

GASTRONOMIC ROULETTE

Just once you'd like to say, "Wow!" to a restaurant meal in London / By Peter Desbarats

This isn't the restaurant column (as in "This Isn't the Rosedale Public Library — the name of a diminutive bookstore tucked away on Queen Street East in Toronto), but it is about food.

Just as we are what we eat, the true character of a city is revealed in its restaurants.

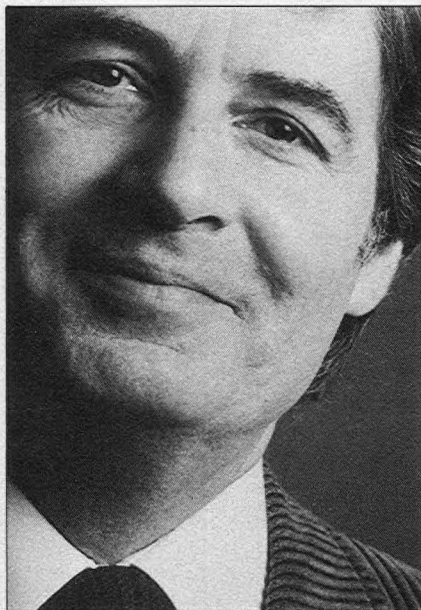
The fact that Toronto became Canada's largest, most vital, and most "edible" city, all at the same time, was more than coincidental.

Today, Toronto has reached the point where it takes gastronomic greatness for granted. Five of us recently had a memorable Chinese meal in a spartan restaurant on Baldwin Street called, simply, "Eating Counter" — spring rolls, delectable deep-fried squid, sizzling lemon shrimp, and three other dishes with rice for \$31.65.

When a city can achieve that without even trying, it doesn't have to rely on a covered stadium to reach the big leagues. It has arrived.

At the other end of the scale — Hamilton. On the way home from Niagara recently, we made a point of stopping there for dinner.

The main street was a wasteland of McDonald's, Harvey's, Wendy's, and every other franchise imaginable. Finally we were directed to a mini-Yorkville at one end of the downtown district where a few passable restaurants huddled together for protection against the smog and the drabness of the Steel City.



London is somewhere in between the wasteland of Hamilton and the Valhalla of Toronto. Its restaurants, like the city itself, appear to have reached a critical stage in their development.

There are a small number of excellent restaurants here, a few that almost make the grade, and far too many that try and fail.

Our own favorite is Anthony's. (I will mention only some of the ones that we like; you can guess about the others.) You don't mind paying a Toronto price for the right atmosphere, food that is original and well-prepared, and friendly service. Anthony's is always crowded, and that helps too — a hum of excited conversation over the smells and bustle of the open kitchen.

How different are many of London's other so-called better restaurants — pretentious establishments where waiters and waitresses who are both supercilious and inexperienced (a deadly combination) slouch across half-empty rooms to serve patrons who sit as tensely as prisoners waiting for the

verdict: What will it be tonight? A lucky reprieve? Or slow death?

In one of these places the other day, I was served a bowl of seafood noodles (fettucine Méditerranée) that had the color of dandelions, the consistency of Scotch oatmeal, and about as many shellfish as Fanshawe Lake. This wasn't the first time that I had lost a round of gastronomic roulette at this particular restaurant, but each time, there has been a longer interval between visits.

Too often, in a London restaurant, everything almost, but not quite, comes together. We love the Bul-goo on Commissioners Road. The Hoo Hoo, downtown on Richmond, is the quintessential Canadian Chinese restaurant of the 1950s. But customers like to be able to say more than, "That was darn good for fourteen bucks." Sometimes you want to cry, "Wow!", as we did at the "Eating Counter" in Toronto.

Many London restaurants are on the brink of achieving this. As new contenders arrive, as the good ones flourish and the failures disappear, they come closer to that magic moment when "critical mass" is achieved, when creativity and excellence become self-perpetuating, and when Londoners will be able to dine at their favorite restaurants, and speculate about topics other than the quality of life in London and what exactly was in the fettucine. ■

Peter Desbarats is Dean, Graduate School of Journalism, University of Western Ontario