

The Day the Stars Fell on Tokyo

Contributed by Todd Crowell
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The new Michelin Guide simply confirms a local belief in Japanese food superiority

The telephones are still ringing in Tokyo's top restaurants three weeks after Michelin published its first Asian dining guide, Tokyo Guide, 2008, and awarded the city nearly three times as many stars as Paris. The dust is not settling. Some have complained that they are getting so many calls asking for reservations that they don't have time to serve their customers properly. This is especially true at the eight establishments, such as the venerable Hamadaya, that received the coveted three stars.

The guide has naturally provoked much comment, not to mention some carping, among Japan's immense cohort of self-described food experts. Some complained that Michelin awarded the city far too many stars, as if it amounted to a kind of grade inflation. But it also left some of Europe's greatest chefs — mon dieu! — at the starting line.

Beige, the Tokyo property of nine-star (in three restaurants) impresario Alain Ducasse, received only a single star, something not taken lightly by the French chef, considered by many to be one of the world's greatest, if not the greatest. Le maitre, in an interview with Asia Sentinel for another story, sniffed that he had eaten at a two-star restaurant in Tokyo after Michelin rating and asked the chef if he was trying to play a joke on him by serving such anodyne food. L'Atelier de Joel Robuchon received only two stars, which may be seen as a slight slap at Robuchon himself, who was once named by the Gault-Millau guide as the best chef of the 20th century.

Seeking a little breathing room from the deluge, some owners of the starred

restaurants may be glad that most local book stores sold out their stock of guides and were frantically ordering more copies.

The Japanese have always smugly believed that theirs were the most sophisticated palates in the world. Many in Japan had expected the Michelin Guide to focus exclusively on Tokyo's many Western-style restaurants, assuming that true understanding of Japanese cuisine was, like other aspects of its culture, beyond the comprehension of non-Japanese. And the Japanese have such unique specialties such as fugu, a fish that can be deadly if not properly prepared, and soba kaiseki, a delicate portion of noodles served in an elegant and traditional manner, all of which found a place in the lineup. Of the eight three-star restaurants in the guide, three are French, and five Japanese, the latter including two sushi restaurants.

In Japanese minds Michelin, the world's most famous restaurant guide, confirmed the belief of Japanese superiority spectacularly. The book identifies 150 restaurants as worthy of at least one star. In total, Michelin issued 191 stars in Tokyo — compared with 64 in Paris and 42 in New York.

The Michelin Guide, which is issued annually by the French automobile tire maker, awards one, two and three stars based on excellence in cooking, exemplary service and beauty of the décor and upkeep. A team of three undercover European and two Japanese inspectors spent a year and a half sampling the fare offered by 1,500 Tokyo restaurants, culled from tens of thousands of eating establishments.

Toyoo Tamamura, a food essayist and expert on French cuisine, noted that in France about 90 percent of the starred restaurants serve French cuisine, in Italy most of the restaurants serve Italian food, and so on. "In Tokyo you have a much more varied fare — Japanese, French, Italian, Chinese, Korean ... I think that Michelin wanted to enlarge the field."

Perhaps the number

of stars is not so out of line when one considers that Tokyo is the largest city in the world. Even though Michelin seems to have limited itself to the eight inner city wards, those still have a population of 8 million people, or about the same as New York, and 3.5 times more than Paris. Tokyo boasts between 100,000 and 190,000 restaurants, depending on how you define the urban boundary, probably the heaviest concentration in the world. Put that way it means that only .001 percent of them received at least one star, and only .00009 percent received three.

Tamamura pointed out that many of the restaurants in the French guide are located in the countryside, as befitting a handbook first published in 1900 by a tire company, whose initial purpose was to encourage motoring so that it could sell more tires. Japanese tend to dine in the city.

In another departure reflecting sensitivity to Japanese tastes, the guide gave high marks to restaurants that are, by European standards, mere cubbyholes. That can be seen in the Sukiyabashi Jiro sushi restaurant in the Ginza, a modest establishment run by 82-year-old Jiro Ono and his older son with the help of two assistants.

It rated three stars even though it had a comfort rating of only 1 out of a 5. "It's true that its décor is low key, but that doesn't mean that the cuisine is anything but first rate, said Michelin's Japan spokesman, Taku Suzuki.

In all, 15 sushi restaurants received stars, which is probably a reflection of the international popularity of this Japanese specialty. Says Tamamura, "sushi is very popular in France; it was a main target."

But some connoisseurs fretted that some of Japan's other cuisines did not get the recognition they deserve. Only one unagi (grilled eel) restaurant was starred, and none was handed out for yakiniku, (a beef dish) which many think is one of the country's most notable cuisines.

Japanese are obsessed with the preparation and display of food. Turn on the television during the day and one will as likely encounter a cooking show as a samurai costume drama. Restaurants with aspirations for excellence are held to very high standards and quick approbation if they fall short or cut corners.

The food scandal du jour involves Sanba Kitcho, an Osaka-based chain of upscale restaurants that was caught allegedly mislabeling beef as coming from the top-rated Tajima and Kitcho districts in Hyogo prefecture (better known to Westerners as Kobe Beef), the most expensive in Japan, worth 30,000 yen a kilo, while substituting meat from someplace else.

More recently, that beleaguered company has been accused mislabeling the origin of its conger eel and the eat-by dates of some of its fish products. Ironically, the founder of the chain, the late Sadaichi Yuki is said to have boosted the idea of Japanese food culture as being elitist. He was the first restaurateur ever to be officially named a Person of Culture by the Japanese government.

It is understood that the Tokyo Michelin Guide is just the first of a series of Asian gourmet guides it plans to issue in the coming years. So if you are a restaurant owner in Hong Kong or Shanghai or Beijing, beware. One of your customers may be an undercover Michelin agent sizing you up for stardom.