

TOUGH CUSTOMERS

BRITISH DINERS ARE GETTING STROPPIER, FINDS CHLOE DISKI.
NOW IT'S THE CHEFS AND WAITERS WHO SUFFER IN SILENCE

Once upon a dinnertime, British diners would go to expensive restaurants, cower appreciatively below snooty waiters, and politely consume half-decent, over-priced food. We were so intimidated and uninformed that, had we gone to one of Marco Pierre White's restaurants and been served a bowl of soup with a few flies in it, we would have probably thought, "Aah, a new garnish. Clever Marco." In those days, chefs were kings, and waiters their guardsman, but in the past few years we have at last begun to realise that it doesn't have to be like that. Now, according to some leading British restaurateurs, it's the diners who make waiters and chefs cower.

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"People have become much ruder to waiters," says Oliver Peyton, one of the UK's top restaurateurs. "Actually, they are sometimes downright aggressive, and you certainly get more chancers nowadays."

Peyton is not the only one who has noticed diners gaining confidence. Many people I have spoken to in the restaurant industry have also noted the change. Vashti Armit is manager of the River Café in Hammersmith, where she has worked since 1991. "Customers are much tougher now," she says. "They'll try anything to get a table, and if they are disappointed with their food, they're more likely to let you know." At Mon Plaisir, Covent Garden's oldest French restaurant, owner Alain Lhermitte has spent 35 years looking after customers. "You always find people who know the least, think they know the most," he explains. "But now more diners are calling our bluff. At my friend's restaurant some customers even put glass in one of their dishes to get out of paying the bill."

Obviously most of us don't go to those extremes, but we have grown so self-assured that complaining has become almost obligatory. This new-found assertiveness has coincided with a food revolution that has swept through the UK in the past decade. "There has been a huge change in our attitudes since the 1990s," says Peyton. "More produce is available, and people have a greater understanding of what they eat." Our food knowledge has expanded further since we've started to travel more, sampling produce from across the globe.

Food has become a modern status symbol and, after a few glasses of wine, diners are keen to show off. Chefs increasingly complain that their restaurants are filling up with ill-informed amateurs who feel they have the right to make a fuss because they've watched Gordon Ramsay's *The F Word*. But perhaps one reason we're complaining more is because some chefs have been touched by the Gordon Ramsay effect as well. Henry Harris, head chef at Racine, one of London's foremost French brasseries, often finds himself correcting chefs. "One of the biggest battles I have is with young cooks who, like the customers, believe they know it all," he says. "They are taught how to taste but not how to eat. They over-salt things because they are only trying one mouthful. Consequently, more dishes are sent back."

Most chefs, however, are cooking better food, and accept that knowledgeable customers are good for business. Chris Galvin, co-owner and head chef of Galvin in London's Baker Street, says he's learnt as much from his customers than from any book or chef: "Scarily for chefs, the customers are so well informed they can't be fobbed off. They know the techniques, and most people now are not shy to return something. Ninety-five per cent of the time the customers are right." **GFR**



A nose for trouble