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AIMING FOR THE STARS

A local version of the famous Michelin Guide could be here within the next couple of years – but are Dubai’s restaurants ready?

By Jason de Souza

AS LONG AS RESTAURANTS have been in business, those who eat out have sought to prevent indigestion by canvassing opinions from food reviewers and gastronomes. For more than a century a little red book has aimed to fill that role, while dishing out generous servings of burning ambition, blissful euphoria and raging jealousy as chefs and restaurateurs around the world compete to earn that most coveted of all status signifiers in the business: three Michelin stars. And it appears a local version of the reality show that accompanies those annual rankings could soon play here in Dubai.

Michael Ellis, international director of the Michelin Guides, told an industry conference in Dubai that it was “only a matter of time” before they compile a list of the best restaurants in the UAE, particularly since the regional headquarters of the tyre company, which publishes the guides, is based here. He refused to offer any details, in line with the company’s policy of never commenting on development strategy.

But is the UAE ready? While international franchises and concepts loosely linked to celebrity chefs are mainstream fare for residents and tourists, there are few homegrown concepts, fine dining or street-level, that serve the high-quality cooking deemed worth a stop — and one star, although being merely commended is enough to inflate menu prices. Nevertheless, industry insiders say tourism authorities are pushing hard for a local guide in two years’ time, ahead of Expo 2020 Dubai. ▶



will raise their standards. We're one major city that has been neglected far too long."

Atherton believes a local guide would separate the wheat from the chaff since diners understand the pecking order. He offers the example of Stay by Yannick Alléno, whose food he describes as wonderful and which he thinks would "go to two stars straightaway".

"As a foodie, if I came here, I'd automatically want to go there," he says. "Whereas now I'd ask the concierge at the hotel, and he'd say, no it's always empty — go to La Petit Maison. But I've been to Stay twice and it's amazing."

Even a mention in the guide can make or break a restaurant, agrees Vida D'Souza, CEO of the international hospitality audit firm GDI International, and former Vice-President of Business Excellence for Taj Hotels and Resorts. "A Michelin rating can help business boom significantly when awarded, or fall dramatically when withdrawn from an establishment. Restaurants usually report as much as 25 per cent increase in guests and average revenue increase of 10 per cent or more. This means guests are looking for that sublime epicurean experience, and are willing to spend more for the meals, as well as to wait in line for the experience and reserve months ahead," she says.

"Eating at a Michelin-star restaurant gives diners bragging rights."

Michelin's inspectors visit restaurants anonymously and pay for their meals. They then rate their meal on five parameters: product quality, flavour and cooking technique, the chef's personality as expressed in the food, value for money, and consistency. Inspectors do not look at table settings, service quality or interiors, the guide's website says.

Venues looking to attract Michelin inspectors should therefore be active in traditional and social media to ensure they are top of mind during the research stage, says Samantha Wood, founder of the impartial review website Foodiva.net and curator of dine around experiences in the UAE. Brands could also encourage clients to write to Michelin directly via its website or Twitter. "What is most important though is that a restaurant focuses on delivering an extraordinary dining experience, with a focus on well-executed food."

However, the pressure to win and maintain a ranking can be tremendous. ▶



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▶ "Dubai would be a better place if the Michelin guide was here, it would really shake up the scene," says Jason Atherton, the chef behind Marina Social in Dubai and Pollen Street Social in London, who has led restaurants that went on to win Michelin accolades worldwide. "Michelin is my life. Every single restaurant I have is in a Michelin guide. It's the only truly international brand; you can't buy it. You either get it or you don't."

Himanshu Saini, the 30-year-old head chef behind the homegrown Indian restaurants Tresind and Carnival, says Dubai needs external recognition, though he believes restaurants run by chefs with starred outlets elsewhere will be acknowledged first. "The rankings bring out the best from each restaurant — even if there's just one that gets listed, all the others

Opposite page, top: Chefs are pictured during the preparation of the gala dinner organised for the presentation of the Michelin Guide Germany 2017 in Berlin. Bottom: Stay by Yannick Alléno is widely considered one of the best restaurants in Dubai.





► “At a Michelin-star restaurant, chefs are expected to reach perfection daily, in every dish, at every meal, during every delivery of produce, even while prepping, and then rinse and repeat, every single day that follows. It creates a certain discipline, provides a tangible goal to achieve, and helps to build enormous self-confidence in the product,” D’Souza says, admitting that the experience can end in tragedy. “Chefs tend to take it seriously and personally.”

In February 2003, French chef Bernard Loiseau (the inspiration for Pixar’s *Ratatouille*) committed suicide when his restaurant was downgraded by Gault&Millau, a similar guide, and reportedly after meeting with a Michelin team “concerned” about standards — but before that year’s ratings were declared. The scenario was replayed in January 2016, when French-Swiss chef Benoît Violier, dubbed the best chef in the world, died of a self-inflicted gunshot shortly before the publication of *guide rouge*, as the French know the Michelin Guide. Gordon Ramsay wept copiously when his establishment lost its stars, comparing the experience to losing a girlfriend.

Such incidents have yet to deter owners and operators from, quite literally, aiming for the stars. D’Souza offers the example of Del Posto, a classic stop for Italian fare in New York, which won two stars in 2007 and lost one in 2009. Its operators, who include Mario Batali and Joseph Bastianich, immediately

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The pressure to maintain his Michelin stars is widely believed to have played a role in chef Benoît Violier’s suicide last year. Above right: Meanwhile, Himanshu Saini, head chef behind Tresind and Carnival, believes a local version will lift the whole industry.

invested \$500,000 in an upgrade, but the restaurant is yet to recoup its former glory.

The opening investment for a Michelin restaurant averages €2.35 million, according to a study by the *Cornell Hotel & Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, with other investments ranging from €50,000 to €20 million. But nearly half of the restaurants sampled were not profitable. “So it’s a question of balance,” D’Souza says.

If the stars do descend on Dubai, Wood says she hopes ranked restaurants will keep their prices in check. “I sincerely hope that if Michelin does start rating Dubai, the restaurants here don’t use this accolade as an excuse to hike prices, given the cost of dining out here is already much more expensive than major cities around the world.” ■