

BUSINESS

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TSX ▼
15,265.35 200.19

DOW ▲
17,279.74 13.75

NASDAQ ▼
4,579.79 13.64

DOLLAR
91.35¢ unchanged

OIL ▼
\$91.65 \$0.33

GOLD ▼
\$1,216.60 \$10.30

PRIME
3% September 3



Chef Sean Murray Smith in the kitchen of Les Deux Singes de Montarville in Mile End. The nine-table bistro is ranked No. 1 of 4,500 restaurants in Montreal on TripAdvisor. PIERRE OBENDRAUF/THE GAZETTE

THE POWER OF CONSUMER REVIEWS

Restaurants feasting on positive online buzz

MARK CARDWELL
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Sean Murray Smith's name has never been mentioned in discussions about Montreal's greatest chefs.

He has never appeared on a television cooking show or been profiled in a newspaper or on the radio.

But for people who consult TripAdvisor for recommendations on the best places to eat in Montreal, the Lennoxville native is the city's culinary king of the world.

"It's exciting for a young chef like me to see what people think of your cooking," said Murray Smith, the 26-year-old chef and co-owner of Les Deux Singes de Montarville.

Located in the Mile End neighbourhood, the nine-table bistro is ranked No. 1 of 4,500 restaurants in Montreal on TripAdvisor, the world's largest travel website.

Nearly 200 rave customer reviews to date for what Murray Smith describes as his "eclectic fusion" fare helped to raise the restaurant from obscurity two years ago, when he took over in the kitchen, to the top ranking a year ago.

The restaurant has held the top spot for nine of the past 12 months.

"It's a nice pat on the back (and) been great for business," Smith said.

It's also a testament to the marketing power and potential of so-

cial media websites and mobile apps that both enable and encourage consumers to write, create and share non-expert reviews, pictures and even video about the businesses, products and services they use.

Traditionally, restaurants are rated by professional reviewers in newspapers, magazines and guidebooks like the Michelin series, which awards one to three stars based on culinary merit.

But review sites like Yelp, Urbanspoon and TripAdvisor are proving to be popular additions to the restaurant ratings menu.

TrippAdvisor in particular ranks 3.1 million businesses worldwide, including 1.7 million restaurants, based on more than 170 million customer reviews posted online.

"I see review websites as the new word of mouth," said Dr. Jui Ramaprasad, an assistant professor in information systems with the Desautels Faculty of Management at McGill University.

An expert on the effects that information technology-enhanced social interactions have on consumer behaviour, Ramaprasad says review websites and social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter are helping to drive consumption away from the mainstream.

"People are exposed to more diversity and niche stuff (and) get recommendations they wouldn't normally get in their personal circles," she said.

When it comes to finding restau-

rants online, she said review websites allow people "to rely on the experience of others (and) help them sort the good from the bad."

That trend is most popular among younger, IT-savvy travelers, noted Dr. Ramaprasad.

"It saves time," she said. "And there's a bit of a cool factor involved in discovering a hot new

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DR. JUI RAMAPRASAD, MCGILL UNIVERSITY

artist or chef."

Fredéric Gonzalo agrees.

A speaker, blogger and consultant in marketing, social media and e-tourism, he says review websites are platforms where people can amplify their opinions and experiences, even in real time.

"They feature fresh and up-to-

date reviews (and) create a buzz," said Gonzalo, who grew up on the West Island but now lives in Quebec City.

He pointed to a recent report commissioned by TripAdvisor that found most users read between six and 12 reviews before making reservations at a hotel or restaurant.

"In my opinion, review websites now have more influence on people than family and friends," Gonzalo said.

Other studies, he added, suggest there is a direct correlation between restaurants' review website rankings and revenues.

That's why he recommends restaurant owners be aware of their rankings on review websites, and respond quickly to negative comments.

"You need to know what people are saying about you (and) manage your online profile," Gonzalo said.

That profile includes the major travel review sites and social media platforms, as well as local restaurant sites like www.restomontreal.ca for Montreal and www.tonresto.ca for Quebec City.

To be sure, the issue of reviews and ratings is hardly a moot point for many restaurants.

They can mean success or failure — even life and death in the case of bipolar French chef Bernard Loiseau, who shot himself in 2003 when his restaurant was rumoured (wrongly) to be in danger of losing its three-star Michel-

in status.

"Ratings are an extremely important part of our business," said Jérôme Ferrer, co-owner and head chef of Montreal's Europea restaurant.

The renowned French restaurant on rue de la Montagne is currently ranked No. 2 for Montreal on TripAdvisor, and made the website's top-10 list of the world's best tables in 2012.

According to Ferrer, ratings are particularly important for visitors to a city.

"They don't know where to go and they need references," he said.

According to the Quebec Restaurants Association, tourists of all stripes — international, national and provincial — account for roughly 19 per cent of the \$10 billion in annual sales generated by Quebec's 19,000 restaurants.

Most of that spending occurs in the province's two major urban centres and tourist hubs, Montreal and Quebec City.

For fledgling eateries, especially small bistros with unknown chefs and low startup costs, positive feedback on a travel review website can be both a marketing windfall and a chance to dine out on tourist dollars.

A delicious example is IX pour Bistro, which in April became — and remains — the No. 1-ranked restaurant on TripAdvisor in Quebec City.

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RATINGS 'TripAdvisor is the best thing that ever happened to me'

CONTINUED FROM ??

Located in a tiny brick building that used to house a pizzeria in the francophone working-class neighbourhood of Limoilou, the modestly decorated restaurant is now filled most nights with well-heeled anglophone tourists.

Most drive there from chic hotels in historic Old Quebec, 15 minutes away. Some arrive by taxi.

"TripAdvisor is the best thing that ever happened to me," said the restaurant's chef and co-owner, Benoit Lemieux.

A graduate of a cooking school in Baie Comeau and a former waiter and sous-chef who opened iX pour Bistro two years ago to strut what he calls his "French fusion cuisine," Lemieux said business was slow until a year ago when a favourable review in a Quebec City newspaper generated local traffic.

That response paled, however, in comparison to impact on business that the restaurant's sudden appearance on the city's Top-10 list on TripAdvisor earlier this year.

"The reaction was immediate," Lemieux said. "We started getting lots of reservations from English tourists."

Those reservations "went through the roof," he added, when the restaurant took over the top spot in the spring (a jump Lemieux said occurred when TripAdvisor deleted several bad reviews posted by the same person).

"It's the best publicity you can get, and it's free," Lemieux said. "But it also puts pressure on you to perform at the highest level every night (and) stay on top as long as you can."



Chef Sean Murray Smith in the kitchen of Les deux singes de Montarville in Mile End. TripAdvisor ranks the bistro the No. 1 restaurant in Montreal.

PIERRE OBENDRAUF/THE GAZETTE

For established restaurants with multimillion-dollar decors, staff and service, bad reviews and low rankings on travel websites can be hard to swallow.

"It's not fun when you see a restaurant like ours ranked lower than a place that serves hamburgers," said Jean Luc

Boulay, the head chef and co-owner of Le Saint-Amour.

Ranked 11th of nearly 1,200 restaurants in Quebec City on TripAdvisor, the gourmet French restaurant in the heart of Old Quebec notably served Paul McCartney and his band when they played in the provincial capital in 2008.

For Boulay, who trained at the world-class École LeNôtre chef school in Paris and spent \$2 million on recent upgrades to his business, restaurant rankings on review websites reflect the current popularity of small bistros that feature daring culinary combinations and threadbare dining

room decorations.

"They cost very little to start up (and) are popping up like mushrooms, especially in suburban areas," he said.

That is making life harder, Boulay added, for mainstream restaurants in what is already a highly competitive business.

He takes a long view, however, on the impact of review websites on his bottom line.

"They reflect popular opinion and, as with most things, tastes change," Boulay said. "For me, a good restaurant has a distinctive ambience and a talented and passionate team in the kitchen. Those things never change."