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<sup>1</sup> For the "Technical resources and innovation" seminar

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## **THE MICHELIN GUIDE : A GLOBAL REFERENCE FOR LOCAL GASTRONOMY**

by

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### **Overview**

The first Michelin Guide was published by the French tyre maker in 1900. Motorists appreciated this small book in which they could find all the information they needed to facilitate their journey, including the location of garages, train stations, inns, grocer's shops and, of course, places where tyre were sold. Having become a best-seller in Belgium, England and Italy, the Guide established itself as the reference for the booming European tourist industry in the post-war years. Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this French institution, which is much prized by those responsible for regional gastronomy, has ventured into the United States and Asia, starting with Japan. Despite the obvious difference with Japanese culture and its cultural traditions which may have been a cause for concern regarding the enterprise, the Guide has been remarkably successful there. One hundred thousand copies of the 2008 Tokyo Guide were sold on the first day of publication. There was an official ceremony with the mayor of Kyoto in front of a temple for the launch of the Kyoto Guide. The chefs of these two cities are among those who have received most Michelin Stars in the world.

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## TALK : Gwendal Poullennec

When I graduated from the ESSEC (École Supérieure des Sciences Économiques et Commerciales) Business School in 2003, I started working for Michelin. Since I wanted to work on the Michelin Guide, I was given the job of marketing the European guides which were already in circulation. Shortly afterwards, I started developing guides for the United States. In 2006, I was asked to analyse the Asian market with a view to publishing a Tokyo Guide in 2008. I was a complete newcomer to Japan, and I was astounded by the way in which the Japanese appropriated the Guide and regarded it as a purely authentic Japanese product. Without knowing the precise reasons for this, I will outline the various historical events which will help to explain what the Michelin Guide represents for the people who have been publishing it for more than a century and for French society (which is its leading market), as well as how the Guide is perceived throughout the world. Finally, I will demonstrate how surprisingly well it is regarded in Japan.

### A success story

The guides have a number of essential characteristics which have not changed throughout the company's history. They are practical and precise, independent, and they show meticulous and careful judgement. In France, where the Michelin Guides have existed for a long time and are still present today, they are legendary products which are greatly appreciated and have almost become an institution.

#### *Practical and precise*

The Michelin Guide was launched in 1900 to celebrate the Paris World Exhibition. The idea was to encourage the development of the car, a vehicle which, like the bicycle, was a natural, commercial marketing opportunity for Michelin tyres. In an act of daring and confidence in the future, 35,000 copies of the Guide were printed, despite the fact that there were still only 3,000 cars in circulation. The Guide was free both for chauffeurs and for car owners, and had a clearly practical emphasis : there were lists of places where one could eat and sleep, repair one's car and change one's tyres, as well as the times of sunrise and sunset (because in those days it was not possible to drive in the dark), and many more very useful tips for a good trip. Through the years, this practical and precise nature of the guides has remained a central and valuable element. When France was liberated in 1944 and 1945, the allies, who wanted to be well organised and methodical, used the town maps printed in the guides, thereby paying an indirect tribute to the guides' incomparable attention to detail.

#### *Independence*

In 1907, Michelin's directors decided to ban the use of advertising space in the guides in order to ensure total impartiality. The leading article that year was accompanied by a drawing of Bibendum (the company mascot) and stated 'Like Caesar's wife, Bibendum must be above suspicion. This year, there will be no sponsored publicity or advertising in our guide.' Even today, we refuse to publish publicity for any of the establishments featured in our guides.

#### *Paying money earns respect*

In 1920, the Michelin Guide was no longer free. The main reason was not to make a profit, but to gain respect, as one of the Michelin brothers remarked 'man only respects what he pays money for.' There is an anecdote that, in a garage, one of the brothers noticed that the guides (which had been free) were sometimes maltreated and used to prop up tables or cupboards ! Unfortunately in 1920, clients did not rush out to buy the Guide, and many remained unsold. Some Guides were used as school prizes and distributed to deserving pupils. Others were put on sale again the following year, without a strategy to publish a special issue for 1921. Despite this initial failure, the aim remained to sell the Guide, and, with time, sales took off.

### *Careful judgement*

In 1926, the Guide originated the first Michelin star to highlight the quality of meals offered by the best restaurants. The criteria for awarding stars have changed little since. They include the intrinsic quality of the basic ingredients (such as vegetables and meat) ; the culinary skill of the chef ; the knowledge of cooking and flavours ; value for money ; and, finally, what one refers to as ‘consistency’, in other words, the ability to offer regular quality throughout the year for all the dishes on the menu. In accordance with this last criterion, the Michelin judges naturally have to eat several times in the same restaurant during the year before giving their verdict. This is a distinct difference between the assessment given by the Michelin Guide and that of other gastronomic critics who come to a restaurant just once and publish their opinion of their meal in a review. I should add that the Michelin inspectors visit the restaurant anonymously, use the usual methods of payment so that their cover is not ‘blown’, and that they are therefore treated no differently from any other clients in the restaurant.

The two-star and three-star ratings, which appeared at the beginning of the 1930s, related to the following criteria : one star, a good meal in its region ; two stars, excellent cuisine, worth the detour ; three stars, one of the best tables in France, worth a trip just for the meal. This rating was construed by the clientele in the following way : one star for a meal on a local level, two stars on a national level, and three stars on an international level. This is roughly still the case today.

### *Legendary, appreciated and an institution*

In 1976, the famous French film ‘L’aile ou la cuisse’ (‘Wing or thigh’) starring the comedian Louis de Funès as Monsieur Duchemin (the closeness in sound to Michelin is not a coincidence), who portrayed an impartial and extremely competent director of a gastronomic guide book who is opposed to the arrival of commercial cuisine, was hugely successful both at the box office and with real-life Michelin inspectors who delighted at how their profession was depicted in the film. This film provided proof of the cherished presence of the Michelin Guide in French society, almost an institution. During the 1970s and 1980s, the Guide sold more than one million copies a year. During the past decade, French circulation has dropped slightly but is still significant, with several hundred thousand copies sold every year.

### **A local but also an international product**

From the beginning, the Michelin Guide, in keeping with its initial idea as a marketing tool, tried to make in-roads into countries other than France. The aim was not to sell guides about France abroad, but to write guides about other countries. The Michelin Guide for Belgium was published in 1904. At the beginning of the First World War, a publication about southern Germany was being prepared : the Guide’s writers had thought that the War would end quickly, with France on the winning side, but this Guide was never published. During the twentieth century, publications for Great Britain, Italy and several other European countries appeared. In 2006, guides were published for a few large American cities such as New York, San Francisco and Las Vegas. Our latest American guide is on Chicago.

Country or city guides follow the same format. Inspectors, who for the most part are recruited locally, visit restaurants and adopt the same criteria as those used for our French guides. Opinions are compiled and edited before the Guide is published, and then put on sale. I should stress that the people who buy the Guide do not regard it as a French product which is a local publication, but as a guide specifically relating to their country, similar to any other ‘home grown’ Italian or British guide etc. This is undoubtedly because of the attention paid to local details. When people of the country or city in question read the Guide, the restaurants described in it appear to be so familiar to them that they assume that the people who wrote it must be ‘regulars’ to that establishment. Of course the guide is written in their language and is usually not translated into French. There are relatively few words in the guides because most of the ‘text’ consists of proper names, addresses and symbols which are the same in all the

guides, of which the Michelin star-rating is the best known symbol. From this point of view, each guide is an international product, available to every traveller. Being both local and international is certainly one of the key elements contributing to the guides' success.

Today some publications have become recognised as the standard throughout the world. The Parker Guide is the ultimate reference for wine ; the Academic Ranking of World Universities, commonly known as the Shanghai ranking, is the standard for universities ; and the Michelin Guide is the reference for gastronomy. Its influence – sometimes more imposed than desired – on those in the profession is enormous. In most countries where Guides exist, it is the first directory that comes to mind when people are looking for a good hotel or restaurant. It is estimated that the Guide's assessments of the establishments that it visits is responsible for a turnover of several billion Euros.

### **A very distant country**

In the middle of the last decade, Édouard Michelin, the director of the Michelin group and great-grandson of the founders, asked those in charge of the guides to do some research about Asia and Japan. As far as Japan was concerned, the initial question was whether Japanese society would accept a foreign guide about something as culturally specific as gastronomy. A few months later, Édouard Michelin called Jean-Luc Naret, the director of the guides, to find out how the project was going. I remember that call very well as I was in Jean-Luc's office at the time. At the end of the call, he turned to me and said 'I have a project for you : the city of Tokyo.'

#### *Distaste for personal judgement*

I arrived in Japan and started thinking about how I could develop the project. I noticed at once that there was no tradition of travel guides in Japan. This is because the Japanese do not allow themselves to pass judgement on people which may implicate others. They cannot express their true opinions about each other in public and instead play a game of polite, verbal 'ping-pong' which avoids them being accused of bias. The ministry for tourism is well aware of the need to stimulate and breathe new life into the catering sector, and in the past attempted several times to introduce a system of classification, but this failed because Japanese society as a whole rejected this process.

#### *Using a well known brand name*

I thought that it would be very difficult to overcome such resistance head-on and I realised that I had to highlight another dimension of the guide. The reputation behind our name was the solution. Brands are very important to Japanese consumers. Kyojiro Hata who was behind the launch of Louis Vuitton in Japan wrote a good account of this in a book in which he lists the criteria which allow the Japanese to distinguish the real brands from the false ones. These include one's own bias, high quality, reliability, and a history. The Michelin Guide as a brand satisfied these criteria perfectly and was already well known and appreciated. From this point of view, we were very warmly received.

### **The Michelin Guide – part of Japanese culture ?**

To compile the Tokyo Guide, we proceeded in our usual way. We recruited a group of inspectors to whom we had explained the 'Michelin criteria' for behaviour and judgement. We drew up a short list of restaurants in Tokyo on which we intended to focus as clearly we could not visit all 150,000 restaurants in the Japanese capital. We then carried out our assessments. We published our first guide in 2008, a second in 2009, and a third in 2010. In 2010, we also devised and marketed a guide about Kyoto and its surrounding area which is said to represent best the soul of Japan. All guides were appreciated both by catering professionals and their clients, and by the local authorities. This appreciation was so strong that we wondered whether the Japanese thought that the Michelin Guide was Japanese !

### *Support from the professionals*

In the first year, twenty-five Tokyo restaurants were awarded two stars. The following year, there were eleven more. This shows the intensity of the 'knock-on' effect which the Guide has produced. Being awarded two Michelin stars is already very impressive (there are about three hundred two-starred restaurants in the world). Further proof of the support for the Guide from professionals is the fact that all the Tokyo chefs who were awarded three stars came to the party organised for the launch of the 2010 Guide despite the fact that it took place during working hours, and that they had only been informed a few hours before the event. They had left their kitchens in order to join us.

### *Reaction from the public*

On November 22nd 2008, the Tokyo Guide's launch day, more than one hundred thousand copies of the Guide were sold, a figure which rose to three hundred thousand a month later. This is three times the number of Harry Potter books sold from the same points of sales. The news programme on the most important Japanese television channel broadcast a report about the launch which lasted eleven minutes. At the first press conference, there were three hundred journalists. Later, the launch of the Guide was heralded as the cultural event of the year. I repeat that this was a cultural not a commercial event which is proof of its acceptance by Japanese society.

### *Support from institutions*

From the very beginning, the authorities at the Ministry of Tourism were very welcoming, although they cannot be seen to support us actively for fear of being accused of favouritism. When the date for the launch of the Guide was announced, other local authorities were very supportive including the City of Tokyo which in 2009 lent us their premises to celebrate the event. In 2010, when the Kyoto Guide was published, the Mayor came dressed in traditional costume for the commemoration photo, and the Minister for Tourism was wearing a suit specially made for the occasion by his wife which was in the form of an apron and a scarf in the same red as our famous Red Guide. Recognising that Japanese society is very formal, these two examples of attention to detail in 'dressing for the part' can be interpreted as a strong mark of friendship.

### **Admiration from both sides**

I would like to conclude this talk by mentioning that the respect and admiration shown to us by the Japanese was reciprocated by our inspectors. The Michelin inspectors were stunned by the high quality of Japanese cuisine. Since 2008, they have awarded one hundred and fifty restaurants in Tokyo with Michelin stars, compared with about sixty restaurants in the Greater Paris area.

## DISCUSSION

**Question :** *Michelin also publishes Green Guides for tourists visiting cities and monuments. Have you developed these in Japan ?*

**Gwendal Poullennec :** We started to do this with support from the Japanese tourist office, and the Guides were very popular. These Guides were not so important from a cultural point of view because they are not published in Japanese and are only intended for foreigners travelling in Japan.

**Q. :** *I thought that the Michelin Red Guide not only evaluated the cuisine but also gave marks for customer service, comfort, and the dining ambiance. You appear to have said the contrary...*

**G. P. :** The stars are awarded for the food, and only the culinary performance is judged according to the criteria which I have mentioned. There is a tiny, three-star sushi restaurant in Tokyo whose toilets are on the landing ! In my talk I have concentrated on the stars because they are the most prestigious and well known ranking. However, the Red Guides also assess everything relating to the actual meal.

**Q. :** *Why was this small, specialised restaurant awarded three stars ?*

**G. P. :** According to the inspectors, the chef created personalised, innovative dishes using the best cuts from the best fresh fish every day from the market, and thus he was able to prepare fish dishes to perfection.

### Assessments recognised by restaurateurs

**Q. :** *Some Japanese dishes are inedible for French diners because their flavours are too different from those to which we are accustomed. How does one compare different kinds of haute cuisine and claim that the three stars have the same relevance throughout the world ? As we all know, taste and colour is very subjective.*

**G. P. :** We judge quality rather than taste, and we do so with relatively objective criteria which can be applied to all cuisines. The difficulty for an inspector is to evaluate a dish for its culinary quality fairly. However, it is a question of experience and not culture. Nevertheless, we realise that the cultural dimension of gastronomy exists, and we want to recognise it. The Michelin Guide has no desire to encourage culinary standardisation. This is why we make up teams of inspectors who are trained both by local people and by foreigners. The contrast in judgement between the two sorts of inspectors allows one to maintain standards of quality and to take local tastes into account.

**Q. :** *Are restaurateurs convinced that the star-rating system can transcend culture by quality ?*

**G. P. :** I think so. A demonstration of this is that all the three-starred chefs in the world came to the launch of the Kyoto Guide. In fact, until now our criteria have shown that they can adapt themselves properly and that the stars are awarded for the meals served and for no other reason. When Joël Robuchon, one of the most famous three-starred chefs invented a new style of restaurant which he named the 'Atelier', he told us that it was not suitable for us to assess because it was too different from what we normally appraise. We still went to the restaurant, anonymously, and we wrote a report which he agreed reflected his cuisine.

**Q. :** *You seem concerned about the remarks made by restaurateurs regarding your assessments. Do you want the support of the restaurateurs ?*

**G. P. :** Yes, I have always wanted that. We hope that when we give out stars, that this does not cause trouble for the restaurant in question. We love gastronomy, and do not want to cause acrimony either between the diners and the chefs, or between the chefs themselves.

### **The discrete expertise of the inspectors**

**Q. :** *Where do your inspectors come from ?*

**G. P. :** Generally, they are people who have had a great deal of experience in the catering industry and in making comparisons. We like to recruit former wine stewards because they are used to recognising the subtle differences between two products which appear very similar. Apart from the recognising quality, they also know how to appreciate combinations of food and wine, because their previous profession encouraged them to judge wine not only for the wines themselves, but also whether the wines were suited to the dishes they were accompanying. They know how to assess the most delicate combinations of flavours. Finally, wine stewards, particularly in Japan, change restaurants more often than chefs. Therefore, when they become inspectors they have a broader range of culinary experience. Their Michelin experience can help them in their later careers.

**Q. :** *And every day they go from one restaurant to another ?*

**G. P. :** Yes, they assess as many as four hundred dishes a year.

**Q. :** *How many inspectors are there ?*

**G. P. :** About one hundred in the world, about ten in Japan.

**Q. :** *A man having a meal alone in an excellent restaurant seems a bit odd... They must get noticed and raise suspicions.*

**G. P. :** They are not always alone ! In fact, there are places where one cannot go alone. In Japan, access to some restaurants is limited, and one has to have a contact there to be allowed in. Generally speaking, we worry about interfering in existing social habits in order to carry out our job of tasting the culinary dishes of a particular country. This undoubtedly helps the local Michelin Guide to be accepted in foreign countries as a 'home-grown', cultural production.

### **The Japanese problem with comparing people**

**Q. :** *You have emphasised the Japanese cultural difficulty of making judgments on other people because they then become the judge versus the judged, which is not acceptable in Japanese society. This is why I am surprised by the support from the restaurateurs. How come they agree to be compared, especially by non-Japanese ?*

**G. P. :** I think it is a combination of two factors : respect for the Michelin Guide's name, its history, its professional assessments, its appreciation of quality, and also because it might have beneficial financial reward for their restaurant. This point is important. Many chefs sense – and rightly so – that a mention in the Guide will draw attention to the catering sector, revive and stimulate it, and this would have a very positive, financial effect for everyone.

**Q. :** *I think you have managed to produce objectivity into a sector which was long considered to be subjective, as a result of your methods and reputation. This objectivity allows one to distance oneself from the judge and the judged, something which the Japanese scarcely know how to do by themselves, but which they realise is necessary. In the 1950s, the American professor William Deming lectured on applied statistics in the industrial world leading to a debate about the assessment of industrial processes. Applied statistics allowed the Japanese to make comparisons by disregarding interpersonal relationships which had led them into an*

*impressive upward spiral of progress. Ten to fifteen years later, they were world leaders in industrial quality. William Deming has become a hero in Japanese history. You seem to have resolved a similar problem and have similar success with haute cuisine.*

**G. P. :** In a long article published in the best known Japanese financial newspaper, a journalist made an analogy between the economic opening-up of Japan which was imposed by Commodore Perry with military force in 1853 (the founding event of the modern Japanese economy) and what he judged to be the cultural opening-up prompted by the Guide. When I read the article for the first time, I thought that such a comparison was taking it too far but at least it shows the impact which the Guide has had on their culture, according to the Japanese.

**Q. :** *Tokyo is an international city. Therefore, it is in competition with other important major cities. This must also have stimulated chefs. Perhaps they felt that the competition was from the rest of the world rather than with each other, and that Japan would inevitably be the winner.*

**G. P. :** Of course Tokyo is an international city. The financial newspaper you mention highlighted this point at the end of its article which described Michelin in such glowing terms. This perhaps was a factor, but it was certainly not the decisive element. This newspaper concluded that success would probably not have been the same in a city like Kyoto which embodies national and traditionally Japanese life. Yet in Kyoto the Guide was warmly received by the public and the chefs. In the photo of the mayor in traditional costume and the minister in his red outfit, there are six of the seven three-starred chefs of the city. This shows that Japanese chefs in the country's heartlands were completely supportive of our work.

**Q. :** *What about the seventh chef ?*

**Q. :** The seventh chef could not come, and so he sent someone in his place. Since this person did not want to give the impression that he was receiving the glory reserved for the chef, he hid behind a pillar when the photo was taken. This illustrates perfectly the natural self-effacement that the Japanese feel when adopting someone else's identity.

**Q. :** *Despite overall support for the Guide, I still think that comparisons must have caused a few problems. Perhaps they have remained hidden ?*

**G. P. :** There have been a few problems. The most significant was caused by the three-star rating given to a chef who was the student of another chef who was only awarded one star. Seeing a protégé receive a better rating than his teacher is contrary to the Japanese sense of social order. This event was well documented in the press : some newspapers wrote that it was appropriate if the pupil was in fact better than his teacher, whereas others criticised us for having published such ignominy ! As far as we were concerned, we decided to continue to use our rating method in the belief that we should publish what we thought was fair based on the great attention given to the work which we carry out. Generally speaking, Japanese society proved to be receptive to our position.

### **The Michelin style**

**Q. :** *The guide was originally created as a marketing strategy to publicise Michelin tyres. Do consumers still associate the guide with our tyres ? Does the reputation of the guide have any effect on sales of the tyres ?*

**G. P. :** We cannot accurately measure the effects of one or the other on the public, but we can make a guess. What is certain is that there is a strong cohesive style within the Michelin group. The Group makes tyres, guides and other products and to each of these products it applies the same set of values. These include a sense of continuity and innovation, an obsession about quality and attention to detail, an understanding of the fair relationship between various factors, and an intimate knowledge of its business.



Let me take the example of our well known roadmaps which until recently and the arrival of the GPS (Global Positioning System) were the usual method used by most drivers. Each year, they informed – and continue to inform – drivers about the location of roads and towns in a very precise way. They described numerous other features such as pretty view-points and even markers on the roadside which allowed drivers to know which route would be more agreeable, or to know their position at a glance during a trip. The Michelin cartographers were capable of relaying this sort of information with flare by using their graphics and printing skills : some lines were drawn slightly thicker than others, and certain colours were used for a specific object. Therefore, the size of the black dot which represents a town is shown according to the ‘weight’ this town has for the driver on his journey, a weight which depends on the population as well as its economic, cultural and administrative importance.

It is likely that our customers, albeit unconsciously, realise the common features between all the Michelin products. From this point of view, the guide, like the roadmaps, contributes to the creation of a setting which is favourable for the sale of our tyres.

**Q. :** *How profitable is the guide in its own right ? Do you know ?*

**G. P. :** We do know because the department in charge of the guide is managed like a profit centre, but I will not give you the figures. We prefer to be discrete when we think that the matter is private.

**Q. :** *What do you think about the competition from other guides ?*

**G. P. :** A certain amount of competition is almost always good from a commercial point of view, because this makes the sector appear attractive to clients. When something positive happens to one company, it has a positive effect on the other because of the competition. The year we launched our guide in New York, our local rivals registered their best ever sales figures ! Naturally, one can only continue to benefit from competition if one has a competitive product, but as far as we are concerned, we are confident in what we produce.

**Q. :** *You mentioned the arrival of GPS systems which have replaced maps. Even though the GPS provides less information, it is very successful because of its technological advantage and ease of use when driving. This shows that changes in the world can marginalise products even when they are the best in their sector. Does the Michelin Guide have this kind of problem ? You mentioned the decrease in sales compared to the end of the 1990s.*

**G. P. :** Sales of the Guide are definitely increasing abroad. Everyone looks forward to the publication of the Guide each year. In France, there are two concerns : firstly from competition from computer-aided products compared to the paper format, and secondly, the conservative image of the Guide which sometimes puts off young people even though they have heard of the Michelin name. As far as we are concerned, we are convinced that the Guide’s content is sufficiently solid and that we provide a real service to our readers. Clients will continue to appreciate the Guide if we try to satisfy their needs. With this in mind, we have started to issue the Guides using an iPhone app which is already proving to be successful.

Presentation of the speaker :

Gwendal Poullennec : graduated from the ESSEC business school in 2003. He started working for Michelin in the maps and guides department. His first job was in the marketing department for European publications of the Michelin Guide. Later, he was put in charge of the project to develop a Michelin Guide for Asia. This resulted in the launch of the first Tokyo Guide in 2008 and the Hong Kong Guide in 2009. He is the director for international development for the Michelin Guide.

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