



## Feeding Word of Mouth

by Sandra Phinney

**A**nne Hardy co-founded Oberon Press 40 years ago. Her publishing house has since launched the careers of some of Canada's best-known writers including David Adams Richards and W.P. Kinsella. In the early days, Hardy traipsed across the country peddling her wares (and still does.) En route, she ate a lot of bad meals. Surely, she thought, there were decent places to eat in Canada.

Sensing a business opportunity, she decided that Canadians needed a food guide for travelers; one that would take the guesswork out of where to eat. A year later, she published *Where to Eat in Canada*. Listing some 500 restaurants in 200 places coast to coast, the "good book" is touted as the first-ever independent guide to Canadian restaurants, and the only one of its kind on the market today. Does it matter? You bet.

For starters, travelers trust *Where to Eat in Canada*.

It's common knowledge that you can't buy your way into the food guide. "And you can't buy your way out either," says Hardy. Furthermore, restaurant reviewers are not allowed to accept free meals, they never identify themselves and Oberon doesn't accept payment of any kind. "This book belongs to its readers – nobody else," says the feisty publisher.

Chefs from around the country love to get into the guide. Like Ray Bear. This is a snippet from *Where to Eat in Canada* when Bear masterminded the menu at Gio in the Prince George Hotel: "If Ray Bear worked in a Toronto kitchen he'd be a celebrity. Working in Halifax as he does, he's merely a local gem. The trouble with Bear is that he's too successful... When he's cooking at Gio, Gio is a three-star restaurant. When he's not – well, that's another story."

So just how much weight does a review carry? Lots. Most recently, Bear was reviewed by food critic Bill Spurr in the *Chronicle Herald*. The results were swift; reservations soared. This is great in the short term and boosts local trade but it also draws the attention of people who write for Canadian icons like *enRoute* and *Where to Eat in Canada*, which in turn draws travelers.

Bear says it's important to keep in the public eye. It's all about getting attention. Take part in lots of community functions. Be visible. "The more the public sees you,

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the more in demand you'll be and the food critics will want to check you out," he says.

But drawing attention in rural parts of Atlantic Canada is a different kettle of fish. "There is no review or food guide that can compete with word of mouth – especially on the subject of food," says Peggy Fisher who, with her husband John, operates Fisher's Loft Inn in Port Rexton, Newfoundland. "Our staff is well aware of this. We cannot afford to stoop to OK. Dining must always be exceptional. Every meal, every night."


To this end, the Fishers engage a consulting chef for at least three days a month who works alongside staff to develop kitchen management skills and new recipes with new ingredients. "This keeps staff and food offerings fresh. We try to make each year a new culinary adventure for our staff; a new eating experience for our guests."

Results? Fisher's Loft has been featured in several travel guides. And they post the write ups on their website. "This enables us to use third party opinion. Consumers place a higher value on what others say about your property and dining room," adds Fisher.

Last April, the inn was listed as one of 150 places to stay in the United States, Mexico, the Caribbean and Canada (only 15 in Canada) in *National Geographic Traveller*. "This listing came about following two visits by the editor of the *National Geographic Traveller* though we never knew he was here."

No doubt about it. Word gets around. Editors, magazine reviewers and food critics have a way of sniffing out the best. And it doesn't hinge on having unpronounceable menu items or \$500 bottles of wine.

"Sometimes I think that regional food reviewers are behind the times. The emphasis today is on fresh, full of flavor, locally produced food simply prepared and served along with a serviceable wine list," says Fisher. "Menus in a foreign language containing an endless list of expensive choices along with architect-designed towers of rich food are just not where it's at any more."

As Ray Bear and Peggy Fisher clearly understand, don't mess with the milk and the cream will rise to the top. 

Sandra Phinney has penned hundreds of business articles. She also writes a culinary column for *The Atlantic Co-operator* and is a regular food columnist for *Living Healthfully in Atlantic Canada*. "Addendum" covers topics like food trends for meetings and conventions, wine etiquette, and where to find laptop-friendly eateries. Feedback: s.phinney@ns.sympatico.ca