

A tribute to Dennis Ray Wheaton, by Bruce G. Carruthers. March 3, 2021.

I first met Dennis in the fall of 1983, when I began my graduate training at the University of Chicago. I was the newcomer and Dennis was the “old hand.” He seemed like a nice guy who did interesting research, but little did I realize that this early connection would bear such fruit. Dennis became the world’s most sociological food critic, first via the New York Times and then thanks to Chicago Magazine. And he needed help to sample all those menus. A lot of help. That is where I came in, joined by my wife Wendy Espeland.

To be invited to accompany Dennis and Susan for a “critic’s dinner” brought together an unusual combination of pleasures: the anticipation of an interesting meal at a review-worthy restaurant; the surety that everyone at the table would sample all the dishes; the realization that in our consumption the food would be taken as seriously as it was by the chefs who created it; recognition that our collective dining experience would be rendered by Dennis into entertaining and insightful prose and published in a widely-read glossy magazine; the guilty pleasure of a “free lunch” (free to us, not to Chicago Magazine); but most especially, the sweetness of good company. And all these pleasures were enjoyed twice: when we first experienced them, and the second time when we read about our own experiences in the magazine. For years, my wife and I were blessed to join Dennis and Susan as they ate their way incognito through the Chicago food renaissance of the 1990s and 2000s. I don’t think we ever turned down an invitation, no matter what kind of babysitting scramble was required. To hear Dennis comment on the dishes (out loud, so that his hidden microphone would record his notes) was to be schooled in cuisines, recipes, and ingredients, but also to witness an extemporized organizational sociology of the food industry. OMG what a palate he possessed, detecting microscopic hints of subtle spices and fully able to reverse-engineer any dish put in front of him. The restaurants we frequented covered every cuisine, from haut to nouvelle to down home, because Dennis was emphatically not a food snob. For myself, I just knew it all tasted good. To join he and Susan would always mean an evening of laughter, gossip, storytelling, and absolute fun. When he left the magazine, I knew it was the end of an era.

Looking back on these memories, I realize now that they involved much more than just good times. Food is the centerpiece of every important ceremony and social rite of passage; it is the embodiment of family, love, and togetherness; food marks the stages of our lives; it reflects history, economy and culture. It is a quintessentially social object. And so, to have broken bread with Dennis, and to have enjoyed the privilege of his company over a meal, was to have participated in a simple and profound human experience. I am so grateful that he shared with me his generosity, enthusiasm, joie-de-vivre, and utter decency. Thank you Dennis.