

THAILAND TATLER

FEATURES

WAVE LENGTH
The eccentric decor at Aziamendi is just one of the attractions—the Basque-influenced menu is pretty special too. See p 112

PAGE
106

Best Seller

Supaluck Umpujh discusses her plans to take Bangkok's luxury retail sector to the next level

PAGE
112

Journey to the Stars

The chefs bringing Michelin-style glamour and kudos to the Thai dining scene

PAGE
118

Tripping Out

There's more to getting away than just basking on a beach. These are the people who holiday with a purpose

STELLAR EXPERIENCE

Joël Robuchon's restaurants have 25 stars but L'Atelier in Bangkok won't be getting one—for the moment, at least



Journey to the STARS

Thailand's enhanced culinary reputation has encouraged the arrival of several chefs from Michelin-starred restaurants to set up here. But, asks **Tim Footman**, will their presence persuade the venerable guide to follow?

LEAFING THROUGH EARLY EDITIONS OF the *Thailand Tatler Best Restaurants*, published just after the turn of the millennium, can be an enlightening experience. It describes a culinary landscape defined by, on one hand, tourist-friendly renditions of what is still defined without irony as Royal Thai cuisine; and on the other, second-hand iterations of classic French and Italian dishes, with heavy cutlery and heavier white tablecloths. Out in the resorts, the story is much the same, but with palm trees. You could have a pleasant meal in Thailand, but there was little excitement, and certainly no danger beyond a moderate chance of food poisoning. For visitors, restaurants were fuel stops between the last temple and the next floating market.

Today, you may as well be on another planet. Thai cuisine is being pulled in multiple directions, between 19th-century funeral books and up-to-the-minute molecular japery. Sustainability, localism and nose-to-tail encourage chefs and diners alike to think hard about ingredients, provenance and supply chains. Italian food is still popular, but do you mean Roman (Appia), Neapolitan (Peppina) or Tuscan (Lenzi)? Brunch places, gastropubs and small plate eateries challenge the idea that good food has to come with the trappings of fine dining. Food trucks? Check. Farmers' markets? Check. Dining in the dark, food pairings with cask-aged cocktails? If you like. Macarons? Hey, that's so 2014, darling.

Thailand has become a place where people come with the express purpose of eating, and maybe they can squeeze in a temple between meals. Food is no longer just enjoyed—it's taken seriously. Word that Jess Barnes or Ian Kittichai might be opening some new outlet is as vital a commodity on social media as the sexual proclivities of your favourite Korean pop star.

But the question inevitably arises—if this is a place where food is such an exciting aspect of life, why doesn't Michelin send its inspectors over and publish a guide to the place? This first became a serious talking point in about 2010, when David Thompson opened Nahm at the Metropolitan Hotel on Sathorn, the original version in London already having picked up a Michelin star—the first Thai restaurant to do so. Soon after, Henrik Yde-Andersen followed a similar path when his similarly Michelin-lauded Kiin Kiin in Copenhagen arrived in the form of Sra Bua at the Siam Kempinski.

That said, Thompson and Yde-Andersen weren't the first examples of Michelin stardust to fall on Bangkok. For many years the Pourcel brothers, proprietors of a two-star restaurant in Montpellier, had overseen D'Sens at the Dusit Thani, which finally closed its doors in 2014. And



BEYOND PAD THAI (Clockwise from top left) Kale velouté at L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon; tuna tartare at J'Aime; an amuse-bouche at Savelberg; Jean-Michel Lorain, whose Burgundy restaurant has had three Michelin stars for nearly 30 years

barely a month went by without one of the big hotels hosting a special event featuring a visiting chef whose place in Berlin or Biarritz had recently been anointed by the tyre company. Michelin was clearly aware of the Asian market, having published guides to Japan and Hong Kong, but the company remained—and remains—tight-lipped about whether it may wish to venture south in the near future.

At this juncture, it's necessary to clarify a key point. Despite what so many strident restaurant press releases declare, there is

no such thing as a "Michelin-starred chef". Michelin stars are awarded to restaurants; clearly their success or failure depends very much on the person leading the kitchen, but it's a collective, institutional award. Chefs from such restaurants may well come from other countries to Thailand, temporarily or permanently, and offer us the benefits of their brilliance but until they work out a way to physically transport Noma or The French Laundry, complete with all its staff and other contents, to a nice location off Thonglor, that's the limit of it.

That said, there's definitely been a shift in the past year or so, with a number of chefs whose restaurants have been lauded in current or past guides deciding that Thailand is the right location for new ventures. Inevitably part of the reason is the inexorable economic shift towards Asia that's been taking place since the financial crash of 2008; fine dining costs money and there's more of that money here and less of it in Europe and North America. But there's also a social shift, a new-found confidence and sophistication among diners who are prepared to pay for the services of high-end restaurants—and to make their displeasure known if the end result isn't what they were hoping for.

The most high-profile chef to make the jump is Joël Robuchon, whose arrival in Bangkok became a protracted saga worthy of a TV *lakhon*. The chef, whose various establishments across Europe, Asia and North America currently carry a total of 25 Michelin stars, finally opened L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon at the MahaNakhon Cube in December.

"Getting my first star was a very emotional experience," he recalls, amidst the familiar red and black trappings of his empire. "But it's not the overall accumulation of stars that's important—it's about each individual restaurant. And remember that, however hard Michelin tries, the ratings will not be the same all over the place. It's all about context."

But what does he think of the widely held notion that Michelin follows Robuchon around—that when he chooses a new location for a restaurant, they're more likely to take the whole city seriously? "Oh really, you value me too much," he grins. "I think it's more a case of both of us moving in the same direction. And it's not just Michelin or me. There's lots of movement, lots of development in the

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restaurant scenes in Asian cities and Bangkok is definitely growing. You just have to look around you. Michelin can't ignore that, whether I've got a restaurant here or not."

Another French chef who established a base in Bangkok in 2014 is Jean-Michel Lorain, whose La Côte Saint Jacques in Burgundy has held three stars since 1986. At J'Aime, the flagship restaurant of the new U Sathorn hotel, his aim is to make classic French cuisine more accessible to an Asian clientele without sacrificing its essential qualities. It's a lush, quirky, slightly camp space, clearly created with an eye to the customer's overall experience—it's not just eating, it's dining. And the distinction is important because, although good food is core to the Michelin ethos, setting and service must be entirely on point as well. "This is an Asian take on French food but it's not fusion," Lorain says, explaining that the only compromises come in the presentation and serving style. He too is convinced that it's Bangkok's turn to shine; unlike Robuchon, though, he's adamant that Michelin has woken up to the fact. "This is the next destination," he declares. "They will come, although I couldn't tell you when. The market is ready and diners are more demanding, more knowledgeable. There are still problems with imports and suppliers but things are so much better now."

Neither Lorain nor Robuchon has committed body and soul to Thailand; the former remains in France, with his protégé Amerigo Sesti heading the Bangkok kitchen, while the latter continues to trek between his various outlets around the world, and will doubtless open more before long. Henk Savelberg, by contrast, has fully relocated, despite a career that saw four of his restaurants earning Michelin stars in his native Netherlands. Having set up shop on the former site of Mandopop, in the Oriental Residence on Wireless Road, he too sees Thailand being on an upward trajectory. "Thais still don't take so many risks when they dine out but things are improving," he says. He won't be drawn on whether Bangkok will become a Michelin city but he knows the effect such an award can have on a young chef. "I was 27 when I got my first Michelin



star and that was a great day but there's no time to enjoy it," says the Dutchman. "As soon as you get the phone call, the pressure is on to maintain it." And in these days of blogs and TripAdvisor is there still a need for such guides? "Some people say all opinions are valid and that's true but, let's be honest, you do listen to some opinions more than others," he admits. "Michelin and the other food guides still matter."

In their various ways, Robuchon, Lorain and Savelberg remain faithful to the sort of cuisine that will always be associated with the Michelin guide; beneath the modish molecular effects, it's essentially French at heart. Eneko Atxa is representative of a younger breed of chef, a representative of the New Basque cuisine pioneered by Juan Mari Arzak. In 2012 Atxa's restaurant Azurmendi near Bilbao earned its third Michelin star—he was just 35 at the time.

Azurmendi serves as the model for Aziamendi, the restaurant at the offbeat luxury resort Iniala Beach House in Phang Nga. Staples such as pintxo—the Basque answer to tapas—undergo modern, often molecular reinventions and the tasting menus,



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Eneko Atxa

control of Alex Burger, has its roots in a specific local tradition but then takes it on an uncertain journey, driven by a combination of technique and instinct. In this way it has more in common with some of the more innovative restaurants in Thailand, such as Paste and Le Du, which are taking familiar flavours into fresh forms and combinations.

It's this delightfully unstable mix of refined high dining and subversive deconstruction that Michelin would have to negotiate if it decided to take on the Thai dining scene. And of course it faces further challenges, from local, regional and global lists that seek to cherry-pick the best of the best. Bangkok places have been doing extraordinarily well on S Pellegrino's list of Asia's 50 Best Restaurants, with Nahm heading the field last year and the prize going to the self-styled progressive Indian Gaggan for 2015. If Michelin's inspectors came to some other conclusion, would it make a whole lot of difference? In any case, Thai culture still has problems coming to terms with upfront criticism and this certainly applies to chefs and restaurateurs—foreigners as well as locals—as can be seen from some recent responses to less than complimentary comments in online media such as TripAdvisor and Coconuts. Some leading chefs, including David Thompson himself, have already gone on record with distinctly impolite things to say about Michelin and its methods.

As the 2015 edition of the *Thailand Tatler Best Restaurants* comes off the presses, we can see how far we've travelled. The chosen restaurants are infinitely more varied, more sophisticated and often more challenging than their counterparts in 2001—and the people who eat in them have proved themselves to be more than equal to such a challenge. Top chefs from Thailand and beyond are investing their time and money in a quest to make the scene even better, one that can be mentioned in the same breath as Hong Kong or Tokyo. The obvious question is not whether Michelin needs Thailand, but whether Thailand really needs Michelin. ●



WORLD CLASS Eneko Atxa (above) from Spain and Dutchman Henk Savelberg (top) bring new culinary spirit to Thailand; (opposite) Savelberg's foie gras terrine

TYRE MARKS

What's the Michelin guide and why is it so important?



The first Michelin guide to France was published in 1900 but it was not until 1926 that the practice of awarding stars (*étoiles*) to favoured restaurants was introduced; five years later the now familiar system of one-, two- and three-star establishments was established. Michelin first covered North America in 2005 and shortly afterwards came to Asia with guides to Hong Kong and Macau (2007) and Tokyo (2008).

The pressure to acquire and maintain a star rating is intense; in 2003 the threat of losing a third star was implicated in the suicide of the French chef Bernard Loiseau. The significance of gaining an extra étoile was a key plot point in the 2014 film *The Hundred-Foot Journey*. Inspectors maintain strict anonymity—they are discouraged from telling even their family and friends what they do for a living—which only adds to the mystique and kudos associated with the awards.

with their bonsai trees and barely cooked truffled eggs, assail all the senses at once.

Atxa acknowledges the commercial value of the Michelin system and the superstar status that comes with it: "A big chef is a client reference point," he says. But he is clearly uncomfortable with such management speak, and is far more keen to talk about the meeting points between the cooking he grew up with in northern Spain and the street food he's encountered on his travels around Thailand. He's renewing his fascination for grilling, for example, relishing what he calls "the prehistoric smell" of flame on meat. And despite his own training and status, he knows there are some things he couldn't manage: "I'm sure I could find someone in a street market who could do it better." Like Savelberg, he's happy with the kudos that Michelin brings but also knows the pressure. "If we had a good day yesterday but today's not so good, that's a problem," he says. "Each guest is special. In fact, if just one person's not having a good experience, that's a problem. There's only good and bad food. The next chapter is today."

Atxa's success may hint at a way forward for Michelin, which has been criticised for being wedded to the norms of Escoffier-era classical French cuisine; some have suggested that their experts lose their sure touch when confronted with non-European styles. The food at Aziamendi, under the day-to-day