

BRUNO

6 October 2017

Dear New York Times Dining and Pete Wells,
I am writing to you in regard to restaurant stars. Chef Sebastien Bras recently announced that he would like to give back the three Michelin stars awarded to his restaurant Le Suquet in France. It is in this same spirit that I would like to give back the New York Times 'zero star' review of Bruno Pizza in 2015.

First, in terms of Bras and his stars, is he turning up his nose at the immense honor three Michelin stars surely is? Are the stars his to give back? Is he crazy? There has been much discussion. Well, whatever his reason, Le Suquet received three Michelin stars for a style of food and service that the Bras worked hard for decades to perfect. Now I guess he wants to do something else to stay sharp and to keep the hustle going. Doing the same thing can get boring. And boring is for suckers. Or maybe he's just exhausted? Either way, would people understand Le Suquet's changes if they saw the Michelin stars slip away without explanation? Or would they wonder if the restaurant was not as good any more? Was he now simply phoning it in? Bras felt it better to make a public statement than to say nothing.

The New York Times also recently illuminated three stars when Dining critic Pete Wells awarded them to Razza Pizza Artigianale in Jersey City. At first I thought "Amazing! So great that a straight-up pizza place can be considered at that level of dining!" I have not eaten at Razza but Wells' description of the naturally leavened dough, tomato tastings, following a herd of New Jersey buffalo for three years, etc., all in the name of pizza excellence, sounded delicious. I was all for it as I work very hard for a high level of pizza as well here at Bruno Pizza.

"But... waitaminit..." (my mental pendulum swung the other way)

"Three stars??"

"My little pizza place only got zero!" (yes, Pete wells gave Bruno a gut-churningly-nauseating zero stars back in 2015)

"What just happened??"

Well, ok fine... the argument has been made that Mr Wells will rate a restaurant in terms of the type of place it is trying to be. Hence two stars to Brooks Hedley's Superiority Burger in relation to all other vegan/vegetarian burger joints with idiosyncratic vegetable side dishes and ridiculously good gelato. Certainly a crowded field. So three stars for Razza could mean that it was an amazing pizza place. But my baby Bruno Pizza receiving zero stars was massively painful then. And the sting was suddenly rekindled with this review. Which then raised the question for me, in what context was Bruno Pizza reviewed? As a modern Neapolitan pizza place? As a restaurant that also serves pizza? I think I knew the answer.

To be fair, I mostly agreed with Mr. Wells assessment of Bruno Pizza. With the exception to the suggestion that there was some big media hype thing going on. It's the New York dining scene. Media hype about restaurants and food was happening long before I conceptualized Bruno. This was nothing new. So it felt a bit like the New York Times was joining in with a crap review of my restaurant as a proxy for a meta conversation on social media among the food press about their relationship with restaurants. An opportunity to abstractly opine with my very real restaurant, the culmination of years of hard work and life's savings, thrown under the bus for traction. Ugh. (I also took exception to his description of the bar seating... but I will leave that for another letter.)

Otherwise, though, I thought Mr. Wells' comments rang true. I knew the food needed development and editing. The pizza dough then was even further behind. Nothing was where I had originally envisioned it to be yet. And he was spot on about the two "co" chefs. They had absolutely no idea how to run a restaurant kitchen. Not to mention that they were really only interested in fussy 'tasting menu' food, regardless of the affirmations they had given me during interviews about my concept. Chaos swirled around them in those early days and it wasn't long after all the reviews that they each imploded. My biggest mistake with the chefs, aside from hiring them, was that I was much too patient with them, hoping again and again that they would step up to the role.

But here's the thing- that zero star review was about a restaurant other than what was my vision for it. I should have fired both of the chefs the day it was published. A few years before I had spent a significant amount of time interning in the kitchen of St. John Restaurant in London. And a little time also at London's River Café. Both profoundly influential to my development, these restaurants excel at food steeped in tradition but humming with their own sort of modernist clarity. This was the lens with which I wanted to focus on food at my Bruno. But this was not what was happening on my plates. The two chefs talked a good game about understanding my vision. But they would then go and try to do whatever they wanted instead. Through the craziness of opening a restaurant, the penny was slowly dropping for me. But I was not quick enough to make the needed changes before the reviewers arrived. Mr. Wells included.

So an epiphany struck with the Razza review. Razza is five years old. Those years surely gave owner Dan Richer lots of time to hone the Razza pizza craftsmanship, weed out shaky employees, stalk water buffalo and generally ensure his restaurant was firing on all cylinders. My restaurant was reviewed after just eight tumultuous weeks. The Bruno Pizza 'Beta launch' team barely knew how to walk let alone run with a restaurant busy with crowds of dining early adopters. I knew that the restaurant needed time to let all of the pieces in my head develop and fit into place. Mr. Wells knew it too. Of course many new restaurants would jump at the chance to be reviewed by the New York Times. And while I was amazed and appreciative that Bruno Pizza was even being considered, I knew it was way too soon for a review.

Because of this, and the inspiration of Sebastien Bras, I would like to give back my zero star New York Times review. O.k. so I kind-of have nothing to give back. Maybe I am the Bizarro Superman of restaurant reviews? But the point is similar, if in reverse. Bras wants refreshing change by taking his mature, successful restaurant in a different direction. At a fledgling eight weeks old, my plans for Bruno Pizza were still being worked out. Now at just over two years, Bruno has developed a lot. The food is more focused. And the pizza is amazingly ahead of where it was when we started. The opening team lucked out occasionally back then but the pizza was inconsistent. I found through a huge learning curve that milling your own locally sourced organic flour to make great pizza dough is a massive challenge. But it is now profoundly better than it was when Mr. Wells was here. And, while there is always opportunity to learn, I am thrilled with the leaps and bounds forward that Bruno Pizza has made. So that zero-star reviewed restaurant back when Bruno Pizza was only a baby is not the restaurant we are now. And certainly not the restaurant we will be if, Lord willing, we make it to five years. So I would respectfully like to give back my zero star review to the New York Times. Thank you but no thanks. But in a couple more years Mr. Wells should feel free to come back and bring Ed Levine (he's never been here) in for some pizza. I'll be happy to chat with them about upstate wheat, fresh pasta, heirloom tomatoes, purslane or whatever. Maybe I will know a thing or two, or at least a couple cows, by then. Thank you very much.

Sincerely,
Demian Repucci

Bruno Pizza