

A reflection on the story, current positioning, offerings and the darker side of the luxury gastronomy book, the *Michelin Guide*

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ABSTRACT: This article gives some personal reflections on the luxury status of the most famous gastronomic bible — *The Michelin Guide*. The question being addressed — Is the Guide still considered a luxurious commodity? By using secondary data, the findings show that it is still recognised internationally as the symbol of "la haute cuisine" world and its epicurean experience. Importantly, being awarded stars has significant impacts on the pricing and visibility of restaurants. Besides, given the dualistic nature of the Guide, its offers become more present and accessible. However, many controversies are gravitating around Michelin: decrease in quality; unsuitable selection processes; secrecy and perceived unfairness in the evaluation system; restaurants and chefs refusing to be featured or awarded; the consumption of alcohol and drugs in Michelin-starred high-end kitchens; and chefs' suicide due to strong pressure.

KEYWORDS: beverages, consumers, food, luxury, Michelin

Introduction

When it comes to luxury establishments such as high-end eateries or luxury hotels, the *Michelin Guide*, also known as the "Red Guide", has undeniable authority and power in the luxury cuisine world. It can be suggested that the guide is referred to as the absolute hallmark of a fine dining experience, the most desired accolade of many of the world's top chefs, and a reference or supporting mechanism for consumers. It is considered as the living proof of high quality, the ultimate source of luxury cuisine, and represents the dominance of the upscale sphere when it comes to culinary excellence (Kiatkawsin & Han, 2019). The *Guide* has been influential since the early 20th century. It can make or break a reputation, create or destroy careers (Kelly, 2018). However, according to Kelly, these days and for more than one century, it has been receiving many criticisms and seems to struggle with controversies and loss of reliability in recommendations for travellers.

This article questions if the French "bible of gastronomy" still deserves its luxury status while also discussing some of the more taboo aspects which Michelin brings to the gastronomy industry, including that of loss of business and, in the worst cases, suicide. To do so, it is necessary to define the concept of luxury and to review the history of the *Michelin Guide*. The following is a critical analysis of the guide to assess first the exclusive or inclusive accessibility of the guide, second to evaluate its place in the new luxury economy, and third to analyse how the *Guide* can positively or negatively affect businesses and individuals (i.e. its darker side). Last but not least, it sums up all the reflections and gives direction for future research about the culinary world's most prestigious guidebook.

What is luxury?

In order to have a deeper understanding of the place of the *Michelin Guide* in today's world, it is necessary to go back and define the concept of luxury, what it stands for and how Michelin is situated in this process. This is because when evoked, the *Michelin Guide* is automatically associated with luxury, exclusivity and expensiveness (Barrière et al., 2010).

In terms of defining luxury, an exact definition of this term cannot be outlined due to the multiple variables of the word. However, even though an exact definition is not easy to provide due to its subjectivity, some traits can be associated with the term, and this is how our definition of luxury will be built. According to Kapferer et al. (2014), a simple definition of luxury refers to rarity, hedonic items and experiences beyond the necessities of everyday life, therefore accessible mostly to those who have surplus money.

Terms such as rarity, quality, expensiveness, know-how, status and desire are specific values that can be associated with luxury (Wiedmann et al., 2009). Rarity, exclusivity or uniqueness are usually associated with this concept because it indicates the exceptional characteristic of a luxury product or service.

Superior quality is often associated with luxury brands and its goods or services (Lipovetsky & Roux, 2003; Roux et al., 2017). This is because luxury brands provide quality by the best people and with the most refined materials. A good example would be a Chanel bag, which if taken good care of can last more than ten years (Olivares, 2020).

The third point is of course expensiveness. According to Bagwell and Riordan (1991), a first-class product is more costly to make and as such more expensive to buy. Therefore, it must be introduced at a high price because the production cost is

higher, and the volumes of the product can be limited in number. Luxury is usually not associated with something that is cheap, rather with something more expensive but unique, and with extraordinary traits. Examples of luxury companies are many. For example, to celebrate the 110th anniversary of Bugatti, the company has created a hyper-car *La Voiture Noire* [The Black Car] and sold it for \$18.7 million, which made it the world's most expensive new car (Chang, 2019).

The next trait is know-how, or tradition and craftsmanship (Batat, 2019). This is because luxury is related to specific savoir faire and expertise, therefore tradition and the search for excellence are very important when defining this concept. In luxury, a watchmaker or a leather tanner are recognised as craftsmen, artisans, belonging to a small and experienced group of people. A good example of a luxury good with a long tradition would be Rolex, which has been manufacturing watches since it was founded over a century ago (Rolex, 2019).

The fifth point is status, and when one thinks of luxury, we think status. This means that, by having a certain item or by consuming a certain product or experience, it makes the consumer feel part of the privileged few who can afford such goods. For example, the flawless and legendary Wittelsbach-Graff diamond was sold for US\$80 million to the Emir of Qatar in a private auction in 2011 (Arts Cash, n.d.). "Today, anyone can buy a purse, a watch, or a pair of shoes, yet specific brands of purses, watches, and shoes are a distinguishing feature for certain classes of consumers" (Han et al., 2010, p. 3). This conspicuous perception of luxury reflects elitism, wealth, distinct social status or membership of a reference class (Veblen, 1899; Wiedmann et al., 2009).

Nevertheless, according to Batat (2019), the conspicuous aspect of luxury has gradually transformed into a more experiential one, meaning emotions are at the heart of luxury goods and services consumption (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Atwal and Williams (2009, p. 50) defined new luxury as "products and services that possess higher levels of quality, taste, and aspiration than other goods in the category but are not so expensive as to be out of reach". Hence, customers, rather than showing wealth or social status, seek unforgettable experiences. Among the luxury sectors, tourism and hospitality is a domain where services are strongly experiential (Hemington, 2007). Batat (2019) believed that in upscale hotels, gourmet restaurants especially Michelin-starred ones, experience is not only linked to the product quality and know-how, but also to the authenticity, storytelling, the physical place, the overall atmosphere and the chef's creativity, and employees' professionalism and kindness complete the customers' immersion. In short, the whole restaurant experience is a set of several elements: the quality of food; the chef's creative work; the physical environment; the scents; the aesthetics of the place; its layout; its lighting; its ambience; the way tables are set; and the service provided by the staff (Bouty & Gomez, 2013; Ryu & Han, 2011).

A history of the *Michelin Guide*

Dating back to 1900, the history of the *Michelin Guide* has been described in detail in Stephen L. Harp's book (Harp, 2001). It was, in the beginning, simply a 400-page advertising guide created by André and Edouard Michelin, who were also the founders of the tyre factory. The *Guide*, which was widely circulated with the purchasing of tyres, was coloured red. 35 000 copies were printed when there were only 3 000 cars on the road. It

allowed drivers to be informed about their journeys (how to repair their vehicle, stock up, change a tyre, or where to find accommodation, food or a doctor). It was thus intended to make the travellers' lives easier.

However, after André Michelin learned that a tyre dealer was using the guide as a foot wedge for his workbench, he decided that the *Michelin Guide* would start charging in 1920 (*Michelin Guide*, 2020b). According to the belief that "man only truly respects what he pays for", the guidebook became available for a price of seven francs (*Michelin Guide*, 2020b). The primary objective was not to make a profit but to ensure that it was respected. Unfortunately, sales were successful, and there were a lot of unsold items. Despite this failure, the *Guide* continued to publish annually. Today, more than one hundred years after its birth, the *Michelin Guide* remains an essential and indispensable work for travellers and gourmets around the world (Harp, 2001).

Since its first publication in 1900, the *Guide* had its own historical classification. In 1920, Michelin created the famous star rating for restaurants across France's territory and which has become the world's leading evaluation system (Harp, 2001; Miklós, 2019; Nice Matin, 2020). The purpose of the star is to distinguish the food service of the best establishments. The first star *de bonne table* [of the good table] was born in 1926, and the second and third star completed in 1931. What differentiates the stars are the following qualities:

- *a good table in the locality;
- **excellent cuisine, is worth the trip;
- ***one of the best tables in the country, is worth the trip (Poullennec, 2011, p. 38).

The first three-star restaurant in France dated back to 1933 (France Info, 2016). Eugénie Brazier of the restaurant *La Mère Brazier* won the first three stars as well as the brothers André and Jacques Pic of *La Maison Pic* (Guestonline, 2020).

Over the years, the criteria have remained more or less the same: the inherent quality of the raw materials (vegetables, meats, etc.); the culinary personality of the chef; the mastery of cooking and flavouring; value for money; and what is known as regularity, for example, the ability to offer consistent quality throughout the year irrespective of the dishes on the menu (*Michelin Guide*, 2018). In order to keep this consistency, it is important that reviewers anonymously visit the restaurants several times a year to sample all segments and price categories (Miklós, 2019). In 1933, the profession of inspector was created (Karpik, 2000). Their job was to criss-cross the world in pursuit of the best addresses to provide a repertoire — from typical inns to luxury palaces, from small bistros to exceptional tables — to satisfy all desires, even the most demanding "globe-trotting gourmets" who are determined to collect the world's shining Michelin stars (Farrer, 2020; *Michelin Guide*, 2020b).

The *Michelin Guide* also has an international impact. Because the guide was working well and in keeping with its vocation as a leading expert, it quickly sought to establish itself in other countries with the aim of having a transnational influence. The aim was not to sell the French edition abroad, but to produce guides for territories other than France (Poullennec, 2011). Guides for other regions were established in the same manner but were modified for other nations. Belgium was the first in 1904. Other editions were published in Italy, the United Kingdom and other European countries. Since 2006, editions have been published in the USA, including cities like New York, San Francisco, Las Vegas or Chicago, and also in China and Japan (Statista, 2020).

This legendary *Guide* has inspired art, particularly in French and American filmmaking. This is especially the case with the movie *L'aile ou la cuisse* [The wing or the thigh] with Louis de Funès, which was a hit with 6 million views in cinemas (Sens Critique, 2020). The tale is about Charles Duchemin (Louis de Funès), the owner of the popular *Duchemin map*, who gives or takes away the stars. It embodies gastronomic justice. His everyday life consists of the uncertainty of eating in restaurants to assess them without their knowledge. Following this film, the *Guide* sold more than a million copies per year between 1970 and 1980. In the 2000s, the French market decreased marginally but is still considerable at several hundred thousand copies a year (Poullennec, 2011). In more recent times, the movie *Burnt*, starring Bradley Cooper, examines the high-pressure nature of a chef who is desperate to achieve three Michelin star status, however, his ways of running his kitchen through what could be considered bullying proves to be insufficient in allowing his team to perform (Rasquinha, 2015). It was only once he changed his attitudes and behaviour that they then began to respect him and eventually they win three Michelin stars. Such a movie showcases the sheer pressure and, in some cases, bullying or harassment which may be present in a Michelin-starred kitchen.

A revaluation of the *Michelin Guide's* luxury status

Michelin-starred restaurants have always been associated with "fine dining" as opposed to convenience dining and regular restaurants (Miklós, 2019). It represents expensive and hedonic consumption (Pacheco, 2018). In the specific case of starred restaurants, access is limited to an exclusive pool of customers who expect high standards of food service in which a single meal is transformed into a unique "experience". The *Michelin Guide* has established an elitist paradigm (Lane, 2013).

Obviously being awarded Michelin stars can have advantageous pricing implications based on increasing prices (Kiatkawsin & Han, 2019; Shin, 2018). Many restaurant managers believe that a high price is usually an indicator of high quality, and therefore consider increasing prices as an effective strategy to enhance prestige (Kiatkawsin & Han, 2019). The economic impact is not negligible: a star brings in on average 20% to 30% more bookings (Henderson, 2017). According to Jean-Baptiste Lavergne Morazzani, who received his first star in 2016 for his restaurant La Table du 11 in Versailles,

[w]e were already lucky enough to have some success but now we are full two months ahead of schedule compared to only two weeks before. The *Michelin Guide* star has enabled us to increase menu prices by five euros and we are considering raising them again (PressFrom, 2017).

Some tasting menus' prices can be up to \$500 and a single sitting at the most expensive restaurant in the world costs \$1 761 (Trejos, n.d.). In addition, restaurants aiming for the *Michelin Guide* have been increasing meal prices steadily, mostly due to the increase in costs associated with increasing service quality to please the *Guide's* inspectors.

However, the luxury status of the "Red Guide" can be debated. Firstly, the guide has a dualistic structure: on one hand, the high-end gastronomic segment, and on the other hand, a wide group of more regular restaurants, not eligible for evaluation (Pacheco, 2018). At the end of the day, it could be argued that the guide is specifically a marketing tool, used to promote hotels

and restaurants but more importantly the company of Michelin and their products and services. Indeed, today Michelin-starred restaurants are globalised. In the analysis of countries covered by *Michelin Guide*, there were around 15 572 restaurants featured in the *Guide*, including 2 813 Michelin-starred restaurants across 33 countries (My Offers, 2019). Among them, Japan, with 731 Michelin stars, surpasses both France (with 621 stars) and Italy (with 367 stars) to become the "Michelin cuisine centre of the world" (p. 9). According to My Offers, it has only taken a century for the guide to extend its influence all over the world. As a result, there are more Michelin-starred restaurants than ever before. Gourmet experiences are countless.

Secondly, even though they are more costly than average restaurants, more and more people can afford to eat in these establishments (Millington, 2018). The distribution of wealth has arguably become more diverse and spread across multiple areas of society, with the middle class now having more disposable income than ever before (Kharas, 2017).

Therefore, the guide is not, as said above, for a specific audience. The *Michelin Guide* makes it more affordable by adding cheaper starred restaurants to its collection. For example, some Michelin-starred restaurants located in East and Southeast Asia cost less than \$3 per meal (Trejos, n.d.). With the concept of luxury based on a high price (McKinsey and Co, 1990), evidence suggests that this example is obviously out of place — arguably making the luxury more accessible to more people. However, these are exceptions because this includes street food, a special category discussed later in this article.

Even if there are more starred restaurants than ever before, the prices are also becoming more expensive. Certainly, more people can have access to these kinds of establishment, but that group of people is still limited. The accessibility is mostly reserved for the less than 1% of elites who have 41% of global wealth, and for 50% of middle-class people (Kharas & Hamel, 2018; Wike, 2014). The 735 million people who are living in extreme poverty, i.e. on less than \$5 per day, are unlikely to even know about the existence of the *Guide* (Oxfam International, 2019). From this perspective, it can definitely be said that the fine-dining experience offered by the "bible of gastronomy" is still the ultimate representation of luxury, expensiveness and elitism.

Nowadays, rather than saying Michelin does not adhere to the luxury definitions discussed, it can be suggested that the future of the *Michelin Guide* be considered as "New Luxury" in response to the experiential economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Indeed, the guide has always been boasting about "the best of the Michelin Experience" (*Michelin Guide*, 2020a). Hence, it can be implicitly interpreted that the guide's recommendations are also based on the quality of experience, which is the centre of New Luxury.

It is important then to discuss first the experiential economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). While the dawn of the millennium may well have been known to be the beginning of the experiential economy, others could also argue it was the dawn of a new luxury period which showcases a need for luxury companies to provide a more exciting array of products and services matched with creating unforgettable experiences. This economic model revolves around the high value that customers place on experience. Consumers are not only looking for a material aspect, but also at an experiential aspect of their purchases. Thus, providers charge a premium price in exchange for offering a unique experience. People are in search of new and meaningful experiences and gastronomy is one of them (Alcoba et al., 2020;

Gilovich & Gallo, 2020). According to Kivela and Crotts (2006), for these kinds of people, the consumption of food and beverage is an essential, pleasurable and memorable part of their holidays, lifestyle, and personality. Life is meant to be lived. Meal experiences are a combination of food products, atmosphere, the senses and the environment. It includes sight, hearing, fragrance, taste and touch (Przymus, 2019). In this context, restaurants are competing with each other to remodel and boost the "experience factor". Chefs' menus and front-of-house design are evolving to meet customers' expectations which are beyond just a good meal (Miklós, 2019).

At *The Fat Duck* in Bray, in the United Kingdom, the "World's Best Restaurant in 2005", chef Heston Blumenthal questions traditional cooking techniques, introducing molecular cuisine using science, and which explores all the senses to enhance the meal experience (Lutrario, 2017; WocomoCOOK, 2016). His signature dish *Sound of the sea* is accompanied by a seashell providing the sound effects. His variation of the Black Forest cake is served with a cherry aroma, sprayed in front of the guests' noses as an additional stimulator.

In addition, given the dualistic aspect of the guide, experience can also be found in what is called by Michelin "simple restaurants", especially in the particular sector of street food. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO; 2020, p. 1) defines street foods as "ready-to-eat foods and beverages prepared and/or sold by vendors or hawkers especially in the streets and other similar places". It is usually cheap and accessible for everyone, especially people with low incomes. It is also a regular source of revenue for people with limited skills. Street food is very common in Southeast Asia and is part of the local culture. It is becoming trendy in Europe and USA. Therefore, street food has been increasingly associated with socio-economic importance. It is also used to gain credibility and respect on social media platforms.

The category of street food appeared for the first time in the 2016 edition of the *Michelin Guide* for Hong Kong and Macau (Henderson, 2017). Recognising this modest kind of eatery is considered by the Michelin's director as a milestone which represents the guide as a true reflection of the restaurant scene. In 2018, a Michelin star was given to *Jay Fai* in Bangkok (Agmapisarn, 2019). It is the world's third street food restaurant to receive a Michelin star. While it could be assumed that these types of restaurants are unique in their offerings and tick the experiential box of luxury, others could debate whether these types of establishments are in actual fact dampening the original image of the *Michelin Guide*.

However, the recognition by the guide brings opportunities and positive impacts on sales for these hawker businesses, but also a sudden surge of attention that they are not used to. In the case of chef Jay Fai, even if she was very honoured to receive a Michelin star, it has also been quite tricky for her business (Agmapisarn, 2019). She has been dealing with unwanted attention from the Thai government, pressure from the new-found fame, diverse crowds, long queues, the loss of regular customers due to the waiting times, as well as unfair and bitter online criticism.

In short, according to Henderson (2017), the *Michelin Guide* offering a street food category is debatable. First, the simple foods and less formal settings cannot be described as a proper restaurant. It is unclear if they satisfy all the criteria for star grading since one star means "a very good restaurant in its category".

Perhaps the conventional method of the *Michelin Guide* may not be applied to evaluating street food, especially when there may be major concerns linked to food safety (FAO, 2020).

Henderson (2017) recommended that a separate guide with a different criterion of evaluation is needed for this category. Yet, its diversity may defy the rating system and selection. Henderson suggested that the positive impacts from receiving the stars may not be sustainable in the long term and questioned whether hawkers/owners have enough knowledge regarding the guide to use it.

Clearly, the *Michelin Guide* has the power to create competition, opportunities, and build careers and fame. It invites its audience to the world's most famous tables. But what can explain the considerable sales drop of the guides by 70% since 2007? In fact, the sales decreased from 144 900 in 2007 to 43 238 in 2019. Is it because the guide has attracted a lot of negative attention in recent years?

This was certainly the case with the famous chef, Marc Veyrat, who decided to appeal to the courts because of the loss of a star for his restaurant *La Maison des bois* in Manigod, France, which he considered unjustified. More recently, after the death of Chef Paul Bocuse, who was considered one of the greatest chefs of his generation and who had owned 3 Macarons since 1965, the *Michelin Guide* decided to take away his third star. According to the guide, the quality of the establishment remained "excellent" but "not anymore at the level of a three star". Gwendal Poullennec, the new president of the "Red Guide", justified himself by explaining that "[n]ow, the stars of the *Michelin Guide* are not inherited, they are deserved" (Europe 1, 2020).

However, everyone does not think that way. Pierre Orsi, a chef, ironically congratulated *Michelin Guide* for the extraordinary buzz and marketing they were able to achieve with the loss of Paul Bocuse's third star. Poignantly, according to a former director of the *Michelin Guide*, Jean François Mespède, these decisions were made with the aim of recovering readers because "the guide is currently experiencing a crisis of youths, everything that is in the tradition is good to throw away" (BFM Lyon, 2020). To which Gwendal Poullennec justified himself and replied that

there can be excellence in both tradition and modernity and that the *Michelin Guide* has the capacity to evaluate tables with the same rigour and the same benevolence... whatever the age of the chef, whatever the type of cuisine he proposes, *Michelin* has the capacity to enhance it.

Moreover, equity is, according to him, of prime importance for the *Michelin Guide*, no matter who you are: "Paul Bocuse is indeed an icon but the stars of the *Michelin Guide* are recommendations and their purpose is to be relevant, current, fair...all tables must be evaluated on an equal footing" (Europe 1, 2020).

According to Lane (2013), the vagueness and opacity that veil the evaluation process in secrecy is part of Michelin's mystical quality which calls into question the Michelin Guide's judgments of taste because chefs are not provided with any information or explanation about why they gained or, especially, lost stars. It is difficult for them to understand, learn or improve from the inspectors' judgments.

The darker side of Michelin

But what is the dark side behind Michelin-starred kitchens? The glory and reputation after receiving stars come with a price. The hard work, stress, pressure and sacrifice are inevitable

in Michelin-starred kitchens to obtain the highest level of perfection (Johri, 2014). According to Giousmpasoglou et al. (2018), to release stress and cope with unsociable working hours, combined with the high adrenaline, and physically and mentally demanding nature of their work, Michelin-starred chefs have the tendency to consume alcohol known as "sweat pints" and marijuana. In many high-end kitchen teams, the use of illicit drugs such as cocaine or amphetamines is normalised to keep the pace needed at work and to maintain job performance. This coping mechanism used by chefs and teams to deal with the stress in the high-end kitchen environment can be detrimental to their health and well-being. But their own desire for and drive towards excellence make them susceptible to such harm (Giousmpasoglou et al., 2018).

Chef Daniel Boulud once said that "[t]o become a young chef, you must look inside yourself and find desire, because if you have it then you will make the time sacrifices and endure the criticisms" (Eburne, 2010). But where is the limit of such sacrifice? Does it have to be the thin line between life and death as in the case of Bernard Loiseau, a key international figure of French haute cuisine? Bernard Loiseau was a very talented and perfectionist French chef. He opened his own restaurant *Côte d'Or* in Burgundy in 1977. He gained the first star from the well-known *Michelin Guide* two years later. Then, in 1991, he obtained his third star. Those three stars shone constantly for 25 years (Loiseau, n.d.).

However, in February 2003, the culinary giant took his own life. Bernard Loiseau's death startled the whole gastronomic world. He was known to worry obsessively about his cuisine and to put himself under tremendous pressure to always be the best. But what is the part of the famous *Guide* in this story? What drove a chef who was at the peak of his career to a sudden death?

Apparently, the *Michelin Guide* did not appreciate that the chef appeared in the media without bothering to visit the Michelin headquarters for years. In fact, Loiseau was warned that he could lose a star during an appointment in 2002 with the *Guide's* management (*L'Express*, 2013). If that had happened, his business might have lost 40% in revenue. He had been working under pressure and coping with depression to keep his stars. Even though he knew before his death that his restaurant had not been downgraded, he took his life. According to a source, what may have happened here is that Loiseau, whose career and status had grown, could not think of losing a star (Echikson, 2003). While people have said that Loiseau suffered from long-term depression and that that was what truly killed him (Danancher, 2013), it has been suggested that the pressure from Michelin and the threat of losing his cherished third Michelin star was a contributing factor to his death.

If the previous hypothesis is true, then what is so critical here is the fact that the *Michelin Guide* might have been seen to have threatened the chef and put pressure on him for not giving more importance to the *Guide* itself. It could be considered as abusing their power of influence. Can it be that by downgrading *Côte d'Or* from a three- to a two-star restaurant in 2016, the *Guide* tried to remind people of its notoriety in the gastronomic world? However, Clauzel et al. (2019), in their research, suggested that based on hedonism and subjectivity, consumers may tend to not follow negative expert judgments. In the case of Loiseau, a majority of customers (55%) expressed disagreement with the *Guide* and questioned the expert judgments. They found the star loss unjustified and chose to actively support the restaurant.

Similar events in the gastronomic world include the suicide of Benoît Violier, a 44-year-old Swiss chef in 2016, or the death of chef Homaro Cantu in 2015 (Severson, 2016). Therefore, can it be said that the pressure from the system of the *Michelin Guide*, the pressure to constantly be excellent, may be an external factor that affects chefs' mental health.

As chef Heston Blumenthal said, "[t]he professional kitchen is not creative. It is a manufacturing line". Measures, precision, and consistency, even though needed, are the enemy of creativity. As a chef, "you need the freedom to fail" (Lutrarario, 2017). However, does Michelin give you that? Does Michelin give you the freedom to fail? Maybe the *Michelin Guide* is limiting chefs' independence, their right to fail, their chance to reflect on quality and to recreate themselves and their cuisine. At this stage, we believe that the pressure coming from the *Guide* should be a positive pressure, like an external motivation that pushes the chefs to move forwards rather than hold them back. The reevaluation of Michelin-starred restaurants should focus more on helping and informing its users with less marketing focus.

Most of all, the cuisine and the concept of food nowadays are so different. "La Nouvelle Cuisine", with leading figures such as Paul Bocuse, disregarded the "Classical Cuisine" of Escoffier, and introduced exotic ingredients and products (Monin & Durand, 2003). Molecular Cuisine uses a scientific approach to introduce new cooking techniques and knowledge (This, 2013). In the past, food consumption was merely the extension of food habits that people formed at home; it was only a supporting element in the consumer experience (Quan & Wang, 2004). Today, food is a multi-conceptual phenomenon, incorporating emotions, and multiple senses, and bringing societies together from far and wide. Food is poetic, a celebration (Van Oudenhoven & Haider, 2015). Food is a creation, yet also science. More than just a meal, food has become a transformational experience which creates and bridges emotions and attachments (Hsu & Scott, 2020). Surely, the *Guide's* strict, unchanged, sometimes unclear and inadequate criteria of evaluations cannot fully assess a chef's work. Is that why many famous chefs are refusing to be recognised or awarded stars by the *Michelin Guide*?

Final reflections

This article aimed to reevaluate and question the luxury status of the *Michelin Guide*. In this process, we went through the definitions of traditional luxury to new luxury. We highlighted the milestones in the history of the most famous guidebook ever to exist and also highlighted the darker nature which the guide has.

In short, this symbol of distinction, part of the high-end sphere, no longer appears too daunting to obtain. Was it more coveted to have a star before than to have a star today? Why would a three Michelin-starred chef such as Marco-Pierre White give back his three Michelin stars? (Puranik, 2019). The influence it once had to seduce travellers now has become an enormous source of pressure for many chefs. The concept of Michelin cuisine and what the *Michelin Guide* should provide have transformed immensely over the past two to three decades, yet certain traditions still remain. "Haute Cuisine" remained high on Michelin's agenda in the past, however, now even street food can be considered to reach those standards. Questions remain about whether the boundaries and criteria which Michelin are looking for are shifting, from traditional *sous vide* cooking to the new molecular approaches. What was once small fine-dining dishes on

crisp porcelain now comes in large portions served in take-away plastic. There are now starred gastronomic restaurants providing menus for a much affordable price. This is a way to soften its criteria, but which can leave others perplexed regarding the quality and the exclusivity that this guide advocates. Despite its openness to other types of modern or less-traditional cuisine, the *Michelin Guide's* criteria and standards remain unchanged, while different categories of restaurants need different systems of evaluation due to their specificities.

This article has its own limitations. A lot of what has been discussed here is based on the opinions of the two authors who have tried to provide evidence in support of these opinions. Others may have different opinions to what has been discussed. While this article has critically looked to question the *Michelin Guide's* luxury status, it should be noted that the concepts of Michelin are luxurious to certain people in society — namely those who do not experience Michelin cuisine on a regular basis. For those who are accustomed to eating in Michelin-starred restaurants, and again with luxury being an exception to normality, questions could be asked about whether regular diners of Michelin-starred restaurants still believe and perceive Michelin standards of food to be compared to those who do not regularly dine at such establishments. The *Michelin Guide* can still be considered luxurious to some people, however, in regard to certain others, is this still the case? Nevertheless, Michelin can be argued to be doing one thing — marketing and opening up its followers to different types of experiences ranging from street food to 14-course fine-dining tasting menus. The future of luxury dining no doubt is changing — how far Michelin will go is still to be seen? Will there be a McDonald's in the *Michelin Guide* in the future? Who knows?!

The purpose of this article was also to potentially provide future research opportunities and create discussion about the current status and issues of the *Michelin Guide*. It is hoped readers and future researchers will explore the concept in more detail.

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