

Lydia Davis

Three Letters of Complaint

Letter to a Hotel Manager

Dear Hotel Manager,

I am writing to point out to you that the word "scrod" has been misspelled on your restaurant menu, so that it appears as "schrod," with an "sch." This word was very puzzling to me when I first read it, dining alone on the first night of my two-night stay at your hotel, in your restaurant on the ground floor off your very beautiful lobby with its carved wood panels, lofty ceiling, and rank of gold elevators. I thought this spelling must be right and I must be wrong, since here I was in New England, in Boston, in fact, home of the cod and the scrod. But when I came down from my room to the lobby the following night, about to dine in your restaurant for the second time, this time with my older brother, and as I waited there in the lobby for him, which is something I generally like to do, if the setting is a pleasant one and I am looking forward to a good dinner, though in fact on this occasion I was quite early and my brother was quite late, so that the wait became rather long and I began to wonder if something had happened to my brother, I was reading some literature provided to me by the friendly clerk behind the reception desk, whose manner, like that of the other staff, with the exception, perhaps, of the restaurant manager, was so natural and unaffected that my stay in your hotel was greatly enhanced by it, after I asked if he had any account of the history of your hotel, since so many interesting and famous people have stayed here or worked here or eaten or drunk here, including my own great-great-grandmother, though she was not famous, and in this literature presumably written by the hotel I read that your restaurant claimed, in fact, to have invented the word "scrod" to describe the catch of the day,

in contrast to “cod,” I suppose, for which this city is also famous. I also remembered, perhaps wrongly, seeing this word elsewhere spelled “shrod,” unless that is a different word with a different meaning. I had thought, I suppose mistakenly, that “scrod” meant “young cod,” or perhaps it was “shrod” that meant “young cod” and “scrod” that meant “catch of the day,” if the word “shrod” existed at all. I don’t know much about scrod, only the old joke about the two genteel ladies returning on the train from Boston and one of them identifying it as a past tense, and I had always thought it was a particular kind of fish. For a moment the previous evening, as I say, I thought this spelling might even be correct, and then I was fairly certain it was not correct but I was unsure whether it should be shrod or scrod, if the word “shrod” existed. But nowhere else have I seen it spelled “schrod,” with an “sch.” I did eventually, on the second evening, make a connection, perhaps a false one, between this misspelling and the accent with which your restaurant manager addressed my brother and me. This manager was present in the dining room both nights I ate there and, although courteous, seemed a bit cool in his manner, not to me in particular but to everyone, and on the second evening did not seem to want to prolong the conversation I started with him in which I suggested that the restaurant add baked beans to the menu, since baked beans are also native to Boston and the restaurant boasts of being the inventor of Boston cream pie, the official Massachusetts state dessert, as I learned from the hotel literature, as well as a special type of roll. He seemed almost transparently impatient to end the conversation and move on, though move on to what I did not know, since he did not appear to have more of a function than to walk rather self-importantly—by which I mean with an excessively erect posture—from one end of the long, rather dim, splendid room to the other, that is, from the wide doorway through which a handful of people now and then came in from the lobby to have dinner, to what must have been the kitchen, well hidden behind some sort of bar and two large potted palms. In any case, I noticed, as he stood conversing with us, inclined slightly toward us but at each pause turning to move away, that his accent might be identified as German, and this caused

me later, when I was thinking about the misspelling of “scrod,” to speculate that the very Germanic “sch” spelling was his doing. This may be quite unfair, and perhaps it was someone else, someone younger, who misspelled “scrod,” and the mistake was not caught by your manager because of his Germanic predisposition towards beginning a word with “sch.” Here I should add in his defense, parenthetically, that in contrast to his cool manner he was quite open to my idea about including baked beans on the menu. He explained that at one time the restaurant had brought out little pots of baked beans with the rolls and butter at the start of the meal and that they had stopped doing this because so many other restaurants in Boston featured baked beans. I did not want him to think I liked the idea of the little pots at the start of the meal—far from it. I thought it was a terrible idea. Baked beans at the start of the meal would not be a good appetizer, being so heavy and sweet. No, no, I said, they should just be included somewhere on the menu. I happen to love baked beans, and I had been disappointed not to find them here in this Boston restaurant, along with the scrod, the rolls, and the Boston cream pie, all of which I ordered on the second night. My dinner companion, that is, my brother, was tolerant of this protracted and perhaps pointless conversation, either because he was happy enough to be sitting over a nice dinner and a glass of red wine after the difficult day he had had going here and there in the city, which is not his native city, as he attempted to complete several pieces of business in connection with our mother’s estate, not all of which were successful, or else because I reminded him, in fact, of our mother, who was so very likely to start a conversation with a stranger, or rather, it would be more truthful to say, could not let a stranger come anywhere near her without striking up a conversation with him, learning something about his life and letting him know about some firmly held conviction of hers, and who passed away last fall, much to our regret. Although, naturally enough, certain of her habits bothered us while she was alive, we like to be reminded of her now, because we miss her, and we are probably both adopting some of those very habits. I think my brother even added a suggestion of his own to the manager, after sitting listening quietly to mine. This was actu-

ally the second time, now at the urging of our waiter, who thought my idea was a good one, that I had called the manager over to our table. The first time I waved to him it was not to speak to him about the baked beans or the spelling of scrod but about another guest in the nearly empty dining room, a very poised little old woman, her hair in a pearl-gray bun at the nape of her neck, who sat surprisingly low down on the banquettes, by the side of her much younger hired companion, so that she had to reach quite far up and out to find her food. I had noticed her during my dinner the night before, since we were near one another and there were even fewer guests, and the companion and I had at last struck up a conversation during which I learned that the old woman lived a short walk away and had been having her dinner at the hotel every night for many years, and that in fact I was inadvertently occupying her usual spot in the dining room, under the brightest light. The companion, after consulting the old woman, had specified that she had been coming here for thirty years, which astounded me, but now, on the second night, the restaurant manager corrected this to a mere five or six years. I wanted to suggest, perhaps because I had drunk my glass of Côte du Rhone by then and was feeling inspired, that the hotel should make a photographic portrait of her and hang it on the wall in one of the rooms, since she was now part of the history of the hotel. I still think that would be a good idea, and that you might consider it. In fact, later I got up from my chair, perhaps indiscreetly, and went over to the old woman and her companion as they were leaving, and suggested the same thing, to their obvious pleasure. I did not think it would be tactful, however, to bring up the spelling of "scrod" so directly with the manager, and that is why I am instead now mentioning it in a letter to you. My stay in your grand hotel was delightful and apart from, perhaps, the coolness of the restaurant manager, every aspect of the service and presentation was flawless except for this one spelling mistake. I do believe the purported home of the scrod should be a place where it is spelled correctly. Thank you for your attention.

Yours sincerely.

Letter to a Peppermint Candy Company

Dear Manufacturer of “Old Fashioned Chewy Peps,”

Last Christmas when my husband and I stopped in at an upscale country store that caters to weekenders as well as locals, and has a lunchroom off to the side, and which is run by a couple who bicker constantly and snap at their help, after we had had lunch and were browsing, before we left, among the displays of packaged and freshly prepared gourmet foods, we were attracted to the festive bright red canister (what you call the “tin”) of your “Old Fashioned Chewy Peps” peppermints. I love peppermints, and when I read the ingredient list on your can and saw that they were made without preservatives or artificial flavors or colors, I decided to buy the peppermints, since it is hard to find pure candies. I did not ask the price of the can, because although I realized that in that particular store it would be expensive, I was willing to be a bit extravagant since Christmas was coming. When I came to pay, though, I was shocked at the price, which was \$15 for the canister of peppermints, net weight 13 ounces (369 grams). After a moment of hesitation I bought it anyway, partly out of embarrassment in front of the impatient and unsmiling young woman at the cash register and partly because I did not want to give up those peppermints. When we got home, I read your various tongue-in-cheek warnings on the can about letting the peppermint soften in one’s mouth before biting down. You said: “Your teeth will thank you!” Well, it is quite true that the peppermints appear soft but then have an iron grip when one bites down. When I did eventually eat them, I chewed cautiously and with great difficulty. They were quite awkward to hold in my mouth, as they kept sticking to one tooth or another. I will say right away, though, that the taste was excellent. What I am writing to you about is not the taste or the difficulty of chewing the mints, but the quantity of mints in the canister. When I first opened it, before I ate any of the peppermints, I noticed that it did not seem to be very tightly packed with candies. They filled it to the top, but loosely. I looked at the ingredients list again. I saw that you

reported a serving size of 6 pieces and then specified that there were “about” 12 1/3 servings per tin. I did the math and calculated that the tin should contain about 74 pieces. Frankly, I did not think there were 74 pieces of candy inside. After I pointed this out to my family, we decided to place bets on how many there were and then count the pieces of candy. My bet was 64 pieces. My husband, being more trusting of your claims, bet that there were 70. My son, being a teenager and more daring, bet that there were only 50 pieces. Well, I counted them out there on the dining table and who do you think won the bet? I’m sorry to say it was my son. There were only 51 pieces in the can (or tin)! I must say, I could understand it if there were 70 or even 66 pieces, but 51 pieces is only two-thirds, approximately, of the number of pieces you claim are in the tin. I don’t really understand why you would make such a false claim. I have just now, out of curiosity, done a calculation to see if your claim as to the net weight of the peppermints is also exaggerated. You claim that each piece weighs 5 grams, and you claim a net weight of 369 grams. Yet that would also yield 74 pieces, rounding up, and since there were not 74 pieces, but 51, the net weight of the peppermints would have been closer to 246 grams. I cannot verify this estimate by weighing the candies because by now we have eaten them all. They were delicious, but we are feeling short-changed, or should I say . . . gypped? Can you please explain this discrepancy?

Yours sincerely.

P.S. This also makes my purchase even more extravagant. 13 ounces at \$15 would have been about \$18/pound; 8 ounces at \$15 is \$30/pound!

LYDIA DAVIS

Letter to a Frozen Peas Manufacturer

Dear Frozen Peas Manufacturer,

We are writing to you because we feel that the peas illustrated on your package of frozen peas are a most unattractive color. We are referring to the 16 oz. plastic package that shows three or four pods, one of them split open, with peas rolling out near them. The peas are a dull yellow green, more the color of pea soup than fresh peas and nothing like the actual color of your peas, which are a nice bright dark green. The depicted peas are, moreover, about three times the size of the actual peas inside the package, which, together with their dull color, makes them even less appealing—they appear to be past their maturity and mealy in texture. Additionally, the color of your illustrated peas contrasts poorly with the color of the lettering and other decoration on your package, which is an almost harsh neon green. We have compared your depiction of peas to that of other frozen peas packages and yours is by far the least appealing. Most food manufacturers depict food on their packaging that is more attractive than the food inside and therefore deceptive. You are doing the opposite: you are falsely representing your peas as less attractive than they actually are. We enjoy your peas and do not want your business to suffer. Please reconsider your art.

Yours sincerely,

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