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The Michelin Man Yawns into Town



Another year's report by the Michelin Man (Bibendum, the cartoon made of tires who looks a lot like the Pillsbury Doughboy) and his satiated inspectors appeared Wednesday in the form of the company's **2012 New York City edition** of their famous red guide. And it's pretty much a yawn, in the sense that, as the French say, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.

Two new three-star ("worth a journey") restaurants have been added — Chef's Table at Brooklyn Fare and Eleven Madison Park — to the five kept in place: Daniel, Jean Georges, Le Bernardin, Masa, and Per Se. Of these, only Masa is resolutely not French (*duh!*) and all are extremely

expensive (double *duh!*): A dinner at Chef's Table is \$110, Masa is \$450, Per Se is \$295, and so on.

New two-star awards ("worth a detour" — from where?) go to L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon (one of a chain of seven from here to Taipei) and SHO Shaun Hergatt in the Wall Street area, joining six oldtimers on the list. The latter richly deserves its second star, but retaining places like Gordon Ramsay at The London (which Ramsay has had nothing to do with for two years) and Momofuko Ko (which has twelve backless counter stools and super-loud house music) is odd. Four of a total of eight are French; one, Marea, is Italian — the only Italian restaurant above the one-star level in a city that may reasonably be called the world's crucible of great Italian restaurants. (Even in all of Italy, Michelin can find only six three-star restaurants.)



Additions to the one-star category ("very good cuisine in its category") are Michael White's Ai Fiori, Brushstroke, Danji, Heartbreak, and Junoon. This is always the most interesting category, as much for its additions as for its puzzling omissions. The one-star category has, since Michelin started publishing the Guide for a 2006 edition, not been overly rich in French restaurants (of 46 listed, only seven are die-hard French), and it's the category where Bibendum shows he's an all-around mensch, embracing everything from a gastropub (The Breslin) and a tapas bar (Casa Mono) to a single steakhouse (Peter Luger) and a super-deluxe Alain Ducasse restaurant, Adour.

This is a mixed bag, and one that's hard to take very seriously. Is Michelin actually saying that an East Village fondue eatery (Heartbreak) is in the same category as Mario Batali's fabulous Del Posto? Do Palm, Smith & Wollensky, Ben Benson's, Porter House, and other indigenous NYC steakhouses not rise to the level of Peter Luger, where everything but the porterhouse is mediocre and the winelist a joke? And is a place called Danny Brown Wine Bar & Kitchen, never even reviewed by the *Times* but known mostly for its ham croquettes and bacon cheeseburger, really in the running with Gotham Bar & Grill or Blue Hill? Something doesn't jibe here.

Anyone who spends time trying to decide where to eat out in NYC probably knows dozens more restaurants that serve "very good cuisine in its category" than make Michelin's one-star list, which has come to look like an extension of its worthwhile Bib Gourmand category of "Inspectors' favorite for good value," which includes scores of places from Prune to Al Bustan, from Fatty Crab to Taco Taco, and of its applaudable "Under \$25" category.



Unless Michelin's modus operandi has changed, its inspectors (about five in NYC to cover 20,000 restaurants in five boroughs) "only judge what's on the plate" when it comes to awarding stars, and while design, amenities, and service may be commented on, they supposedly are not criteria for stars. Michelin also contends it doesn't care at all if a chef or owner is ever in the kitchen, which explains the stars for Gordon Ramsay at The London, L'Atelier Joël Robuchon, and many others.

These anonymous inspectors pretty much eat lunch and dinner out every day, usually alone and unknown to the other inspectors, like moles in secret cells. Which means that an inspection is made by a single, perhaps dyspeptic inspector who makes his report and judgment on the basis of a single meal, in which there may have been a misstep — an overcooked piece of fish, a tad too much salt, or a lunch menu that has little to do with dinner — which could remove the restaurant from further consideration for a star. A return visit would not be required. If the restaurant *does* merit further interest, a different inspector — perhaps several — will visit. Maybe one from Japan will even fly in to test out a place like Masa.

Over the years, journalists and defecting inspectors have revealed a lot of dirty linen about Michelin's workings, including awarding a star to a restaurant that hadn't even opened and its bias towards famous French chefs whose best days are long behind them. And Michelin's dropping of its guides to Los Angeles and Las Vegas was explained by the company's former director, Jean-Luc Naret, who said in an [interview with Esquire.com last year](#), "The people in Los Angeles are not real foodies. They are not too interested in eating well but just in who goes to which restaurant and where they sit."

Whether or not Michelin still has the clout it has in France or can excite Americans who find it largely irrelevant remains to be seen at a time when the blogosphere claims to have its finger on the true pulse of the people.

It is interesting to note, then, that the new NYC Zagat survey, which also [debuted this week](#), reported that 81 percent of its 41,604 respondents said they "don't follow restaurants or food trucks via social media sites" and 49 percent said they have "not downloaded restaurant-related apps on their smartphones." Yet 55 percent said they "shared their dining experiences, both good and bad, via websites, blogs, and social media." (Hmmm, and Zagat was just [bought by Google](#).)

And now comes yet another survey of the vox populi (har-dee-har-har): TripAdvisor's new [2011 Travelers' Choice Food and Wine U.S. Destinations](#), whose [NYC mix](#) is hilarious: Number-one favorite restaurant? (Drum roll...) [E&E Grill House](#). The rest of the top ten include The Capitol Grille, Junoon, Le Bernardin, Patzeria Family & Friends, Levain Bakery, Eleven Madison Park, Seasonal Restaurant and Weinbar, Quality Meats, and Patzeria Perfect Pizza. (Note to self: Gotta get those Patzeria places on speed-dial ASAP.)

Well, for those who don't give a rap for the super-secret Michelin ratings process or the always-sky-high numbers ratings in Zagat or the suspicious ratings of TripAdvisor, next week Esquire will announce our pick of the Best New Restaurants in America 2012. Stay tuned.