

Great cooking is in the heart, not in guides

Nicholas Lander wonders if Michelin's one set of criteria can be applied to restaurants worldwide

I wouldn't expect restaurant writers to be impartial about the Michelin guide. To some extent, we are all jealous of the headlines it attracts and the influence it has.

Having said that, I can't think of one of my colleagues who would swap their job for a Michelin inspector's. The monotony of those endless meals; the reports rather than the joy of writing; the loneliness of the single diner; and the fact that so much of the job is looking for faults rather than maximising pleasure; these factors are enough to be off-putting in the extreme.

The recent, simultaneous publication of the *2008 Michelin Guide to Great Britain and Ireland* and the *2008 Michelin Guide to London* does, however, provide the opportunity to evaluate whether the conscious transformation of this little red book into an international guide is in the best interest of its readers.

Michelin has undoubtedly become a victim of the success of the industry it has nurtured for so long. There are now so many restaurants that I believe it must be becoming more difficult for the research to be as detailed as it used to be. By using readers' reports as well as their own opinions, Harden's Guides on this side of the Atlantic and Zagat on the other benefit from what I believe is a more comprehensive methodology.

At the same time, while sticking so rigidly to its classification system, Michelin has failed to appreciate how

the market has evolved. There is far more now to a great meal than just the excellence of the cooking and that is where I fundamentally disagree with this guide's findings.

It is good to see this year's guide highlighting the rise of restaurant-goers' concerns about the provenance of ingredients, and the decline – at last – of fusion cooking. I applaud its continuing, via its awards of Bib Gourmands, the search for those restaurants offering particularly good value. It is, of course, in both the chefs' and Michelin's best interests to maintain a united front to the world that it is only the food that matters.

One of the consequences of the guide's publication in late January is the flurry of openings during November of the previous year. This, the chefs hope, will allow them enough time to impress the inspectors. The most conspicuous late 2007 openings included Hibiscus, to which the Michelin has, I believe correctly, given one star with the note that it is capable of regaining the sec-

ond it had in Ludlow; and Ducasse, quite rightly, was left unstarred for his new restaurant at the Dorchester.

Both the lunch and the dinner I have had at this new de luxe restaurant have been extremely disappointing, with only the quality of the patisserie to distinguish it, and some very high prices

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to make one want to forget it. With Ducasse continuing to steam ahead with new openings, it is hard to see how this underperformance will be rectified.

Fortunately, I have recently had one very good – and extremely good-value – example of French cooking in the heart of London which mysteriously does not seem to register on Michelin's radar. Clos Maggiore in Covent Garden is a rather old-fashioned looking restau-

rant from its front desk. Inside, however, it has an extremely warm and homely feel which is matched by excellent service. Most impressive was the precision of the cooking from chef Marcellin Marc during a meal that included squid in black ink, well-sourced and flavourful lamb, and an unctuous dessert of a praline trapezienne. This set lunch was £19.50 for three courses, and the restaurant's wine list is one of the most comprehensive and keenly priced in the capital.

Now, as Michelin seeks to rank the world's restaurants, two larger concerns trouble me. The first is that the standard of cooking across France has unquestionably fallen over the past decade, and this was happening while Michelin has been the most respected guardian of its native country's culinary reputation. Is this because it has not been tough enough? Or has this happened because it looked overseas for growth, to countries whose cuisine, most notably Spain and Italy, I believe Michelin has never really understood?

My deeper concern is whether this worldwide approach is really in restaurant-goers' best interests. With the spread of globalisation, restaurants are becoming one of the few remaining distinctive measures of a city. Is an international set of criteria the best, even if these are supplemented by some local expertise?

My personal preference will always be for the national over the interna-

tional. But these concerns will not, I hope, negate in any way the talents of the chefs. The true nature of chefs' profession was summed up for me last week at a hoteliers' gathering in Munich by Italian chef Fulvio Pierangelini, whose Tuscan restaurant, Gambero Rosso, is highly regarded by everyone. "When I cook," he explained, "the muscle I use the most is not my tongue but my heart."

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Warm feeling: Clos Maggiore in Covent Garden