San Fran diners rely on Bauer’s refined tastes

How does Michael Bauer know he’s been spotted? They change the waiter.

“It’s almost impossible to be anonymous with the Internet,” says Bauer, the San Francisco Chronicle’s executive food and wine editor and restaurant critic. “I was outed by the SF Eater in 2009 when they put my picture online. But I often get seated without being recognized.”

San Francisco last year hosted more than 16 million visitors, many attracted by its food and restaurants. Bauer, ’73, likes to blend with the crowd, preferring an early seating, usually around 6 p.m., when the tourist trade is thick and restaurants least expect a critic to visit.

“We have a list of pseudonyms and phone numbers,” Bauer says. “But it’s hard to go completely unnoticed when you’ve been eating out in the same community every night of the week for over 25 years.”

Restaurant critics, particularly those of Bauer’s pedigree, are the guides, ambassadors and occasional kingmakers of food cultures of their communities. Bauer’s annual “Top 100 Restaurants in the Bay Area” is an internationally respected foodie guidebook, and restaurants that make the grade can expect significant spikes in business.

Bauer visits each restaurant three times and uses a four-star rating system. Food counts for two stars, ambience and service for one each.

“I put the emphasis on food,” Bauer says, “because ultimately that’s what it’s all about, especially in California where menus are so ingredient-driven.”

He lists inexperienced hosts, excessively loud music, warm red wine and too-small tables among his top peeves.

“The complaints I hear are from people not feeling like they’ve been treated well,” he says. “It’s so important that the customer feels special.”

Food has always been a big part of Bauer’s life. He worked in his father’s Chanute meat market during high school and college. He began his food reporting career at the Kansas City Star in 1975, then joined the Dallas Times Herald in 1981 and the Chronicle in 1986.

In 2003, Bauer moved his Food & Wine staff, the largest of any newspaper in the country, into a separate building behind the Chronicle headquarters: “We have a 10,000-bottle wine cellar, we’re growing grapes in the kitchen garden on the roof, and we now have three beehives.”

But such luxurious perks don’t come easily. Bauer oversees the paper’s Home section and monthly magazine, and writes two reviews a week for print. Online, he publishes a daily restaurant review, a biweekly column, a monthly newsletter and frequent social media updates.

Does he ever get sick of food?

“I try to take one trip a year that isn’t food-related,” he says. “Last year, I went to Antarctica.”

—King is a Lawrence freelance writer.