“Starry” Gastronomy. Michelin Stars

Man Carmen Mihaela¹
Slave Camelia²

Received: April 15, 2023
Accepted: July 15, 2023
Published: October 30, 2023

Abstract: Just like the Grammy Awards for music, the restaurant industry also has a star of recognition and that is the Michelin star. The dream of any chef is not necessarily to cook the best food but to have it appreciated by as many people as possible. And the appreciation doesn’t come anyway but through a really special distinction: one star, two... or even three. We are, of course, talking about the famous Michelin stars which distinguish the best restaurants in the world. But how many know the story of the Michelin Guide, this Oscar of restaurants, and how it came to be made by a tire manufacturer?

1. INTRODUCTION

Michelin stars are the classification system used in the guide with the same name to classify restaurants around the world. The Michelin star is an idea that has been known for more than 100 years and is part of the tire manufacturer’s marketing strategy. From 1889, when the first Michelin Guide was launched, up to now there have been important changes in the publication. Firstly, it served to provide pieces of advice on routes, eating places, accommodation and service stops for cars. It focused mainly on France, the country where the initiative was born. The idea of the guide was to encourage people to buy cars (there were less than 3,000 cars in France at the time) and, implicitly, to increase the demand for tires.

The first edition of the Michelin guide was printed in 35,000 copies and was distributed free of charge: drivers could pick up the guide from hotels, restaurants, or mechanic workshops anywhere in France. In the following years, the Michelin brothers produced such guides for other areas of the French-speaking area such as Belgium (1904), Algeria, and Tunisia (1907), but also the Alps-Rhine area, including Northern Italy, Switzerland, Bavaria, and the Netherlands (1908), Germany, Spain and Portugal (1910), Great Britain (1911), North Africa, Southern Italy and Corsica (1911). In 1909, the first English version of the Michelin guide for France was also published.

The outbreak of the First World War stopped the publication of the guide, and in the years 1918-1920, older editions of it were republished. Only after that did the Michelin brothers decide to no longer distribute the guide for free, starting from the idea that people won’t respect or trust something free. Then there were other changes in the format of the guide: from now on

¹ University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Bucharest, 59 Mărăști Blvd, Bucharest, Romania
² University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Bucharest, 59 Mărăști Blvd, Bucharest, Romania
restaurants were listed by certain categories and advertisements were abandoned. When they realized that the most popular section of the guide was the restaurant section, the Michelin brothers hired a team of inspectors to visit places and write reviews. As of today, these inspectors remained anonymous. In 1926, in response to restaurant owners who began feeling uneasy about not being listed in the guide, the rating star was established.

In 1936, a rating star was adopted, with the minimum being 1 star and the maximum being 3. According to the Michelin guide, stars are awarded according to one criterion: the food on the plate and anything else. But this food is carefully analysed and all elements are taken into account: the quality of the ingredients, the mastery of the chef, the creativity, the value of money and the compliance with the culinary standards.

The annual publication of the Michelin guide was again suspended during World War II, with one exception: in 1944, at the express request of the Allies, the French guide from 1939 was republished. The edition was printed in Washington especially for armies that landed in Normandy in June 1944 because the Michelin guide had the best maps of French territory. The publication of the guide was then resumed in the month in which the war ended, in May 1945 (Easter, 2022).

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

Michelin imposes a maximum of 2 stars that can be awarded to a restaurant. Thus, step by step, the creation of brothers André and Edouard Michelin established itself as the maximum recognition in the restaurant sector, to transform the life of any chef and restaurant. While the focus is on starred restaurants, or stars as they are called, the guide also includes restaurants that - even if they don’t have stars - are of superior quality.

The recognition process with a Michelin star is in the hands of 85 people. These people are called inspectors who, although they work in the utmost secrecy, have the knowledge and training to evaluate any restaurant in the world. Each inspector is responsible for eating at an average of 800 restaurants in his area. About 1,100 visits are made within this process, an experience that can reach over 30,000 km traveled during these visits. Inspectors have a reputation for being incorruptible, strict, and direct in their work. They have a clear idea of what they have to do and will do it without any problems (Lane, 2016).

But what does it take for a restaurant to be recognized with a Michelin star? The restaurant must be part of the community. It should not be an isolated entity. Inspectors take into account where the ingredients are purchased from and the restaurant’s relationship with farmers and producers in the area. The use of indigenous, ingredients in each region in the preparation of dishes is also evaluated. Cheese and meat types must also come from the community. The idea is to promote sustainable development in the area where the establishment is located. A cuisine with international recognition needs quality ingredients. The fruits and vegetables used in Michelin-starred kitchens must meet the criterion of freshness, and the diversity of the dishes is defining.

The trend of the presentation is taken into account by each inspector. Based on the expression “we eat with our eyes”, particular attention is given to the shape chosen to present each dish. The ingredients must be pleasant to eat and the arrangement on the plate must be close to perfection.
The chef’s creativity and innovation give each restaurant’s cuisine a unique personality. This is one of the most appreciated aspects by inspectors. The differentiating element of a dish, which is prepared by hundreds of restaurants all over the world, is an aspect to be taken into account.

Chefs, like scientists, must never stop improving their craft. Otherwise, they will stagnate, as the world evolves. It is important to get in touch with the world of cooking, to go to the root, to explore new cooking methods, new ingredients, and new ways of preparing, among other things. When a chef transforms a common dish, the inspectors of the Michelin Guide welcome it with pleasure (Brown, 2018).

As we have noticed above, a restaurant in the world can receive a maximum of three stars. The Michelin Stars Awards is an annual process. Stars are not for life, so if a restaurant is downgraded in terms of quality it will also lose its Michelin recognition (Easter, 2022).

Each star of the Michelin fame has the following meaning:

- **1 star:** Very good cuisine. Firm proposal. It’s worth stopping there to eat. When a restaurant receives a Michelin star it means that it serves the best quality food. And of course, in the spirit of the Guide, it means it’s worth a stop on your already planned route.

- **2 stars:** Exceptional cuisine. If the restaurant is not on your route, it is worth a detour to taste its dishes. Two Michelin stars mean that the restaurant that receives this rating promises exceptional food and it is worth a detour from the planned route. Two-star Michelin restaurants are even rarer, with just 414 worldwide at the start of 2020. Two-star restaurants offer consistent quality cuisine and are staffed by top chefs in the business. These are likely to be well-known establishments in the foodie world, and many of them will have long waiting lists for reservations.

- **3 stars:** The highest category is awarded to restaurants with a unique proposal. Just eating there is worth the trip, no matter the distance. Three Michelin stars... that’s a rarity. This qualification implies a unique cuisine, a unique menu and a complete dining experience. Therefore, this restaurant deserves a dedicated trip. That means you can plan your vacation around this culinary experience. As you might expect, booking a table in a Michelin 3-star restaurant can only be done many months in advance. Inspectors look at the quality, technique, personality and consistency of the food and ignore decor or service. The three-star restaurants offer the pinnacle of fine dining and are led by chefs recognized worldwide for their contribution to the culinary arts. These restaurants are as good as they come, offering a once-in-a-lifetime dining experience, and are always in high demand.

All three-star restaurants are remarkable in their way, but the restaurant that has retained this distinction the longest is Les Prés d’Eugénie, which first received three stars in 1977, and has been creating renowned cuisine in the entire world. Les Prés d’Eugénie is owned by patron chef Michel Guérard, one of the founders of nouvelle cuisine, and his wife Christine, and is part of a spa complex in the small French town of Eugénie-les-Bains.

To get a star, the restaurant is visited several times by local inspectors. A restaurant is evaluated according to five criteria: the quality of the ingredients used, the know-how of the food preparation, the association of flavours, the quality-price ratio and the consistency of the culinary standards, according to the visit of an inspector. In each of their visits, the results must be consistent. The first Michelin star requires the visit of 4 inspectors. To achieve the two stars, they receive up to 10 visits from national and French inspectors. To obtain the third star, because of
the significance of this distinction, the establishment must be visited by inspectors from the respective country, but also by international inspectors. The result must be unanimous. If one of them does not agree, the restaurant will not get the third star.

An important element for the Michelin Guide, in the era of communication, is the opinion received from hundreds of people by e-mail. Their feelings are considered when planning a visit to any space.

Regardless of the country, region, or location of the restaurant, if you deserve this distinction, you will receive it. The Michelin Guide brings together the best of world cuisine and concentrates all its efforts on this point. This rule is evidenced by the recognition, in 2016, with a Michelin star, of the Hong Kong Soya Sauce Chicken Rice and Noodle Restaurant in Singapore, a street food stand that prepares dishes to the tune of 2 dollars. The preparation of the Hong Kong-style soy chicken, cooked more than 35 years ago by Chan Hon Meng, surprised the inspectors who awarded him this recognition. However, the restaurant lost its Michelin star in 2021, but it was later included in the Michelin Bib Gourmand. In addition to stars, the Michelin Guide awards the Bib Gourmand, which identifies good restaurants with prices for all budgets, and the Michelin Plat, the latest distinction for quality cuisine (Brown, 2018).

The guide is reader-centered and aims to provide the most up-to-date information for everyone. To do this, each award and recognition is reviewed annually. At the end of the year, restaurants can be ratified in their current position, receive new recognition and – in the worst case – lose part of those received.

Do Michelin stars transfer with chefs to new restaurants if they leave, and do restaurants lose stars if a new chef takes over? Considered by many to be the ultimate mark of culinary excellence, Michelin stars are awarded to restaurants seen as a particularly high standard. Rated restaurants can receive one, two or three stars, and this distinction is highly desired by chefs around the world, but chefs who run multiple restaurants can hold more than three stars. Chefs do not and cannot obtain Michelin stars. Michelin stars can only be awarded to a restaurant and not to an individual chef. The guide even states this: “There is no Michelin-starred chef”. If a chef leaves a restaurant, he also does not have the right to take the stars with him. On the contrary, the stars are considered the result of collective teamwork and remain attached to the restaurant where they were obtained. The record for most Michelin stars belonged to the late chef Joël Robuchon, who once held 32 Michelin stars in total. He is followed by Alain Ducasse, with 19 Michelin stars. He owns three restaurants with three Michelin-star restaurants in three different cities. In third place, we find Pierre Gagnaire, who has 14 Michelin stars, and the first one he got at the age of 26. The restaurant that bears his name, located on Rue Balzac in Paris, has managed to maintain its 3 stars for 20 years.

In France, gastronomy is something “sacred”. The country has always enjoyed an undisputed culinary reputation with various gastronomic styles from the French tradition. Over the centuries, French cuisine has evolved without straying from tradition, thanks to great chefs. Lovers of gourmet dishes do not hesitate to make trips to discover the delights of the chefs with a star in France. Many French chefs have stars in the Michelin Guide, their restaurants are references in French and world gastronomy. In fact, France holds the first place in the top ten countries with the most Michelin stars, with 662 restaurants, followed by Japan in second place, with 544 restaurants. Italy is the third place, with 372 restaurants, and Germany is the fourth place, with
323 restaurants. Spain ranks fifth, with 226 restaurants, followed by the United States, with 215 restaurants, and Great Britain, with 174 restaurants, in sixth place. Belgium, with 138 restaurants, the Netherlands, with 117 restaurants and Switzerland, with 111 restaurants complete the list of the top ten countries that have received the most Michelin stars (The MICHELIN Guide – France, 2023; MICHELIN Guide, 2023; Restaurant Imaginaire, 2023).

According to the Michelin Guide, worldwide there are 2563 one-star Michelin restaurants, 480 two-star restaurants, and only 129 three-star restaurants. The first positions in the Michelin restaurant list are occupied by locations in Spain (Azurmendi Restaurant), New York (Per Se and Le Bernardin restaurants), Macau (Robuchon Au Dôme Restaurant) and Great Britain (The Fat Duck Restaurant) (MICHELIN Guide, 2023).

As for the city with the most Michelin stars in the world, for 13 years the record has been in Tokyo: a title that is earned by hosting the incredible number of 226 Michelin-starred restaurants, listed in the 2020 Michelin Guide in Tokyo.

The Tokyo Michelin Guide has an impressive number of additions from year to year and currently has 11 restaurants with 3 Michelin stars, 49 restaurants with 2 Michelin stars and 166 restaurants with 1 Michelin star. The Japanese capital offers an eclectic mix of cuisines expressed at the highest level, from Chinese to French, and continues to represent a favorite destination even for foodies for its concentration of fine restaurants, putting it ahead of other iconic cities such as Paris, which occupies the second position, with 119 starred restaurants, Kyoto, with 108 restaurants, Osaka, with 98 restaurants and New York, the fifth Michelin starred city, with its 76 restaurants.

3. CONCLUSION

Fine gastronomy is a call for travels and discoveries. The starred chefs are among the most talented cooks and put all their know-how at the service of original and delicate cuisine. You then taste a menu elaborated from a great reflection and realized with a lot of technique, and discover dishes that arouse as much desire as curiosity. The star chef has mastered the art of sublimating the products we consume daily and associating them with rarer and less well-known foods. This subtle and tasty cuisine offers a unique culinary journey, where the authenticity, freshness and quality of the products are guaranteed. Eating in a starred restaurant is, therefore, an opportunity to live a unique experience, to discover original dishes, recipes and ingredients. Each chef is then distinguished by his personal touch, his technique and his implementation. French, Italian, or even African gastronomy, all cuisines are opportunities to travel around the world.

References
