

Food Writers New Zealand
HANDBOOK

reviews and memoirs



REVIEWS AND MEMOIRS

BOOK REVIEWS

Responsibilities of a book reviewer

Be totally unbiased.

Have a fair knowledge of the book you are judging if it is not a recipe-led book.

Be consistent with your reviews.

Endeavour to present the review in the style of the publication where it will be printed.

Review criteria

Is the book relevant to its market and true to its aim? (Include information, design, book format, recipes, styling and photography.)

Is the book of literary as well as culinary interest?

Are the recipes clearly written and easy to follow?

Do the recipes work – test at least one before reviewing.

Are recipes that are photographed true to the recipe?

Is there a good index?

Price – is it value for money?

Compulsory information

Full and correct title of the book

Author's/authors' name(s)

Publisher's name

Recommended retail price

Date of publication / availability for sale.

RESTAURANT REVIEWS

A restaurant reviewer has a real responsibility to provide an accurate and unbiased report of a restaurant, café or bar.

The two most important qualities needed are a comprehensive knowledge of food and cooking, and the ability to write well, in an entertaining manner. It is also essential to understand how a restaurant is run and managed.

A good reviewer will visit a restaurant at least twice, attempting to try as many dishes as possible. It is also important to find out just what the owner or chef, or both, have set out to achieve in terms of philosophy, target market, cuisine and format, and then to ascertain if what they have set out to do is being achieved.

It is not enough to merely write about the food consumed by the reviewer. This can be irrelevant in a restaurant where the menu changes frequently, as the reader may be enticed by the sound of a surprising dish, only to find it has been removed from the menu.

Try to put the reader in the restaurant, describe the ambience, and suggest who will feel comfortable there. Never write about the other diners. Do write about the service, the wine list, the expected cost and the décor.

Attempt to be constructive at all times. Reviewers do not put bad restaurants out of business, bad restaurants do that for themselves, eventually.

Be consistent, especially when in a position of awarding ratings, and be sure to measure the value for money aspect of each place.

Be accurate and declare the full and correct name and address of the restaurant, the days and hours of business, contact details and whether bookings are taken. Also note special features like private rooms, outdoor dining and location. Share website details.

Book under a nom de plume but be aware that the hospitality scene is well connected and it may be impossible to remain anonymous. Be fair and always declare any interests or advantages.

ANNE ELSE ON WRITING A FOOD MEMOIR

I found it really daunting to tackle a memoir. Although I'd written very widely, including some food-focused articles, I'd never written personally before. Even if you've been writing about food professionally for years, a memoir can feel like a completely new venture. Here are some tips I've found really useful.

Ingredients come first

Writing a food memoir is like making rissoles. There's no set recipe because what you put in depends on what remembered "cold meat" you have to start with – how much, what kind – and what you can find to go with it.

Much more than the food

A compelling food memoir is never just about the food. It's really about you, your life and your relationships – with food and the people, places and cultures that go with it.

Season with emotion

Everyone's experiences of food are strongly coloured by the emotional atmospheres in which they cook and eat. People respond to reading about how you felt at the time.

Method matters

While there's no correct way to write a memoir, you can learn a lot from others. Find memoirs you really like and work out why. What are the writers doing or not doing with their words that makes them appeal to you? Then find ones you don't like and work out why.

Listen and learn

Doing a course in memoir writing or creative non-fiction can be a really useful way to get started. Writing courses can give you new ideas, make you tackle new approaches, show you pitfalls to avoid, and give you feedback from a keenly interested audience.

Focus on what's in your head

If you find yourself staring helplessly at a blank screen, turn the screen off and start writing about one of your memories. This makes you concentrate on what you want to say, rather than how you're saying it. When you turn the screen on again and save what's there, you'll have hundreds of words to work with.

Tell the literary truth

Your memoir needs to be as faithful as you can make it to your own memories and perceptions. But it's never "the literal truth". There's no such thing in creative writing. What matters is shaping the facts into an effective story – the literary truth.

Create a writing voice

Although you're writing about yourself, what the reader hears isn't really you speaking. You need to create a compelling "author voice" for the purposes of telling this particular story.

Speak to the reader

Good personal writing always comes across like a voice talking to you. To hear how well you're doing, read your drafts out loud to yourself, mark anything that isn't working, and go back to fix it later.

How does it taste?

The key questions you need to ask yourself about what you've written are the same as for a new dish you've created: Is this interesting? Will anyone want to read it? How can I make them want to read it?

Try this for a starter

As with cooking and eating, practice makes perfect. It helps to write short pieces first and see how they turn out. Think for a moment about your life with food: what surfaces as your strongest memory of a food-related experience, good or bad? Take 10 minutes to write about that experience, and see what you get.

Anne Else's book [The Colour of Food: A memoir of life, love & dinner](#) (Awa Press) is available in print and ebook editions.

Our first handbook was produced in 1991, with the purpose of providing a reference tool that in turn would establish standards for New Zealand food writers. In 1999 the handbook was updated to reflect the growing needs of members.

Food Writers New Zealand is indebted to our hardworking, talented, innovative and active contributors who provided their specialist input for this latest edition.

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KATHY PATERSON, PRESIDENT, 2016

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