant critic of *The Restaurant*. But it was really quite funny to be of no fixed abode for that. Having said that, I know it's not what we're talking about, but that introduced a whole demographic and made the Irish *Daily Mail* much more relevant to what I… I would say it's a tabloid but it's not a red top. It's populist and it's man, woman in the street. And I suppose in relation to what I do now, there's an element of education in the sense that I will never assume that people know exactly what you mean by *gremolata* so you spell things out but not in a didactic sort of way. I really quite

enjoy that because it just makes good food accessible to everybody. So it's been an interesting ride.

C: It certainly sounds like it. And I think we've nearly covered everything you'll be pleased to hear.

T: It wouldn't be a career I'd recommend as a way to make a living. It's definitely bad for that. It can be very boring and my absolute nightmare, when you're sort of saying that was ok. There was nothing very good about it, but there was nothing very bad about it. And you go, oh Jesus. How do I get 650 words out of this? I realised that AA Gill could get away with writing about absolutely anything except what he was meant to be writing about. He got to the final paragraph and I tried in my own very modest way, I would describe it as starting on a tangent and continuing to tangent off and eventually get back to it when you realise, oh there's only so much on the screen left to describe the food. But I'd much rather have a ghastly experience or a celestial experience because you can fit the words to that.

C: Actually, there was one question I meant to ask you. Was there anybody internationally that you looked to in terms of reviewers you admired.

T: Oh, that's a very interesting point because until comparatively recently I absolutely refused to read any of the Irish critics if they were writing about somewhere I hadn't experienced myself. I'd obviously read them if that were not the case. Internationally, I always enjoyed AA Gill, not because of anything he said about food although he was enormously knowledgeable about food I actually believe he didn't think his readership was terribly interested in food so he was an entertainer. I did meet him a few times and found him a very complex man.

C: I interviewed him and found him so pleasant, I was astounded. I thought he was going to be mean

T: Well he could be very unpleasant to people but terribly nice, a gentle sort of character. I hugely enjoyed – and this is largely forgotten now – I suppose the restaurant critic I really enjoyed was Jan Moir who was the restaurant critic of the daily *Telegraph* for many years and who I got to know. She's old, hard-core, *Daily Mail* at this stage and I would distance myself considerably from some of her work but she's enormously good craic and I would have a boozy lunch with. But Jan wrote brilliantly about food because like AA Gill, she didn't dwell too much on the food but she did so in a very knowledgeable way. She'd just have you laughing about the whole thing. Her brilliant coup was Saturday '04? '03? Saturday was April Fool's Day and she invented a restaurant called Solace in reclaimed dental factory in Shoreditch, and this was before Shoreditch was quite what it is now. It was a baby-food themed restaurant for grown-ups and apparently Elton John had thrown a strop and thrown his toys all over the place. The whole thing, it was a masterpiece. I remember reading through it and thinking the world has gone mad – oh no, hang on a minute, what day is it today? Other ones… funnily enough I always liked Tanya Gold in *The Spectator*. Again, she wouldn't say an awful lot about food, which I think was almost a fashion at the time and Tanya actually introduced me to an extraordinary restaurant in London called Oslo Court which is in St John's Wood and hasn't changed since 1968 and has pink, flock wallpaper and incredibly camp elderly waiters and everyone is Jewish.

C: I really want to go there.

T: And they do Steak Diane. It's magic and it's extremely hard to find. It's on the ground floor of a block of 1930s' flats and there's a tiny sign which you'll miss. You go into the foyer and there's a concierge but no sign of the restaurant. And then you go into this pink explosion. It's like Princess Diana's stepmother's boudoir and all the customers are Jewish, from North London. It's a hoot and it's quite good value as well, with decent wines.

Appendix C: Interview with Sandy O'Byrne

Interview with Sandy O'Byrne, interviewed by Claire O'Mahony on 7 March 2019, recorded using a Sony PX240 Mono Digital Voice Recorder

S: Sandy O'Byrne

C: Claire O'Mahony

C: I think the first 'Table Talk' I came across was in 1987?

S: So started in 1986. Did we call it 'Table Talk' from the start? I think we did. But I'm not sure. It was 'Table for Two' before that in the *Irish Times* and I think it was called 'Table Talk' from the beginning. I was trying to find out when it actually started in '86, but it was '86. I couldn't find the date.

C: And were you working for the *Irish Times* before that or how did it come about?

S: That's a funny one. I was quite young, which was a good thing and a bad thing. I read English and history of art in college in Trinity. I had always been fascinated by food, I enjoyed cooking and I enjoyed food in general. After college I took a year out and I worked in a restaurant. I was very fortunate that the owner of the Arbutus Lodge in Cork, which at the time was a very good restaurant, gave me a chance to work there for a while and then I actually went back to work on a more permanent basis there. I spent a couple of years there and my idea was that I was probably going to write about food, or I had this vague notion, which never happened, that I'd love to have a gallery with a restaurant and the restaurant would supplement the gallery. Anyway, the *Irish*

Times had been doing ‘Table for Two’, which was done by different journalists on staff. It was fine, it was good fun. They decided to do something different and they were looking around and I was one of the people they spoke to. For whatever reason I got the job, which was to do a weekly column about different restaurants around Dublin. In the 1980s everything was getting very serious and it was a time where it was the free market, it was money, money, money. Everything about our lives had this sort of measure of power and going forward and it was no longer a sort of fun approach to food. Food was getting really serious. It was all this stuff in France, it was nouvelle cuisine and it was becoming much more so of an art than just food as it was before that. But it was quite a busy time and I think newspapers started to think “we need a restaurant column; we need to put this in with the theatre reviews, with the music reviews". Before that, I suppose restaurant columns were partly the information side of papers, they were partly a sort of hangover in a way from the old social columns or society pages or whatever but then they became more of a sort of feature in their own right as we went into the 1980s and food became more trendy, restaurants became sexy and the whole thing became much more serious.

C: What was your brief? You mentioned Dublin restaurants, was it only Dublin restaurants?

S: No. In practical terms, we did have a bias towards Dublin. Partly the circulation of the paper and partly my availability but we did try to cover the country as much as possible. The brief was to give as much variety in the restaurants we chose, obviously new restaurants after they’d settled down for a while. I wouldn’t review restaurants when they were very new, I think you have to give restaurants six months before you really… I may have broken that rule at times but on the whole, I tried to do that. I tried to get a spread of different kinds of restaurants, different environments, different styles, different price levels. In the 1980s there was a bias towards the upper end of the market and that wasn’t because restaurateurs were greedy or anything like that. It was partly… I think there were a number of things. I think most Irish restaurants were new. If you had restaurants in France they might be second or third generation but Irish restaurants, a lot of them were new, they had capital overheads and the tax regime at the time was

very hard on restaurants. VAT was very high and not only on the restaurant but on wine. The rest of Europe, excluding the UK and ourselves, you could make 200-300 per cent on a bottle of wine without really sort of overcharging your customer. Here you were lucky if you got 100 per cent at that time and that may seem a lot but it's not for restaurants. Prices tended to be at the upper end of the market. I think the perception of people too was, even in the 1980s, quite a small amount of people were eating out regularly. A lot of it was business entertaining, which has a certain type, certain specifics, certain needs. Other people would eat out on occasion, they eat out for celebrations. There was a lot more of that rather than the 'I'll eat out, I couldn't be bothered cooking tonight' kind of thing, or there's nothing in the fridge, or you'll dial up something. That is a complete change from thirty years ago obviously. At the time I think there was still the idea that going out was something special. There was an element of you went out to a restaurant, you'd go out to the theatre or you'd go out to a show. It was an event and restaurants were required to have quite sort of fancy environments. There were some exceptions and it was the beginning of the smaller restaurants, the neighbourhood bistros, the Italians, the Chinese, whatever. That was quite challenging: to find middle market restaurants where you could go as a family because we didn't bring out children out to eat. When you went away on holidays, you'd see all families – grandma, parents, kids, and babies, everybody eating out. We tended for it to be a more serious and adult procedure over here. It was hard to get a variety of restaurants. Around the country it was changing and the pub restaurants were very good, particularly outside the cities. They fulfilled a great role. I'm going to try and avoid naming names as I'm going to end of forgetting some but there were a lot of good pub restaurants in Kinsale, Cork and quite a few around the various suburbs of Cork. Throughout the country, a lot of good pub restaurants, obviously Clarinbridge and places like that in the west. They really started a middle market and did it really well. Country house restaurants were a great feature of Ireland at the time, it was very popular with tourists and they showed off the ingredients and showed that we do have really good food. Ballymaloe was obviously the sort of leader in the field in a way and they've done so much for Irish food. But there were an awful lot throughout the country and different styles and they did a lot I think for establishing Ireland as a foodie destination.

C: Did you have a budget?

S: There was a sort of a general price range but it wasn't cast in stone. But if some place came on the radar that I knew was particularly expensive, I'd go to the editor and say it but generally, I can't remember what the going rate at the time was but it was probably about £20 a head or something like that. Again, it was trying to get variety so you weren't constantly going to… because there brilliant restaurants at the time and people were being really creative and really good but they were necessarily very expensive. As a journalist, you know yourself, you have your duty to your editor first, to your readers and then in the case of restaurant reviewing, obviously restaurants. But for the sake of readers, you don't want to be constantly talking about expense accounting eating. And this was one of the problems at the time. It was a big challenge to find restaurants that were interesting, that were doing authentic food but were competitively priced and that the family could go.

C: And did you have a reader in mind? Who were you writing to? Was it the *Irish Times* demographic or did you have a particular idea as to who you were trying to talk to?

S: I think a lot of it was an unconscious demographic in a way. It was towards the *Irish Times* reader, obviously, which was fundamentally what it was, and probably towards a thirty-something age group. It tended to be towards *Double Income No Kids* as it was at the time, what they were called. There was some of that. We also did try and pitch it towards families because it was an opening market and towards younger people, because again that was something that was happening. People were having disposable income earlier as the workforce changed and all of that sort of thing. But again, trying to get variety because our readership was quite spread and we have a substantial older readership and a more traditional readership so you tried to get to everything and to everybody and to do every type of restaurants.

C: And you said that there were lots of exciting things happening at that time in Ireland in restaurants but how would you describe the general vista. Obviously more high end, you've mentioned difficult to find a middle market price wise.

S: I think food was changing. There were obvious things like the beginning of the different ethnic restaurants, Chinese restaurants, Middle Eastern, Italian, different food backgrounds. I suppose Irish food had come out of a quite a traditional, classical, almost sort of hotel type food. If we think back to the 1960s and the 1970s, the history if you like, the Dublin restaurants – you had the Jammet's, the Dolphin. Otherwise it was the Russell, the Hibernian, the Shelbourne, the Gresham and around the country, it was the grand hotels that were often seen as the local restaurant for some sort of occasion, and that kind of food, that traditional, quite classic food. Suddenly that changed very much in the 1980s. There were patron-run restaurants opening up where people were experimenting with different kinds of foods and different kinds of menus and much more attention to the ingredients. You were beginning to see ingredients on menus that hadn't been used before. The traditional things like Irish seaweeds, nettles, things like crubeens or heaven forbid drisheen or something like that. But it was great to see those sort of produce coming on a menu. There were also new imports. You don't realise how narrow the choice of food was. At one stage I did some teaching and some demonstrating of cookery and I remember, it would have been the late 1980s I think, one of the people in my class went out to buy pesto in her local supermarket, which was near Dublin, and they sent her to the fly spray area because they thought it was a pesticide. We don't really realise how much things have changed in the last twenty, thirty years in a way. It was exciting to see different things. I remember Declan Ryan in Cork saying to me that his father thought the restaurant was going to close the day he took prawn cocktail off the menu. It's not that there's anything wrong with prawn cocktail, it can be a lovely dish if it's properly made but people started doing new things and different types of food – lighter food. And things were plated and the whole visual presentation became much more important. People started to talk about food. As time went on, and it was one of the things I wasn't entirely comfortable with, the column became less sort of information and it more sort of gained a following of 'where are they this week and what's happening, what are they saying this week'. It became entertainment in the way that cookery shows on television started out sort of people

telling you how to make a Victorian sandwich or whatever and they ended up with a celebrity chef and all the razzmatazz and usually recipes that are highly suspect as to whether they're actually going to work out or not. And restaurant writing became sort of that too, it became a sort of an entertainment in itself and people would just read the reviews and not actually think that they were going to go to the restaurant but to read the reviews and see what you were eating. Yes, it generating interest and it was generating readership which was obviously important but it was a side that I wasn't terribly comfortable with.

C: I did actually notice that in some of your earlier reviews, that there was quite an educational aspect to in. In one I was reading last night, you explained how to make a certain dish as it was in the restaurant. That was obviously important to you. What other roles did you see yourself as having? Did you see yourself as being a promoter of the industry or were you very much on the consumer side?

S: I think primarily my role was to the readers. There were a lot of restaurants springing up, there were a lot of really good restaurants but there were a lot that were not really good. And the really consistent thing was the price and a lot of time, if go to a store and you buy something, you can take it back the next day. When you're out for somebody's birthday or an anniversary and you happen to have spent a lot of money on it, if turns out really badly, there's nothing you can do. You can complain to the restaurant and something is spoiled for people so I did have that sense quite a lot and it was expensive at that time, for most Irish people whose salaries are not what they are now. For some people, a small percentage of people it didn't matter but for most people it was probably an event. Also I felt, there were some people who were doing some really good food. There were some really good restaurateurs and chefs working in Ireland, in Dublin and around the country at the time and they were being really creative and they were working against the odds. It was hard to source ingredients, the taxation was ridiculous, it was expensive to employ people, they were carrying a lot of overheads, and they were being let down in a sense by people who were just jumping on a bandwagon to a degree. Obviously my first duty was to the readers but you had to be responsible. This was

people's livelihoods and bad reviews are easier to write and they're fun to read, but you can't do that, it's somebody's livelihood.

C: Would you visit a place more than once?

S: This was a big issue. I wasn't paid to visit more than once. I did sometimes because sometimes I just felt I'm not comfortable with what I'm not going to write. On the whole, no because it's one time for everybody, like a play you review on the first night and that's it. I always felt and I tried to know the difference between a bad night and a restaurant that really hasn't got its act together. Was it fair? I think on the whole yes it was and it is the tradition of reviewing, that you review on opening night, you review the concert, you review the exhibition or whatever. So yes, it was basically one visit.

C: Did you read other Irish critics or were there any critics abroad, international ones that you admired.

S: I'd read reviews in general, obviously. I'm trying to think outside Ireland some of the people I used to read a lot. I always felt the UK reviewers got away with an awful lot more than we would have done. There wasn't one in particular, I'm sorry.

C: Writing in the 1980s, in recessionary times, I know we touched on the issue of money and people salaries but was that a conscious factor in your reviews, were you quite aware of that?

S: It was at the time, particularly in the early years because I think economically things weren't good and it was always trying to find value for money as well as trying to find good places and all that sort of thing. As we got into the 1990s things changed a bit alright because there was more restaurants, there was more variety and there was more

sort of flexibility. In the 1980s, value for money would have been a big thing and it would from people writing to me, a lot of it would have been about good value for money or criticising some place and yes, you could say it's wonderful but look at the price.

C: Things became slightly more affluent in the early 1990s. Did you see a change in the food scene then?

S: It certainly expanded. The middle market began to expand a lot more; people were eating out more and eating out more and eating out regularly or beginning too. It's gone up again now in leaps and bounds, but people were beginning to eat out rather than eating at home, and it was beginning to happen, or they were eating out more and it wasn't an occasion as such. There were beginning to be a lot of good, mid-market restaurants and cafes, a lot of good Italian food, Mediterranean. The whole sort of advent of Mediterranean cooking brought in a much simple style. The 1980s, there were new ideas and new ingredients but it was still very much the sort of classically French dominated food in a way with the sauces and the stocks and things that were very expensive, and expensive to produce and make. It was meat based and the ingredients were very expensive. In the 1990s, it was a different style. It was a lot more putting ingredients together. The olive oil dressings and all of that sort of thing started to replace sauces. It was a much lighter style of food, more casual and that as beginning to happen.

C: One thing I found very interesting, from my sample, there's a substantial period of time in both the *Indo* and the *Times*, where there are actually no restaurant reviews at all, kind of around the early 1990s until about mid-1990s.

S: Yes, there was a period in which restaurant reviewing, I don't know, in the *Irish Times* there was a change of editor and a change in editorial policy and it was this changeover from it being a fairly, a column about food and about restaurants and a lot

of it was information, much as the same way you'd write a review of a play or a book. Then it did become more sort of a small feature in its own right and it became more sort of trendy, there was a constant change to: ok, it's summer, let's go to restaurants with the best views. It's Valentine's Day, the best tables for two people or the most romantic meal and all that sort of stuff. To a point it was good because it breaks up a regular column but it became much more chatty and almost went full circle, going back into almost a social column. There was a period when the restaurant review was looking for a new identity for a while and it didn't find it. Different people seemed to drop; it was going back to the idea of different people reviewing restaurants, or people reviewing them with a particular guest or something like that. It just changed in nature.

C: In the early days of 'Table Talk', how do you think it was regarded by the newspaper?

S: At the beginning I think they felt it was something they should have – we need to have a restaurant column that can stand on its own. As I was saying earlier I think it came from a new interest in food and people who were doing cookery course, buying cookbooks and that sort of thing. Restaurants were becoming more, well, there were more of them about and newspapers felt that this is something we've got to have. Once one of them has a restaurant column, they've all want to have one. That's being a bit facetious but it's true. I think when I took over the *Irish Times* column, I don't think it was wildly popular with the rest of the staff because 'Table for Two' had been seen as a benefit in a sense, and here was this uppity postgraduate and doing something else with something that traditionally had been a fun slot. The *Irish Times* always attracts, and did at that time particularly, always attracts a certain amount of… everybody wanted a column in the *Irish Times*, or a lot of people did. So, I don't think I was exactly welcomed onto the stage at all. I was too young and either naïve or arrogant, one or the other and probably a mixture of both, to realise that I wasn't at all popular with the rest of my colleagues on the newspaper. It did I think stimulate a certain amount of attention to the restaurant column. I tried to make it, in the beginning – I knew something about food and I had worked as a chef – and I tried to make it more, I suppose it had a bit more content. I wasn't just 'I had this, I liked that' sort of thing. I was trying to do

something different. I think it showed that this is a serious profession and people are working really hard and one thing in the restaurant business is that you do work extremely hard. I think people did begin to take a real sort of interest in the quality of food and it's something that Ireland could do. We have very good food here and we were beginning to have some really well-trained chefs. You had people like the Allens in Ballymaloe and the Ryans in the Arbutus, you had a number of people in the Dublin restaurants. Patrick Guilbaud's is a byword for expense account eating but he did something at the time that nobody else had done and he held on through the recession in the 1980s and through some very tough times to create a, what is it a two-star now restaurant of its type. And it's very good, whether you like two-star eating is another matter but it is a very good restaurant and it did something new and there were other people at the time working in Ireland. Kevin Thornton when he began in a little place in Rathgar, he did some really wonderful food. The Healys out in Dunderry Lodge, Catherine had the most extraordinary passion for food that I've seen in anybody. The problem is I'm going to mention half a dozen and forget others that were really important but there were an awful lot of people doing really good things and changing restaurants. I was a teenager in the seventies and there was very little unless you went to hotel or something like that and the chefs of that sort of next generation changed things. It made a big difference to tourism in this country and the country houses, as I was saying earlier, and the pubs and all that sort of thing around the country.

C: In terms of trends, just you were saying in the educational capacity, did you feel it was your duty to educate readers about trends and inform them, or how much of the reviewing was trend led would you say?

S: Yes, I think there was a bit element of that. And I think there was an element of trying to I suppose, it was again two-sided. It was talking about what was happening in the restaurants and promoting it if you like, talking about it to the reader, and also trying to get people to experiment and go outside their comfort zone in food and in restaurants and to try new things. There was a big, for example, portion size went down a lot with the new cooking, the new cuisine and a lot of people didn't like the big plate with the small amount of food in the centre, which obviously can be taken to extremes. To some

extent, you tried to get people to think differently about what it looks like on the plate, what they're actually getting and to think about the health aspect of things. There was that side of it and trying to talk to the consumer and say these guys are being innovative and creative, they're working hard so give them a chance. There was also the side of saying to the restaurant that people want who eat out and people enjoy the ambience you're providing and you've got to be more competitive. You've got to listen to your market because like all talented people, chefs can be prima donnas and while you can do different things, you can't dictate to the person who is paying the bill. Ultimately the customer is in charge. There were a lot of silly things going on, like restaurants wouldn't put salt on the table. Or Éamonn Ó Catháin who is a brilliant chef, he was one of the first people to do a middle market, bistro type, he was somebody who if somebody said 'I really don't like that vegetables, can you give me this instead', he would storm out of the kitchen. If you don't like my food, get out, sort of thing. Which can be fun sometimes, but there was that attitude to it. So there were two sides to it really.

C: Again in the educational capacity, you mentioned that going out was an occasion. Was there an element too of setting up people's expectations of what the restaurant experience was? In the review you did of Barberstown Castle, you outlined what a should restaurant should have – great service and good food – and it was almost like you were showing people who don't know exactly what they should be looking for. I think that was quite interesting.

S: I think there are three dimensions to it. Food and restaurants, it's something like a theatre in a way. In a restaurant there's the food, there's the service and there's the ambience. It depends on the style of restaurant and on the price. If you're going down the road to have a main course and a glass of wine on Wednesday evening because you don't feel like cooking or you haven't anything in the fridge, that's one kind of ambience. Obviously there are basics for an ambience, it should be comfortable, it should be clean, that sort of thing. But you have certain expectations. If you're going to make the detour to something like a country house or a garden restaurant with lovely views, then you expect a bit more, you expect something different. Obviously as you go

up the price range you expect a certain level of service and service is important in a restaurant. I don't know whether it's a historic thing in Ireland or whether we have a thing about serving at table, but sometimes it's not slick. Even today, you get people leaning across the table to you. It's the fact that you try to make it comfortable for the person who is dining, who is out there with their friends or whatever. Service should be good, it should be attentive, it should be non-intrusive and obviously try to get things right. Food should be good, food should be correctly cooked and in a sense you have to assume that if people are going out to a restaurant to be fed. After that, it's the level of creativity and the level of expertise and the quality of ingredients and all those sort of things. I tried to break the reviews into those three sort of headings if you like; obviously dependent on the kind of environment you were in. If you were going to an expensive restaurant in town, like L'Ecrivain, you had one set of expectations. If you were going to a pub restaurant in Wexford, you'd another set of expectations. The food should always be good, competent, well cooked and what it's meant to be. The ambience, it should be clean and comfortable and have enough space and the service should be competent again. Then it's above and beyond all that and how it relates to the environment and to the kind of expectations you should have. But on the flip side of that, the customer's expectations, I mean I remember years ago writing a review of a small sort of bistro restaurant in Sandymount or Ballsbridge or some area like that, which I thought was really good for what it did. I remember getting a storm of abuse because the expectations were wrong. If you had business guests, or whatever it was, I don't know, that's not the type of restaurant for that. The customer has to have appropriate expectations. I think that's changed now. I think people now make the distinction probably because we can eat out more. We have more money; we have more choice of restaurants. You can call into Carluccio's on Dawson Street on your way home or something and you expect to have a nice meal and friendly surroundings. That's what you expect and that's what you get and it is actually a fun place to go. But you don't have the expectations if you'd booked the restaurant two weeks in advance and you were planning to go out to bring your future in-laws, it's a different thing.

C: In general, did you get a lot of letters and were they useful to you? Did they inform any of your future reviewing decisions?

S: I didn’t get an inordinate amount. I did get some letters. Criticism is very helpful and it’s actually something you need and it’s often something I would say to restaurateurs is that you have great advantage because you’re meeting your customers face to face and if they say things to you it can be extremely helpful. Nobody likes criticism and certainly if you’re had your feet in the kitchen for twelve hours, you’re not in the mood. In the same way, I would like to have had criticism. Most of it unfortunately would have tended to be the stuff you’d read online now, this "I didn’t like this restaurant and it’s all your fault" kind of thing. Some of it was constructive which was good. Sometimes it was people telling you about places, which was interesting because with the best will in the world, you can’t hear about everything and that’s really useful and really nice. Sometimes the criticisms were useful but unfortunately, usually it was just an awful lot of abuse, which comes with the territory.

C: Do you remember when ‘Table Talk’ wound down, that was about the mid-1990s?

S: Yes, it was the mid-1990s.

C: But they didn’t replace it

S: They didn’t replace it for a while. I think it was that period when they were making up their mind where they were going with it. I had done it for almost 10 years at that stage and I think was beginning to think I’d given it as much as I can at this stage. It probably needed a fresh voice.

C: I’m sure you get reviewer’s fatigue.

S: Oh yes, absolutely, you do. Certainly, it is something. And then there are the practical facts, that people get to know you and it’s not that it makes such a great

difference, it's just that it makes it more awkward. It's more awkward for the restaurant and it's more difficult for me.

C: You didn't have a byline picture did you?

S: They did that for a while, which I didn't want. I protested about it but they ran with it for one and took it off again. Again, it's not so much that you're hiding or you're pretending that you're not there; it just makes it more awkward. The restaurant gets all uptight and I remember myself from the days when I worked in the kitchens, there were these phone calls saying the Michelin man is arriving and there would be panic stations for about two weeks. Then somebody came in at 7pm for a table for one…

C: Were you often recognised? I'm sure, as you said, after 10 years a lot of them knew it was you.

S: A lot of them did, yes. In Dublin, I'm sure a lot of them did. People have said to me since that "The first time we got a photo of you it went up in the kitchen".

C: I've asked you about how the paper viewed the column. Did people find your job a particularly enviable one?

S: Yes, people did. And yes, obviously it's an enjoyable job and if you like food and restaurants, it's a lovely thing to do. I don't know if I was the right personality. I'm actually a relatively quiet sort of person and there was that image that went with it, and there was a lot of envy but mainly within my own profession I have to say. But that's not uncommon. There was a lot of the feeling that you're on expenses doing this and you can go anywhere you want and that sort of thing.

C: Did you feel undermined by that as it seems to suggest that it is just a jolly and it's not a professional activity?

S: I think that's what in the beginning, that's what made me – I was rather formal and rather serious when I was reviewing the restaurants. I was trying to say I'm not just a journalist on expenses. There is a point to this, trying to inform you, trying to help you get better value for your money and find the right place for whatever occasion or whatever you want, and at the same time you were trying to say this is something new in the country that we can try and there are a lot of people doing a really good job. But there still was an attitude, warranted to some degrees I suppose. It's the same argument that all the arts in the broadest way, they're not essentials to life but they're a very important part of life. If you didn't have theatres, we didn't have cinemas, life would be an awful lot poorer and as I say, it was a time great change and great development and excitement really in food and restaurants and cooking in general. It was from all sides because there were new restaurants, there were cooking shows coming on television and big, glossy cookbooks were appearing all the time and as we got into the 1990s, it was the birth of the celebrity chef, which is a slightly dubious product. The food shows, the food markets started and all this sort of thing, it began to become part of culture really and to be well informed about food, if you went out to somebody's home. I know, going way back, when I went out with my parents, food was just assumed. Nobody ever spoke about it and it was considered bad manners to mention the food. If you were invited to somebody's home you didn't mention the food, it wasn't considered to be the right thing to do. But suddenly, if you went out to dinner, everybody was talking about food and it was "Where did you find this?" and "Isn't this a wonderful sauce?" It had suddenly become part of culture, the way you'd discuss a book or a play.

C: And how important was the wine aspect of your reviews?

S: It was if a restaurant had a particular cellar, obviously it was part of the restaurant and there were a lot of people who liked wine. At the time, Ireland was probably the worst place to order a good bottle of wine because the restaurants had a mark-up

obviously and the cost of it was phenomenal. I used to say that a restaurant was not the place to have a good red wine because it's travelled around so much by the time you get it to your table and then you're not going to have the time to appreciate it. There were some restaurants that had good cellars, there were some people who brought in their own, particularly some of the Italian restaurants and it was interesting because you would get wines you couldn't get elsewhere. But it wasn't a big side. I did write about wine separately later on but normally I would order the house wine because it gives you an idea, it's another part of the restaurant. Have they been a bit creative? Have they picked out a decent house wine? Or have they just taken something from the cash and carry?

C: Do you think there was an associated increase in interest in wine as people became more interested in food?

S: Yes, huge. We saw that in the statistics. When I started to write the per capita consumption of wine in Ireland was 1.5 litres per head, per year. I don't know what it is now, about 15? Wine has become a much more regular drink for people. Wine drinking was quite, certainly before the 1980s, it was quite rare. It was specific people who drank wine. Now it's become a drink that people will have without food, pubs serve a variety of different wines and young people will buy a bottle of wine for the evening. People are drinking at home more too because of the drinking and driving obviously and all the supermarkets have wine and all the filling stations have wine. It's part of life.

C: This has all been great. Is there anything else about the era or about your experiences that we haven't touched on that you think would be important to mention?

S: I was trying to think about this yesterday and this morning. I think that so much change took place between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s in restaurant and food culture in Ireland from really a very small environment to begin with, a very small number of restaurants, the food was quite predicable in some ways too. There was this

real excitement and fascination with it and it became this big topic of social conversation. People started doing cookery course, they started collecting books and entertaining in their homes, where food was the star to some extent or it was a big talking point. I think food has changed a lot too. I'm not sure I'm entirely happy with the way some of it has changed. The type of food that was dominant in the 1980s was a sort of lightened version of classical French cooking if you like. But there was a lot of work in food, there really was, and I think that probably had to change because there was too much work and you could only do it at a certain level of cost. I've never been comfortable with fusion of all sorts of different types of food. I think you can do that but you have to very careful how you do it. It can work brilliant but it can also be rather a mess. Perhaps we've thrown out too much of the classical but there is much more variety and far greater range to choose from. But I think that change is the big thing. It was really extraordinary, from the early 1990s to the sort of mid-1990s, that sort of 10, 15 years there, food and restaurants just changed beyond all recognition and people's attitudes changed from something that was very much an occasion or business to something that people say "We'll eat at home or we'll eat out". It's one or the other. I have been looking at houses recently and kitchens seem to have gotten smaller and smaller and these are five bedroom houses. Nobody eats at home here. Even coffee has changed completely. You now have a coffee menu.

C: We've become so accustomed to it.

S: We have become accustomed to it but it didn't exist when I started writing about restaurants. You got an espresso if you went to the Unicorn or Nico's; otherwise you were lucky if it wasn't Nescafe.

Appendix D: Interview with Fionnuala McCarthy

Interview with Fionnuala McCarthy interviewed by Claire O'Mahony via email, 18 March 2019.

F: Fionnuala McCarthy

C: Claire O'Mahony

C: When did you start working for the *Sunday Tribune* as magazine editor?

F: I began working as magazine editor in 2004. I was in the role until the paper closed in 2011.

C: How many reviewers did you employ during your time there?

F: Five. During my tenure we had Catherine Cleary now of *Irish Times*, *Tribune* news editor Diarmuid Doyle, author Chris Binchy, writer Eoin Higgins now of *Cara* and Katy McGuinness who has been restaurant critic of *Irish Independent* for the past four years.

C: Who were they and can you give the reasons why you employed these particular reviewers?

F: Catherine Cleary, we parted company with her soon after I arrived. Diarmuid Doyle was employed because he was staff and we were trying to save money as we had just signed Rachel Allen as a food writer. We only had to cover his expenses. Chris Binchy was a rising literary star at the time, having published his first novel to great acclaim which was set in Dublin, he had worked as a chef while writing his novel. Eoin Higgins was also a writer of the moment, having being deputy editor of *The Dubliner* magazine, which at the time was freshly launched and very zeitgeisty. Katy McGuinness was signed as she is a bona fide foodie with good credentials as she had been reviewing in *The Gloss*. She can appreciate good food and see through any over blown PR hype.

C: How important were the reviews to the magazine and to you?

F: The restaurant review was one page in a 64-page magazine, so although important, it was another regular page like fashion, beauty, gardening, TV review, that had to be filled. I didn't really see it as any more or less important than the other regular pages. But certainly the restaurants chosen did say a lot about who we thought our readers were – so I did want to know four weeks out where the critic was thinking of going, so I could ensure there was a good mix in terms of geography, food styles, budget, etc.

C: Did you get much feedback from readers about them?

F: Not that I recall. At the time there wasn't Twitter, Instagram or Facebook so it was different in terms of feedback. People had to write a letter or email, which they didn't really do for something like a restaurant review, as it wasn't something that got people exercised.

C: What brief did you give to reviewers?

F: To always get to new restaurants as soon as they open, always to review first before the competition (*Sindo, Irish Times*). Focus more restaurants in South County Dublin as that was where the majority of our readership was based, and to get outside of Dublin when time and budgets permitted.

C: Did you have a budget in terms of how much they could spend?

F: I recall it as being around the €200 mark. But if it was expensive one week, we would expect the week after for it to be reigned back in.

C: How important do you think that the reviews were to the newspaper?

F: I think the restaurants selected said a lot about who we were as a brand and who we thought our readers were, so that is why I liked to vet the proposed list. There was a sense of affluence and prosperity around the south of Dublin city up to 2007/2008 and we wanted to reflect where people were socialising in bars, restaurants and clubs. Then when the recession hit and people had a lot less money to eat out, we started to feature pop up restaurants and ethnic restaurants in places like Parnell Street and Capel Street. It was reflective of how we were changing as a country – no one had expense accounts anymore, most of these restaurants didn't even take credit cards. Over the summer, we would focus on restaurants in places where people liked to holiday – West Cork, Galway, Wexford, many of our readers decamped to holiday homes there for the summer. We also focused more on ethnic restaurants, reflecting the growing diversification in Ireland, as our readers were eager to try new cuisines in up and coming neighbourhoods.

C: Do you think that there was a growing interest in food at the time you were commissioning the reviews?

F: Most definitely. There are always trends in food, but yes at the time I recall a big emphasis on the traceability of food and restaurants including on menus where their meat and vegetables were sourced. People also became aware of seasonal eating, so there was less emphasis on having strawberries in winter time. Big on meat restaurants also became very popular – Brazilian Barbecue Sabor and the Mongolian Barbecue are just two I recall – the heavy emphasis on meat could be linked to the popularity of the Atkins Diet at the time! And party restaurants were very much in vogue – various tribes went to eat and be seen – Town Bar & Grill on Kildare Street was one popular before the crowd moved on to Renards or Lillies. The Unicorn on Merrion Row was hugely popular with the arts and media set. Mint, the tiny cramped Dylan McGrath Michelin restaurant in Ranelagh, and Bang and Residence private members' club on St Stephen's Green were popular haunts.

C: Were you aware of a growing foodie culture in Ireland?

F: I certainly remember a big focus on GYO and doing a lot of features on people who have allotments, and people getting delivery of organic vegetable boxes to their homes.

C: Was this reflected by other food-related features that you commissioned?

F: We started a series in 2008 called 'Frugal Foods', which featured a menu planner of dinners for a week for a specific budget, along with a shopping list – this was a different time to a few years earlier when people were taking delivery of organic veg boxes. Celebrity TV chefs were coming into their own during these years, so we frequently featured interviews and recipes from everyone from Jamie Oliver to Ainsley Harriott to Nigella.

C: Do you think that the Celtic Tiger impacted on what was reviewed?

F: I think we reflected what was going on – we held a mirror up to society – so we reviewed the restaurants that people would go to with their expense accounts for sure. Our readers were predominantly affluent middle class and they wanted to know about the newly opened quality restaurants, so we were doing our jobs as editors in serving that up to them. We probably reviewed Chapter One every year, but that was just because it got awarded Michelin stars every year – and possibly because critics liked to be schmooze there too.

C: Was it important that the restaurants outside of Dublin were reviewed?

F: Yes. We tried to make every 4th or 5th review be outside of Dublin. Again we hit the bigger towns and cities, and because there was a lot of new plush hotels opening around the country with fine dining restaurants, we also made a point of going to those – think Monart, Bellinter, the Ice House, the Cliff House.

C: Did you keep abreast of what other Irish papers were doing in terms of their food coverage or their reviews?

F: Yes I certainly looked on a Saturday to see what Paolo Tullio did in the *Independent* and whoever in was in the *Irish Times*, as I wanted for the *Tribune* to be the first with a review, which we usually were. The *Sunday Independent* printed a week ahead of us, so they never really got to a restaurant before we did.

C: Who was the target readership for the reviews or the magazine?

F: Middle class liberal professionals, aged 30s and 40s plus in urban areas. That was my take on who they were. They were certainly people affected in the downturn as the paper closed in 2011.

C: Did you consider your readership to be sophisticated in terms of their food knowledge?

F: Definitely, I pictured them eating out regularly and hosting Ottolenghi dinner parties. I think they had much more sophisticated lives and tastes to me!

C: Were there ever any periods during your tenure when you did not run reviews?

F: No, we always ran reviews in every issue.

C: As an editor, what did you want the magazine's reviews to be that might have differed from other publications?

F: I wanted them to be light in tone, it is food, not politics – and to write about food that women like to eat, which is different in so many ways to what men order off a menu. I wanted the reviews to appeal to anyone not just foodies but also people looking for a recommendation for a date or a significant celebration.

C: Did you commission originally photography for the reviews?

F: Yes, our staff photographer was always sent to take a photo after the critic had been and filed their copy. The problem with that was the images were generally of an empty dining space – we were mindful of depicting people in photos without their permission and in restaurant settings, some people may not want to be featured or might be having a private meeting. So often the copy published might have said that the restaurant was out the door and every table full, but the image did not reflect that.

C: Do any anecdotes or memories stand out from your experience related to restaurant reviews?

F: Three.

All show how being such a small country did at times make publishing not-so-complimentary restaurant reviews difficult.

One time we reviewed a restaurant of a hotel in Wexford and it wasn't a good review. The hotel owner was a golfing pal of the *Tribune* managing director. The hotel owner made his displeasure known on the day of publication and claimed it was not an accurate description of what transpired that evening in the restaurant. I can recall it being messy as the managing director instructing me to 'fix it'.

The second was of a review of a local restaurant that had just opened in Drumcondra in Dublin. The review found more faults than it did things to praise. Ten years later the *Tribune* had closed, and I became friends with the owners of the restaurant through our children going to the same school. One evening they talked about how a review in the *Tribune* in their first weeks had upset them and how unfair it is for a critic to arrive in unannounced when the restaurant is having teething difficulties.

The third was a review of a celebrity chef-owned restaurant. We regularly featured the chef in the paper and this review was not complimentary, in fact it was mean in my opinion and could have done damage to the paper's reputation as he is a well-respected chef. I made the decision not to publish the review as I thought the PR would not be good for us in the long term.