

Eating alone

15 May 2012 by Natasha Hughes

See our [guide to all readers' restaurant reviews](#). Today wine writer [Tash Hughes](#) argues the case against conviviality.

I suspect that the following statement is going to make me sound like Johnny No Mates (or should that be Joanie No Mates?): I often find myself eating alone in restaurants. Before you start feeling sorry for me - or wondering whether I've got a personal hygiene problem - I should probably explain that my solo meals are more frequently a matter of choice than of necessity.

In order to make solitary dining work, observe one key rule: choose your restaurant with care. I have learned from experience that those in search of a quiet dinner should never contemplate entering a restaurant full of rowdy Scandinavians, particularly when it's clear that you're gate-crashing a stag party and that many beers have been consumed over the past few hours.

Most importantly, though, I would advise avoiding top-end restaurants on principle. I love a well-judged gastronomic blowout as much as (probably more than) the next person, but these places seldom seem as much fun when I'm by myself as they do when they're a shared experience.

The longest five-course degustation dinner I've ever endured took place at the **Auberge du Vieux Puits**, a charming two-starred establishment high in the hills of Corbières (see both [Languedoc v Catalunya](#) and [Costa Brava to Languedoc](#)). The food was fantastic (all other considerations aside, you have to admire the lack of sentimentality in a menu that touts 'baby kid cooked in its mother's milk' as one of its main courses), but the over-attentive staff kept hovering round my table, refilling my glass, checking to make sure I was enjoying my meal and tweaking the silverware. I could barely get fork to mouth without some kind of well-intentioned interruption, although I noticed that those tables occupied by couples or family groups were largely left to get on with their meals in peace. Perhaps the waiters thought I was a Michelin inspector - some of the other diners certainly did. One of them even sidled up to me after dinner to ask me whether the restaurant was keeping its rating.

The best solitary meals are usually to be had in less formal restaurants. A recent dinner at San Francisco's **Nopa** saw me seated at the long counter reserved for blow-ins (arrive early or be prepared to wait) within 10 minutes of my impromptu arrival. By the time I was halfway through my glass of tangy, saline Equipo Navazos' Fino #18, I'd struck up a dialogue with a gay couple who had admired my turquoise nail varnish. The conversation moved on from there to art, music and, inevitably, restaurants. Their enthusiastic recommendations not only led me to a delightful private gallery the next afternoon, where I enjoyed a superb exhibition of work by some local artists, they also tipped me off to the best sushi joint in the city, **Sebo**.

When I pitched up for dinner the next evening, I did find myself wondering whether I'd been given a bum steer. The place was nearly empty; one occupied table and a couple of diners seated at the counter in front of the sushi chefs on a Saturday evening did not bode well. I shouldn't have worried. The *omakase* meal (the chef's selection of an assortment of dishes, from a delicate salad of thinly sliced cucumber and *wakame* seaweed to the robust monkfish liver *nigiri*) proved an intriguing selection of flavours. Best of all, though, my next-door neighbour (a refugee from LA who'd once lived in Tokyo) suggested I share his portion of deep-fried mackerel bones, apparently the bar snack of choice in downtown Edo. I was initially dubious but the salty, crunchy fish proved to be - as promised - a textural revelation.

Despite the potential for restaurant recommendations or new culinary discoveries, however, you don't always want to chat to your fellow diners. One of the joys of eating alone is the fact that you can spend the entire meal with your nose stuck in a book or flicking through a magazine without it being considered to be bad manners. I thoroughly enjoyed the chapter of Barbara Kingsolver's *The Lacuna* that I read while chowing down on an enormous lobster roll at Manhattan's **Pearl Oyster Bar**, and I plotted out my tasting notes for Chardonnays from around the world in the weeks before last year's MW tasting exams while snacking on curry *udon* at **Koya**.

With the recent rise in popularity of the no-reservation restaurant, another advantage of eating alone has become clear. Try to get a table for two (or more) at **Polpo**, **Ducksoup** or **Meat Liquor** and you'll find yourself either eating at an unsociable time of day or queuing for half an hour or more. Turn up by yourself, though, and it's highly likely that you'll be

seated within a matter of minutes.

Furthermore, the solitary gastronome will never find themselves at war with their dining partner over the choice of wine (you want a Crozes Hermitage to go with your pigeon with lentils while they fancy a Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc to match their goat's cheese and asparagus tart, and neither wine is available by the glass). Nor will your dining companions have to have a degree in advanced accountancy in order to work out the relative share of the bill when someone points out that they've only had a green salad and a glass of water and should, therefore, pay less than everyone else. (Such people should never again be invited to a congenial dinner as a point of principle.)

So, think twice before deploying smug conviviality. The sad singleton at the next table is probably having a much better time than you might imagine. Oh, and good luck dividing that bill...

Auberge du Vieux Puits, Fontjoncouse, Corbières, www.aubergeduvieuxpuits.fr

Nopa, San Francisco, California, www.nopasf.com

Sebo, San Francisco, California, www.sebosf.com

Pearl Oyster Bar, Manhattan, New York, www.pearloysterbar.com

Koya, Soho, London, www.koya.co.uk

Polpo, Soho, London, www.polpo.co.uk

Ducksoup, Soho, London, www.ducksoupsoho.co.uk

Meat Liquor, Marylebone, London, www.meatliquor.com