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Can you Heimlich?

A top US chef saves a life - could you do the same? And, indeed, would you?



Almost-former US president George W Bush displays the bruise he received after choking on a pretzel, fainting, and falling to the floor. Photograph: Paul J Richards/EPA

Occasionally you see a bit of web news that really piques your curiosity: there's an obvious good news story but you suspect there's something much more interesting going on underneath. One such appears this morning in the form of an [eyewitness account](#) of US celebrity chef Tom Colicchio saving the life of a food writer in a roomful of chefs by performing the [Heimlich manoeuvre](#).

On the face of it, great story - Hero Chef Saves Writer - but the interesting bit comes in the detail. After the writer had inhaled a bit of chicken - an experience sadly all too familiar to those of us who can't eat without talking about it - there was confusion in the room, including American food goddess Alice Waters running about shouting "Does anyone know the [Heimlich manoeuvre](#)?"

What's odd about this story will be apparent to anyone who's worked in US restaurants. The Heimlich has been widely taught in a huge public education effort. It's usually shown on big descriptive noticeboards behind the swing doors and generally an intrinsic facet of US restaurant life. In many years working front of house in the US, I used the Heimlich twice (once on an American footballer wearing a [halo brace](#) - a challenge if only because of the sheer scale of the subject). I also saw it performed many more times by others. At the first signs of airway obstruction most people seem to realise what's going on and the waiter is usually the first to respond. They are immediately backed by a short queue of volunteer firefighters, off-duty [EMTs](#), nurses, ex-service people and Girl Guides. In my experience, the only people in a US restaurant who don't rush to Heimlich a choker are

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Tim Hayward: Learn the Heimlich man...

experience, the only people in a US restaurant who don't rush to Heimlich a choker are any doctors who are, usually, at the bar with their lawyers.

I relate this story partly as a reminder, particularly those of us who spend much time in public eating establishments, to learn the Heimlich manoeuvre. It's one of the few ways you can learn to save a life just by spending three minutes reading a website. Partly I have to ask, from a professional point of view, if a writer is choking in a room full of chefs, what on earth could she have written to piss them off?

Do you know how to perform the Heimlich and would you be there, confidently, at the front of the queue ready to save the life of a fellow diner? On the other hand, are there any restaurateurs, chefs or food writers you'd be happy to watch slowly choke to death?

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