

Sandy McDivot examines the issue of quality, and finds that one man's quality can be the epitome of bad taste to another...

Quality assured?

Quality is a highly subjective issue. What is it, who decides it, what factors determine it? One man's quality can be the epitome of bad taste to someone else. To illustrate, let me describe an experience I had recently with my nearest and dearest when we were invited to take over her mother's bed and breakfast establishment for a week while she sunned herself on some remote Caribbean island.

An initial briefing session was set up whereby she indoctrinated us on the ways of the landlady. Breakfast, which consisted of fried bacon-flavoured grease with a bake bean garnish was at 7am to 8am and the "guests" were to be out by 9 o'clock.

I kid you not when I say that hot water was unavailable to one side of the house unless a fire was lit in the living room. Needless to say the decadent practice of fire lighting was all but abolished due to the prohibitive cost of wood and this resulted in the guests having to boil a kettle to carry out their morning ablutions. The central heating I later found out was programmed to come on for about five minutes at night and a slightly shorter duration in the morning. This particular extravagance was I concluded, essential due to it being just sufficient to thaw out the ice that would form inside the toilet during periods of inclement weather. The taking of a shower in the morning would have contravened international laws on human rights.

Having turned on the bathroom light (I never knew you could buy 10 watt bulbs), removed the dozens of articles of clothing (essential if one was to keep the body core temperature from slipping below the critical level at night) one was faced with a shower that looked to be some sort of Victorian prototype. Turning on the tap would result in an immediate and prolonged wailing noise accompanied by a violent shuddering of the entire house. About a minute later and some brown liquid would slowly ooze from the showerhead. The water temperature would then randomly and instantaneously fluctuate between that which is found beneath polar ice caps and something akin to

super heated steam capable of removing several layers of skin tissue. It was just as well so little water was exuded from this ghastly contraption as the shower door was falling off its hinges anyway.

The entire establishment which appeared to be modelled on one of Joseph Stalin's 1950's Siberian political correction institutions, would have made 17th century puritans recoil in horror. The only organisms that felt at home in this place were the thermophilic bacteria that lived in among the 20-year-old layer of encrusted gunge on the frying pans.

Yet despite all this, the punters were queuing up to get in. To me, it was reminiscent of the hostelry found in a certain Hitchcock movie, yet to them it was the height of luxury, a home from home that they were desperate to sample on a regular basis. Pitiful cries of anguish would be emitted when late arrivals were summarily refused entry. To them the word "quality" had a different derivation. To this day I cannot understand it, yet who am I to say they are wrong and I am right.

I have often felt many art critics have a perception of quality that is to be found in a different part of the solar system to the rest of us. To me, an unmade bed, a crude reworking of a Buster Keaton sketch or half a pickled cow does not even constitute art, yet to them they are worthy of prolonged and gushing praise followed by an international award or two. Call me cynical but I feel sure that had I included one of the above in my CSE art efforts all those years ago it would not have significantly improved my resultant grade 5.

But then who am I to argue. I have not spent years studying the subject; I have not the keen intellect or the expert analytical eye that they have at their disposal. I readily acknowledge their superiority on the subject and if these representations can give genuine pleasure to the onlooker then I accept the conviction of the art critic unconditionally and embrace them as great works of art.

But being a greenkeeper I do have authoritative knowledge on one issue. I am, I believe, eminently qual-

ified to give an expert opinion on one particular composition produced by the skilled artisan. In fact at the risk of conceit, I believe my qualifications for in depth analysis of a particular topic is equalled only by a tiny minority of people on this planet. That subject I am sure you have surmised, is the quality of a golf green and the tiny minority I referred to are other greenkeepers.

It is only greenkeepers who can look at a golf green and from the outward appearance at the surface can tell exactly what is going on underneath. Only a greenkeeper can look at a green in the summer and predict with extreme accuracy what condition it will be in during the winter. Only a greenkeeper can tell what the root development is like, how much and what kind of disease is suffered, even the quantities and type of fertiliser that has been applied.

Personally speaking, and in common with many of my colleagues, I have a strong preference for the more traditional style of green. My particular version of Da Vinci's Mona Lisa is a surface that is pale green with a hint of brown in the summer, while in the winter it is pale green with a hint of brown. At all times it is firm with minimal thatch and a tight sward composed principally of bent and fescue grasses. Fertiliser input would be negligible, disease practically non-existent, rooting deep and it would have a wear resistance capable of withstanding all out nuclear attack. That is not to say I have achieved this particular masterpiece myself but I live in hope.

The problem is, my interpretation of the word "quality" when applied to a golf green does not always coincide with that of golfers. I once remember asking a golfing friend of mine what he thought of the quality of the greens at a highly prestigious golf course he had recently played. "Oh, they were quite superb" he informed me. "They were lush and green and when you walked on them your shoes would sink in leaving water filled footprints that would slowly spring back up." Now to me I would find such greens to be physically repulsive but in this case, due

to my credentials I am able to argue with complete authority that my version of a golf green in Utopia was correct while his was entirely erroneous.

Unfortunately though, and in common with many golfers, he was not offering an opinion on the greens but making what he considered to be a statement of fact. Based on the dual principal that he could occasionally hit a golf ball in the rough vicinity of the target and that he was playing a golf course acknowledged to be of exceptional quality he concluded that he was fully qualified to make such a statement. To him the greens in question were of a quality that was highly desirable and he wanted to know when my greens would be of a comparable standard. I however took the stance of the art critic talking to the philistine and was able to point out the gross error of his ways. The greens I suggested, far from being admirable, were in fact artificial, horrifically

bumpy, diseased and unplayable for most of the winter, inordinately expensive to maintain, environmentally unsound and teetering on total demise whenever hotter than average weather was encountered. I also pointed out that their softness would negate all strategic elements painstakingly designed into the golf course. After all, there is no point in having a shrewdly placed greenside bunker if the green has all the characteristics of a green blancmange. Anyone can lob a mid iron over the offending object from heavy rough and still get it to stop within a couple of feet so what is the point in having the bunker there in the first place. It ceases to have any influence on how to play the preceding shot.

You might as well have that deranged individual from "Home Front in the Garden" design the course for all the subtlety you would need with greens like that. I ask you, would Tiger Woods with his supreme golfing brain have so dominated our Open Championship at St Andrews if Eddie Adams' greens had the receptive qualities of a plum duff? Well yes, he probably would have, but you get my point don't you?

However, to be fair, I do believe that most golfers do appreciate true quality when they finally encounter it. Just recently a popular golf magazine ran a piece on courses that they considered were in possession of the finest greens in the country. Listed were several leading courses and I am delighted to report that all of them were maintained in that traditional British way that produces a golf green

we, the greenkeeper, so admire. Yes, all of the courses mentioned had greens that were firm, true, fast and consistent whatever the time of year and surprise, surprise not a USGA spec among them. But we don't want to dig that old chestnut up again, do we?

So I say to all my fellow greenkeepers out there, if you are getting some serious abuse of the acoustic nerve then remember, you are the expert and they the layman. You are the respected art critic, they the student. You are the connoisseur while they are the apprentice. So argue your case from the position of complete authority that your knowledge bestows upon you ... in the nicest possible way of course.

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