



Chefs beware: the kids are judging you

The tables have turned: Elementary school students are used to being ignored at restaurants, but for the next month at least, they have the power.

April 02, 2009

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Over the next month, Queen West restaurants will face their toughest critics yet: elementary school students.

Eat the Street is part two of *Parkdale Public School vs. Queen Street West*, an ongoing interactive conceptual art project that is the brainchild of Darren O'Donnell and his experimental theatre company Mammalian Diving Reflex.

The Parkdale Pumas, a group of kids who have been trained in the art of restaurant criticism by this paper's own Corey Mintz, will be reviewing a series of popular

restaurants along Queen St. W., including The Beaver, the Drake Hotel and Mitzi's Sister.

The public is encouraged to join the fledgling food critics at their dinners, which take place weekly between now and early May.

Eat the Street will culminate with an awards ceremony, where the kids will be handing out awards to their favourite (and least favourite) restaurants.

At a dinner, everyone is given a name tag and seated at a communal table with the pint-size jury members, who are outfitted with notebooks and pens and encouraged to order whatever they want and as much as they want from the menu (the restaurants graciously comp their young judges).

"It's about an intervention into circumstances," explains O'Donnell. "We're asking institutions – in this case, restaurants – to accommodate neighbourhood kids who aren't usually thought of by most restaurants, since kids don't have cash."

In asking restaurants to open themselves up to judgment from local elementary school kids, O'Donnell is inverting the status quo, a theme that's common throughout his work.

It's a "performance of empowerment," though O'Donnell is wary about using that term. "I can't guarantee that this is an empowering experience for the kids who participate," he says. "I mean, people are paying attention to them, and they get to see that they can be seen in a different way. What's most important to me is that everyone is having fun."

The kids certainly seem to be having fun, and their reviews can provide details that jaded, adult restaurant critics overlook. "The only bad part about this experience is that the bathrooms are really cold," writes young Ahash J. after dining at Shangrila (1600 Queen St. W.).

Or this concise "review" from Tenzin Chosang on Skyline Restaurant (1426 Queen St. W.): "They forgot to take my order. The temperature was nice and warm. The washrooms shouldn't be in the basement. There was graffiti in the washroom. I like the waitress."

The next Eat the Street dinner is

6 p.m. tomorrow at Mitzi's Sister (1554 Queen W.): eatdastreet.blogspot.com.