

February 21, 2007

Mr. Pete Wells, Editor

Dining In/Dining Out, *The New York Times*

Dear Mr. Wells:

Recently I opened a restaurant in New York City called Kobe Club on west 58th street. It is a restaurant I am particularly proud of. It features, not surprisingly, the finest Japanese, Australian, and American Wagyu ("Kobe" and "Kobe style" beef) available in this country, as well as traditional and non-traditional American prime beef and other steakhouse fare. I and my staff worked extremely hard on this project and the response has been, frankly (no pun intended), overwhelmingly positive. People love it, well, most people. Three of New York's and the country's most important and respected critics loved it — Gael Greene of *New York Magazine*¹, Bob Lape of *Crain's*² and John Mariani, restaurant critic for, among others, *Esquire Magazine*³. These critics have over 80 years of combined restaurant critique experience and I invite you and anyone reading this letter to read their comments in full. Unfortunately, based on his comments in his recent review of Kobe Club (February 7, 2007) in your newspaper, your "critic," Frank Bruni, did not. I was surprised but not shocked. As anyone who read the review can see, the review was as much or more about me than it was the restaurant (as opposed to the three reviews referenced above which were solely about the restaurant). Ever since my ill-fated collaboration with Rocco DiSpirito on the TV show, *The Restaurant*, critics for the *New York Times* (and certain other publications) have been very hard on me. This was no exception. Admittedly, there was that one errant clam (out of a 3-tier seafood tower). Unfortunately, bad clams happen... occasionally, but how does a review in which the main player, Kobe beef, is acknowledged by Mr. Bruni to be perfectly prepared, warrant zero stars?

I don't know what I actually did to engender these personal attacks on me. I opened Rocco's with the best of intentions. After all, what's a better story than a talented avant-garde chef going back to his roots to cook the food he grew up on with the mother he loves. I also love my mother so it was easy for me to be seduced by the idea. I don't think anybody could have predicted that outcome.

After Rocco's, I opened Caviar & Banana in the Rocco's space — bad name, great restaurant. Almost everyone who ate there loved it, but the critics killed it before it could develop enough critical mass. Some called it the Rocco's curse. In fact, I was going to walk away from that space and its karma, but decided not to for one simple reason — there were a lot of great people who worked at Rocco's and I was determined to keep them employed. I failed, with the *Times*' help. Fortunately I can afford to take the hit; most restaurateurs couldn't. As unusual as it was to have had the ghost of Rocco's haunting every review of Caviar & Banana, I am even more at a loss as to the significance it has to Kobe Club.

This time, fortunately, the vitriolic comments come too late... Kobe Club is booming. Even a rival publication commented that same Wednesday, in an article lamenting the bastardization of the traditional steakhouse genre by these non-steakhouse steakhouses, that two of these offenders, Quality Meats and Kobe Club, across the street from one another on west 58th street, were mobbed, the former, in part, because people were unable to get into the latter. I open restaurants for people, not critics. Kobe Club, with its 2000 samurai swords dangling blade-down, and its over-the-top luxe menu is not for everyone, but do we really need another traditional steakhouse in New York City?

Why then, one might ask, did I need to take out this full-page ad? For two reasons. First, and foremost, you need to understand that, as often happens, the intended target (in this case, me) does not get injured — innocent bystanders do. I have been too successful and battle-hardened to be affected by this, but my restaurant staff, who are some of the nicest, most hard-working people I have ever worked with are affected, and they deserve an apology. They have created a great restaurant, and you should have critics on your staff that celebrate and support the efforts of people who work in New York in one of the most difficult and demanding industries there is. Criticize, but do it fairly, honestly and objectively and through people with credentials, like the three bona fide critics listed above.

This brings me to my second reason for writing this letter. A couple of years ago, my wife and I attended a restaurant preview dinner at which we were randomly seated with a former food critic for the *NY Times* and his wife, he having recently left his position at the *Times*. They were extremely pleasant and my wife, out of curiosity, asked his wife where they like to have dinner, now that her husband is no longer the *NY Times* food critic. His wife replied that they live in Queens and eat mostly at home. She told my wife that before her husband became the food critic for the *Times*, they almost never went out to dinner. He was a great writer, I'm sure, as is Mr. Bruni. But, they are not really food critics, at least any more than any of us who eat out regularly. Mr. Bruni comes to us from Rome where he was not the local "expert" on Italian cuisine; he wrote about politics. In fact, there hasn't been a real food critic with food background (except perhaps Amanda Hesser) at the *New York Times* since Ruth Reichl (now editor-in-chief at *Gourmet* magazine). Perhaps that's also why your reviews are so all over the lot, with great restaurants getting bad reviews, fair restaurants getting great ones, one star reviews that read like two star and three star reviews that read like one star.

Your readers would not expect your drama critic to have no background in drama or your architecture critic to not be an architect. For a publication that prides itself on integrity, I feel your readers should be better informed as to this VERY IMPORTANT fact, so that they can give your reviews the weight, or lack thereof, they deserve. In the interest of fairness, I am also introducing my personal blog, which will be a compilation of my food-related experiences and musings and a special section entitled Following Frank and After Adam, in which I will make a follow-up visit to restaurants they write about for the purpose of reviewing their reviews. My blog will appear at www.chinagrillmgt.com/blog. My friends in the restaurant business have warned me that there will be further retaliation against me for speaking up. So be it.

Cordially,



Jeffrey Chodorow

p.s. — Last week, *WQXR* and *Culinary Gourmet* Restaurant and Wine Journalist, Jay Walman, said Kobe Club is "The Best Restaurant to Visit in 2007."

1) Gael Greene appeared in "Ask Gael" column in the January 15, 2007 issue of *New York Magazine*. (<http://nymag.com/restaurants/reviews/insatiable/26268/index.html>)
2) Bob Lape review published in the January 15, 2007 issue of *Crain's New York Business*. (<http://www.newyorkbusiness.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070114/FREE/70114017/1073/lape>)
3) John Mariani appeared in 12/31/06 *Virtual Gourmet* newsletter (<http://www.johnmariani.com/archive/2006/061231/index.html>)