

CityLimits

Her Feast for Our Eyes

Dara Moskowitz makes food writing worth reading.

by David Brauer



The Twin Cities is home to the best restaurant reviewer in the nation.

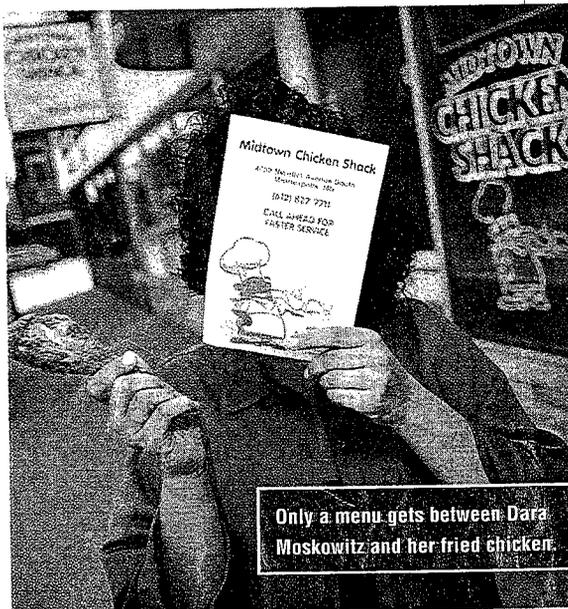
So bragged *City Pages* in May, and, for once, such in-house boosterism seemed justified. Dara Moskowitz, *CP*'s dining critic since 1997, bagged a James Beard Foundation Award for Best Newspaper Review or Critique. OK, technically, there may be a magazine reviewer better than Moskowitz, but the category covered the epicures at the *New York Times*, *L.A. Times*, and, of course, our own humble dailies. How big a deal is it? Kathie Jenkins, the *Pioneer Press*'s reviewer, calls the Beard "the Academy Award of food writing."

Fans—and I count myself among them—know the prize is richly deserved. Moskowitz is the rarest of writers—she points foodies to the best vittles, but also captures the broad cultural experience that dining out has become.

In one of her award-winning reviews, here's how Moskowitz described a room at Little Jack's, an old-line northeast-Minneapolis steak house: "The pièce de résistance, the dining room to top all dining rooms: The Viscount Room. The Viscount was remodeled in the 1950s, and, like lipstick on chocolate, it's all dark and scarlet and deliciously decadent: magenta showpiece booths, matching curvy chairs, chandeliers that look like they're fitted with tubes of Jell-O-cube stacks, paintings of Spanish

señoritas posing sultrily at bullfights, silk carnations in cut-glass vases, and a general aura of love in the afternoon, circa 1956."

This isn't the purple prose of an overwrought reviewer creasing her thesaurus for new ways to equate chocolate and foreplay. Moskowitz, who has been a chef and a waiter,



Only a menu gets between Dara Moskowitz and her fried chicken.

also owns a Tamarack Award, given to Minnesota fiction writers. She has room to roam on the generous full page she fills.

"More than anything, the column gives Minneapolis a sense of place," says Moskowitz, a native New Yorker lured here by Carleton College. "Places like Little Jack's, Singapore Chinese Cuisine, the Midtown Chicken Shack—these are interesting stories that situate the Twin Cities in a present-day context. Few people are doing sense-of-place writing in this town. It's some kind of local modesty; people think that people in Min-

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neapolis aren't interesting.

"I kinda think of myself doing a little bit of vaudeville, just to make it interesting. If it's a mediocre restaurant, I try to bring in something else interesting—a personality in the kitchen, something in the crowd."

The irony of Moskowitz's honor is that it came in the wake of both daily newspapers supersizing their food coverage. Why hasn't a local daily snapped up Moskowitz? The *Strib*, given its penchant for ignoring local talent, has never called, but the *Pi-Press*'s Jenkins did, only to conclude that Moskowitz wasn't right for the reporter's job that needed filling. (The local dailies have only one primary reviewer each and the jobs rarely turn over. The papers are typically unwilling to hire someone simply because that someone possesses extraordinary talent. The square peg must fit their square hole.)

"I'm not interested in a desk job," Moskowitz says. "Going to meetings, being responsible for photography, making sure things get through the [copy] desk—it seems to me the worst possible use of a writer."

Driven as much by a hunger for ads as by reader satisfaction, the *Strib*'s section showcases gorgeous photography—it's practically soft-core food porn—but its copy is too diced and sliced for a literary repast. Its text, in fact, is mostly news nuggets, recipes, and roundups. (The *Strib*'s Jeremy Igers was a Beard finalist for a terrific piece on the cuisine of Cuba.) "Personally, I think the way newspapers are going, they're going to be spreadsheets with pictures," Moskowitz quips. "I think readers like to read."

Right on, sister. If readers are going to put up with fat ad come-ons, there should at least be room for a tale-spinner as remarkable as Moskowitz. Luckily, she isn't going anywhere. For now, she says, she will stay in Minneapolis—and at *City Pages*.

Lift a glass to the feasts still in our future. ■