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VIRTUAL REALITY

Laptop Critics: Where the Web's Foodies Dish

By STEVE STECKLOW
 June 17, 2006

When Nell Ingerman recently discovered that her favorite neighborhood restaurant -- a Mexican place in Manhattan called Baby Bo's Cantina -- had boosted prices and swapped enchiladas for wild salmon, she was outraged. She planned to collect complaints and present them to the manager.

But she didn't have to. The restaurant's owner, Bo Quijano, emailed her and promised to bring the old menu back. He'd read a message she'd posted on a popular foodie Internet Web site called [Chowhound.com](#). He even posted an apology, confessing that in a good-faith effort to improve the menu, "I simply got carried away."

To the chagrin of some restaurants and professional food critics, a lot of the most influential -- and opinionated -- advice on where to eat these days comes from Web sites and blogs. On sites like Chowhound, [eGullet.com](#) and [Mouthfulsfood.com](#), members of the foodie community praise and pillory restaurants, post photos of what they ordered for dinner and share recipes and food-shopping tips.

Now Chowhound, widely considered the granddaddy of the virtual dining world, is about to undergo a radical transformation. Late next week, it will be relaunched by CNET Networks, the San Francisco-based Internet media powerhouse that acquired the site in December for an undisclosed price.

As anyone who's ever scanned the site knows, Chowhound's plodding, primitive message-board software makes Craigslist.org, the famously no-frills online community bulletin board, seem state-of-the-art. No more. I got a sneak peek at the new site and found a highly polished graphical interface and infinitely more user-friendly message boards.

Within a month or so, Chowhound will become part of a much broader new CNET food Web site called Chow.com, although Chowhound.com will still be accessible as an independent site. The people at CNET say they also intend to broaden Chowhound's horizons; currently it centers mostly on a few big U.S. cities.

Whether Chowhound's diehard community of food junkies will accept the overhaul -- which includes a new requirement that users register to post messages -- remains to be seen. "It is not

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our intention to alienate anyone," says Mike Tatum, CNET's general manager of lifestyle, noting that the new site adopts many user suggestions. Adds Chowhound co-founder Jim Leff: "It still has that hip vibe to it. That's what makes me psyched, and that's why I'm still here running it."

Mr. Leff, a 43-year-old New York jazz trombonist and writer, says he and a friend founded Chowhound "as a lark," a means for people to share their dining discoveries -- "the good stuff, the treasures, the kind of things that I want to pound my fist into the table when I eat them." (This is a guy who, in his online dining diary, describes routinely driving 70 miles each way to get takeout pizza from a favorite haunt in New Haven, Conn.)

He says he hoped to attract a few hundred "fellow eaters" to the site, but it eventually drew tens of thousands and required so much maintenance that he nearly shut it down. The way he describes it, CNET came to the rescue in the nick of time. He won't say whether the takeover made him rich.

To keep itself honest, Chowhound accepts no restaurant ads and tries to remove any postings that seem to come from restaurant employees. Even Mr. Quijano's confession soon disappeared.

That attitude appeals to users like Dian Tanuwidjaja, a civil engineering graduate student at the University of California in Los Angeles. She says she trusts the site because "people like me" contribute and "no one's paying them to give their opinions."

Being a closet foodie myself -- I once confessed that my four favorite words in the English language are "all you can eat" -- I decided to put Chowhound to a test. Using the handle "Minuteman," I posted a message asking for suggestions for dinner in Acton, Mass., a somewhat rural town of 20,000 about 25 miles northwest of Boston.

After moving there last summer, I discovered that, amid the Dunkin' Donuts and pizza joints, Acton has at least one first-class eatery, a country-style French restaurant called Number 5 Strawberry Hill. I was curious what the Chowhounds thought of the place and whether there were other great local food finds I had missed.

But the picture of Acton painted by my fellow Chowhounds was grim. "Having lived near Acton for 11 years, I have yet to find a good restaurant in the area," one respondent wrote. "In Acton, there is nothing worth eating" except at a pizza place, added another. Declared a third: "In Acton proper, I think you're out of luck."

Two posters suggested an upscale Italian place in neighboring Concord, Mass., called Serafina Ristorante. It wasn't in Acton, but I decided to take my wife and try it anyway. It's in a nondescript strip mall, next to a video rental place, and the décor, to put it gently, is unremarkable. The food -- we had a plate of baked, breaded oysters that were on special, a mesclun salad with apples and goat cheese, a simple seafood stew and Chilean sea bass with roasted tomato and onion -- was generally good. But the prices seemed steep; the stew was \$27.

Moreover, the place was no match for our Acton favorite. Somehow the outspoken community of Chowhounds had failed to discover it.

Chow Downloads

Since Chowhound.com launched in 1997, enthusiasts have created scores of food-related Web sites. Here is a selection:

NAME/WEB ADDRESS	COMMENT
eGullet www.egullet.com	An upscale site with articles, forums and recipes. It has a complicated membership system for complete access.
Saute Wednesday www.sautewednesday.com	Commentary from a San Francisco-based food writer. Lots of links to food news and reviews in other media.
Chocolate & Zucchini www.chocolateandzucchini.com	A blog written in English by a 26-year-old Parisian who has become a sensation. Many recipes and links to other blogs.
The Food Section www.thefoodsection.com	Its food writing, photos and events listings are New York-centric, but it links to sites like Pizza Ottawa and Sushi World Guide.
Mouthfuls www.mouthfulsfood.com	A community bulletin board like Chowhound.com, but with less traffic, most of it from New York and the Pacific coast.

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