

Eat, drink, blog

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A big part of blogging is the social side — it's a tight-knit community. "I really love the way the blog has given me the opportunity to connect with people who are equally passionate about food," says Davie.

Many communal events take place online, where bloggers might exchange recipes and ideas or cook a dish that, for example, uses a featured ingredient, a Donna Hay recipe or perhaps matches with a favourite wine.

They also get together offline for a barbecue, to dine out, attend events, such as this year's Taste Melbourne, or design their own, such as this month's Food Bloggers Dinner, when 45 people paid \$100 to share a five-course meal cooked at a St Kilda cafe by five Melbourne bloggers.

"A large part of blogging is the community," says Charles, who says he's made some very close friends. "[It] brings together a diverse group of people.

"The difference between bloggers who grow quickly and those that don't is they go out, they participate in blog events, they leave and answer comments."

Davie's earring encounter also hints at bloggers' growing influence. "They're getting noticed," says White. The numbers back him up. Sydney-sider Lorraine Elliot (Not Quite Nigella), perhaps the Queen of Australian food blogs, reportedly pulls in about 320,000 page views a month. In Melbourne, Tummy Rumbles has about 50,000, Tomato about 30,000 and Melbourne Gastronome 43,000.

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"If you look at some of these bloggers, they have the highest [online] readership, not just for food but across all areas," says White. "They have a following that likes what they do. In some cases you're looking at small magazine circulations."

One prominent Sydney blogger Jenius (aka Jennifer Lam) has compiled her own league table of the Top 50 Australian Food Blogs, taking into account Google page rank, back links, blog reactions and Twitter followers. Her latest figures reveal NSW has 22 in the top 50; Melbourne 21; and Western Australia, four.



With its strong line-up of food and cooking shows, SBS has engaged social media to broaden its audience. The station's new media specialist, Aisha Hillary, says the broadcaster provides access to food events and chefs and invites a few of the higher-profile bloggers to write for SBS online.

"We work closely with a lot of bloggers, building relationships and getting involved with the grassroots community," says Hillary.

While some industry watchers still dismiss blogs as an "internal conversation to a select group", Hillary sees their profile becoming more prominent.

The public relations industry is certainly on board. Bloggers are prominent on many agency invitation lists because their attendance



Lorraine Elliot (top) and Duncan Markham.

to commercial possibilities, accepting freebies, sponsorship and advertising as well as running giveaways and promotions.

Such changes, though, are creating discontent and divisions in the blogging community. "Some are asking for free meals," says Charles. "Others think that gives blogging a bad name. It's come to the fore because more people are doing it."

Cook Almost Anything Once's Haalo (a pseudonym — she prefers to remain anonymous) is critical of the increasing influence of advertising and PR on bloggers. "People are no longer posting on things that interest them but on things that will get them something," she says. A note on her blog drives the point home: "If you are a PR company or advertiser, I'm not interested in pimping out my site."

She says food businesses and PR agencies invite groups of bloggers to events to create "a buzz". Twitter is also altering behaviour. "You have restaurant bloggers tweeting directly to a restaurant that they are going there for dinner that night."



Share your passion, it's as easy as pie

By DEWI COOKE

THERE'S a lot of talk in the media at the moment about "branding", about how journalists need to be their own little marketing companies so they can take listeners/viewers/readers along with them to wherever a story is published, or they decide to jump ship. So, thinking about my brand, I decided to start a blog. Not thinking enough about my brand, the blog I started is about pies.

I blame a friend, let's call her Libby, with whom I travelled the US. Inexplicably, we started photographing our meals, from the obese omelet and pancake stacks in local diners to the ice-cream sundaes in old-time milk bars. Along the way, we began chasing key lime pie — a curd tart, best with a crumbly Graham cracker base — and its many manifestations.

We found key lime gelato in New Orleans where a bartender also whipped us up a key lime martini. In Orlando Airport in Florida, we risked missing a connecting flight to sample the key lime pie at an airport hotel. Late at night in Washington DC we discovered a pie shop selling key lime that stayed open until 3am and where the staff all wore big glasses.

At the end of our adventure I had a pair of tightening jeans and a bunch of photos of American food. But when I settled in New York, I realised that the opportunity to spy pie had not ended.

Pies are big here, cafes are devoted entirely to the pursuit of them and just last week I went to a pie bake-off in Brooklyn after which the crowd stormed the store to snaffle slices of maple pecan, apple cheddar and other US holiday favourites.

About this time, another friend who knows of such things showed me a Tumblr blog he started about his passion for Philly cheesesteaks. Tumblr, a picture-centric micro-blogging platform, seemed like the right place for my photos and the little captions I wanted to run with them. It automatically produces neat little slide shows of my pictures, too.

The other appeal of Tumblr is its capacity for social networking, linking up your Twitter and Facebook contacts so that you can all be 100 per cent aware, 100 per cent of the time of what your friends and followers are doing and whether they like, recommend or retweet to anything you post. It's different to blog sites such as WordPress or Blogger, that let you fool yourself that dozens, nay, hundreds of people may be covertly following you. With Tumblr, you can see exactly who your "fans" are. I have three. I'm trying not to get upset about it. ispypie.tumblr.com

Dewi Cooke is an Age journalist who is on leave while completing a master's degree in digital media at New York's Columbia University.



Salted caramel apple pie from Four and Twenty Blackbirds in Brooklyn, New York.

Blogger Fitzroyalty recently provoked heated debate in the blogosphere with his post criticising the rise of sponsored content: "when bloggers sell out audiences stop reading," and that "social media has value because it provides unique perspectives about diverse topics... if they undermine their uniqueness they become redundant".

Australia's first food blogger conference, Eat.Drink.Blog, held in Melbourne in March, wrestled with the topic, says the Last Appetite's Phil Lees. "People began paying more attention to how they justify what they do," he says. "They're starting to

disclose much more upfront... it brought out a lot of grey areas."

While Restaurant and Catering chief John Hart believes bloggers are fine to express their views, his members are most worried when blogs are seen, or reported, as a review. "It's the lack of qualifications and checking of details that concerns us," says Hart.

Matt Wilkinson, former Circa head chef and now co-owner of Brunswick's Pope Joan, is similarly critical. "Someone adds comments to Urbanspoon and suddenly they think they're a blogger," says Wilkinson. "It's a lot of crap."

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