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10-year-old restaurant critic nibbles at blog stardom

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Like every good food critic, Abby Fitzpatrick takes note of Lucca Restaurant & Bar's pleasingly blue water glasses, listens intently to the specials of the night and regards the hint of fiery chili pepper in the ricotta gnocchi.

Then, her legs dangling from a wicker chair, her nails painted hot pink, and a fork earring in one ear and a spoon earring in the other, she writes it all down in a silver-sequined journal with a purple feather-topped pen.



Abby is 10. She's been writing about food for almost a year, ever since complications of Crohn's disease left her eating almost nothing for about a month last summer. Now it's all food, all the time, and she shares her thoughts on her blog, "Abby's Adventures in Dining," and appears monthly on "Fox40 Live" to report on her reviews.

"She is a natural on camera, plus she's just so cute, and she's passionate about what she's doing," says Fox40 anchor and reporter Natalie Bomke.

"Instead of having a run-of-the-mill food critic come in, we thought it would be fun to jump on board with what Abby has done with her blog – she reviews from a child's perspective and rates it depending on how kid-friendly a restaurant is."

Abby, a previously picky eater, became adventurous with food after spending parts of June and July in the hospital, preparing for an operation as a result of Crohn's, an autoimmune disease that attacks the gastrointestinal tract.

Abby watched the 2007 Pixar movie "Ratatouille," with all its fabulous food imagery, over and over again on a loop. If her parents tried to turn it off while Abby was napping, she would wake up in protest.

"It made me so hungry," the fourth-grader recalled.

Still, the film made her see food differently. Abby announced while in the hospital that she wanted to be like the movie's feared food critic, Anton Ego, and well, eat everything she wanted.

Her parents, Brent and Kathleen, could only comply.

Just out of the hospital on July 28, Abby visited her first restaurant for review – Shanghai Garden on Alhambra Boulevard in Sacramento.

"The restaurant smelled good when I walked in with my family for dinner. There were beautiful decorations like Chinese writing and bamboo designs on the wallpaper. There were beautiful Asian pictures and good-luck kitty cats. My favorite one was the golden cat," she blogged.

She continued by noting the flavorful tea, the grease-free appetizers and the perfectly slippery chow mein noodles. She described the vegetable fried rice, the sweet-and-sour potatoes and the fortune cookie, too.

She concluded with her rating: "I recommend this restaurant – 5 stars!"

Abby has since reviewed restaurants from Sacramento to Santa Monica, always with her entire family in tow. (Her 7-year-old brother, Spencer, always finds something to eat, although he has yet to venture beyond his diet of cheese pizza, French fries, grilled cheese sandwiches and deep-fried won ton wrappers.)

In her notebook, Abby has noted the "fun, good, cold" root beer at Fat City Bar & Cafe, the "warm and fluffy" pancakes at Nopalitos and the "crunchy good bread" used in the grilled cheese sandwiches at Boudin SF.



Her spelling is sometimes off, but mom Kathleen fixes that when she types reviews into the blog.

All reviews so far have been pretty positive.

"I don't write bad reviews. I don't give thumbs down. I just say it's not my thing," Abby says. "I don't want to hurt any feelings."

Sitting on Lucca's patio, with the tinkle of a water fountain setting the soundtrack, Abby orders her favorite drink, root beer, and then the Caesar salad with Dungeness crab cakes. A vegetarian who eats seafood, Abby has made her blog an informal review of the region's crab cakes, since she always orders them if they're on the menu.

The meal comes on a large plate with three large, puck-shaped crab cakes.

"Oh wow, those croutons are crunchy," Abby says of her first bite of salad. Then she proclaims the crab cakes worthy of 4 3/4 stars.

The conversation ranges from the food – the zucchini chip shapes are likened to tacos and burritos – to the "Pirates of the Caribbean" movies, usual topics enlivening the classic family dinner.

Abby smiles throughout and constantly wraps a curl behind her left ear.

"I like to eat out. I like to try new foods," she says. "And when we run out of restaurants in Sacramento, we'll have to go to new cities. And Spencer wants to be a pilot, so he can take me around the world."

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