



## Amanda Topper :: How to Earn a Good Restaurant Review

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Born and raised in Chicago, Illinois, Amanda Topper has been a food writer for six years via the blog she founded known as [The Ghost Guest](#). What started as an undercover project highlighting Chicago restaurant reviews soon became a collaborative adventure with the goal of giving audiences unbiased write-ups about local restaurants while also sharing the best places to stop and eat while traveling outside the Chicago area.

Along with continuing to manage The Ghost Guest, Amanda is also a contributing writer for [Thrillist](#) while acting as a full-time foodservice industry analyst at Mintel where she examines menus and businesses, predicting trends for the restaurant industry.

We sat down for a chat with Amanda to discuss her experience as a culinary critic while also delving into her life of forecasting and experiencing food and flavor trends firsthand.

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### **1. As a seasoned restaurant critic, what is your selection process for deciding which Chicago restaurant to review?**

*Well, new restaurants are opening all the time, so much that it can be hard to keep up but these tend to be a majority of the businesses I review since they're fresh. Restaurants that are generally being talked about in the media also grab my attention right off the bat. I even write roundups for top places to eat in certain categories like best cocktails, for example. Other than restaurants that are well-advertised or promoted, I like to talk to other industry influencers to get personal recommendations that are off the beaten path.*

### **2. Once you've selected which restaurant to review, how do you choose what to order?**

*When I actually go to these places, I tend to rely on social media for what I should order off the menus as I'm a very visual person and usually like to know what I'm going to try before I even get there.*

**3. What's the most memorable social media menu recommendation that you've ordered?**

*There was this boozy milkshake with a slice of cake on top that was colorful and caught my attention. When I saw it on social, I immediately visited the restaurant to order it. I just really wanted to know if it tasted as good as it looked and it did. It went way above my expectations.*

**4. What criteria are you looking to include in your restaurant review & what advice do you have for restaurants & chefs who could be reviewed?**

*Obviously the food has to be well-prepared, well-presented and taste great. The level of service is also a strong component when I'm reviewing a restaurant because it's important to have staff who are well-educated about beverages and dishes I might want to order. If they don't understand the ins and outs of the menu items, it can be hard for them to make recommendations or answer questions about the food.*

**5. What advice do you have for restaurants & chefs who could be reviewed?**

*While restaurants and chefs may not be aware they are being reviewed, if they do know someone is coming in to review them, it's always helpful when they offer a table by the window. This is ideal for capturing high-quality photos with bright natural lighting.*

**6. How do restaurants & chefs thrive off a good review and improve off a poor review?**

*Diners want to see unbiased reviews of a restaurant by real people so these businesses should choose to thrive by sharing their reviews on their social media channels and websites.*

*On the other hand, they should also acknowledge their less-than stellar-reviews which can be too easy to brush aside and hide. Management needs to be open to a conversation about the review; what went wrong, why and how to improve.*

**7. What line of thought goes into the physical food, taste & flavor aspects of a review?**

*When I'm eating something that tastes really good, it's all about the components of the dish working together in harmony. Whereas, when I'm writing about flavors, I try to help my audience understand every detail without overcomplicating things. I don't want to isolate a non-foodie with complex descriptions. Not everyone has the same culinary background or exposure to diverse cuisine types. They shouldn't have to decode what they're about to eat.*

**8. How does a restaurant's ambiance tie into the food & flavor experience during a review?**

*It honestly depends on the type of food they're serving or the segment the restaurant is part of. There's one particular restaurant in Chicago, for example, that serves food that's intentionally over the top but the ambiance is very neutral to not take attention away from that food.*

*I'm also seeing more and more restaurants where the location is the experience in itself, putting you in the right mindset to enjoy a certain type of cuisine.*

**9. Which flavors have you had in Chicago recently that were unexpected?**

*In general, I think there is strong growth in Filipino and Korean flavors across restaurant segments and in fusion cuisine. I once enjoyed a meal at a Polish-Korean restaurant that had a variety of fusion dishes including a Polish sausage with kimchi. The flavors were seamless together and I loved how creative the chefs could get when they combined various international cuisines.*

*I'm also seeing more African flavor influences like harissa and piri-piri, both of which are becoming mainstream across restaurant segments from fast and casual to fine dining. They are extremely versatile additions and can even be used in condiments like our ketchups.*