



Daniel Boulud



When in Manhattan, I invariably breakfast at the Evergreen Coffee Shop and Restaurant. Service is swift and friendly, and the atmosphere so stereotypically that of a diner, you feel like you're in a movie. By wading through a large, fresh-as-a-daisy fruit salad, a fry-up, toast and jam, juice and unlimited smack-you-across-the-face-and-shout-"Wake-Up"! coffee, I can spend all of £7.50. I toy with a light snack about 12-hours later. Sometimes.

And isn't such a breakfast, or maybe enormous pastrami sandwiches with fries and dill pickles at the legendary Carnegie Deli, just what we expect, and want, in New York? Aren't big plates of efficiently-delivered, honest food at bargain prices what eating there is all about?

Well, yes and no: New York is all things to all people, so there is plenty of top-end eating, too. Dining at all levels is on the up: 222 new venues opened whilst only 102 closed in the 12 months to October 2006. New Yorkers were deterred neither by price rises of almost twice the rate of inflation nor by their restaurant meals being the US's dearest, if the latest Zagat Guide is to be believed.

And New Yorkers certainly do believe it: since Nina and Tim Zagat started it as a hobby, canvassing the culinary opinions of 200 friends and acquaintances 27 years ago, Zagat has grown into a mighty publishing empire. 31,604 diners contributed to the latest edition, and there are companion

volumes for most other US cities plus Tokyo, Vancouver, Paris and London. Not content with restaurants, Zagat reviews golf courses, shopping, films, music, nightlife, even web and wireless products, too. One way or another, it can help you out in 99 countries.

Ordinary restaurant-goers submit their findings annually, a consensus is reached and establishments receive ratings out of 30 for quality, variety and service: it works exactly like our Harden's guide.

But now Zagat has a rival: Michelin, longtime arbiter of all things culinary in Europe, recently published its second annual New York guide. And if Zagat covers Paris and London, why the heck shouldn't it?

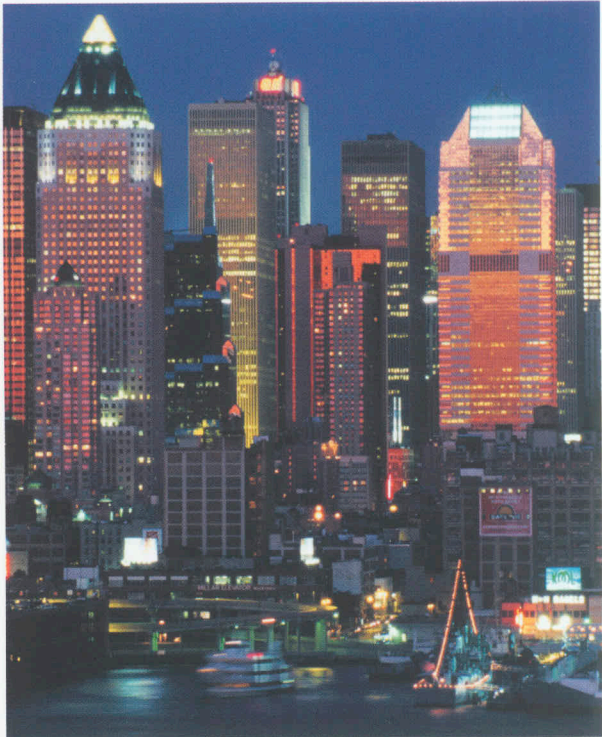
The contrast between the two could hardly be more Old World/New World: Michelin, the *sauve*, 107-year-old veteran; Zagat, the punchy, 20-something upstart: Michelin relying on the views of a handful of 'expert' inspectors; Zagat the very definition of dining democracy.

Michelin gave 32 New York restaurants one star this year, whilst four merited two, and only three were awarded a perfect three stars. I decide to try one establishment from each category to see whether I'm more in tune with its handful of professional inspectors or Zagat's countless amateurs.

First stop is the French, two-starred Daniel. Michelin says chef-patron Daniel Boulud has "become something of an Upper East Side institution, drawing a steady clientèle of area



Daniel restaurant dining room. Picture by P. Medilek



Picture by Jeff Nalin

denizens and well-heeled foreigners". He is something of a national institution too: as I wait for my table (I am early, it is ready precisely on time), I browse through two of his six books. He has a TV series, too, and other, less formal restaurants in NY and beyond. Daniel, which he opened in 1993, remains his flagship.

Michelin might consider it worth only two stars, but Zagat contributors rave: it is their number one citywide choice for décor, comes second for food, and third for both service and in the 'Most Popular' poll. It scores 28 out of 30 for quality, variety and service, a feat unmatched.

Michelin loves the "Italian Renaissance-style dining room" which Zagat calls "opulent". I like my décors a little more pared-down, but there my criticism ends: everything I eat is divine and service is suave yet friendly: when I finish the white wine I have bought only a glass of, for example, the waiter pours me almost as much again, explaining: "It's the end of the bottle, so it's not worth saving." Maybe I'm easily bought, but it's a lovely moment (and no-one knows I'm a journo). Fellow diners are suitably glamorous and quietly animated.

The amuses-bouches leave my bouche not just amused but laughing out loud: a blob of goat's cheese in a Parmesan tartlet and a Lilliputian bowl of pea soup are particularly memorable.

My caramelized sea scallops with asparagus 'chartreuse', crispy potato and fiddlehead ferns (a new one on me: young,

This is £85 exceptionally well spent. How could Daniel's food merit only two stars? Sorry, Michelin, I'm with Zagat's army of consumers who place this restaurant above all others



Picture by Jeff Nalin

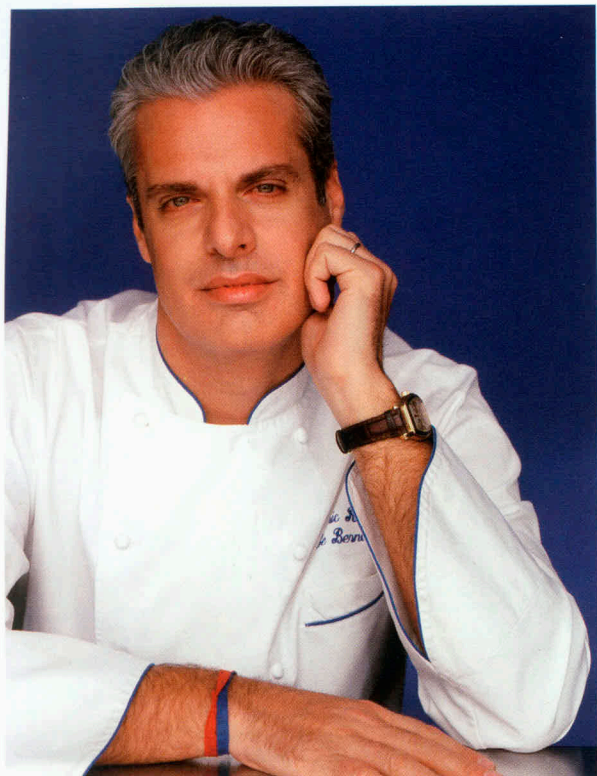
unfurled fern heads with a flavour not unlike asparagus) is a perfectly judged melange. What's more, there is quite a lot of it – two whacking great scallops, for example, when one would have done.

A main of spring lamb, artichoke, stewed peppers, garbanzo beans (chick peas) and Thai basil jus is similarly substantial, and just fabulous cooking, all the components marrying effortlessly.

Although you can pick lighter meals at the bar, in the dining room, you are obliged to order three courses for a fixed price of \$96 (about £50), although you can bump this up by \$11 with the Dover sole or \$660 with the Golden Ossetra Iranian caviar.

This system means there's no point in wimping out and foregoing pudding. I choose coconut dacquoise (nutty, cream-filled meringue), poached pineapple, lime cream and pineapple sorbet. No superlatives can do it justice: it is the loveliest thing I taste during my stay. And, better yet: service now goes beyond flawless and becomes mindreading: alongside my pudding, a half-sized chocolate dessert appears: how could they tell I'd been torn between the two? Ten petits-fours complete the experience, even though I decline coffee. I'm full by now – so I only eat all ten of them.

This is £85 exceptionally well spent. How could Daniel's food merit only two stars? Sorry, Michelin, I'm with Zagat's army of consumers who place this restaurant above all others.



Eric Ripert. Picture by Nigel Parry



Le Bernardin restaurant



Picture by Shimon & Tammar

Once I've paid, I reveal my credentials, and M. Boulud joins me to chat at the bar.

He seems a mild-mannered maestro (a tour of the kitchen reveals calm, hushed staff, which suggests he really is like that). He claims not to mind the lack of a third star, saying it might lead to complacency or the menus becoming more static. "We have the standard and know-how for three stars, but maybe they prefer smaller places," he offers with a Gallic shrug.

He is diplomatic over which guide is the more important but, when pressed, leans towards Zagat. "Certainly for the US market, it has the edge, but Michelin is spreading."

When our conversation is interrupted by Chef's need to glad-hand regulars or answer staff queries, I chat with a couple who consider Daniel New York's finest, bar none. How do they feel, then, about the Michelin rating? Interestingly, these moneyed, middle-aged New Yorkers with informed views on everything from the Euro to Helen Mirren's Oscar frock, are only vaguely aware of, and uninterested in, Michelin. Two people do not a survey make, of course, but does this suggest the European interloper will have a tough time stealing fans from Zagat?

Another day, another dinner. Well, lunch, actually, at three-starred Le Bernardin. Specialising in fish, this is another fixture of the city's dining scene. Eric Ripert has commanded the kitchen for 13 years. Zagat's contributors rate it almost

"People want less of a wait between courses here because the restaurant is only part of the night: they will also be going for cocktails or attending a party or benefit."

as highly as Daniel, calling the setting "serene", the food "stunningly well-executed" and the service "stellar". The menu refuses to pander to fish-haters: 17 of the 19 starters featured fish or seafood, and of the two that don't, one is a prosaic-sounding vegetable and herb salad. There were 11 fishy main courses: two meat mains and the solitary vegetarian option appear separately under the stern, capitalised heading: UPON REQUEST. "Bravo", say I: if you don't like fish, what are you doing here?

My sautéed calamari in a calamari consommé is stuffed with prawns and wood-ear mushrooms (an Asian variety). It tastes a bit like the stuffing you get with roast chicken: it's good but not historic.

Next is pan-roasted monkfish (I'm not sure I understand the term 'pan-roasting', even after all its years on menus: don't you roast in an oven and fry in a pan?) with truffled potato emulsion and a red wine-brandy sauce. The fish is perfectly cooked, the emulsion (I would call it a foam) wonderfully earthy, the sauce not overpowering. Perfection. Well, perfection as far as it goes: a few pieces of vegetables appear here and there, but a decent portion and some potato (not just foam!) would be good. Maybe I'm just not refined enough for Michelin-anointed temples to gastronomy, and maybe the last thing New York's movers and shakers want is a heavy lunch, but I like to leave a restaurant with a reasonably full stomach.

Dessert is a multi-component lemon affair including



Picture by Shimon & Tammar



Vong restaurant

parfait, cream, sorbet and intriguingly flat meringue. It was refreshing and delicate but, again, not very big.

Chef, who joins me for a chat afterwards, is as mild-mannered as M. Boulud was the night before. M. Ripert thinks the more guides, the merrier. "It's all good, and it all stops you staying in the same place."

How do New York restaurants and those in Michelin's traditional territory, Europe, differ? "Pace," he answers, without hesitation. "People want less of a wait between courses here because the restaurant is only part of the night: they will also be going for cocktails or attending a party or benefit."

It is an impressive lunch, value at just under £60, and certainly an occasion, but, if I only had five Michelin stars to play with, I would give two to Le Bernardin and three to Daniel rather than vice versa, no question.

Finally, I lunch at one-star Vong which has been attracting New Yorkers with modern Asian, particularly Thai, food since 1992. Michelin praises chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten's "masterful technique and artful presentation", Zagat brands it an "epicurean delight" with "impeccable service". This contradicts the couple I met at Daniel who branded the service "a joke" and the food not much better. Likewise, friends living in New York, thrilled that

I am to experience Daniel and Le Bernardin, remain unexcited about Vong.

My experience falls between the two extremes. It's a quiet lunchtime service, so atmosphere is lacking. The warm asparagus salad, shrimp cakes and beef sirloin with roasted root vegetables are all fine, but I feel I've had their equal at uncelebrated establishments back home. The crispy tofu with lily bulb and radish salad with white sesame and lavender is the stand-out dish, the tofu's slippery creaminess contrasting beautifully with its impeccably crisp batter, although I can't taste lavender. Service is far from a joke, although we have to ask twice for our prosecco aperitifs.



New York's dining scene is vibrant at all levels, and its high priests think Michelin can only make it more so. Whilst it may assist many European visitors, it'll be a while, maybe forever, before it prises the city's natives from Zagat, their tested, trusted, democratic friend.

My culinary highlights? Dinner at Daniel, without doubt... And breakfast at Evergreen. The dear old diner is never going to get a Michelin star, and I don't suppose it cares. Neither do I. Sometimes you want hot cereal, eggs over easy, a motherly waitress and a snapshot of everyday New York life. More coffee, please! ☐

EVERGREEN COFFEE SHOP AND RESTAURANT

145 W 47th Street
between 6th and 7th Ave
001 212 921 7676

CARNEGIE DELI

854 7th Ave at 55th Street
001 212 757 2245

DANIEL

60 E 65th Street between
Madison and Park Ave
001 212 288 0033

LE BERNARDIN

155 W 51st Street between
6th and 7th Ave
001 212 554 1515

VONG

200 E 54th Street between
2nd and 3rd Ave
001 212 486 9592