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From left: A table is set for dinner service at Pierre Gagnaire's Michelin-starred restaurant Pierre, at the Mandarin Oriental, Hong Kong; a large crystal chandelier hangs above Pierre's main dining room; beef tartare served with soft-boiled egg at Pierre; the tables are set at Alain Ducasse's Michelin-starred restaurant Beige, in Tokyo. PHOTOS: BLOOMBERG

Reaching for the stars

Michelin recently launched a restaurant guide for Hong Kong and Macau. Does Taiwan, which is more famous for its street food than its fine-dining scene, have what it takes to get its own version of the 'little red book'?

BY ALISON JENNER
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Last month, chefs in top kitchens across Taiwan were clanging their pots and pans and juggling their precious white truffles in exhilaration over a piece of news.

The Michelin guide, the revered food bible on which chefs pin their careers — and lives — was reportedly coming to Taiwan. “The Government Information Office (GIO) has invited the French Michelin Co to issue a Michelin restaurant guide for Taiwan,” reported the Deutsche Presse Agentur news agency on Dec. 22, quoting the Chinese-language *United Daily News*. “The GIO has reached a consensus with the Michelin Co to issue the guide for Taiwan, hopefully by 2012.”

This piece of news, if true, could potentially propel the careers of Michelin-starred chefs here to levels never seen before and, according to Michelin, increase receipts at their restaurants by nearly one-third. Some figures in the local culinary community might even attain celebrity chef status.

The celebrations were premature. “There are no discussions and no projects between Michelin and the government of Taiwan regarding a possible guide on Taiwan,” Marie-Benedicte Chevet, a spokeswoman for Michelin, said in an e-mail interview.

A follow-up interview with Manfred Peng (彭濟沅), head of the GIO's Department of International Information, revealed that the report was the result of a mix-up. Taiwan was looking at a travel guidebook, not a restaurant guide.

The revelation was more than a little disappointing for those hoping to earn a star or two from Michelin, which had awarded editions to neighbors Tokyo, at the end of 2007, and, in December, Hong Kong and Macau.

STILL IN THE OVEN

In a nation where people greet each other by asking “Have you eaten?” eating is, as the Chinese proverb goes, “even more important than the emperor.”

Such is the fame of Taiwan's *xiao chi* (小吃), or snacks, that they have become an important feature in tourists' plans. Sixty-two percent of inbound visitors in 2007 chose to chomp their way through the fare on offer at the country's night markets, according to a survey by the Tourism Bureau. The next highest-ranked attraction listed by tourists was the National Palace Museum, at 44 percent.

While some would argue that Taiwan does not need Michelin-star restaurants to showcase its cuisine, because its street vendors and night markets are capable of fulfilling a gourmet's desires, is the country enough of a gastronomic haven to compete with neighbors like Hong Kong and Tokyo, whose culinary scenes have been stamped and honored by Michelin?

Don't bet on it is the sentiment from industry insiders here. “Taiwan's culinary standard is wonderful because it has a mix of local and different cuisines from China,” said Tony Chang (張志騰), a professor at Chinese Culture University's (中華大學) Department of Hospitality Management. “In my opinion, Taiwan's Chinese food is of a very high standard, probably among the top three in Southeast Asia. However, the standard of the Western cuisine here is about 10 years behind Hong Kong.”

Another hurdle is the economic cost involved in setting up and maintaining fine-dining establishments that the holy grail of restaurant guides frequently honors.

Although Michelin states that “the criteria to award stars — quality of the products, skills in their preparation, combination of flavors, levels of creativity, value for money and consistency throughout the year and on the entire menu — are the same whatever the country and whatever the type of cuisine,” one would find it hard to imagine that your friendly neighborhood beef noodle stand — even if it fulfills all of Michelin's requirements — would garner a star.

Out of the 12 anonymous inspectors who made the selections for the *Michelin Guide Hong Kong and Macau*, only two were ethnic Chinese. As with the Tokyo guide, the Hong Kong Macau edition ruffled feathers as local foodies debated how a mostly European team of inspectors could accurately judge Asian cuisines. In Tokyo, the guide was criticized for favoring French restaurants, while the Hong Kong and Macau version was attacked for focusing on hotel restaurants.

Here in Taiwan, one wonders, how would a team of mostly non-Mandarin-speaking foreigners who were not well-versed in Chinese culinary traditions navigate their way through Taiwan's restaurants and menus? And, cultural and linguistic barriers aside, does Taiwan measure up to Michelin's standards?

“Frankly, I don't think Taiwan is ready for Michelin yet,” said Justin Quek (郭文秀), an award-winning chef and owner of La Petite Cuisine at the Evergreen Laurel Hotel (長榮桂冠酒店) in Taipei. “I've worked in Michelin restaurants before. Their criteria in the past were very simple, but times have changed and getting three stars is no longer like those days. The focus has shifted and is no longer just about food.”



View from the stars

Michelin-starred chefs give their perspectives on Taiwan's gastronomic scene



“Taiwan has got all the winning cards for [a Michelin guide]: a genuine culinary tradition, which is rich and diverse. More importantly, there is in Taiwan a growing interest in eating well, rediscovering Taiwanese cuisine and discovering new flavors. There is also a stable of young, talented chefs who are eager to succeed.”

— ALAIN DUCASSE, CURRENT HOLDER OF 15 MICHELIN STARS AND THE FIRST CHEF TO OWN RESTAURANTS CARRYING THREE MICHELIN STARS IN THREE CITIES



“I'm a big fan of Taiwanese cuisine. The culinary standards in Taiwan are very high and are constantly improving. Since Taiwan is such an important place with regards to food, I'm sure it would make an interesting destination for Michelin — hopefully we'll see a Michelin guide to Taiwan in the not-too-distant future.”

— CHAN YAN-TAK (陳恩德), THE FIRST CHINESE CHEF TO BE AWARDED THREE MICHELIN STARS



“I have always thought that the most important thing in cuisine is human beings. They can belong to any country; if they have talent, if they have passion, if they are eager to share and to please then they can achieve anything. So, yes, of course there can be a chef in Taiwan that will be awarded three stars.”

— PIERRE GAGNAIRE, MULTI-STARRED FRENCH CHEF WITH RESTAURANTS IN PARIS, LONDON, TOKYO, HONG KONG, SEOUL AND DUBAI

PHOTOS: BLOOMBERG AND EPA

— ALISON JENNER

Michelin, however, asserts that stars are based on the food on the plate and “do not take into account the decor and service which are the categories of comfort and [are designated] by the *couverts* pictograms (the spoon and fork).” Jean-Luc Naret, director of the Michelin guides, told the *Taipei Times* in an e-mail interview. (The spoon and fork symbols in Michelin guides signify “restaurant classification according to comfort.”)

Still, when readers visit a three-star establishment recommended by Michelin, they expect the best: the finest ingredients, flawless service, luxurious settings. A cursory glance at the starred restaurants listed in various Michelin guides invariably reveals lavish interiors.

“[Michelin-starred restaurants] invest millions; silverware, crockery — all these are not cheap,” said Quek. “That's why chefs who want three stars are slaves to the trade. They might get three stars but their pockets are empty.”

MAKING A MEAL OF IT

There have been many chefs who have fallen into depression or run their funds dry to maintain their Michelin status. In 1995, Pierre Gagnaire became the first chef to go bankrupt running a three-star restaurant. When Marc Meneau of L'Esperance in Vezelay, France, lost his third star in 1999, he told *Dining in France* that, “It's like losing a child.”

Because of the high level of investment necessary to reach and maintain three-star status, more than a few chefs have turned their backs on Michelin at the pinnacle of their success. In 2005, Alain Senderens returned the three Michelin stars he earned for his Parisian restaurant Lucas Carton. More recently, in November last year, Olivier Roellinger announced plans to close his three-star restaurant, La Maison du Bricourt, in Brittany, France.

French chef Bernard Loiseau, the late owner of La Cote d'Or restaurant in Burgundy, committed suicide by shooting himself in the mouth with a rifle in 2003 shortly after another respected guide, the *Gault Millau*, downgraded his restaurant by two points. There were also rumors that he might lose one of his three stars from Michelin (it later emerged that this was not the case). According to a BBC dispatch, earlier the same year Loiseau told another three-star chef, Jacques Lameloise, “If I lose a star, I'll kill myself.”

CHANGING THE MENU

Why do the stars matter so much?

Having one's name and restaurant in a Michelin guide, which is viewed as the supreme arbiter of culinary excellence, means not only prestige. It can turn an unknown chef into a wealthy celebrity. For a city to be given a local edition of the “little red book,” as it is colloquially known, is to bestow legitimacy on that city's fine-dining scene in general.

Food is an important part of the tourism industry in most countries, and Taiwan is no different. A local edition of the red book would lure gourmants to make food pilgrimages here and provide enormous positive publicity for the country. The first edition of the *Michelin Guide Tokyo* sold out within two days.

A Taiwan edition would also motivate chefs to push for better quality and consistency.

“A chef who gets a star will be encouraged to work harder to keep it. A chef who does not get a star will also work harder in a bid to attain one,” said Chang, who is also the President of the Taiwan Formosa Chefs' Association (台灣福爾摩莎廚藝美食協會).

At a media event for the launch of the *Michelin Guide Hong Kong and Macau*, Naret let slip that Michelin's inspectors had, during the assessment process, had anonymous meals at restaurants in Taiwan. With Hong Kong and Macau being the second Asian cities after Tokyo to receive the red book, the question of when Taiwan might receive such an honor beckons.

“Taiwan will only get it after China does,” said Chang, who stopped short of commenting further on the political sensitivities between the two countries.

Naret, for his part, confirmed that the recently launched Hong Kong and Macau guide is “indeed the first step of the guide in China,” although, “It's surely not the last even if it's yet too early to say where and when the next edition will be launched.”

Political sensitivities aside, Taiwan has a high chance of getting its own guide, said Naret — although it might have to wait a while.

“Taiwan's culinary standards are very interesting, as noted by the inspectors after they've been there, having anonymous meals in many restaurants,” said Naret. “The cuisine is diverse and very interesting and it's sure that Taipei is on the map for a Michelin guide. It took 105 years for the guide to cross the Atlantic and launch a guide in New York. It will surely not take another 105 years before we launch a [restaurant] guide in Taipei.”