

Food bloggers face legal heat over reviews

Unhappy eatery owners could threaten to sue over negative comments

By SERENE LUO

UNDERGRADUATE Kaelyn Ong's review on the desserts at Obolo, an eatery in Joo Chiat, got a heated reaction when the eatery shot her a terse reply on what it thought of her comments.

It told her to remove the post to "avoid further problems", adding it would be taking legal advice to see if she had defamed the pastry cafe.

In response to The Straits Times, one of the chef-owners of the Joo Chiat cafe, Ms June Lee, said all she had wanted was "a third-party opinion from a legal point of view to see if the content of the blog or the way it is being written constitutes any form of libel or defamation".

She did not send Miss Ong any formal legal letters.

"People are entitled to their own opinions, and bloggers do put a disclaimer on their blogs. Perhaps, they should try to avoid insensitive or provoking descriptions," said Ms Lee.

Ms Veron Ang, 24, the Web developer behind Sparklette Food Blog, said restaurants had threatened her on various occasions.

She had blogged about restaurants that did not serve water and compiled a list of them.

One of them said the list was "libelous", and that it would "not hesitate to engage our lawyer if we are not removed from this list".

She did not comply with the demands, and the restaurant "never came back to me", she said.

Business development manager Ivan Ng, 38, who has been blogging about food for five years at RecentRunes.com, shared similar experiences.

"After a mixed review, one of them, for instance, said I had damaged his repu-

tion and cost him customers and wanted me to pay damages... I did not take it to heart because he could not substantiate it," he said.

To avoid legal problems, some bloggers said they would blog only about the good experiences they come across. Others would just inform the staff instead of putting a bad review online.

Lawyers say a criticism in an entry is allowed by law if it is based on fact and made without malice.

It is debatable if food and service reviews are matters of public interest, as there are no reported decisions on such cases.

Cafes and restaurants, however, may have a case if the criticism is based on untrue statements - especially if the blogger has never been to the cafe, said defamation expert Doris Chia of David Lim and Partners.

Mr Bryan Tan of Keystone Law said: "As long as bloggers are careful not to embellish or exaggerate, they are fine... For example, as long as they don't say things like, 'This is the smallest cake in the world', or 'This is the worst thing I have ever eaten in my life'."

He added that most people may take the posts down to avoid trouble.

"They don't earn any money out of it, so they don't want to end up paying legal fees or damages if they get sued for it," he said.

Still, there are restaurants which take the negative comments in their stride.

Mrs Dyana Sulistyawati, 30, the managing director of Zento Contemporary Japanese Cuisine in the Dempsey area, said while she had received some "very bad comments", she would "tolerate it and try to take it positively".

Ms Chen Jingwen, editor of SoShiok.com, the top food and wine site in Singapore, said not all online opinions are trustworthy.

"It may be better to place your faith in established food writers, who also have access to the experts, to judge the food," she said.

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