

Book Review: Michelin Guide: Tokyo 2008

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The Michelin Guide to Tokyo, the French tyre-maker's foray into Asian culinary critique, should be released in Australia soon, and just in case you're thinking of going out to get it, don't bother. As a guide, it's useless.

Many of the restaurants listed in the characteristically red gastronomic guide are inaccessible to tourists according to a number of Japanese food critics. Some eateries included by Michelin don't accept credit cards, don't reveal prices or the content of their menus (it's seasonal, or changes depending on how the chef feels), close too early (a three Michelin star sushi joint, Sukiyabashi Jiro, can close as early as 8 p.m.), are virtually impossible to find (tucked away in dark alleys with little signage) or have poor facilities like shared toilets and only counter seating.

What's more, Tokyo has around 160,000 eateries, yet only 1500 or a mere one percent was visited by the five undercover reviewers who penned the guide (two Japanese, three European), begging the question, is the guide truly representative of the Tokyo food scene? Add to this the fact that a record 191 stars were awarded to 150 restaurants featured in the Tokyo guide (all received at least one of three stars, which is unprecedented in Michelin guide publishing history), means Tokyo scored higher than Paris (97 stars) and New York (54).

One well known food critic Masuhiro Yamamoto claimed that the number of stars awarded was "excessive" and questioned the reliability of Michelin's rating system. Tokyo foodies are very upset--perhaps Michelin just doesn't understand Japanese food?

Certainly, the Tokyo controversy has raised some doubts about the credibility of Michelin guides. Michelin first published its guide in 1900 to assist French motorists find hotels and eateries while on the road. It has since been publishing guides in European and American cities, and most guides conform more or less to the original idea of encouraging road travel, and the use of lots of tyres, preferably Michelin ones. But if Tokyo's starring restaurants are so inaccessible to travellers, what's the real reason for Michelin's Tokyo foray?

According to Esquire Japan's January issue, it's all about the Michelin brand. There are tons of restaurant and hotel guides in Japan, (one of the best I think is a series put out by magazine dancyu) but Michelin is the only one with an international reputation for excellence. Expanding the brand to Tokyo, arguably one of the world's most interesting food capitals, makes perfect brand strategy sense.

But the Japanese voices of protest claim that it's a strategy that's

backfired because foreigners just don't understand Japanese food, sensibilities, presentation, food culture etc. One such voice belongs to food critic Yuya Tomosato (check out his blog) whose scathing critique of the guide in the January issue of respected magazine 'Bungei Shunju' caused a right stir. In it he claimed that many of the restaurants in the Tokyo guide, including Kanda which was one of eight restaurants awarded the coveted three stars, is the kind of restaurant that 'foreigners would like', but is not really Japanese.

Food journalist Noboru Umeya told another Japanese publication about the importance of 'jouren' or regular customers to the value of a typical Japanese restaurant. Chefs get to know their customers and cater to them specifically. They become very special places for the jouren, and something that a one-time visitor could never experience. How do you weave that custom into the Michelin rating system?

Furthermore, there are many Japanese establishments that are so discreet, you can only enter if you have a personal introduction. This practice of turning back first timer is known as 'ichigensan', and for example, Kaishindo, a most exquisite handmade biscuit company, will only accept orders from people who have had a personal introduction into the clientele circle. This is the 10th year of my desperate search for an introduction….

Tomosato also wrote in the Bungei Shunju article that he knew of a number of top Tokyo establishments that refused to be included in the Michelin guide, concluding that the Michelin guide is promotional, not critical. But given Tokyo has around 160,000 eateries compared with Paris and New York which have around 20,000, and that Tokyo eateries boast a pretty high general standard of gastronomic excellence, it's not hard to find the hidden noodle bar or sushi counter where you can have a great meal for a great price. Such places may never feature in any guide, but for the intrepid culinary adventurer, who needs Michelin?

Finally, the company with whom we share a meal is often the most important factor in its enjoyment. No guide can factor that in.

Michelin Guide to Tokyo's website is here . It's in Japanese.

by Masako Fukui Copyright Kei's Kitchen (2008)

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