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IS THE MICHELIN MAN A WINE LOVER?

Michelin insists that wine plays a key part in its restaurant ratings. Decanter's restaurant critic, **BRIAN ST PIERRE**, is still to be convinced

The Michelin man is one of the world's best-known symbols, and the red hotel and restaurant guides he has jauntily spun off are almost as familiar to travellers. It's understood that 'starred' restaurants are a shorthand way of saying Michelin-starred, and that the gatekeepers of the guide books have brought them into one of the world's most exclusive clubs (there were only 56 top-rated, three-starred restaurants in the 21 countries covered by the latest guides, with just three in the UK). Nearly a million guides are sold annually; their ratings have accounted for headlines, foreclosures, reputations made and lost, at least one suicide, and an average price hike of 20% for a meal. It's more of an empire than a franchise, a long way from the free guide first handed out in 1900, when there were only 2,789 cars in France and a drive from Paris to Marseille could take four days.

A Michelin inspector works at it full time – 240 meal 'evaluations' and at least 130 nights spent in hotels every year, with over 800 follow-up inspections and reports. There are 10 inspectors in the UK and, like their counterparts in other countries, they have degrees and experience



Michelin guide chief Jean-Luc Naret: a photo of UK editor Derek Bulmer, who guards his anonymity closely so as to carry out effective reviews, was not forthcoming

in hotel and catering management. They each have territories, but if a restaurant is considered for one or more stars, others are brought in for extra evaluations. This system doesn't shield them from criticism (*Times* critic AA Gill called it 'an absurd

and pointless system', and chef Alastair Little once said it was 'an irrelevance'), but it rolls on – guides to New York and San Francisco have been added to the line-up, and editions for Asia are planned.

There is also another question about the thoroughness of the guides, though, and an ironic one considering their place of origin – do they do justice to wine? Wine-loving restaurateurs have long grumbled – off the record, of course – that the passion poured into their lists has been ignored, or at best counted for little in the evaluations. (It is only two years since Michelin added a bunch-of-grapes symbol to show a 'particularly interesting wine list', after all.)

Michelin has long been notorious for its secretiveness about its methods, but there have been cracks in the wall of silence recently, in response to a critical book by an ex-inspector, as well as the competition from the internet, including an avalanche of dining-out blogs, and other guide books. On the occasion of the release of the 2007 guides to Great Britain & Ireland, and the reformatted London guide, I was invited to meet Jean-Luc Naret, the new director, and Derek Bulmer, editor of the British editions.

They were keen to stress that dining out in the UK is better than ever, hence the increase in listings and ratings of good restaurants from an ever-expanding pool.

Bulmer seemed slightly taken aback by the wine question. 'It's always been important, but we decided to use the symbol to show a real interest, knowledge and passion for wine.' But only for the last two years? Are fine wine lists that new? 'We don't divorce wine from the meal experience,' he insisted. 'We look at the creativity of the menu, and also the breadth and interest of the wine list – how much thought has gone into choosing the wines, how much into the house wine, and their selection by the glass.' I asked about the inspectors' wine qualifications, mentioned nowhere in the Michelin literature. 'If new inspectors don't have a

SOUR GRAPES? THE DECANTER VERDICT

We took three London restaurants deemed worthy of Michelin's grapes symbol for their 'particularly interesting wine list' and dissected their lists. The first, Pied à Terre, has all the greats at the top end, but lacks more modestly priced inspiration or innovation. Hence there are 40-odd assorted Montrachets, but just two Mâconnais. Of its 16 California Cabernets, only one costs less than £80. It also has a slightly thin five reds and five whites by the glass. Le Pont de la Tour offers an even more comprehensive list in terms of the classics, has more on offer in terms of mid-range interest and also ticks some of the boxes for more

modern fare. It merits its grapes, but should volume be so readily rewarded? How many crus classés does any wine list need? The Savoy Grill falls into the same category, and has some laudable content (albeit without further detail for the uninitiated) from the Loire and other, lesser-known parts of regional France. Yet more interesting to our eye are lists such as The Tate Modern – fewer bins, but with a high proportion of wines by the glass, a more global representation, and more innovation as far as lesser-known European regions are concerned. It also provides text with details of the wine. No grapes though.



hopes of better-than-average wine, in the absence of the few 'knowledge and passion' symbols awarded.

Thus, even starred restaurants like the River Café, with a superb Italian list, or Tamarind, with a list that complements sophisticated modern Indian cooking, merely get a wine glass, while the mediocre lists at the Wolseley, Rules and Inn the Park are elevated to bunches of grapes. Clarke's, astonishingly, gets neither – so much for breadth and value – nor does Cambio de Tercio, a Spanish standout. The Ledbury, Nahm, Kensington Place, Fino, Cigala, Galvin Bistrot, Enoteca Turi and the Cinnamon Club – all good places to drink as well as eat – all get the lesser symbol. The Harrow at Little Bedwyn, which has had a great list for years, one that should have led a team of inspectors to its door long ago, finally got a star in 2007; The Abbey in Penzance simplified its list considerably, and got its star back anyway. Mark-ups at L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon are pitiless, but it got a star shortly after opening – a pattern repeated around the UK.

At three-star level, you're going to get mostly five-star wines. The real variances are at the one-star level: The Greenhouse has over 2,000, mainly blue-chip wines listed at high prices, while Arbutus has less than 100, mainly lesser known, but available in 250ml carafes, and keenly priced. Meanwhile, several starred places have high mark-ups – Rhodes 24, Robuchon and Hakkasan, to name three. Prices by the glass are also creeping up, again especially in the starred places. Sneaky, or just the way the world is going? Either way, don't ask the Michelin man... **D**

great wine knowledge, we send them on a Wine & Spirit Education Trust course.'

Anyone who's ever picked up a bill at some of their starred restaurants has felt the sting of high mark-ups on wine. 'It's relative, isn't it?' Bulmer said. 'You could say the same in any capital city in the world. Value for money is one of the judgments we make; we tell people what we think of a place, and they decide whether they wish to eat there. If they feel the wine list is 20% overpriced, they'll probably order a cheaper wine. Who decides the correct price level of a bottle

of wine? It's not a finite judgment.'

Well, as philosophers like to say, reasonable people can reasonably disagree, as conversations with several restaurateurs, two of them Michelin-starred, illustrated. ('I don't think they care about wine much. I've even been let down in France by the lack of decent wine recommendations,' one said.) Perhaps it's a communication problem – the guides (which don't indicate wine prices in any way) carry another symbol, a wine glass, representing 'wines served by the glass', but which appear to be doing an extra duty, a nudge towards

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