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Words to Savor



Alum Pushes the Boundaries of Food Criticism

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“Do you taste that bitterness?” asks Todd Kliman '91.

Somewhere in the lightly seared tuna, avocado cream and crunchy coleslaw-like topping, I can almost detect what he’s talking about. But at 10 p.m. on a drizzly Monday, after we’ve spent hours being turned away from one overcrowded D.C. bar after another, it’s easier for me to just chew, nod and be grateful for something delicious in this tiny Filipino restaurant.

And so it goes throughout the meal at Bad Saint in Columbia Heights, as he declares there’s no dried shrimp in a rice noodle dish (prompted by an inquiry for a vegetarian friend) and that the best way to eat the clams with Chinese sausage and black beans is to pluck them from their overstuffed shells and taste them with a spoonful of broth, where all the briny juices have pooled.

At one point, the cheery waitress brings over light pink prawn crackers with homemade XO sauce. “A gift from the chef,” she says.

“That’s probably a sign I’ve been recognized,” says the *Washingtonian* food critic once she leaves.

A lesser critic might be concerned about a restaurant’s efforts to control his experience. But Kliman’s writing goes beyond just the particulars of each dish (though Chef Michel Richard once told him that with his palate, it was a shame he wasn’t a chef) or

the service he receives. He's more focused on the tide that's ushered in this Brooklyn-esque, two-dozen-seat, no-reservations joint and the history—or lack thereof—of authentic Filipino food in the D.C. metro area.

You can't find that on Twitter, Yelp and blogs, where analysis from restaurant-goers typically goes no deeper than complaints about cold bread, a waiter's use of "guys" or a salty pork chop.

Kliman prefers to contemplate the big picture. He may ruminate on persistent, silent segregation in the restaurant industry in an *Oxford American* essay, selected for the "Best Food Writing 2015" anthology; the challenges of opening a restaurant that caters to both old and new residents in a gentrifying neighborhood in his new column, "OtherWise"; or the right or wrong way to eat unfamiliar Ethiopian cuisine, in his weekly online chat with readers.

"Food has changed. Products have changed. People have educated themselves about food, making food a bigger part of their lives," he says. "If you want to know about the mere existence of a new restaurant or what to get, you don't need what I do. I would like to think that there are ways to write about food that can help people understand the time they're living in."

WRITE OF PASSAGE

It's a little strange to imagine the erudite Kliman, who peppers his conversations with references to Philip Roth and Stanley Whitney, covering youth sports for a modest Prince George's County paper as a 15-year-old.

But "writing was all I wanted to do," says Kliman.

After graduating from Eleanor Roosevelt High School in Greenbelt, Kliman didn't go straight to college. He instead wrote for the Washington Weekly (then D.C.'s version of *The Village Voice*), went on a months-long cross-country road trip and served as a news aide at *The Washington Post* before enrolling at UMD two years after his peers.



"Money was always a struggle," he says, since his dad was an artist and his mom wrote instruction manuals. So he paid his own way.

Instead of taking a shift at the local Dairy Queen, he parlayed his clips into new assignments for national magazines, penning pieces on topics ranging from bullfighting in the Southwest to the melodrama of senior year in high school (he went back, "21 Jump Street"-style).

In the classroom, English professors Jack Russell, Michael Olmert and Don Kleine taught him to appreciate novels that defied classification, as well as the nuances of language and structure, and to embrace an unorthodox writing style.

“I decided to drift more in that direction,” he says, “not heeding the dictates of an editor.”

THE OUTSIDER

“Artists are rarely if ever in the swim of society. They stand athwart it, the better to penetrate it. What the best of them produce is fundamentally spiritual, not material—the means to see through the falsehoods and fatuities of the culture.”—

“OtherWise,” Sept. 17, 2015

Though Kliman didn’t write that to describe himself, it helps illuminate why he enrolled in a small, traditionally women’s college for his master’s in English, then turned to teaching at historically black Howard University. What others might find uncomfortable, Kliman took as opportunities to better understand worlds not his own.

As one of few white instructors at Howard, he encountered skepticism.

“Why are you here?” Kliman recalls being asked in one of his first classes.

He was devoted to helping them not only understand the power of words, but the city and society that surrounded them.

“He wanted us to branch out and see the world a little differently,” says Frederick Uku, who remembers trekking to the Library of Congress to do research and organizing a symposium on gentrification. “He forced us to get out and see parts of the city we hadn’t seen.”

Kliman, who taught there for seven years, left such an impression on Uku that they’ve remained friends since he graduated.

“It’s unusual for a white Jewish kid that grew up in Maryland to identify with African-American culture,” Uku says. “But you can see it in his writing—it’s soulful.”

A CRITIC APART

Kliman isn’t the guy to take down a restaurant. To some extent, his readership limits his power to do that—*Washingtonian’s* monthly readership of about 200,000 is certainly not that of *The New York Times*. What truly interests him is lifting a little place in Beltsville or Fulton, Md., or Falls Church, Va., out of obscurity.

“I really appreciate that he supports mom-and-pop shops and these small businesses,” says Ferhat Yalcin, owner and chef at Fishnet in College Park, which sells his version of Turkish fish sandwiches, and of a newly revamped second seafood restaurant in D.C.’s Shaw neighborhood.

From the start, that’s been Kliman’s goal. “I always wanted to find a place no other reviewer would find,” he says. (An early tactic was to scour immigrant newspapers, because the help-wanted ads were always in English.)



When it became clear that Howard wouldn't offer him tenure, he started looking for other opportunities—and Washington City Paper was looking for monthly food reviews. It eventually hired him full time, and in less than two years, Kliman won a James Beard Award, the Oscar of the restaurant world.

Washingtonian grabbed him in 2005 to help invigorate the D.C. institution. Kliman launched his weekly chat and expanded his coverage area—a prescient move. Today, some of the area's best new restaurants open at the fringes of the city and beyond, where, he says, “with cheaper rent, you have the ability to make really creative food.”

He eats out nearly every day, sometimes multiple meals a day. He avoids disguises, preferring to have friends arrive first or to make reservations at off-peak times. He typically visits three times before he publishes a formal review, though he offers quick impressions during his chats.

Kliman's early praise of Fishnet spurred Yalcin, an industry veteran, to cross the unspoken line between restaurateur and critic and seek advice when his second restaurant was struggling.

“The things I want to do, he understands it,” says Yalcin.

FOOD AND FAMILY

Kliman approaches his work as a cultural critic who just happens to have a food-writing gig. Nowhere is this more evident than in his weekly online column, where he muses about food but also about the unusual struggles of civil rights activist Rachel Dolezal or the conflicting views of Steve Jobs as an artist and businessman.

He's also never stopped writing on his own time. His first book, “[The Wild Vine](#),” weaves a tale about a melancholic antebellum doctor, a dot-com transsexual multimillionaire and a forgotten grape over 200 years of American history. The Richmond Times-Dispatch called it “an outstanding piece of literature.”



The new book he's working on reflects the emptiness he felt after his father's death six years ago—he still signs off every chat with “Missing you, TEK,” his father's initials—and serves as a combination memoir and chronicle of Kliman's search for an author whose book spoke deeply to his father during his final years.

Now a father himself to two young boys with his wife, Ellen M.M. '00, Kliman often takes them on review visits. Seven-year-old Jesse, he estimates, has visited more than 2,500 restaurants.

Though a sumptuous tasting menu or a great burger can still thrill him, “a lot of the experiences I have that I remember and hold onto are meals with my family,” he says.

That's part of what he likes at Bad Saint, which features comfort food among photos of the owners' grandparents. When the flames from the sizzling wok die down and the chatter of the crowd wanes, Kliman and I are the last people there. I'm satisfied but sleepy, worried about conking out on my Metro ride home.

But Kliman's energized. He sees potential in this fledgling restaurant, aside from one concern: The intimate space could turn off those unable or unwilling to wait for hours. That's a shame, he says, because more people should taste its no-compromise dishes.

Bad Saint, meet the big picture. **TERP**



EXCERPTS FROM RECENT PIECES BY KLIMAN

“Coding and Decoding Dinner”

Oxford American, March 15, 2015

We have come to expect and accept black and white in the workplace, on the playing field, in politics, in the military, and we congratulate ourselves on our steady march to racial harmony. But our neighborhoods and our restaurants do not look much different today than they did fifty years ago. That Kingly vision of sitting down at the same table together and breaking bread is as smudgy as it's ever been.

“Bad Saint” restaurant review

Washingtonian, December 2015

Even Filipinos can't agree on what constitutes the core of its dishes: In a country of more than 7,000 islands, unity and coherence simply aren't possible. In this regard, the cuisine is intensely micro-regional, to use the term beloved by many slow-food devotees. One night, a waitress remarked that she'd never heard of some of the dishes on chef Tom Cunanan's menu—“and I've been eating Filipino food all my life!”

“40 Thoughts about Stanley Whitney's New Show”

“OtherWise,” Aug. 11, 2015

Picasso once said that it was his greatest desire to see the world with the uncorrupted eyes of a child. Much has been made of this remark; what often is left out is that he wished to retain the technical skill of an older man to render this pure, fresh vision. This is the animating tension in his best work, and it is also part of what makes the Whitney show so engrossing.