



Food blogging is all the rage — and Perth's The Food Pornographer explains the appeal of sharing her lusty love of meals with the world.

THE FOOD PORNOGRAPHER

i eat therefore i blog

STORY: SHERYL-LEE KERR AND FLEUR BAINGER
PHOTOGRAPHY: KARIN CALVERT

LUNCH IS READY. THE DARK-HAIRED DINER by the window at Rifo's in East Victoria Park rummages quickly through her bag while her female dining companion waits, fork poised. The friend knows the drill – no eating yet.

Out comes a small automatic camera. A waiter heading past with cappuccinos slides his eyes over to the woman now snapping shots of her food, but keeps walking.

Within hours The Food Pornographer (TFP) will blog about the sights, smells and tastes of her meal, for thousands of followers to enjoy. Before long the whole world will be able to find out what she thought of her lunch at Rifo's on this particular Saturday.

TFP – who likes to be anonymous – is part of a growing global phenomenon called food blogging. While Perth's bloggers of culinary delights and disasters might only number in the dozens,

in the eastern states it's in the hundreds. Open a new restaurant there, and the reviews are instant, plentiful and, for good or ill, uncensored.

Overseas the trend is so huge, and in some cases so feared, that some restaurants are banning cameras – in part due to renegade food bloggers hauling out tripods and Hasselblads and firing up the flashes. This, says a frowning TFP, is poor food-blogging etiquette.

And she would know. Her site celebrates its fifth birthday in August – along with five years of posts on meals of every possible variety.

TFP is no food snob. Now 35, she came to Australia from Malaysia aged 10 and boasts a fabulously varied palate. She'll blog about everything from her bacon and maple syrup pancake breakfast to an intricate bento box she made for lunch to a fancy restaurant feast or the chicken curry her partner, Jac, whipped up for dinner.

Her meals might be oozing with fat or bursting with meat, or lean, green and tasty. It all gets her tastebuds going – and her readers reading.

In April, TFP had over 130,000 page impressions at thefoodpornographer.com, with 23,000 unique viewers and she averages 3000 to 5000 hits a day. But that's not why she does it.

"I didn't actually think about being a food blogger," she says. "I started it as my own journal – whether I was happy or sad. I used to write about myself. I started taking photos of food.

"After a while I found I started getting emails from random people I didn't know. They would find me by saying 'I was searching for a picture of chicken curry'. I thought 'People are responding, it just makes sense to keep going with it'."

When a friend said her site looked like "food porn", TFP reasoned she must be the food pornographer and thus her site name was born. >>

"I love knowing that my photos can make people hungry – the verb I use is 'hungrify'. I love that my photos can hunglify people," she says.

But not everyone is entirely in love with the idea of the masses all potentially being food critics. It would mean anyone, anywhere, with any level of food knowledge could blog their thoughts – with varying degrees of accuracy.

Paul Aron, owner and manager of The Greenhouse, city, says he's worried about "the negative stuff" from bloggers not getting his concept.

"In a town like Perth, everyone starting a new restaurant is trying to create new and exciting experiences," he says. "It can be detrimental to the industry if negative things are posted.

"But then there are the guys who put a lot of time and effort into their sites. Some of them write really well, and take really nice pics.

"I've had people come here off the back of a positive blog. I know lots of people read them.

"I love it when people get excited about their food and want to take photos before they destroy the dish."

Says chef Justin Peters, owner of West End Deli: "We freak out any time a food critic walks in, but you never know who the food critic is.

"People know more about cooking than they did 10 years ago. It's fantastic people are so into it. My only reservation is that we can't all be food critics, and respected ones have a well-thought-out process – it's not just their opinion. I worry about whether bloggers take that side of it seriously. I'm not sure if they truly understand the industry. They look from the outside in and make assumptions about good and bad.

"But the bigger it gets, the non-credible ones will phase themselves out."

While in the US some restaurants have started banning cameras, TFP says she has never been asked to put her little Panasonic T23 away.

"Restaurant staff have asked me what I'm doing, but it's usually because they're curious," she says. "Because I'm of Asian appearance, some people may think I'm a tourist taking photos of the food I eat while on holiday.

"I write honestly and reasonably about my experiences at restaurants, good and bad. I recently dined at a restaurant and sat through what I thought was unacceptably slow service, but my food when it finally arrived was magnificent and I said so in my post.

"Some readers even said they would check out the restaurant for themselves, slow service or not, because the food looked so delicious."

TFP often keeps her readers in mind when eating – not always ordering the same things, being adventurous and trying to mix up the homemade food with the restaurant fare.

"I did (initially) get a lot of criticisms from people who assumed everything I blogged about was all I ate," she says. "I had lots of junk food posts apparently too close together. I'd get these emails that were quite sort of sanctimonious, preachy. They'd say things like 'You must be the size of a house' and 'I hope you get a heart attack because nobody should eat the way you do.'"

Her honest appraisals have meant TFP has,

reluctantly, also come to be regarded as something of a food oracle – the person to ask where to eat when her readers are hitting Perth.

"I actually really hate that," she says. "I don't know what they like. I could recommend all these thick meaty, fatty things I love and really quite horrify them."

However, while she might not know her readers' tastes, by now they know all hers.

"If I happened to rock up in Singapore and go to the house of this reader who has been reading me for three or four years, she'd know exactly what to cook for me and my partner," she says.

Since she first began, TFP has been noticing a greater awareness of what she does.

"I think awareness of food blogging – and the potential of food bloggers to influence – is slowly growing in Perth," she says. "A couple of Sydney food bloggers I've met told me they get invited to restaurant openings and food events quite often – food bloggers have become part of the PR/communications strategy over there."

Matt O'Donohue, the blogger from abstractgourmet.com, agrees that the interstate scene is ahead of Perth's.

"In Melbourne, 20 people will go in (to a new place) and reviews pop up all over the place," he says. "That's starting to happen in Perth."

Part of the problem may be to do with Perth's size, TFP believes. She says it's hard to find a place open for breakfast before 8am, and it's the same late at night, which discourages diners.

"It's like after my graduation last year for my PhD," says TFP, who works in communications. "We drove through Northbridge and they were already stacking chairs and wiping down tables. And you should have seen the looks we got – like 'Don't come here! We're closing!'."

"We don't have the population of Sydney or Melbourne to really sustain bustling businesses at all hours. Plus we've got all that weirdness – and I don't want to get political – with extended shopping hours. So the overall culture is for people to not always go out at night."

But that's not to say she doesn't love eating her way through Perth's food spots.

"I love eating. I love writing. I love taking photos. I love the web," she says. "Food blogging is my creative outlet. It allows me to express myself creatively and share my love of food with other people who also love food, not just in Perth or Australia but all around the world."

And she's not the only one who loves what she does. Partner Jac is a firm supporter.

"She's quite proud of being 'the partner of TFP'," says TFP. "I know that sometimes she does get annoyed by my need to take photos of our meals. She doesn't quite understand why strangers around the world would be so fascinated by what she cooks and what we eat, but she knows how important my blog is to me and understands my need for creative expression, so she is very supportive.

"Food blogging is totally part of our life now. Whenever she cooks dinner, she doesn't call out 'Dinner's ready!'. She calls out 'Got your camera?'."

WA'S TOP FIVE FOOD BLOGS

01. THEFOODPORNOGRAPHER.COM

Colourful, sumptuous feasts grace this popular site as TFP journals about her life and food, including homemade, restaurant and budget fare. It's food lust with mouth-watering pics. Don't read it hungry.

A TASTE: "I couldn't help gazing longingly at that shiny red strawberry glaze and imagining how sticky it would feel and how sweet it would taste."

LIKES: Mondo Butchers, Inglewood: A carnivore's dream of hot roast sandwiches on Saturdays.

Ikea, Innaloo: Swedish meatballs and \$1 hot dogs.

Sapporo, Carlisle: Delicious home-style cooking.

02. ABSTRACTGOURMET.COM

IT consultant Matt O'Donohue, 30, started his site as an excuse to school up on food and photography.

Now it gets 10,000 hits a month. Sassy, intelligent and considered writing with stunning photographs.

A TASTE: "Rosa's chorizo is used all over Perth by the most discerning chefs. Not so long ago I think I lived on it for the better part of a few weeks."

LIKES: Hawker's Cuisine, Northbridge: The Marmite chicken changed my life.

Took Begi, city: Amazing potato noodles and kim chi pancakes.

Jessie's Curry Kitchen, Inglewood: Try the string hoppers, home-style curries, roti and meaty samosas.

03. BEAUFORTSTREETBLOG.BLOGSPOT.COM

This foursome of foodies aim to try all of Beaufort St's eateries. What they lack in photography, they make up for with entertaining write-ups.

A TASTE: "Instead of the menu, the waitress accidentally gave us each a copy of Britannica's Encyclopaedia of Indian Cuisine. The list of foods was staggering."

LIKES: Beaufort Street Steakhouse, city: Perfectly cooked steak, giant serves.

Little Saigon, Mt Lawley: Love the crispy potato cakes with prawns.

Oriental Secrets, Mt Lawley: Pepper beef. And the price. And the prawn crackers.

04. WANNABEGOURMAND.COM

Quite possibly Perth's funniest food blog, brimming with sarky comments, honest opinions and slick snaps. Scribe Lori is studying law but used to work in hospitality. She loves all food, leaping from poached eggs to curry and rice water cakes.

A TASTE: "Their glass display of goodies had, for me, the same effect as dangling the window of an Amsterdam sex shop in front of a German sex tourist – nose pressed up to the glass."

LIKES: Restaurant Jun, city: Authentic underground kushiyaki-style Japanese restaurant.

Severino Garden Restaurant, Fremantle: Pick the roasted capretto.

Gypsy Tapas House, Fremantle: Unpretentious tapas; a bargain unlimited banquet.

05. TANNICTEETH.COM

Blogger Jason's main bone of contention is price – whether what's served up deserves the fee. A sharp, witty blog about restaurants, bars and any other worthy snippets of life.

A TASTE: "Insanely expensive, microbially volatile and possibly contains parasites. It's like a culinary Russian roulette."

LIKES: Pho Huynh, Girrawheen: The tastiest Vietnamese beef noodle soup.

Fortune Garden Chinese, Joondalup: Asian dishes of incomparable quality.

Ankara Kebabs, Mt Lawley: Go for the Ankara Burger with seriously fresh Turkish buns.

STM