



# Brave New World

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*Can you cook but can't tweet? Getting no 'Face' time? Feel like a Luddite in a town full of technophiles? There's hope for you yet*

ne lunch hour during last Summerlicious in Toronto, Pangaea Restaurant chef and co owner, Martin Kouprie, was checking his tweet mentions when he noticed a customer post a picture of himself in the restaurant that very minute. He found him at table three, and sent him a complimentary drink. The gentleman tweeted about that, too. "It turned into this really positive instantaneous experience, says Kouprie, who has been an avid Twitter and Facebook user since March .



## A Computer for Two, Please

Here are a few different ways restaurants can engage customers through social media:

- Even if you don't have a website, make sure you are searchable in local business sections of guides like Yelp.com and Urbanspoon.com. Make sure your information is up to date – Kingman is shocked by how many restaurants have old numbers listed or don't indicate hours. And don't put music on your site. Up to 80 per cent of people surf websites at work and if loud music starts playing they close the site as soon as possible.
- Sign up for Twitter, Facebook and MySpace and post links to all of these on your website. (Post as many images as possible – don't forget Flickr.)
- Before starting a blog, consider the fact that you should make three to four 300-word postings a week.
- Check out Google Alerts – a great way to listen to what is being said about your restaurant across the worldwide web.
- The food industry lends itself to YouTube; think live cooking/food shopping videos. It is also a great way to communicate the brand in recruitment campaigns. Host TweetUps or Meetups (meetup.com) for any in-restaurant events.

Kouprie's Pangaea Restaurant Lovers Unite Facebook page has 187 members, while the chef enjoys a following of 542 on Twitter. Both social media sites are free; Facebook has 300 million users compared to Twitter's 8.9 million (which is growing fast). However, unlike Facebook, a user doesn't need permission to follow someone on Twitter, making it more accessible to the avid online food community. Kouprie tweets (writes digital messages of 140 characters or less) up to 10 times a day from his cellphone or laptop, on everything from who he had lunch with (his old scuba instructor), to being interviewed by yours truly for this article. It's safe to say that Kouprie is hooked on social media.

"I saw it as a gimmick at first, just another time waster," he admits. But the self-described "closet nerd" tried it out anyway and within the first week he had 50 followers (thanks to a mention that he was tweeting in *Toronto Life* magazine). "All of these people are tuning in to see what I'm saying. It's a great vehicle for Pangaea, to get our name out there and make us more accessible to everyone." He adds that he's been astonished by the interaction that happens between peers and people in the industry. He can get the jump on fresh food by checking out his suppliers' followers, for example, and swaps helpful information with other tweetin' chefs, including Jason Bangerter of Toronto's Auberge du Pommier (almost daily). Kouprie even communicates with his wife, noted food blogger, chef and prodigious tweeter, Dana McCauley, on Twitter from time to time.

Using social media is no longer optional for restaurants. The technology enables the best, most instantaneous dialogue you can have with customers (and colleagues) short of a tableside conversation. Initiatives are won over quickly as they experiment with sites such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Flickr, which can be powerful marketing and recruiting tools, according to the experts. But it takes a special touch — a desire to engage the virtual food community in authentic conversation every day — to reap the most from social media.

The authenticity part just can't be faked. Case-in-point: the social identity theft of chef Michael Smith. In September 2009, Smith discovered someone was posing as him on Twitter when a *Montreal Gazette* writer questioned him directly about a few negative comments made by the imposter. "It was a very odd introduc-

tion to the whole thing. It was scary. And I went through a whole gambit of emotions. I was deep in a hole by midday and very angry," admits the Food Network star of *Chef at Home* and *Chef Abroad*. "Then I started using Twitter to ask others to get the word out and by the end of the day, the whole thing had turned around dramatically. The subscriptions to the phony one had plunged."

Smith says he was blown away by how fast the whole event occurred and instantly saw the validity of the tool. "Twitter is easy to do; 140 characters is no big deal and it's a great way to draw attention

to things I care about." He says there's value in paying attention to what everyone else is doing, but admits that he doesn't have the time to use it in that way. He also doesn't use Twitter as a promotional vehicle. "Let's be honest, I get a lot of promotion already. To me, Twitter has more immediate value. I can delve a little deeper and draw attention to something that really matters to me in the moment, such as new ingredient or a *Globe and Mail* article on sodium consumption."

One major misconception is that social media is just another channel to market, cautions Rob Cottingham, principal of Social Signal, a Vancouver-based consultancy in social media. "In fact, it is way more conversational than anything before it. One learns far more by listening than talking." When starting out in social media, experts encourage users to spend time watching what competitors are doing and, most importantly, listen to your audience.

Earls Restaurants Ltd. in Vancouver does just that with its Facebook and Twitter followings (2,663 and 1,913, respectively). For example, it asks questions like, "What is your favourite Earls location and why?" which elicits responses like "Yaletown and Smith/Hornby locations are my favourite. You guys need Sake (rice wine) for your Asian fusion dishes!"

and "Tin Palace, Calgary. Oooh the memories!" Marketing manager Taili Coates says the biggest surprise for Earls since it developed its social media strategy about five months ago is how much customers want to engage in conversation. "It's the kind of connections our staff experience at the store level. We've never reached out from a corporate level in this kind of personal way before."

Earls has one dedicated staffer who represents the face of the company ("Sepy," the assistant marketing manager), helping to personalize the chatter coming from the large chain. Coates says that this

### FASTFACT

No time like the present to get started — less than 10 per cent of restaurants have embraced social media, according to a **Chalkboarder.com** study of 500 restaurants in the U.S. And two-thirds of those that are doing it have just begun.



# Name This Bar



When the owners of The Harbord Room in Toronto were getting ready to open a new bar a few months ago, only to find out at the last minute the name they had selected was already taken, they turned to Facebook for help. “Two months before we opened the Double Deuce, we announced on Facebook that anyone who named our bar would drink for free,” says Dave Mitton. “If anyone came up with the name, they would get a \$1,000 tab. We thought we might generate some buzz, but *Toronto Life* did an article about it, and so did the *Toronto Star* and *The Globe and Mail*. It made our Facebook page fill up like crazy.” They didn’t end up using any of the entries – the bar was named by a staff member – but it helped spread the word well before they opened. The staffer got the thousand-dollar tab, too.

enables them to maintain a consistent tone and stay true to the brand throughout conversations. She adds that Earls is currently on a learning curve when it comes to testing social media as a sales tool, including how to measure the response. “One thing we have learned is that you’ve got to stay engaged. It’s not good enough to put up a Facebook page and sit back. You have to be posting stuff on a regular basis.” Earls also discovered one of the golden rules of social media — post images. Its Earls’ Twitter Buddies, which encourages people to post photos of themselves dining at an Earls location, which are in turn posted on the Facebook page, is incredibly popular.

If you’re going to use social media, you need be telling compelling stories, advises Jeffrey Kingman, CEO of Chalkboarder.com, a Milwaukee, Oregon-based social media consultancy to the hospitality industry. “Today’s restaurant consumers want to know the story behind the chef, why he or she is cooking. People are seeking connections and social media enables those.” Kingman adds that consumers are savvy and will see right through overt pitches on social media. “But having said that, if you craft a message in a way that is friendly and genuine you will get more traction out of it.”

One success story he cites is Houston-based CoffeeGroundz (the story itself has been retweeted thousands of times — an example of the viral power of social media). According to one account, the operations manager, J.R. Cohen, credits Twitter with almost doubling his clientele. When a regular customer tweeted Cohen in 2008 asking if he could place an order in advance, Cohen said yes, and started taking orders via direct message from any of his Twitter clientele. This is hailed as the first time Twitter was used to place a takeout order.

Earls posts promotional messages on its website, but they’re strategic and conversational (“Happy Friday everyone! What are you getting up to this weekend? Anybody for some \$1 off Martini’s at Earls?”). The real power of Twitter, YouTube and Flickr is in having conversations, points out Cottingham. “You need to invest time and intention in what you are saying.”

Coates says Earls has not yet linked the use of social media to sales increases, “but that is the next step for us.” Kouprie has tracked direct sales. A current VQA no-corkage-on-Ontario-wine event (cross-promoted with SpotlightToronto.com on Twitter) has brought well over 60 people into the restaurant. “That is huge,” adds Kouprie.

Kingman says there’s great potential in social media for restaurants because people are so passionate about food. “We love to share

great restaurant finds and our experiences in them. And it makes sense. Restaurants are a forum where humanity celebrates joy, commiserates in tragedy and lives life. So there’s a deeper response for restaurants using social media than is the case for other retailers.”

This passion can run the opposite way, of course. User-generated websites popular among diners, namely Yelp.com and Urbanspoon.com — which have their own popular iPhone applications — and Chowhound.com, are a hotbed of good and bad commentary. Cottingham says chefs and restaurant owners need to pick and choose their conversations carefully. “You need the skills to be able manage a dialogue, but they are the same kind of skills you would use at a party. You aren’t going to change people’s minds,” he says, adding that if there’s a situation that can be easily and quickly rectified with social media, the benefit is powerful.

Kingman points out that Urbanspoon.com created an algorithm that showed it takes more energy for a customer to write a bad review than a good one. “This means that the customer is invested in your restaurant. They actually want to have a great experience. Reaching out to someone within a couple of hours of a bad posting can turn the situation into a home run.”

Experts say Facebook and Twitter are useful recruiting tools for restaurateurs. Hospitality headhunters can enjoy great success using social media for staffing, says Kingman. Coates says that the viral nature of the medium helps spread the word about job openings among users, which results in leads. But Earls finds it most useful to communicate the culture and history of the company to prospective employees. They’ve posted a bunch of videos on YouTube from CEO Stan Fuller, talking about the history of the first restaurant to staff sharing their career goals. Kouprie hasn’t hired directly from social media, but he has put the word out

about a posting, and figures it helps plant seeds if someone is thinking of moving.

The really great aspect of social media is that if you’re doing something wrong, you will find out about it right away, says Kingman. And never forget the “social” part — you need an outgoing personality to pull off the enthusiasm and commitment that’s on display 24/7 and to ultimately build relationships among users. Most important, as Kouprie, Coates and all proponents agree, have fun while you’re at it.

“People think chefs live in ivory towers,” says Kouprie. “This is a wonderful way to share a bunch of different facets of yourself and interact with others.”

## FASTFACT

Toronto’s Nyood restaurant is turning the tables on the faux pas of using your smartphone during dinner. During the upcoming Winterlicious, it’s inviting guests to tweet about the food and ambiance as they experience it, with the tweets projected on a wall. Has anyone ever sent back soup on Twitter?

