

The Miele Guide: The Battle for The Most Democratic Restaurant Guide *)

by Laksmi Pamuntjak

* This article was featured in *The Jakarta Post*, 23 November 2008.

Now that restaurants have become big and necessary, the one industry we know doesn't cave in during a recession, cooks and restaurateurs and eaters and writers weigh in on the question: what is a restaurant guide?

At its most basic, restaurant guides select and rate restaurants, often ranking them or providing information for consumer decisions (type of food, ambience, facilities, price range and so on).

The first "guide" dated back to 12th century Hangzhou also believed to be the location of the first restaurant. They appeared as signs that could often be found posted in the city square listing the restaurants in the area and local customer's opinions of the quality of their food.

As one can imagine, this was the precursor of much of the bribery and even violence still found in today's (supposedly) civilized culinary scene.

Today the Michelin series of guides, which dishes out one to three stars to usually high-end, big-ticket restaurants, still causes the sort of flutter in the heart people get when presented with a vintage Prada or a bottle of Ch*teau P*trus.

Its main competitor in Europe, the guidebook series published by Gault Millau, doesn't shoulder as large a mythical burden, and is by nature quite different.

Unlike the Michelin guide which takes such factors as d*cor, ambience and service into consideration, Gault Millau only judges the quality of the food. Its ratings are on a scale of one to 20, with 20 being the highest.

The popular Zagat Survey compiles individuals' comments-mostly avid local restaurant-goers-about restaurants but does not put them through an "official" critical assessment.

Then there is Time Out, beloved for its snappy, comprehensive writing. It offers the inside scoop on some 2,000 restaurants in major cities of the world-big, little, stylish, grungy, and everything in between-and anoint the best of the best the Tony 100.

Close in wit and spirit to Time Out is The Good Food Guide series, published by the Fairfax Newspaper Group in Australia.

One to Three Chefs Hats are awarded for outstanding restaurants, with sections on bars, cafes and providers.

Today, nearly all major newspapers employ restaurant critics or at least have a restaurant review section.

Then for every major city you can think of there is at least one lunatic who would gladly sacrifice his or her waistline and live for months with amnesia, flatulence and indigestion in order to enlighten their fellow men and women on the gems of the cities. Known otherwise as a one man/woman show, this is certainly not for the faint-hearted.

When such people publish the fruits of their labours, the results tend to be independent and intensely personal. Think John Kennerdell in Tokyo, Jurgen Goethe in Vancouver, Mietta in Melbourne.

Yet it should come as no surprise that some of the best of the independent reviews-whether by food critics or by the general public-are to be found online. In addition to popular blogs, several websites are gaining traction including *eGullet.com* and *chowhound.com*.

What all restaurant guides share in common, ultimately, is that they are about holding restaurants to a certain set of standards: the mechanics designed not just to nose out incompetence or any slip in standard, but also to recognize a good thing when they see it.

It is against this background that The Miele Guide was launched on October 31, 2008 at a star-studded dinner at the Grand Hyatt Singapore.

Pitched by its founders as Asia's first truly independent and authoritative restaurant guide, it is partially similar to Zagat in that it is essentially a mix of professional and public voices.

To arrive at the final list of 320 restaurants featured in the inaugural edition, there were four rounds of selection and adjudication.

First, there was the shortlist of "best restaurants" drawn up by 84 of the region's top food writers and restaurant critics.

Polling was then conducted online amongst first over 15,000 registered voters from over 40 countries, then, separately, a jury of 1,500 respected foodies, journalists and F&B professionals.

The results of these two votes were then combined with slightly more weight given to the public vote. The guide's Top 20 list was then confirmed after the Miele team dined incognito at the top-ranked restaurants.

As a self-professed independent guide, *The Miele Guide* naturally claims to have accepted no advertising, sponsorship or free meals from any of the restaurants reviewed. While the guide bears the name Miele, the

German manufacturer of premium and innovative cooking also insists that as naming sponsor it did not influence the selection and judging process.

No rating system, of course, is without flaw. However democratic it tries to be, it is predicated on a meeting of subjective minds to set it down in the first place, as with the case of *The Miele Guide*'s first round of selection.

The "democratic" mechanics that follows can also yield somewhat results.

That the Top 20 list shows an overwhelming presence of Hong Kong and Singapore restaurants is doubtless to do with the fact that online voting -- for many possible reasons that include lifestyle -- is highest in the two cities.

Two of the top three restaurants are from Singapore (Iggy's in first place, Les Amis in third) while a resounding eight are from Hong Kong. One restaurateur-chef, the indomitable Joel Robuchon, enjoys a booming triumph with three of his restaurants-in Macau, Hong Kong and Tokyo-making it to the Top 20. The only Indonesian restaurant to make it to the list is Mozaic in Bali, at number five.

This doesn't, however, urge against popular voting systems in which restaurants are rated by a supposedly impartial and knowing public rather than by "experts," professional or otherwise.

A recent survey of New York City showed that 20,424 people rated nearly 2,000 places for Zagat, which is, after all, the ultimate "democratic" institution. As a point of comparison, *The Miele Guide* yielded over 75,000 votes for Asia before the list was whittled down.

Still, as the respectable food critic Mimi Sheraton points out, almost all of the restaurants with the highest ratings for food in Zagat are extremely fancy-looking and expensive.

The Miele Guide is no different. One has to wonder whether there is something to be said about the psychology of taste that renders it difficult to separate the cooking from the surroundings. As we know, this tendency will remain a thorny issue in a region best known for the richness and consistency of its casual and street food.

"We expect that this list will be controversial," says Aun Koh, Director of Ate Media, publisher of *The Miele Guide*. "Like any list, we expect people to dispute the rankings and to criticize us. But the more people talk about and debate which restaurants and chefs they think are Asia's best, the more we can help the restaurant industry in Asia grow."

To that end, *The Miele Guide* has created a culinary scholarship program which aims to promote formal culinary education through collaboration with experienced international chefs and other F&B professionals.

Working with the renowned At-Sunrice Global Chef Academy in Singapore, The Miele Guide-At-Sunrice scholarships were awarded this year to two young aspiring chefs, Lai Kit Yee and Malcolm Lee Seow Meng.

The Miele Guide 2008-2009 is available in Jakarta at Aksara Bookstore.