

A Space Voyage into The Michelin Constellation

By Angel More

The More's Introduction to Fine Dining

There are activities that bond families, it's their family thing. Some parents like to take their kids to museums. Some families have a RV or a boat. Some families go on Turkey Trots. Some families play board games. My family hikes and fine dines. We will table hiking for now. My dad is the one who really likes fine dining and who began the chase for Michelin Star restaurants. To be honest he doesn't know much about food—he will eat cream cheese and blueberries and when he is trying to be healthy he will use an Amazon vegetable guillotine to cut every vegetable in sight, mix them together, and eat them—no dressing, no flavor, just rabbit food. When my parents moved to the US, they had no money to their names. They pulled themselves up by their bootstraps and got to work. Classic immigrant story. They rarely went out to eat because it didn't feel like they were getting their money's worth. My mom would gauge the value of a meal using the price of jeans. She wouldn't spend more than \$10 on a pair of jeans, so a \$30 meal would be three pairs of jeans: not worth it. My dad went to college in Florida and lived on Nissin Cup Noodles and fast food chicken sandwiches. After graduating, he vowed to never eat a Cup Noodle or from a chain again. A vow that he has kept to this day.

So, when I was growing up we were Romano's Macaroni Grill and Olive Garden frequenters. But Indians eat pasta pasta pasta all the time we get bored. The Macaroni Grill near us closed down, a much-needed opportunity for culinary exploration. My parents, who no longer had to take care of crying babies or go in for work (they started their own company so their work hours were flexible) started to work up the food chain. They would visit new restaurants, looking for something new and interesting. Until accidentally, my dad stumbled over a restaurant with a Michelin star. And from then on out, before any meal, he asked, "Does that restaurant have a Michelin star?" I think my dad liked the prestige that came with eating at a Michelin-starred restaurant. Beyond the food—which I don't think is the reason either of my parents like to go to those restaurants—the Michelin star was the security my dad needed to know that he would never have to eat a Cup Noodle or chicken sandwich again. On the other hand, my mom doesn't really care much for food, but likes going to restaurants so she can post about them. Starting in January 2017, my mom started a Facebook group, Foodie, where she posts photos of restaurants' interior and dishes. Also, as an incredible chef herself, will occasionally post a photo of a meal she made. Since its creation, Foodie has been one of the most consistent parts of my life. Even if I was crying with teenage angst fueling my anger or no one at the table was speaking to each other, we all knew to pause before digging into our meal so my mom could take photos for Foodie. It's my mom's diary, a record of family meals, trips, parties, and the general ongoings of her life. Even though my mom doesn't really care for these restaurants, for her, this Facebook group gives the mundane purpose.

The History Of Michelin Restaurants

When I first found out about Michelin restaurants, I thought it was silly that this restaurant rating system had the same name as the Costco marshmallow man tire company. It took me a few years to learn that the Michelin rating system was the offspring of that very tire company. In the early 1900s, people did not drive much. But French brothers Édouard and André Michelin (I'm sure you can gather this, but they started the Michelin tire company) wanted people to drive more so they could sell more tires (or tyres as they spell it). They created a small red guide book, specifically targeting French motorists, with useful information, such as maps, gas station locations, steps to change a tire, etc, and called it the Michelin Guide. Their vision was that people with cars and motorcycles would use the guide, travel more and in turn, use their tires more, and would need to buy more Michelin tires. Circular economy!!

In 1920, the guide started to include detailed recommendations alongside the original lists of hotels and restaurants. The restaurant section of the guide started to pick up traction and influence, so the Michelin brothers hired "mystery diners" that would visit and review restaurants anonymously. In 1926, the guide began awarding a single star to the finest dining establishments. The range of stars—between 1 to 3 stars—came in 1936. The ratings are based on five criteria: quality of the ingredients used, mastery of flavor and cooking techniques, the personality of the chef de cuisine, harmony of flavors, and consistency between visits. One star signifies "High quality cooking, worth a stop!" Two stars signifies "Excellent cooking, worth a detour!" and three stars signifies "Exceptional cuisine, worth a special journey!" Apparently restaurant inspectors do NOT take interior decor, table setting, or service quality into consideration when awarding stars, but I don't buy it. I heard a story—from whom I have no idea, so don't take my word for it—where restaurant inspectors will "accidentally" drop a fork on the ground and see if and how long it takes a staff member to notice and replace the fork. If the restaurant inspector is not satisfied with the fork retrieval, that can make or break the bestowal of a star on the restaurant. Attentiveness is also a criteria, I suppose. (This Quora question came up during my googling about criteria and I think it's a hilarious question and one that I don't know how I would answer or deal with.)

In 2022, there were 2,817 Michelin Star restaurants in the world: 2,290 restaurants with a single Michelin star, 414 restaurants with two stars, and 113 restaurants with three stars. Though, each year these numbers change since restaurants gain stars and others lose them. The top five countries with the highest number of Michelin star restaurants: France (628); Japan (577); Italy (374); Germany (307); United States (192).

My Take on Fine Dining

From the start I was bothered by fine dining because I found it pretentious and slow and did not appreciate the small serverings attached to big bucks. These restaurants can be cold and quiet and devoid of soul. These various atmospheric aspects are masked as a way to "give respect" to the chef, but it makes the whole experience drab. Being a loud brown family, you can imagine that when we got to these fancy restaurants, we were not like most of the people. I felt judged in these restaurants and embarrassed to be there. I hated feeling so out of place, and would wonder if we were being seated in the back of the restaurant, away from fun adults (who btw themselves were drunkenly laughing loudly??), was it a coincidence or was it purposeful. Of course not all fine dining restaurants are like this. As a younger diverse wave of chefs joins the ranks, fine dining restaurants have been gaining the spunkiness that they so desperately need. And as I got older, I came to appreciate going out to eat and the philosophy of food more. Food is so universal—it's something that every single person knows about and has opinions on—and is so deeply tied to our upbringings and cultures. Many restaurants, fine dining or not, are designed to tell you a story. Maybe the story is putting a Thai lens on fine global cuisines from France To Mexico (Kin Kan, LA), an Indian childhood in Kerala (Copra, SF), or embracing a positive, fun, carefree lifestyle (Good Good Culture, SF). Restaurants can be like art galleries. From the menu to the silverware and plates to the seating arrangements, each aspect of the restaurant was carefully selected to be a part of a multi-sensory experience. Restaurants have allowed me to explore my adulthood and fully test my independence. I have grown to love the once large and sometimes irritating LA, and discover the cultural pockets that make LA a beautiful place. Above all, restaurants give me authority. It's hard to compete with the vast knowledge of books, art, music, fashion my peers have, but I know that I can give someone the best tailored restaurant recommendations for a tasteful time.

Fine dining and Michelin stars seem so frivolous in the context of dysfunctional food systems at home and around the world. But fine dining can and should be a blueprint for how we can approach food in a more humanitarian and sustainable manner. Fine dining, with its focus on high quality ingredients, careful preparation, and storytelling is the food that everyone deserves to be nourished with. Great food should be for all.