

The State of Museum Dining
Former *Washington Post* Restaurant Critic
Phyllis Richman Chews the Fat

Interview By Susan Breitkopf

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Museum restaurants have come a long way but just how far? Managing Editor Susan Breitkopf recently talked with former *Washington Post* restaurant critic Phyllis Richman over lunch at the International Spy Museum's Zola restaurant in Washington, D.C. Richman had the tuna tartar with spicy lime vinaigrette and taro chips and the grilled lamb sandwich with goat cheese aioli. She talked about her most memorable museum dining experiences and what she thinks still needs to change.

Susan Breitkopf: **What's your first memory of eating in a museum restaurant?**

Phyllis Richman: When I was 10, the National Gallery used to have southern cooks who made good lunches. And I used to go to there with a friend. We would take this two-hour bus and trolley ride to go there. There was a museum guard who used to guide us and tell us what to go see. And we would have lunch there. It was a big deal.

What kind of things do you remember eating there?

Spoon bread and cornbread. And I don't know whether they had fried chicken or I imagined they did. But it was nice, homemade food.

So was it a draw to go into the galleries afterwards?

Oh, yeah. We loved the galleries. And the lunch was an extra.

Did that shape your view of museum restaurants?

I didn't tend to think of museums in terms of restaurants. And I think the National Gallery was kind of an aberration that just happened to be good. And it happened to fit in with the kind of management and food service that was available. And so after that I tend to think of museum eating places as conveniences, places that I wouldn't think of to go to lunch if they weren't in the museum. I don't remember most museum restaurants I've eaten in. There'd be no reason to.

Has your perception of the museum eatery changed, then?

In the last, I don't know, maybe 20 years, I've seen museums want to draw people in for the food. And, also, consider it appropriate that some institution devoted to art could carry its art into every part of life that it's involved with.

When I was in grad school, I visited Puerto Rico, and they had a very nice restaurant in the San Juan Museum of Art and History. But that was one of the first, certainly in this hemisphere, that I would go just to go to the restaurant. It was one of the best restaurants in town.

But you didn't go there initially just for the restaurant.

No. But once I was going there, I made sure that I had a chance to try the restaurant.

The Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City, Mo., also has a nice restaurant. What I tried wasn't great food, but it was more sophisticated and trendy than you expected to find in a museum. It's surprisingly good for a museum, and it's also a beautiful room. People talk about it as a good restaurant on its own. It's the first place I had a wrap—but I don't like wraps.



One of my favorites is the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. It has a charming lunchroom and very good food. It's a beautiful place to eat. I would have gone there just for the restaurant, except I also love the museum. It would be a good restaurant anywhere. There was no theme. The food is not particular to the art. The theme is good taste.

What are some other strong memories you have of museum restaurants?

In Budapest, the old synagogues all clustered in a group were, and are, open as museums. When I first went there in 1964, we went to visit the synagogues. When we came out, some of the old people who were involved with the synagogue invited us to dinner. And every Friday night, they would have kind of a community or Shabbat dinner. The dinner carried out the museum's theme. It was really wonderful. I was in my 20s. We were two young kids visiting synagogues, and they thought we needed some home cooking.

What would you like to see in Washington, D.C.'s museums?

We need a restaurant like the one I went to in Budapest. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum could really benefit from something like that. That's a museum where people spend a lot of time. It's not really near anything else. People spend a lot of time looking for someplace to eat around there. And many people there have special needs—they keep Kosher or they are old and frail. It would also serve non-Jews well to have a sense of place through a restaurant at the museum. Our experience and memory of the synagogues of Budapest was so enhanced by what we ate. The museum restaurant should be another experience that would fit into what the museum is meant to be.

The cafes and restaurant at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) have won several awards and have had glowing reviews. What's your take on them?

I like the cafe on the fifth floor of MoMA. It's very sweet and charming. I also like the Bar Room at the Modern. [Co-owner] Danny Meyer can do no wrong.

Would you say that the price of a meal at the Modern, which can be \$138 per person for a tasting menu, is in keeping with the admission fee?

You expect to spend \$100 for a good meal. You don't expect to spend \$20 for a museum.

Given that museums are partnering with such well-known restaurateurs as Danny Meyer and Wolfgang Puck, do you think it's a good idea to get a famous chef to run a museum restaurant or create the menu?

It helps when they have somebody the public trusts because we're not used to good food in museums. It's changing in some places, but overall it's not very good. One of the problems is that museums contract out for places that won't cause much trouble. Only recently they're getting contractors who are restaurateurs and not just mass feeders. Wolfgang Puck does a good job. He is one big chef who has successfully been able to produce small food for mass feeding.

It's a good idea to have a big-name chef. If Jean-Georges Vongerichten put his name on a restaurant, he would work to make it good or take his name off. If you have a stake in the name it should work out.

Zola is an interesting case. It is technically a museum restaurant, but it has little to do with the International Spy Museum.

I don't know what effect they have on each other, but it seems a mismatch. Many museums would do well to have this restaurant, but it's kind of irrelevant to this museum. It doesn't draw people likely to go to the Spy Museum. Washington, D.C., is a town where people aren't used to paying for museums, and the restaurant [with dinner entrees ranging from \$16–\$29] is out of balance with museums.

When I started writing about restaurants in 1972, this restaurant [Zola] would have been something of great note, but now it's just another excellent restaurant.