

Restaurant owners feeling fleeced by online review sites

By Timothy Sandoval, Sacramento Bee

Restaurant owner Sonny Mayugba was given an offer he almost could not refuse two weeks ago.

Not by a local gangster, but by a user of a popular online review site, Yelp.com.

Mayugba said the user threatened to blast the Red Rabbit Kitchen and Bar at 2718 J St., which Mayugba co-owns, on Yelp because he believed he and his party got food poisoning from their meals.

Mayugba said it was impossible to prove whether the man got food poisoning from the restaurant but offered to give him a \$60 gift card to a restaurant of his choice. The man said he deserved \$100. If the restaurant did not pay up, he said he would write a bad Yelp review and report him to health authorities.

Is what happened to the Red Rabbit Kitchen an isolated case? Or has the growth in popularity of restaurant review websites – which allow anyone to write and rate restaurants from one to five stars – created a new way for some people to get preferential treatment.

Restaurant owners say online websites have changed consumer behavior as many people rely more on citizen reviews than on reviews of professional critics or advertisements. Yelp had a monthly average of more than 71 million unique visitors and 27 million reviews worldwide this year from January to the end of March, the company said.

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