

The double-agent at table 14

Mystery-shopping firms put food and wait staffs to the test

Scott Joseph | Sentinel Restaurant Critic

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Restaurant owners seem to be obsessed with finding information about restaurant critics. They post grainy pictures in their kitchens and give receptionists and hostesses rumored descriptions and details so they can be alerted when the critic walks in.

But they're never on the lookout for Gail Bates or Michelle Glover or any of the thousands of people who work as independent contractors for companies known collectively as mystery shoppers. These everyday diners visit a restaurant, eat a meal, then report their observations, good or bad, via a questionnaire or survey to the mystery-shopper company, which then analyzes and tabulates the report and issues the restaurant the results, known as the shopper score.

The restaurants get immediate feedback on how well their establishments are doing, and the mystery diners get a free or greatly discounted meal for their efforts. These reports are taken quite seriously. Restaurant owners say a review from a professional critic can have an immediate if not lasting effect on business traffic. But a report from a mystery diner can have immediate and lasting results that might affect management bonuses and determine whether certain workers, from bartenders to hostesses to waiters and table busers, will be allowed to remain employed there.

Mystery-shopping services are not new, and their clients are not restricted to the food-service industry. Mystery shoppers can be employed to go shopping, hired to visit a client store, purchase a particular item and report on the attention of the sales clerk, the cleanliness of the store, even whether the clerk said "thank you for shopping at ----."

Mystery shoppers might be asked to visit auto-repair franchises to report on service expertise; hotels, where shoppers check in and pretend to be vacationers; shoppers might even use Internet sites to evaluate speed and accuracy. Things can get even more unusual. John Saccheri, president of Mystique Shopper in Orlando, says he has had people sign up for college and actually attend classes for a mystery shop. And, another time, an organization that feeds homeless people hired his company to make sure people of all races were being treated equally at the client's soup kitchen.

But it's the restaurant shops, mystery-dining gigs, that seem to interest people the most. People sign up at mystery-shopping services' Web sites with dreams of dining for free at some of the area's finest restaurants. Sometimes, instead of a four-course meal in an upscale restaurant, shoppers are assigned to order food at the drive-through window of a fast-food chain. And even when the chance to dine in an upscale restaurant comes along, mystery diners discover what professional critics have known for a long time: Upscale doesn't necessarily mean good.

Jacki Skelton, a mystery diner for Winter Park-based Mystery Guest, says she has been disappointed by some of the fine-dining restaurants she has been sent to. But she says she and her husband, Charlie, enjoy all the assignments, and they find it a satisfying experience overall and a great way to supplement their meal plan. "We eat out a lot anyway," says Skelton, "and it's a great way of subsidizing eating out."

Gail Bates, who dines on the sly for Levy Restaurants, which operates Fulton Crab House, Portobello Yacht Club and Wolfgang Puck Cafe at Downtown Disney, says she and her husband, David, enjoy the chance to get out and visit restaurants they might not go to otherwise. "It's a night out," says Bates, "that's the way we look at it."

But mystery diners are expected to work for their suppers. They must memorize the names of the hosts, bartenders, servers and managers they have contact with; they could be instructed to listen for particular phrases or note whether the waiter told them about the daily specials or offered coffee at the end of the meal; they have to time how long it takes between courses; they must duck into the restroom and check for cleanliness and see if there are paper towels and toilet paper; and, of course, they have to observe the quality of the food and whether hot items were hot and cold items were cold. And, they're forbidden to take notes at the table lest they be revealed as mystery shoppers.

Once they leave the restaurant, they return home and log on to the mystery shopper's Web site and fill out an extensive questionnaire about their dining experience, supplying all those names and particulars they've committed to memory.

And what do they get for their efforts? In most cases, it's reimbursement of the cost of the meal. In some cases, such as for those who shop for Mystery Guest, only partial reimbursement is offered, usually the cost of specific items the shoppers are instructed to order during their visit. In rarer cases, the mystery shopper also receives a small fee for extra effort, maybe \$25.

But though mystery-shopper companies use "ordinary" people, you should know they're very particular about whom they hire to do their mystery dining.

Jane Newnum, co-owner of Mystery Guest, says her company has a system of quality control for maintaining a database of reliable diner/shoppers. "We do a lot of interviewing before that person is even selected to go out on a job," says Newnum. And it should be noted that although the words "job" or "hired" are used here, the mystery diners are considered independent contractors for their services and are not actually employees of the companies. And even the best and most-reliable mystery diners are seldom used more than once a month, sometimes once a quarter, so being a mystery diner is hardly a way to supplement income.

Michelle Glover has been dining for Mystery Guest for about three years. She said she heard about the service, went to the Web site and filled out the questionnaire. She says there were questions about demographics -- race, gender, level of education and household income -- but she also had to describe "an unforgettable dining experience."

"I think they were looking for clear written expression," says Glover, "being able to use adjectives well, so that after you do a mystery-dining experience, it isn't just yes or no." She says that whether the experience was good or bad she has to be able to explain why. And she must use good grammar as well as be descriptive.

Newnum says the demographics part of the application is important to send mystery diners to appropriate restaurants. She likens it to a focus-group session at which participants fit the criteria for a target audience. "For instance," she says, "a client like Seasons 52 has a unique profile for the type of person who dines there. We try to match that up."

In addition, says Mystique Shopper's Saccheri, his company tries to send mystery diners to the kind of restaurants they're used to dining in. "We're not going to send the same person to McDonald's as we would to a fine-dining restaurant"

As for the restaurateurs, most think it's important to get feedback about what their guests think, and even if they don't hire one of the professional companies to send people in and file a report, most will at least call on friends and neighbors to visit their restaurants to evaluate the food and service. Servers are aware of it too, and will try to figure out who the shoppers are.

But Luciano Cortes, a manager at Chef Justin's Park Plaza Gardens in Winter Park, has great advice for his staff. "Everyone who comes in here are mystery-shopping you," he tells them, "because they're the ones who are coming back."

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