

OPINION *or* PROFIT

Considering ethics in food blogging

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Wouldn't it be nice if all your food news and information came with such upfront transparency?

In the food blogosphere—the ever-expanding world of Instagram food-porn posts and online tips and quips from self-appointed food experts—the who, why and funding behind the words isn't always obvious. Rather than objective, unbiased information, readers might be getting thinly disguised advertising.

Amid the dime-a-dozen blogosphere influencers are many who can seem like Costco sample pushers with their vanity posts that shove readers to buy this or like that. Competing with them is a humble chorus of Idaho bloggers who tap into the humanity of food with educational and informative posts and a nod toward journalistic integrity. Their work is wrapped in nuanced memoir writing that invites followers to gather 'round the kitchen table with the entire family.

The collective occupies the annals of food musings once occupied almost entirely by food journalists and cookbook authors. Some of their photos and words look equally tantalizing but the intent may taste wildly different with servings of integrity served as a main dish in some blogs and in others, not at all.

Blogger and marketing representative Linda Whittig says some companies learned early in the social media game that paying a blogger could bring payoffs that traditional advertising couldn't buy.

"If you could hire a blogger that has a following because they feel like they could trust them to promote a product ... [followers] may say, 'Maybe I'll try that next time I'm at the market.'"

As a food writer, and marketing rep who recruits bloggers and influencers to promote food products, Whittig has seen and participated in the numerous shades of food blog-

ging. She's written a passion-fueled blog, created paid social media content and attended conferences with well-paid influencers who take their blogging seriously enough to keep assistants, business attorneys and accountants in tow. She's almost seen it all in the food blogosphere.

Plenty of blogs and Instagram pages start with a quick burst of content then lapse into posting with the frequency of a solar eclipse only to slowly fade away into a forgotten, neglected page. It takes hard work to produce appetizing content, Whittig says. Just ask any food journalist. And it takes even more work to attract a following.

"You're looking at hours and hours to do this," she says.

But for the advertisers, social media coverage from their likes pays off.

Advertisers often find the guerilla marketing of social media cheaper than traditional advertising. And Idaho restaurateurs are in on the tactic.

"They know it's cheaper to invite six food bloggers out to lunch than pay for print advertising," says Boise blogger Brad Wegelin of *TwoZeroAte.com*.

It's this payment that pointedly distinguishes the food blogger or influencer from the traditional food journalist.

A good food journalist, says Association of Food Journalists President Hanna Ruskin, abides by ethical rules like the ones laid out by the AFJ, which outline codes of conduct that maintain transparency, accuracy and truth and eschew conflicts of interest.

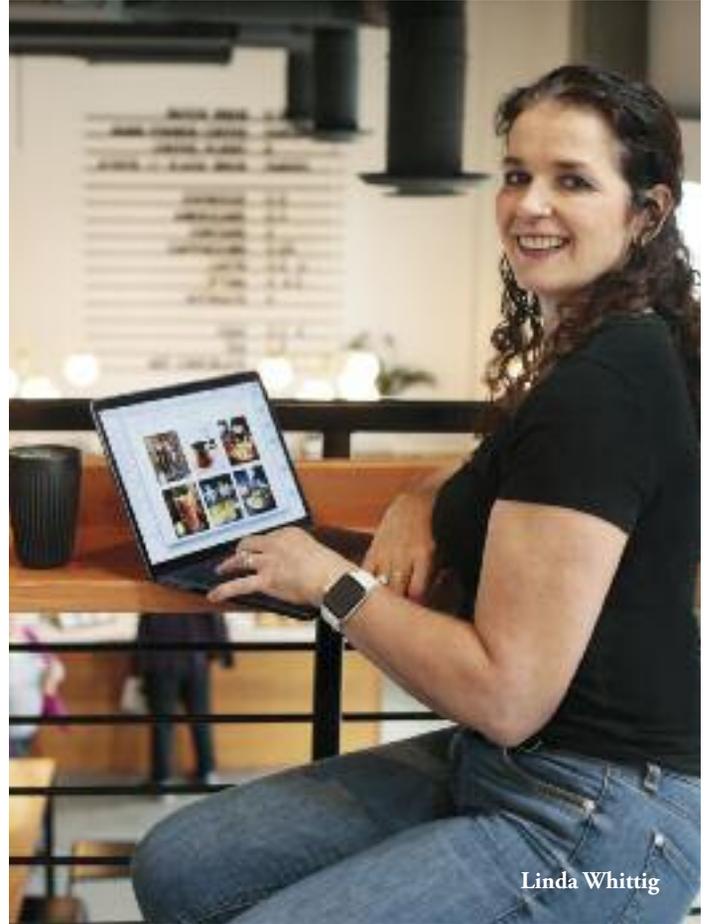
A good food blogger would abide by those rules, disclose the intent of the blog and clearly state in posts when payment from an advertiser is accepted in return for online promotion, Ruskin says.

Whittig does this and advertisers often ensure influencers know the rules, she says. But some food bloggers are less obvious.

A blogger's self-proclaimed passion project may look light on original, creative content then bam, bam, bam mention a lot of product that they just can't seem to get enough of between posts that dish scrupulous nutrition advice and laud diet fads. Who are these bloggers? Are they that passionate about



Brad Wegelin



Linda Whittig

diets and buying stuff? Are they getting paid? Getting kickbacks?

The Federal Communications Commission requires paid promotion disclosures and Whittig says that most professional influencers know this. But not all shout outs come with a kickback. Some come from true super fans, Whittig says. Others may fish for a future paycheck.

On one end of the Idaho food blogosphere you'll find pages with rudimentary musings and heavy doses of obvious impression management, opaque sales pitches, #influencer hashtags and an overdose of some ingenuous variation of "love it!"

On the other, there's the Insta feasts and blog delights chalked in full by food purists spilling thirsty passions for what stokes their foodie flame. There are the regular servings of Idaho's SmokedMeatSunday.com's food porn for carnivores that heap piles of charbroiled perfection on its Instagram news feed and Boise's Best Bites that exudes a contagious cu-

riosity for dine-out delights around the City of Trees. Some even maintain the polish of a glossy magazine that carried the authors through journalism careers before blogging even became a thing and then their thing. Whittig's blog carries the same adept writing and detail that she used to fill magazines, and *Boise Weekly* and *Edible Idaho* alum-turned-caterer Tara Morgan offers a bountiful feast of beautiful food tablescapes and equally digestible fine writing worthy of publication in top-tier food magazines on Wild-PlumEvents.com.

The bloggers in the latter category lean more toward simple passion, creativity and integrity to fill their pages.

For Wegelin, being upfront about his intent as well as the occasional free lunch that comes his way is just as important as sharing his reverence for local chefs with his readers. On TwoZeroAte.com Wegelin discloses the why behind the blog that pays homage to the state's area code and notable culinary finds.

His respect for chefs and their hard work compelled him to share their feats and help grow their support, he says. He lets readers know it and about the occasional gratis plate of food that makes its way to his table.

"I know that's really important," Wegelin says. "It helps you to be more trusted and authentic." 🍷

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