

Lunch with M.

Undercover with a Michelin inspector.

by John Colapinto November 23, 2009



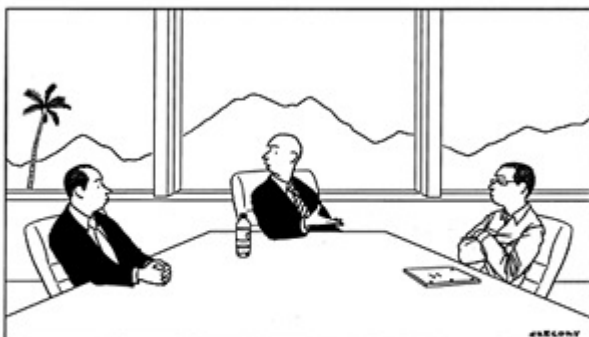
“Was every single element prepared exactly perfectly, technically correct?” M. asked.

One afternoon last month, a woman in her early thirties, with shoulder-length blond hair and large brown eyes, arrived at Jean Georges, on the ground floor of the Trump International Hotel, in midtown Manhattan. The restaurant, which is owned by the chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten, and is one of the highest rated in the world, has an understated décor, with bare white walls and floor-to-ceiling windows. The woman took a seat at one of the tables in the center of the room. She wore a light-blue dress with a high neckline, little makeup, and no jewelry. There was nothing remarkable about her appearance, and her demeanor was quiet and unassuming, as if designed to deflect attention—a trait indispensable for her profession as an inspector for the Michelin hotel-and-restaurant guide.

Conceived in France at the beginning of the last century, the Michelin guide today has editions in twenty-three countries and is one of the best-selling restaurant guides in the world. It operates on the principle that only reviews by anonymous, professionally trained experts can be trusted for accurate assessments of a restaurant's food and service. Major newspapers like the *Times* aspire to anonymity for their restaurant reviewers but rarely achieve it. In his recent memoir, "Born Round," Frank Bruni, who served as the *Times*' restaurant reviewer from 2004 until earlier this year, describes his efforts at camouflage—using aliases, wearing a wig and fake mustache—which were mostly futile once the dust-jacket photograph from one of his early books was posted on the Internet. Photographs of Bruni's successor, Sam Sifton, doctored in several ways to suggest what he might look like in disguise, began to circulate on foodie Web sites like Eater months before he took up his duties.

Michelin has gone to extraordinary lengths to maintain the anonymity of its inspectors. Many of the company's top executives have never met an inspector; inspectors themselves are advised not to disclose their line of work, even to their parents (who might be tempted to boast about it); and, in all the years that it has been putting out the guide, Michelin has refused to allow its inspectors to speak to journalists. The inspectors write reports that are distilled, in annual "stars meetings" at the guide's various national offices, into the ranking of three stars, two stars, or one star—or no stars. (Establishments that Michelin deems unworthy of a visit are not included in the guide.) A three-star Michelin ranking—like that enjoyed by Jean Georges—is exceedingly rare. Only twenty-six three-star restaurants exist in France, and only eighty-one in the world.

In 2005, Michelin launched its first foray into North America, with the publication of the 2006 New York City guide. (It has also published guides to Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and San Francisco.) Since coming to America, Michelin has learned that its brand of Gallic opacity and unapologetic gastronomic élitism has been a tougher sell here than it was in Europe or Asia. (The Tokyo edition of the guide, which debuted in 2007, sold more than a hundred thousand copies on its first day.) Five years after its arrival in New York City, Michelin has failed to knock the *Times* from its perch as the premier arbiter of restaurants in the city, or to outsell the Zagat guide, which relies on customer surveys for its restaurant rankings.



"Seth, here, is one of the best young creative compromisers in the business."

This fall, in an effort to promote what the managing director of the guides, a forty-eight-year-old Frenchman named Jean-Luc Naret, calls a “better understanding” of the guides’ means and methods, Michelin launched a Web site, *Famously Anonymous*, to explain to Americans the concept of the Michelin inspector; it has also recently opened Twitter accounts for its reviewers. But by far the most salient sign of Michelin’s new openness was its decision, this fall, to allow me to meet—and to eat with—one of its New York-based inspectors.

Naret joined me and the inspector for lunch. He has a handsome, darkly tanned face, and favors designer suits with flared-collar shirts and no tie. Although the inspector was never identified to the staff, Naret, who eats often at Jean Georges and is well-known to the restaurant’s staff, considered her anonymity compromised; she would never pay an inspection visit to the restaurant again. As a precondition of our interview, I was told that certain details of the inspector’s personal life would be obscured—or not divulged to me at all. When I asked her name, the inspector laughed nervously. “No,” she said. “Let’s not even say it. Make something up.”

I suggested the first thing that came to mind. “Maxime?”

Naret smiled, and then, with a soupçon of extra secrecy, began referring to her as M.

Maxime is a New Yorker. She said that speaking to me about her work felt “surreal.” “We spend all our time not letting people know who we are,” she said, but admitted that she had told her husband what she does for a living. “He’s an attorney; he knows all about confidentiality.” For most others, she keeps her occupation vague. “We try not to lie,” she said. “You say you’re ‘in publishing,’ something like that.”

The waiter, a young man in a dark suit, handed us menus. I asked Maxime how she chooses what to order.

“You’re looking for something that really tests a number of quality ingredients and then something that’s a little complex, because you want to see what the kitchen can do,” she said. “We would never order something like a salad. We rarely order soup.” She decided to try the foie-gras brûlée, “although I usually avoid it, because of the calories.”

Maxime eats out more than two hundred days of the year, lunch and dinner. She eats the maximum number of courses offered—at Jean Georges, we were having three courses, plus dessert; that way, she said, “you really get to see the most food”—and she is required to eat everything on her plate. It is a regimen that calls to mind the force-feeding of the ducks that supply Vongerichten with his velvety foie gras, but Maxime, blessed with a quick metabolism, had managed to avoid obesity, an occupational hazard.

She was tending toward the Arctic char for her main course but couldn’t decide about her second course. The waiter reappeared and asked if he could answer any questions.

“Can you tell me about the crab toast?” she asked.

“It’s Peekytoe crab, a chiffonade of tarragon as well as chives topped with white sesame seeds, toasted in the oven, finished with a miso mustard, and a pear salad on the side,” he said.

“It’s new?” she said.

“About a week on the menu.”

She asked the waiter to give her a minute and then leaned in to me. Inspectors love it when they ask a question and can tell that a waiter has made up an answer, she explained, adding, “That never happens here.”

The original *Guide Michelin* was developed by André Michelin, an engineer, and his younger brother, Édouard. Born into a wealthy manufacturing family in Clermont-Ferrand, the brothers, in 1895, presented a new design for a pneumatic tire for cars. Automobiles were still a rarity on roads in France. The brothers had the idea that a guidebook to hotels in the French countryside would encourage people to climb into a car (equipped with Michelin tires) and hit the open road. The first edition, published in 1900, was a five-hundred-and-seventy-five-page alphabetical listing of towns throughout France and the distances between them, with recommendations for hotels and places to refuel, and instructions on how to change a flat. In a preface to the first edition, André wrote, “This work comes out with the century; it will last as long.” In 1933, the Michelin brothers introduced the first countrywide restaurant listings and unveiled the star system for ranking food, with one star denoting “a very good restaurant in its class”; two stars “excellent cooking, worth a detour”; and three stars “exceptional cuisine, worth a special journey.”

Over the years, other publications attempted to challenge Michelin but without success. To offset the expense of sending inspectors to restaurants across the country, rival guides were obliged to accept free meals, or to offer favors, like free advertising in the guides’ pages. Michelin’s inspectors faced no such quid pro quo. A century after André and Édouard created their first tire patent, Michelin has grown into one of the most successful multinational corporations in the world, a company more than three times the size of Goodyear. Michelin’s profits help to defray the costs of food inspectors’ salaries, travel budgets, and restaurant bills (which can run into real money at the upper end of the gastronomic scale: six years ago, at Bernard Loiseau’s La Côte d’Or, a three-star restaurant in Burgundy, the chicken stuffed with carrots, leeks, and truffles was two hundred and sixty-seven dollars). This independence, coupled with the jealously guarded anonymity of its inspectors, is what gives Michelin its aura of incorruptibility. The French chef Paul Bocuse, who helped create *nouvelle cuisine* in the nineteen-sixties, and whose restaurant near Lyons has held a three-star Michelin ranking for a record forty-five years, has said, “Michelin is the only guide that counts.” Indeed, in France publication of the guide each year sparks the kind of media excitement attendant on the Academy Awards. The days and weeks leading up to publication day are given over to endless debate, speculation, and rumor on TV and in newspapers over who might lose, and who might gain, a star. The results, revealed in early March, provide either a very public triumph or a very public humiliation for the chefs concerned, and a corresponding rise or drop in revenues for their restaurants.

Not everyone, however, is convinced that anonymous experts with bottomless expense accounts are the key to a dependable restaurant guide. “We’re coming at it from a completely different perspective,” says Nina Zagat, who dreamed up the idea of a customer-driven food survey with her husband, Tim, in their Upper West Side apartment thirty-one years ago. Today, Zagat covers more than ninety cities worldwide, is available as an iPhone app, and remains the top-selling restaurant guide in New York. “We’ve never believed that there were experts that should tell you what to do.”

“I’d love to know what their training is,” Tim Zagat added, speaking about Michelin’s inspectors. “Usually, the experts—for example, the major critics for the major papers—you know what their background is. But this business of making a virtue out of *not* knowing? I question it. How are you supposed to judge their expertise if you don’t have any idea who they are?”

Bernard Loiseau, the chef and owner of La Côte d'Or, once told a fellow-chef that if he ever lost one of his Michelin stars he would kill himself. Loiseau had made a life's ambition of becoming a three-star chef, a goal he achieved in 1991, seventeen years after arriving at La Côte d'Or. His ranking led to a line of frozen food bearing his name and likeness, and the Legion of Honor, awarded by President François Mitterrand. But by 2002 Loiseau's classic cooking was losing ground to trendier fusion styles, business was slowing, and he was swimming in debt. As Rudolph Chelminski relates in his 2005 book "The Perfectionist," the food writer François Simon published a story in *Le Figaro* hinting that Loiseau was on thin ice with Michelin. Loiseau, who had suffered periodic depression for years, sank into despair. In early February, 2003, he was notified by Michelin that he would keep his third star. Still, Simon wrote another piece, in which he suggested that Loiseau and his third star were "living on borrowed time." Two and a half weeks later, after a day at work in the kitchen, Loiseau killed himself with a shotgun blast to the head. He was fifty-two.

Loiseau's death ushered in a dark period for the guide. In early 2004, an inspector named Pascal Rémy broke the company's code of silence when he published a book based on a diary that he had kept of fifteen years on the road as a Michelin inspector in France. (Rémy, having notified Michelin of his plans to publish, was fired; he later sued.) Rémy's book, "L'Inspecteur Se Met à Table" ("The Inspector Sits Down at the Table"), described the inspector's life as one of loneliness and underpaid drudgery, driving around the French countryside for weeks on end, dining alone and under intense pressure to file reports. Michelin had always hinted that it employed roughly a hundred inspectors to cover Europe, but Rémy claimed that it employed only eleven within France when he was first hired, in 1988—a number that had shrunk to five by the time he left, in 2003. Contrary to Michelin's assertion that every starred restaurant was revisited several times a year, Rémy said only one visit every few years was possible. Furthermore, he wrote, the guide played favorites—most notably with Bocuse, whose restaurant in Lyons was known, according to Rémy, to have declined drastically in quality yet continued to hold three stars. Rémy's revelations made the front page of *Le Monde*. Derek Brown, the director of the guides at the time, denied Rémy's assertions in an interview in the *Times*, but he remained vague about how many full-time inspectors the guide employs in France and offered an anemic rebuttal to Rémy's claim that certain three-star chefs were untouchable: "There would be little sense in saying a restaurant was worth three stars if it weren't true, if for no other reason than that the customer would write and tell us."

The Rémy affair occurred during Brown's final year at the guide. As his successor, Michelin hired the charismatic and outgoing Naret, who worked for many years as a hotelier, but whose professional focus has not been food. He boasts of giving more than two thousand interviews a year, in which he tells journalists how many inspectors Michelin employs in France (about fifteen), throughout the world (ninety), and in the United States (ten).

Naret introduced the idea of expanding into North America and chose New York City as the best place to start. The first New York City guide, which appeared in November, 2005, was created by a team of five European inspectors, who examined fifteen hundred restaurants in all five boroughs, and selected five hundred for inclusion. Their selection was criticized, by some, as Francocentric. The *Times* noted that more than half the restaurants that received at least two stars "could be considered French." Among the one-star restaurants was the now defunct La Goulue, which one highly regarded New York food critic describes as "this dinosaur of an outdated, mediocre kind of French bistro on the Upper East Side." And the 2006 guide failed to award stars to Eleven Madison Park (Danny Meyer's haute-cuisine restaurant), Craft (the "Top Chef" head

judge Tom Colicchio's take on contemporary American food), "or any number of celebrated restaurants," the critic adds. "It was one of those things, like, only a bunch of French people could respond that way."

Naret, who says that he never intended to continue to use European teams, established an office in New York for the next year's guide and began recruiting New Yorkers. He received thirty-five hundred applications.

Though born in New York City, Maxime moved with her family to a nearby "rural countryside" town, which, she says, has "an extraordinarily active foodie community." Maxime's family was discerning about food, and came into the city frequently to sample the restaurants. "I ate falafel at Mamoun's and bagels and lox from Russ & Daughters before I'd even heard of a peanut-butter sandwich," she said. The family also travelled abroad, and she learned early about the Michelin guide. "Other kids wanted a Barbie or something. I wanted to go to a three-star restaurant in Paris." Maxime's fascination with food was not confined to haute cuisine. "It's a global food passion," as she put it. Big Macs, tacos from "these divey little delis in Sunset Park," Chinese food from "a Szechuan restaurant that's a total dump," even hot dogs from Papaya King's grimy corner kiosks in Manhattan elicit groans of pleasure: "Oh, *fantastic* hot dogs!"

Linda Bartoshuk, a professor of community dentistry and behavioral science at the University of Florida, has for more than three decades done research into genetic variations in the perception of taste. Through studies of the disposition and the density of taste buds on the tongues of test subjects, Bartoshuk has divided people into three categories: supertasters, tasters, and non-tasters. Most food and wine experts would fall into the "taster" category. (Supertasters, despite their name, have too many taste buds and are thus oversensitive to flavor, and tend to prefer bland foods; non-tasters can eat an exquisite risotto and say, "Eh.") I asked Maxime if she believed that she had some biological advantage when it came to tasting and discerning flavors. "You could argue that the inspectors have some biological makeup, or you could argue that they eat so much that they have the grounds for comparison," she said. "And they have their training, the professional training."

A degree in hospitality, hotel management, or cooking is mandatory for Michelin inspectors. Every job that Maxime held, from high school on, had been in the domestic food, wine, or restaurant industry. She got a master's from N.Y.U. in food studies, and obtained a sommelier's certification. Six years ago, she was working in a food-and-hospitality job in a city far from New York when she learned that Michelin was recruiting inspectors to produce a New York City guide. "I immediately started stalking Jean-Luc," she said. She had several preliminary interviews in New York, during which she was warned about the rigors of life as an inspector—the travel, the regimen of constant eating, the pressure to fill out meticulously detailed reports on time, the enforced anonymity, the low pay. ("Let's just say it's not about the money," she said.)

"The interview process is a bit like trying to scare you off," she went on. "You really have to be committed. It's your life. It's not like a nine-to-five job." Nor is it all about three-star dining. "The stars are only ten per cent of the selection," she said. "The vast majority of the time, we're hiking around the Upper East Side, we're eating at neighborhood restaurants, we're hiking around Brooklyn." Assigned specific areas of the city to cover, Maxime, who lives in Manhattan, spends weeks riding the subway out to the farthest reaches of Queens to make her way through a selection of Thai restaurants, eating two meals a day, every day, and she typically eats alone, since talking with a spouse or friend is frowned upon.

After making the first cut, she was obliged to order and eat a series of dinners in New York restaurants under the scrutiny of seasoned European inspectors. "You don't know what you're doing, so you're, like, What do I

pick? What do I eat? And then they show you the wine list to see what wine you choose.” After the meal, she was required to write a paper analyzing the experience, while an inspector looked on. “And then there’s also the kind of covert-ops part,” she said. “You never know the name of the person you’re meeting, you never know where they’re meeting you until right before, so they call you up and say ‘Meet me at the corner of XYZ and XYZ.’ ”

All candidates are flown to France to take part in the Michelin training program. “You’ve got to go to the mother ship to understand the origins of the system,” she said. The fundamentals include not only the star rankings but also the *couverts*: the crossed-knife-and-spoon icons used to rank the ambience, comfort, and service of a given restaurant. The *couverts* range from one to four, in ascending order of quality, and they can be in black or red ink. (Red ink denotes exceptional service and décor.) After their time in France, trainees receive additional instruction in another European country. Maxime was sent to England, where, she says, she contracted her only bout of food poisoning, from a pork-belly dish.

When she returned to New York, she was required to apprentice under one of the European inspectors. “There’s no point in sending you off on your own if you’re going to come back and say, ‘I don’t know if it’s a two-*couvert* or a three-*couvert*’ or ‘Oh, I thought it was a star’ ”—only to have the senior inspector go back to the restaurant and discover that the food is, as she put it, “junk.” This period of apprenticeship generally lasts three to six months, but at any point an applicant can be told that he or she is not working out.

The waiter arrived and placed before Maxime a large white plate. At the center was her foie gras, a short pillar of puréed duck liver on a piece of crisp toast with a lacy web of caramelized sugar on top; the sides were studded with cherries and sprinkled with pistachios, and a transparent sauce, made of white port gelée, surrounded the entire creation like a moat. She considered the dish for a few moments, as if trying to determine the best angle of attack. With the side of her fork, she broke off a piece of the complicated construction, and tasted it. The dish, which I later tried, activated every sense with which humans are equipped: the foie gras was smooth and as rich as butter, its silky texture contrasting with the caramelized sugar, which shattered like a pane of microscopically thin glass against the teeth and tongue, its sweetness offset by the sour cherries, the rounded aromatic flavor of the toasted nuts, and the texture and taste of the port gelée.

“Excellent,” Maxime said.

I asked her what she liked about it.

“It’s not really a ‘like’ and a ‘not like,’ ” she said. “It’s an *analysis*. You’re eating it and you’re looking for the quality of the products. At this level, they have to be top quality. You’re looking at ‘Was every single element prepared exactly perfectly, technically correct?’ And then you’re looking at the creativity. Did it work? Did the balance of ingredients work? Was there good texture? Did everything come together? Did something overpower something else? Did something not work with something else? The pistachios—everything was perfect.”

When her second appetizer arrived—the crab toast topped with toasted sesame seeds—she dipped the tines of her fork into a thick line of dark-green sauce that bisected the narrow rectangle of crab toast, and touched it to her tongue. Her eyes grew wide.

“This sauce is really good,” she said. “It’s so Jean-Georges. He does this French-and-Asian thing.” She warned me that she would need a few seconds to figure out its precise ingredients. (She refused to divulge them, on

the ground that Vongerichten would consider the recipe “a trade secret.” I later learned from one of the waiters that the ingredients include powdered English mustard and soy sauce.) “It’s so complex,” she said. “It makes me smile.”

Her Arctic char arrived, on a bed of watercress rémoulade, and accompanied by a julienne of apple. She took a bite. “It’s perfectly cooked,” she said, excitedly. “I mean, it’s *textbook*.”

For New York City’s chefs—particularly those raised and trained in France—the arrival of the Michelin guide was both a blessing and a curse. Eric Ripert, the chef and co-owner of Le Bernardin, a three-star Michelin restaurant in midtown Manhattan, attended culinary school in France and trained in several three-star restaurants there. “Most of us very young cooks were aspiring to be one day a three-star chef,” Ripert told me. “Very few of us were aspiring to have a bistro.” But when Ripert joined Le Bernardin, in 1991, Michelin did not yet have an outpost in New York, and there were no plans to open one. “I remember sometimes chefs here, especially the French ones—and even some American ones—we were a bit frustrated that we will never be judged by Michelin,” Ripert said. “But at the same time we were a little bit, like, more relaxed because obviously the Michelin puts pressure on chefs and restaurateurs to be excellent.”

Le Bernardin was one of only four restaurants in New York (along with Jean Georges, Thomas Keller’s Per Se, and the now defunct Alain Ducasse at the Essex House) that earned three stars in the debut issue of the Michelin guide, and it has held on to its three stars ever since. Ripert estimates that revenues increased by eighteen per cent when the first guide came out, but the pressure to hold on to his stars has also escalated. “Today when I wake up and I go to work I don’t think *guide*, I don’t think *stars*,” he insisted. “You can’t. When I go to work, I think about my day and about what I have to achieve during my day as a chef.” Still, Ripert admitted that, just before the publication of a new guide, he gets nervous. “It’s not in my mind until a week before, and then every day I think about it,” he said.

Like Ripert, Jean-Georges Vongerichten trained in three-star restaurants in France, and he was eager to know how its inspectors would rate him internationally, yet he also dreaded that knowledge. At a party thrown by Michelin at Rockefeller Center on the evening that this year’s star rankings were announced, I spoke to Vongerichten, a dapper man with slicked-back dark hair and intense dark eyes. He was “happy and relieved,” he said, to have retained his three-star ranking for Jean Georges, but he added, “Ah, but we lost a star, too—for my restaurant JoJo.” He was referring to the moderately priced restaurant he runs out of a town house on East Sixty-fourth Street. In the previous four guides, JoJo had earned one star. Now it had none. Vongerichten was determined to get the rating back. “I will ask for the report on JoJo,” Vongerichten told me. (Michelin will, on request, supply to chefs the inspectors’ written report on their restaurant.) “I will study it. The good thing is, you have a year to make it better!”

Also at the party was the chef Daniel Boulud, a short, dark-haired man in a double-breasted suit, who bustled through the crowd, happily accepting congratulations from all who recognized him. That morning, Boulud had received a call from Naret informing him that, for the first time, his restaurant Daniel had been promoted from two stars to three. To many in the food-and-restaurant industry, it was overdue. Daniel consistently drew top rankings in the Zagat guide and for years had earned the *Times*’ highest rank of four stars. During my lunch with Maxime, I had asked about Michelin’s ranking of Daniel.

“We got beat up a lot the last five years for not giving him three,” she said. “But it wasn’t there.”

“In terms of consistency?” I asked.

“Consistency—and accuracy,” she said. “It’s just technical. I mean, cooking is a science, and either it’s right or it’s wrong. And that’s something that’s very objective. Either a sauce is prepared accurately—or it’s not. A fish is cooked accurately—or it’s not. There’s the talent, the creativity that has to be applied to get a three-star—he has to be a very talented chef—but there was just a lot of inconsistency.” This year, she added, “it was so obvious. It was so solid.” Michelin sent inspectors back to eat at Daniel eight times over the year, Naret told me. At the stars meeting, which he oversees, every inspector’s report described the restaurant as flawless.

I talked to Boulud a couple of days later. Like Ripert and Vongerichten, he trained in multiple three-star restaurants in France. He pronounced himself “proud and happy” to get his third star, but I sensed a less immediate embrace of the Michelin system. When I told him that Naret and the inspector had said that the restaurant, in previous years, lacked consistency and accuracy, he didn’t exactly disagree. But he bridled a little, saying, “My restaurant is extremely chef-driven and extremely market-driven, and so the menu changes a lot—to the pleasure of my customers. Maybe the success I have today is because we keep giving pleasure in very simple ways or sometimes in a very spontaneous way and without thinking, Oh my God, am I perfectly consistent with that dish? I mean, Did I create the masterpiece where I don’t need to change anything? I just need to program it now?”

Boulud’s comments called to mind criticisms often levelled against Michelin: that its approach to restaurants and food is too wedded to an ideal of formal, technical accuracy that is not applicable to restaurants outside France. “When I lived abroad, in Rome, the Michelin guide was not, to be utterly candid, very helpful,” Frank Bruni, the former *Times* restaurant reviewer, told me recently. “The kinds of restaurant in Italy that Michelin smiles on are restaurants that feel sort of fussily French.” He added that the New York guide seemed to be trying to address this. “In New York—maybe because Michelin is trying to Americanize—you see the inspectors trying to move beyond that. Right from the get-go they gave a star to the Spotted Pig”—the chef April Bloomfield’s upscale pub-food restaurant. “In years since, they’ve given stars to places like Dressler, in Brooklyn”—a restaurant that serves contemporary American food with a French twist. “So you can see them trying. . . . But I wonder if a certain sort of chromosomal stodginess can ever really be completely leached out of the Michelin guide and the system.” He added, “The other thing that has always made me wonder about Michelin rankings is that they claim a lot of science to them, but is there a lot of soul to them? When Michelin describes its own system, I think, Where is the allowance for just a visceral, emotional response to a restaurant?” Bruni is also no fan of the *couverts* and other icons that Michelin uses: “Those crosses and spoons and all those symbols—it’s like hieroglyphics, it’s like cave etchings.”

The waiter arrived with dessert. He placed a rectangular plate before Maxime. He pointed to one end, where a small piece of strawberry gâteau rested. “It begins on the right, with cumel-macerated strawberries, cream-cheese sponge cake, and pear-de-vanilla-center crème fraîche; to the left is strawberry sorbet swirled with lemongrass glacée and lavender crisp; and, lastly, a blueberry soda with fresh blueberries, which you can drink directly from the glass.”

She thanked him, and the waiter moved off.

If she were on an inspection visit, she said, she would go home directly after finishing dessert and paying her bill, and begin filling out her report, which is made in the form of entries in a classification form supplied to all Michelin inspectors. She would list every ingredient in everything she ate, and the specifics of every preparation. She would rate these according to several criteria, including quality of the products, mastery in the cooking, technical accuracy, balance of flavors, and creativity of the chef. Then she would fill out the

section that deals with setting, comfort, and service—and that determines the number of *couverts* the restaurant will earn. “I’ll talk about the service, the crowd, the décor, the ambience, the wine list, the sake list—whatever is applicable,” Maxime said. “The salt, the glasses, everything about the experience you had from the second you made the phone call to book the reservation, to when you walked in the door, when the hostess greeted you—or didn’t greet you—to whatever little goodies you have at the end of the meal.” For a restaurant like Jean Georges, filling out the reports would take two to three hours. A Chinese restaurant might take an hour.

It was three o’clock by the time we emerged onto the street in front of the restaurant. I couldn’t recall ever feeling so full. I asked Maxime what she would do with the rest of her day. She said that she had to work that night, reviewing a restaurant in another borough.

Which one? I asked.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I can’t tell you that.” ♦

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