

EDIBLE

Bounce, Baby

Old Fisherman's Grotto panic educates us on eating out.

By Mark C. Anderson

I hate babies. The fat faces. The bulgy bodies. The self-centeredness. The bad hand-eye coordination. The narcolepsy. The crapping. The babbling. The greedy need for attention.

Thank you for listening. Here's the simultaneously terrifying and glorious thing about those thoughts.

First the terrifying part: Plenty of people—mature non-babies, no less—will read them and be aghast. Gaga. They will rush to their Facebook and cell phone and commence rallying outrage.

They've done as much, after **KSBW** saw a sign in front of **Old Fisherman's Grotto** on Fisherman's Wharf that's been there a few years. It reads: "NO STROLLERS - NO HIGH CHAIRS - NO BOOSTER CHAIRS" then adds, "Children crying or making loud noises are a distraction to other diners, and as such are not allowed in the dining room."

People freaked. They screamed discrimination. On the Facebook page calling for a boycott is a picture of longtime owner-operator **Chris Shake** overlaid with the words "I NEVER WAS A CHILD." He was and is son of **Sabu**, the wharf's enduring icon. A replica of Sabu stands watch next to the chowder sample station, and the offending sign.

The outrage touched off the biggest food "story" to come out of our area in years. I wish I didn't have to type that. But this story went to Australia, Brazil, Canada and England. It drew interview requests from Fox Network's **Fox and Friends**, NBC's **The Today Show**, CNN, **The Los Angeles Times**, **The New York Times**, **KGO** and, according to estimates from Shake, more than 70 other radio and TV stations in just 48 hours. (He declined.) He has counted 1,200 stories total. "[**Sean Hannity** called my mother's home wanting to interview me," Shake says.

That's what scares me. People are so ready to react with righteousness they don't slow down to listen, let alone think. But that's also that glorious part: This



Cajun tilapia, broiled lobster, seafood combos and calamari pile up next to the menu, a suddenly famous sign and the statue of Sabu Shake, Chris Shake's late father.

provides an opportunity to reflect on restaurants and the dining experience.

First of all, it's not a ban on kids. It's a ban on kids spoiling the experience for others. To that end, I don't see anyone picketing **The French Laundry** to permit loud youngsters. There's no family section in **Aubergine** or **Sierra Mar**. Like *Weekly* Editor **Mary Duan** told me in explaining how she took her boys to **Bouchon** at an early age, "They knew to wear a jacket and not to chew their food like death-row prisoners." These restaurants are creating an experience, and that's how it's been since the dawn of dining.

Someone should post a new sign that reads: "CONGRATS - YOU CRACKED THE CODE! YOU CAN 'BOYCOTT'! WE CALL IT 'CHOOSING A LOUDER PLACE,' BUT THAT'S THE FUN OF EATING OUT. YOU GET TO PICK WHERE TO EAT!"

"YOU CAN BOYCOTT! THAT'S THE FUN OF EATING OUT. YOU GET TO PICK!"

My nieces **Ava** and **Katherine** can be charismatic angels. They can also be booth-stomping, mood-swinging, hilarious, obnoxious, crazy-loud little aliens, particularly when the cousins are combined. I eat out with them regularly, and at nice enough spots. Difference is, their parents aren't looking for other people to cope with their life decisions or parenting approach, so they pick places with a good vigorous roar so the maniacs don't impinge on anyone's enjoyment—including **STICKS**, **The Tap Room**, **Cantinetta Luca** and **Il Fornaio**. Everybody wins.

I wonder how the protesting types would fare at one of my favorite restaurants, **Cachagua General Store** (check out the cover story I did on it on the blog, with some comments on customer ser-

vice from Chef **Michael Jones** himself). Want butter? Tough—he didn't harvest the rosemary and track down the incredible olive oil for you to reject it. Anyone who lags into the second seating is in for a rough time. Disrespect the staff and it'll get graphic. Which is his prerogative. You don't like it, open your own restaurant. Or watch a few scenes from the film **Waiting** to see what's coming in your soup.

The point being missed: A good meal is a function of a relationship with a restaurant and its people. Give and take. Harmony between service, food and, yes, setting. Respect given and reciprocated, not commands and subservience.

The sign's only overstep might be banning booster seats, which wouldn't cause the congestion Shake says is the inspiration for the highchair/stroller ban. Otherwise it looks like clear and simple communication, at the owner's discretion—and, come to think of it, a simple way to differentiate themselves from the neighboring restaurants.

Differentiation is good business. So is free press from 1,200 places. In a statement, Grotto reps write, "Reservations increased 40 percent the day after the story aired; many came in with children specifically to show their support for the policy." And it just so happens that the **American Culinary Federation**, the nation's premier organization of professional chefs, honored Old Fisherman's Grotto with an Achievement of Excellence Award at the 2014 ACF National Convention in Kansas City, Missouri, last week, right as this tantrum was gathering steam.

For the record, I never got to ask Shake if he hates babies. But I did confirm, contrary to the Facebook frothing, that he was once a child! The proof is pictured in an old photo of his family hanging upstairs at the Grotto, which, on a bustling touristy Tuesday, was an oasis. And, for what it's worth, packed. ★

QUICK BITES

→ **Windy Oaks Estate** (574-3135) has opened a new tasting room in Carmel at Su Vecino Court, on Dolores between Fifth and Sixth—across the courtyard from **Jack London's**. The grand opening is noon-7pm Saturday and Sunday, Aug. 9-10, with **Cheese Shop** goodies and appetizers. Tastings run \$10-\$15.

→ Friend-of-the-*Weekly* **Anthony Anderson** of *Law & Order* has a new food show that has him hunting superb home cooks. More on the blog.

→ **The Dinner Belle** has officially launched at **Carmel Belle** (624-1600), The Delottas and new Chef **Kyle Odell** celebrated Sunday with a succulent three-course yum run of heirloom-watermelon-goat gouda panzanella, super tasty wild salmon and banana cream pie in a jar. Place is looking sweet too.

→ My top two Car Week events race this way like a 250 Testa Rossa: **McCall Motorworks Gathering** at the **Jet Center** and **The Quail** in Carmel Valley. Check p. 34 and next week's issue for more. There's also a **Balvenie Rare Craft Collection** whiskey making/tasting Aug. 13-16, www.thebalvenie.com/collection.



ONLINE EXTRA
Carmel gets ANOTHER tasting room. It has a lot of tasting rooms.
www.mcweekly.com/edible

→ **Monterey County Fair Kick Off BBQ** benefit hits 5pm Friday, Aug. 8, in the Monterey Room (\$10-\$20, 372-5863), followed by a tasty steak dinner and **The Money Band**.

→ **Galante Vineyards** hosts annual BBQ and Muster at the winery noon-3pm Saturday, Aug. 9, for club members and guests. Sign up now!—and come 4-8pm Aug. 13 GV does "sip 'n smoke," an evening of fine wine and hand-rolled Cubans from master **Payne Mason**, who will prepare your personal stogie (\$75; RSVP).

→ One big story from this year that didn't quite crack my top 10: The rise and rocky ride of **Lucky's Roadside** (899-5825) in Seaside, a great spot with a good concept from **Bill Lee**. Check out that top 10 and other nibbles with the foodie newsletter, www.mcweekly.com/edible.

→ North Monterey's underrated **The Market Restaurant** (373-2200) has a nice lunch special—entrée plus soup or salad for \$10.75.

→ "When I ask how old your toddler is, I don't need to hear '27 months,'" says **George Carlin**. "He's 2' will do just fine. He's not a cheese."

Send a nibble to edible@mcweekly.com

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