

GQ ON EATING & DRINKING

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The Power of Three

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*A three-star chef at last, **Daniel Boulud** sits down with the kingmaker of the restaurant world*



About forty years ago, a 15-year-old kid from Lyon named Daniel Boulud apprenticed in the kitchen of the legendary chef Paul Bocuse. He moved up quickly and went on to hone his skills in France's finest three-star kitchens (La Mère Blanc, Le Moulin de Mougins, Les Prés d'Eugénie). And then, lucky for us, he came to America. Boulud has since transformed our understanding of fine dining through his eponymous restaurant empire, where you'll find clairvoyant service, elaborate tableside presentations, and the best damn charcuterie on earth. So when the eminently French Michelin Guide considered crossing the pond for an American edition, the first restaurant that Michelin's global director looked at was Daniel, the empire's flagship, which Boulud opened on Manhattan's Upper East Side in 1993. But for the past four years, Michelin gave Daniel only two stars.

Now, two stars ain't half bad, but it means, in Michelin terms, that Daniel served "excellent cuisine, worth a detour" rather than "exceptional cuisine, worth a special journey." And this, according to our own Alan Richman, was "a major mistake." But this year the inspectors from the *Guide Rouge* got their act together, and Daniel finally got the three stars it deserves. To celebrate, we brokered a sit-down between Boulud and Jean-Luc Naret, global director of

the Michelin Guide, and the man who tormented him with tough two-star love for all those years. At a table in Daniel's ultra-luxe velvet-lined lounge, the great chef and his former nemesis discussed Michelin's stealth tactics, what the guide got wrong, and why it means more this year than ever.

GQ: Daniel, it doesn't seem like you're sitting down with your tormentor. You two seem cordial.

Daniel Boulud: Well, he tormented me for five years, but now the storm has passed.

GQ: So you're happy?

DB: I'm very happy. You cannot imagine. Daniel already had many accolades in New York....

GQ: Just about every accolade in New York.

DB: But I was missing one.

GQ: Where were you when you found out about the stars?

DB: The night before, I was at 11 Madison Park doing a charity dinner with Daniel Humm, and I got home at two thirty, quarter to three on a Sunday night, which was very bad to start my week. I knew they would be calling sometime in the morning, but I didn't realize it would be so early.

Jean-Luc Naret: Usually we do it at eleven, but this year we did it earlier.

DB: My wife was up, and she knew I was still sleeping, so she asked for Jean-Luc to call a little bit later.

J-LN: I called and asked to speak to Daniel Boulud, and she was like, "I'm sorry, he's still asleep. It's quite early here." She thought I was in France and that I didn't realize the time difference. I said, "I know it's early, but I'm sure he's going to be very happy with this call." And she said, "Yeah, but he came in late." And I say, "I know. He's going to receive so many calls after my call that he needs to be awake."

DB: I was stunned. I didn't know if I should scream or cry. I think I cry more than I scream.

J-LN: It's always incredibly emotional when you pass information like that. It's full of emotion, even for me. You call and say, "Well, you got three stars," and there's a blank until the emotion starts coming through on the other side. I know what it means to them.

GQ: Jean-Luc, how long do you know in advance how many stars restaurants are going to get? How long do you have to keep it secret?

J-LN: I've known Daniel would be getting three stars since we made the final decision in July. In July we have the stars meeting where I sit down in every country around the world. End of July we close the selection.

GQ: You keep these secrets tightly guarded.

DB: It's incredible. In France there's always a leak.

J-LN: There were no leaks here. Nobody knew about the three stars. We've been watching Daniel very carefully. Daniel was the first restaurant I looked at when we were first thinking of doing a Michelin Guide in New York in 2003, and I must say I was disappointed that we could not find three stars at Daniel in the first year. I know you were disappointed, too.

DB: No, I was not disappointed. But at the same time I knew I was maybe the best of the two stars. But what was going to take to jump to three? It wasn't about my commitment to cooking. Last year the restaurant was ten years old, and I wanted to do something. So I redid the entire restaurant. Totally fresh. I think that put the booster into our performance.

J-LN: One day I was sitting with Daniel in Vegas, and I say, "Daniel, when we going to get three stars?" I was not making fun. We really would have loved to do that. And this year we've come here eight times altogether. The first inspector called me because I'm traveling all over the world, and they said, "Listen, we just came from Daniel. It was, like, incredible. It really is three-star. I just wanted to let you know." The second one went, and the third one went, and I came in one night and had a fantastic meal. I came with another chef, and we had the same reaction: *What*

happened here? Something changed. Everybody realized this.

GQ: Jean-Luc, you genuinely seem to be rooting for restaurants to do well. I'm kind of surprised.

J-LN: When we arrive to a new country, the level of gastronomy comes up. We see that in all the countries we go to. Tokyo was amazing. The first year we look at all the restaurants, we find 150 with stars. Every one of them with one star wanted to become two-star. A lot of twos were aspiring to be threes. You will be amazed by how many stars are there. And it's not because we lower our standards; it's because the level of gastronomy has risen.

GQ: Who has Michelin misjudged?

DB: The first year when Michelin came, and the second year, I think there were a lot of mistakes. There's still mistakes. I think some of my restaurants deserved better. And also some of my best friends, too. Daniel Humm [11 Madison Park] and Paul Liebrandt [Corton] will both earn more Michelin stars.

J-LN: Paul is an incredible talent. We followed him very carefully. When he was at Gilt, we had given him two stars. We were printing the guide when we heard he was leaving. We literally had to destroy the page by hand because he was gone. When we found out he was going to Corton, we followed him very carefully and gave him two stars right away.

DB: Daniel [Humm] is an incredible young chef, too. He is very young. He is building something. I think getting four stars [in *The New York Times*] already this year is very disturbing for them.

J-LN: It is. Everybody will be looking at them the same way they look at Jean-Georges, Daniel...

DB: ...Per Se. It takes a while to get there.

GQ: How seriously do you think the guide has been taken in the U.S. since being introduced five years ago?

J-LN: It's like a baby. When we first came here on the first year, I came with a few select inspectors. I couldn't have any American inspectors, because the trained personnel was not there, not ready. So when we first came there, I come with a team of five inspectors, and we start the selection process. We tried 1,500 and wrote about the 500 we feel were the best. That was the first guide. I think it's really improved now. The team is now 100 percent American after five years. Altogether we have ten inspectors living both in New York and in California—men and women, small and big, bald and beautiful.

DB: Do those people usually have another occupation in life?

J-LN: No, no, it's a full-time job. We have houses around the world, and they have to work at the office. They do what they have to do. Make a reservation two years in advance if they need to. I'm the only one who can pick up the phone and say, "Can I come for dinner tonight?" One night I came here, and at the same time I had two inspectors on the other side, just to see if there'd be any different treatment.

GQ: That's very sneaky.

J-LN: No, it's not sneaky; it's what we have to do. The difference between here and Europe is, in Europe, at the end of a lunch the inspector would say, "I'd like to see the chef. I'd like to see the back of the kitchen." We don't do that here, because here if you spot someone doing that, their picture will be on the Internet the next day. In Europe, an inspector will not come back to a region for five years. But here we do not have that many people. The people who live here are protected completely. They don't tell their mother. They don't tell their father.

GQ: Do you burn off their fingerprints with lasers?

J-LN: And we scan their eyeballs. It's like James Bond. But really, once they start with us, they have six months' training across Europe, the States, and Asia, and after six months they come back here with a pair of inspectors going around to all their restaurants, and then they can be by themselves. Or *not* by themselves, because no one is dining alone in New York.

DB: We have single people dining!

J-LN: But it's more European to do that. But here it might be a giveaway, so our inspectors come in different configurations. They could be a nice couple, or two businessmen. When I come, sometimes it's the chef's pleasure

to receive me, but it's like, *Shit, he's here!* But I'm not an inspector. I'm a regular guest.

GQ: Do American-born chefs care as much about getting Michelin stars as European-born chefs working in the United States? Does it mean as much to them?

J-LN: I give you an example: Alice Waters. When I went to San Francisco, everybody was like, "Oh, she's going to get three stars." But she's not a three-star cook. So when I call her and gave her the news that she was a one-star, there was just a blank, and I was like, *Shit, maybe she was expecting more.* And she said, "You know what? I'm so happy, because all my life all my cooking was really based on the Michelin one-star food of France." It's not that one star is worse than three stars. It's just a different kind of food.

GQ: What would you say about the critique that Michelin only knows how to talk about France and French food and tends to favor it?

J-LN: First of all, there are more starred restaurants in New York than in Paris. We are totally independent, totally earnest on all of our decisions, and I think there's no favoritism in any way. Chefs see us as the only independent benchmark.

DB: New York has more stars than London, too.

J-LN: Tokyo is number one, but only for one reason: 160,000 restaurants. There are around 60,000 here.

GQ: Do you think people start looking more to Web sites and blogs than to Michelin Guides, especially in the States? Any fear of losing credibility?

J-LN: There are three groups. There is the food critic like *The New York Times* or Alan Richman, and they write their own opinion about the restaurant, which is fine—good or bad, it's one person writing about their own experience. Then you've got the people's choice: everybody writing about their own experiences on the blog. You don't know who they are, really; you don't know if they're friends of the chef or if they have something personal against the chef. Our inspectors are in the middle. They don't know the chef; they just know what the food is about, and they do their jobs totally anonymously. No one group is trying to do the job of the other. We are three different categories. The more people talk about gastronomy, the better. But as there are more blogs—who might be passionate about food but who also might be passionate about destroying restaurants—we have to make sure we speak even more loudly.

DB: I cannot read every blog. All I know is, there are more people writing. We see it on Google Alert, how many different people are writing about us. I think the serious ones will remain. I'm more concerned about what I do every day with my team, trying to maintain a standard. Three-star is changing everything. I've been in New York almost twenty-six years, and out of twenty-six years I had four stars from the Times for twenty years at least, so I'm comfortable dealing with it and knowing what it represents. But now that I have three-star Michelin, I think it's a little added pressure of making sure we strike the right balance all the time.

GQ: You've had three Michelin stars for a couple of days now. Are you aware of it at every moment?

DB: I'm pinching myself every morning. I think I'm going to be pinching myself for a while.

GQ: Have you already seen a boost in business?

DB: Well, people don't call at the last minute to eat at a three-star. But I'm considering opening reservations up so people can make them two months in advance as opposed to one. People from Europe like to plan a little farther in advance. But I think, first and foremost, I'm a New York restaurant, and I want to remain that. In France, when you have one star, you are regional and really have the clientele of the region. When you have two stars, you start to be national. When you have three stars, it's international. At that point, the restaurateur has to work very hard at holding on to some regionality. Not all restaurants can do it that well. For us, we've always been dealing with international a lot, but we like when people call us last minute at five o'clock and ask if they can squeeze in.

GQ: This has not been a good year for the restaurant business. The guide could actually help keep some places from shutting down. I heard that getting a Michelin star can boost business by 25 percent.

DB: A lot of the closings have been about real estate deals. Landlords, fallouts. I'm one of the very, very few restaurateurs in New York who own the real estate. I don't depend on the landlord. I'm not doing it for him. It's mine. I can make it beautiful however I see fit. That makes a lot of difference in the stability and longevity of my place in the

future. It's not easy. But it's true what you say about the Guide. It matters this year in a different way.

— *Howie Kahn*

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