Jay Rayner’s wrong on pubs

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Opinion

While it might lack the same grandeur shared by some of the buildings along Liverpool’s Dale Street, there’s a faded elegance to the exterior of the Ship and Mitre I find irresistible. Built around 1935, the pale grey, art-deco frontage looms onto the pavement like a tall ship pulling into harbour. Passing by, whether intentionally or not, is an invitation I cannot refuse – for my money this is one of the best pubs the city has to offer. The Ship’s nautical theme continues within, with a wood-clad bar and raised lounge forming an oval around the central service area. Well worn, yet still brightly patterned carpets meet the base of sturdy furniture, some of which sits beneath the tall windows at the front of the pub. I much prefer the darker corners though, found in the recesses to the pub’s rear. Here I might stay for an hour or two, drinking either something local on cask, or one of the vast collections of German lagers it keeps in its fridges. It doesn’t matter really; the real pleasure is getting to enjoy a bit of time inside this very special pub. While you might describe the Ship’s interior as faded, or perhaps even shabby, this all feels very intentional. You can tell that a lot of love and care goes into the pub’s regular upkeep. It is almost certainly not a “sticky carpeted redoubt,” which is one of the incredibly disappointing phrases food and restaurant critic Jay Rayner used to describe pubs in his first byline for his new paper, the Financial Times, last month. Following a 20-year stint at both the Guardian and the Observer, Rayner deservedly built a lofty reputation as one of the very best food critics in the business. At the start of the year, he decided to jump ship, forming an elite panel of food and drink writers at the FT, which also includes Jancis Robinson, Marina O’Loughlin and Tim Hayward, among others. Rayner will be bringing his two decades of experience to a new restaurant column, which I am very much looking forward to reading each week. However, it was in the FTs first published feature used to showcase this new team that Rayner, very regrettably, decided to direct his ire towards pubs. Pitched to the reader as its critics’ Rules for Restaurant Dining, the article establishes the columnists’ opinions on various aspects of restaurant culture, while also offering humorous rebuttal from various other writers and food personalities including Brooklyn Beckham and Nigella Lawson. It is towards the end of the piece where Rayner begins his attack, where he poses that gastropubs (and honestly I can’t remember when I last used the term with a straight face) are “not an attack on British culture, but a huge bell-ringing improvement”. Whether or not his tongue was pressed into cheek as he put down that sentence, things soon worsened, as he decided not just to insult pubs themselves, but the people who use them. Could it be that I, relaxing in the Ship and Mitre with my bottle of Augustiner, am, in fact, “a gloomy beer drinker, lost in the froth of my pint”? On the contrary, Mr Rayner, I happen to feel quite chipper. And you’ve just demonstrated to me in the space of two short sentences that you really don’t understand pubs at all. I understand why, as someone who I imagine considers restaurants to be their preferred “third space” pubs might not be a place where Rayner feels the same joy and contentment as I do. I see the merits in both, as I love treating myself to a good meal with excellent service, whether that’s at a proper restaurant, or a pub that serves food. (For the record, I consider a pub that has been converted into a space that no longer offers provision for drinkers to be a restaurant, and that the term gastropub is utterly redundant). However, I don’t feel the need to then dump on valuable, and, more often than not, community-led spaces, and the people who use them, in a way that is filled with obvious, and factually incorrect contempt. Especially as, according to data published by the British Beer and Pub Association, pubs are currently closing at a rate of six per week. I consider that a publication with the integrity of the FT has a duty of care when it comes to its reporting. If it truly wishes to lead in the realm of food and drink, as indicated by its recent hires, then it needs to perform proper due diligence when it covers British beer and pub culture. If it does not, then its coverage is simply not reflective of British gastronomy as a whole. I should also note that food is served at the Ship and Mitre. Served by resident kitchen One Pan Band, I can honestly say it's far better than it needs to be in a pub like this. But it all feels so effortless, like it's only natural to order a bowl of perfectly seasoned salt and pepper chips, expertly cooked pork belly, or a steaming bowl of rich, brown Scouse stew to enjoy with your beer, should you feel like it. Food is always a bonus, not an essential in such pubs, but for a leading food critic to dismissively put spaces just like this to the sword in a national newspaper doesn't just do them a disservice, it's potentially damaging. Call me gloomy if you like, Mr Rayner, but you can prise the satisfaction I take from visiting pubs like this from my cold, dead hands.