



The fussy eater

Ariel Leve

Candlelit meals set a seductive mood. Unless you're worried about setting your hair on fire...

There is a fine line between romantic lighting and lighting that causes eye strain. It's never a good sign when I have to tilt the candle on the table to read the menu. The wax drips everywhere and I'm always on edge that something will catch fire. Like my hair. Surely the restaurant must know the lights are too low because if I can't read anything, others can't either.

I'll ask the person I'm dining with, "Can you read the menu?" and usually they'll shake their head, shrug, point to something random and reply, "I'm having that."

I'm not a fan of ordering "that". When the waiter comes over, it doubles the ordering time because I have to begin with asking him to recite the menu. Some places think it's romantic to dim the lights but romantic lighting means that both the food and the company look seductive. When there's a good chance someone's hair will go up in flames, that's not seductive. It's scary.

I notice the lighting immediately at a restaurant because it's the most important part of the ambience and the one part you're actually stuck with. You



can move tables, send a plate of food back or ask them to lower the music but it's hard to request candlelight if you're seated under a chandelier.

You can be eating the best meal in the world but the experience isn't enjoyable if the lighting is off. I don't care what's on the menu, if the place is lit like the inside of a tube station I can't go in. There's no excuse for bright lighting. That's why God invented the dimmer.

On the other hand, when a place is lit well, everyone feels like a supermodel. I could find something to eat at a TGI Friday's if they had a low-watt bulb.

Eating outside, particularly in tropical settings, is often a challenge. Tiki torches are useless but even worse are the heat lamps. Not only do they

never give off enough light, but they remind you how much warmer you'd be if you were indoors.

The other night I went out to eat with my father, who lives in Bali where moonlight makes candlelight seem extravagant. While it's true we could see the stars, I would have preferred to see what was on my plate. Especially since it appeared to be moving.

I squinted following the trail of what I thought was a peppercorn crawl behind a lettuce leaf. "Next time," my father said, "you should bring a flashlight."

I know I'm getting old but I'm not sure I'm ready to be one of those women who pull a mini squeezable flashlight out of my purse. Between that and the reading glasses, I should be eating at 5pm when it's still light out.

My father has taken to bringing a flashlight with him so that he can read while at dinner. Not just any flashlight though, it's a reading headlamp that wraps around and sheds light from his forehead, like a miner's light.

He doesn't mind eating in a faintly lit setting right up until the bill comes. Then, all of a sudden, the darkness becomes irritating. He's convinced restaurants use lighter ink on the paper so you can't read the prices. "They want you to just hand over your credit card," he says. So why not use the miner's light? "I do!" he exclaims.

He's not bothered by any of this but a miner's lamp is not a good look for me. Not to mention that any time you have to bring apparatus to a meal, I think you might as well stay at home. **OFM** ariel.leve@observer.co.uk

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The Good Food Guide 2011

What is it? Now 60 years old, *The Good Food Guide* is a venerable institution with quirky origins: founder Raymond Postgate also helped start the British communist party and his son, Oliver, created *Bagpuss*. But can its £4.99 iPhone and iPad-compatible bid to keep up with the times match leading digital upstarts such as Squaremeal and Urbanspoon?

Is it up to the challenge? Online reviews face the same problem as their recipe equivalent. There are loads of them, so who do you trust? This feels as authoritative as the print version, only cheaper and more functional – a reservation is but a tap away, plus you can quickly sort by cuisine, price and distance. **Thoroughly modern, then?** Not quite. It still feels slightly fusty, and can't match the up to the minute, instant feedback feel of the digital newcomers. Stick with them if you're happy sifting through chaos; this is for anyone preferring a reliable old campaigner.

THE PIE CHART

The month in food, at a glance

