

'Can't a Guy Get a Decent Review In This Town?'

By Robert Templer and Annabel Jackson

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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Europe has its Michelin guides and the U.S. has its plenipotentiary newspaper critics, and both are powerful forces in shaping their respective culinary landscapes. What's the answer for Asia? Most restaurant professionals are skeptical that the aloof hauteur of Michelin's inspectors could work well in Asia, with its multiethnic cuisines. And at least so far, there's no infrastructure for informed, independent, serious food journalism in the region.

But another model seems to be evolving here -- one that blends the pluralism of the Zagat's Surveys, the U.S.-based guides that accept reviews from any diner, with the anonymity and immediacy of cyberspace. Across the region customers are taking criticism into their own hands, filling Web sites with recommendations and complaints. Diners are pulling no punches, taking restaurants to task for overcharging, underserving and misrepresenting. This new sharing of information may end up diminishing the roles of the restaurant critic and food guide in Asia.

FULL TEXT

Restaurant guides and local reviews in Asia are flawed. And that hurts diners and restaurants alike, writes Food for Thought columnist Robert Templer, with reporting by Annabel Jackson.

It's hard to find a really bad meal in a city like Bangkok. To eat well, all you have to do is step out on the street and you'll find stalls selling noodles or satay. To find something truly, memorably awful you have to look really hard. Or simply consult a guide book.

Craving Italian food, I checked a city restaurant guide and found a place nearby. I should have known it was a bad choice when the staff was wide-eyed with surprise at my arrival in the empty restaurant. Did they know something I didn't? Yes, they knew I'd made a horrible mistake that I didn't fully comprehend until the antipasto arrived.

The dish consisted of slices of mystery meat and undercooked vegetables (and I'm not talking pleasantly al dente here -- nobody eats potatoes al dente) slathered in a tomato sauce so powerfully acidic it tasted like ketchup thinned with drain cleaner. The "risotto" was even worse. It was a bowl of rice -- just plain steamed rice -- covered with the same sauce and pieces of a gray, knotted substance that looked like well-used gum. The guidebook had lured me out with the promise of "fine Italian dining," so why did it seem more like chemical warfare?

Had this been some provincial town, the food could have been written off as a forgivable cultural misunderstanding. To find it in Bangkok, a city with some excellent Italian restaurants, was disappointing. More infuriating was the fact that such an irredeemably disgusting restaurant was touted in a guide.

This miserable experience set me off on the hunt for a restaurant guide that could be relied on -- something with a

reputation for independence and fairness, a nose for quality and good information on food, facilities, service, atmosphere and price. A guide that would tell me the good places but also clearly warn me off those that should be avoided. So far such a guide has eluded me.

The region has no English-language books with comprehensive coverage of restaurants in major cities, nor is there any standardized rating system. Promotional publications put in hotel rooms for tourists tend to be uncritical and newspapers are often worse, adopting a completely supine approach to reviewing. The result is less competitive pressure on restaurants, particularly in the area of service, less guidance for diners and less of the sort of culinary policing that helps chefs achieve their best.

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In Europe and the United States, it's the restaurant guides and critics who can make or break a restaurant. Owners are constantly on the lookout for critics, who mostly try to review anonymously, even using disguises. Notice boards in the kitchens are often covered with descriptions of top critics, and warnings to staff to keep their eyes peeled.

Try sitting in an expensive New York restaurant, jotting some notes on a pad and asking the waiter a few questions. You might end up with additional courses and hefty discounts. I was recently offered a \$250 meal for less than \$30. (I paid the full price, but non-reviewers need not reject such eagerly proffered rebates.)

Restaurateurs live in fear of a scorching sentence from critics. Sirio Maccioni of top New York restaurant Le Cirque is said to have announced to former New York Times restaurant critic Ruth Reichl that the King of Spain was waiting in the bar but that her table was ready.

The Michelin system is equally daunting. The guides are written by anonymous inspectors who visit each restaurant only once. They are said to consider a blizzard of tiny details from how you are treated when you make the reservation to the provision of a stool for women to put their bags on. Michelin never explains its rankings, but the industry believes the assessments are 70% about the food and 30% about the service and atmosphere. Most importantly, Michelin's stars are something of a blunt weapon. Yanking a star can kill a restaurant.

No critic has that power in Asia and no guide influences restaurants that way.

For some restaurateurs this is a blessing, as powerful critics can quickly damage a restaurant's standing or raise expectations to unrealistic heights. "Critics should be informed and impartial. They need to have a bit of knowledge of what it is like to work in a restaurant as well as a bit of compassion," says Michelle Garnaut of M at the Fringe in Hong Kong and M on the Bund in Shanghai. "Like tonight in Shanghai, we had no gas from 6:30 until about 7:45. We had to apologize to every guest and make certain recommendations of what not to eat. Imagine if a food reviewer had walked into that.

"The Michelin system is not relevant to the modern world outside of France," says Ms. Garnaut.

Yet others believe Asia desperately needs a more rigorous method for appraising its restaurants. "An independent, internationally recognized food criticism organization certainly would help raise the standards of chefs and cuisines in this part of the world as well as raise awareness and credibility for local gastronomy," says Maximilian Pleyer, director of food and beverages at the Mandarin Oriental in Kuala Lumpur.

Frederic Vershoore, executive sous-chef at the Kowloon Shangri-la in Hong Kong, who has worked at a three-star restaurant in France, says he misses the challenge of having the Michelin system looming over him. In the absence of a serious rating program, Mr. Vershoore relies exclusively on his customers for feedback. "If they are happy, then fine," he says. Yet because many of his customers have little experience with authentic French food, being dependent on their critiques doesn't necessarily make him a better chef or help him prepare more daring food, he adds. While in France, customers instinctively turn things over to the chef, his patrons in Asia are not afraid to make special requests, however unorthodox and unsuitable to the cuisine.

Restaurant reviewing in Asia is generally pallid. Standards vary among publications, but it's often seen as more of an entertaining perk for journalists than a serious enterprise. Few critics have any background in the industry, as many now do in the United States, and few visit a restaurant more than once.

Many reviewers eat all their meals at the invitation of restaurants or are well known so that they inevitably get special treatment. Lau Chi Sun, editor of the Chinese-language magazine Wine Now and one of the few critics who strikes fear into the hearts of Hong Kong restaurateurs, says he constantly has to allow for the fact that he gets three-star service but everyone else gets much less.

It's common among Asian publications simply not to run negative reviews. "We only want to promote good restaurants," says Mala Chandran of Vision KL Magazine in Malaysia, which has backing from tourism associations and is run by Vision Four, a company that provides cable television to hotels. "If they are not good, they don't get a write-up."

Reading about 40 reviews that appeared in the Business Times in Singapore, I found only one that was harsh enough to deter a diner -- and that was for Planet Hollywood, surely a fish-in-a-barrel target for any critic. Singapore, indeed, has many good restaurants, but when praise is indiscriminate it becomes meaningless.

Creating a Michelin-like system for Asia's cities could be unwieldy. Mr. Vershoore believes that if the guide were to be done in, say, Hong Kong it would need to be written by local inspectors and would have to shift its emphasis to consider such things as the quality of expensive dried ingredients used in Cantonese cuisine.

Mr. Lau questions whether enough people know Cantonese food intimately enough to sustain a guide. "Food columns are now done by young reporters who don't know anything. They just repeat what the chef or PR says and even then they make mistakes," he says. "There are no professional food critics in Hong Kong."

The wave of the future in Asia may be lay reviewers whose greatest strength is their candor and passion. Last year Zagat's published a guide to restaurants in Tokyo and surprised many restaurateurs by including the fairly acidic assessments of diners. Japanese reviewers had tended to gush over any restaurant, but Zagat's contributors weren't always so kind. Strong opinions are Zagat's lifeblood. The New York-based company's Web site even has a page of comments that it considered too strong for reviews. (One contributor described a restaurant as Cafe Ebola.

Another suggested the waitresses at a particular establishment had been trained by Joseph Stalin. Zagat's spared these restaurants the embarrassment of being named.)

Zagat's provided the idea for a new type of criticism and now the Internet has provided the means. One of the reasons restaurant guides have not been a great success across Asia is that most people rely on word of mouth. Web sites provide a public forum for those previously private opinions. Anyone can post a message either praising or complaining about a restaurant. Most complaints are about service, the biggest problem in restaurants around the region.

Foodeasy.com, the best on-line listings guide in Hong Kong, allows readers to add their own assessments and rankings alongside its own reviewers. These reviewers tend to be much more sensitive to bad service and expect better value for money than reviewers, who don't pay for their own meals. Fook Lam Moon, a Cantonese restaurant in the city's Wanchai area, gets top marks from the site's reviewer but diners were much more critical. "Way, way too expensive," wrote one reviewer, expressing the view shared by all of those who had posted several indignant messages. Chesa, the Swiss restaurant at the Peninsula Hotel, gets a high ranking and top ratings from all of those who posted messages because it was seen as friendly and not as costly as other restaurants in the hotel.

Looking at a number of these sites across Asia, several things are clear. People want value and good service and they don't like small portions. They want a comfortable environment for eating out with children. Hotel buffets that try to pad their tables with too many carbohydrates at the expense of seafood will not pass muster. A good view or a nice interior will not cut it if the food is too expensive. Customers want to be heard and not have their criticisms brushed off by haughty staff. Restaurateurs be warned: Nowadays, everyone's a critic.

Reviewers Reviewed
When it comes to food, whom can you trust? Most of the guides are
promotional vehicles and few of the mainstream English-language
newspapers have critics of any noticeable reputation or skill.
If you read reviews with phrases like "signature dish," "enjoy a
culinary trip to ..." or "dining concept," you can be sure the writer
has fallen under the spell of someone skilled in the dark arts of
restaurant PR.
Good restaurant listings or reviews should have all the basics, but
they should also tell you about any special features of the restaurant

(a great view, a theme, a specialty, a focus on wine) and, more
importantly, give you a clear idea of food quality and style, cost,
value for money and atmosphere. You should know before you go if the
restaurant is going to be full of rowdy brokers or elderly dowagers
taking tea.
So where should you look for advice? For your dining pleasure, we
offer a review of reviewers from a selection of Asian cities.
HONG KONG:
HK Magazine **
Each edition of this weekly has extensive listings, and every year it
produces a comprehensive magazine of its reviews. The latest edition
ranks 101 new restaurants, grading them from a cross ("a restaurant we
cannot recommend") to five stars ("approaching the sublime"). It also
includes capsule reviews of a large number of other restaurants. This
was the only publication in Hong Kong that clearly stated its policy
on reviews -- it does not accept free meals and restaurants don't pay
for listings. The publication gives a fair assessment of a wide range
of places but is sometimes a little too generous given the poor value
for money of so many Hong Kong restaurants, particularly those in the
Central district.
BC **
A monthly listings magazine that's a little more downmarket and

younger in its appeal than HK Magazine. It also publishes a restaurant
guide. Publisher Simon Durrant says the key criteria is whether you
would recommend it to a friend. The magazine uses mostly unknown
reviewers to "get more of an average customer experience."
Hong Kong Tatler Best Restaurant Guide **
Readers of Hong Kong's society magazine nominate the restaurants to
be reviewed for this guide, which has been going for 16 years. "It is
completely reader-driven," says editor Andrew Glenn. Reviewers from
Hong Kong are then
selected to write up entries for the 150 restaurants depending on
their area of knowledge. It has numerical rankings for food, service
and wine and comments on decor and atmosphere. Generally good
assessments of the top restaurants but it favors the pricier
establishments. Good for finding the best restaurants in a category,
not so useful in searching out everyday fare.
Foodeasy.com (www.foodeasy.com) **
The best listings Web site in Hong Kong. Available in Chinese and
English. Ranks food, service, hygiene, gives an overall ranking, and
allows rankings from outside reviewers, providing a good mix of
information and criticism. Good listings of buffets in Hong Kong and
well-thought-out maps and price information. Good searching system by
location, cuisine, food specialty and cost. Some graphics problems on

the site can lead to garble.
SINGAPORE:
I-S Magazine **
Similar to HK magazine, as it's published by the same company. Same style and reach of reviews. Generally useful.
Makan Time **
Personal Web site with many reviews and lots of information about restaurants in Singapore. Useful complaints section and recommendations from readers. A good site but sadly the pages are updated infrequently.
ASIAONE (www.asiaone.com) **
Listings and reviews from the newspapers of Singapore Press Holdings, all of them bursting with enthusiasm for every restaurant. Needs a critical edge.
Feasting.com (www.feasting.com) *
Limited range of restaurants; some information on special offers.
KUALA LUMPUR:
KL Online *
Searchable by name and type of food. Readers can submit reviews but so far not enough have for it to be useful. Limited in scope and usefulness.

Vision KL *
A magazine published with backing from various tourist associations
and a company that sells cable services to hotels. Listings are
limited and uncritical. Most of the copy on food is straight from
hotel announcements.
BANGKOK:
Bangkok Metro Magazine (www.bkkmetro.com) **
Feisty magazine with good restaurant listings and an annual
competition for the best of different categories. Good variety of
places, sensibly organized and selected. (They don't send you off on
wild goose chases to distant sois in outer Bangkok). Good
recommendations for dishes and well written.
Bangkok@night (www.bangkok-at-night.com)
Collection of business home pages. Not useful
JAKARTA:
Indonesian Hotel and Restaurant Association (www.ihra.co.id .)
A poorly designed Web site that is slow, unhelpful and rarely updated.
REGIONWIDE:
Asiadining.com (www.asiadining.com) *
Provides links of varying usefulness to dining sites across the
region. Includes some irritating old links, and does not yet include

all countries.
Asiacuisine (www.asiacuisine.com) *
Not strictly a restaurant listings site. Regional food site with
emphasis on restaurants in Singapore but some elsewhere. Print and
electronic magazine and a weekly e-mail guide to what is happening in
the Asian food world.
No stars -- worthless; One star -- useful but flawed; Two stars --
good, accurate; Three stars -- accurate, well written, critical and
thoughtful; Four stars -- follow this advice blindly.

DETAILS

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