

Voices

# In a simmering stew over a few Michelin stars

Italians, apparently, are furious at the notion that British cuisine is better. It's all rubbish, says Emily Green

Emily Green | Saturday 22 April 1995 00:02 |



 There has not been a good European gastronomic spat for some years, but this week produced one that would be the envy of the publicist Max Clifford. It had Italy pitched against Britain, with the French in the middle. The gist? A wild suggestion that the Michelin guides somehow, suddenly, rated British food more highly than Italian.

It went like this: on Thursday the Times published a short piece, no more than a couple of paragraphs, reporting that Italians had been outraged to discover the previous day that the Michelin Red Guides had downgraded Italian cooking "to fourth place, behind France, Germany - and Britain". By early morning, the news was crackling out on the BBC's Today programme - cue for lunching listeners to abandon borlotti bean stew in favour of Welsh rarebit. By midday, the furore was such that a press officer for Michelin was rushing off to the television studios of Network SouthEast for an impromptu interview. When he returned, the Daily Mail and Evening Standard were on the line, chasing the story.

And story it was, the tall-tale variety. Michelin has been publishing guides in one form or another since 1900, latterly for Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Great Britain & Ireland, Benelux (Belgium and Luxembourg), France, Spain & Portugal and, finally, a tome for businessmen known as Main Cities Europe. Its Red Guide to Italy, which was actually published not yesterday but on 6 January, credited the Italians with two three-star restaurants, 17 two-star and 193 one-stars, a total of 212. By contrast, since we are counting, Britain has four three-stars, six two-stars and 57 one-stars, or a total of 67. This hardly puts Italy in "fourth place" behind Britain.

Britain has two more three-star restaurants than Italy, which little fact appears, sometime between publication and now, to have irritated one Enrico Derflingher, executive chef of the Eden Hotel in Rome. Speaking to the Italian daily Il Messaggero, after the hotel's recent refurbishment, Mr Derflingher reportedly complained about Michelin slighting his homeland.

Mr Derflingher is an executive chef in a Forte-owned hotel, which is the sort of huge organisation that can employ chefs who do not cook. Yet in a shrewd move, Forte has taken to leasing out its London hotel restaurants to star chefs, notably Marco Pierre White and Nico Ladenis. This has rewarded Rocco Forte with two Michelin three-stars in four years. If Mr Derflingher is as furious as Il Messaggero and the Times suggest, his ire may be of less international significance than corporate. We may be witnessing pique writ large.

Derflingher dismisses the British three-stars as "trendy", which would suggest that he has never been to them. It is safe to say that Barbara Cartland could pose for a Hello! colour spread in either of these restaurants without calling in the prop people. His attack reportedly goes on: "The English are only better when they copy us." For the record, Mr Derflingher: the British copy Italian food almost as a national sport. Supermarkets do it. Racy new-wave restaurants do it. Middlesbrough housewives do it. And they, alas, are not better at it than Italians. What is more, when it comes to Michelin three-stars, British cooks do not do it: they ape the French. And when not aping the French, they seem to inhabit that region whose culinary tradition is gauche pandering to the spending power of the rich and tasteless.

And so, much to the dismay of critics, do the Italians. At the three-star Antica Osteria del Ponte in Abbiategrasso near Milan, a dinner might cost £51.85 without wine, and might take a rustic dish of kid stew with almonds, and serve it dinkily, Frenchily, as a meat crepe. At Gualtiero Marchesi in Erbusco, also near Milan, the speciality is less the sort of regional food we equate with Italian cooking than titillation for big spenders. Michelin notes one of its specialities to be insalata di storione con le sue uova, that is to say, sturgeon with caviare, or luxury with a garnish of luxury.

Franco Taruschio is an Italian cook with experience of the Michelin guides in both Britain and Italy. Famously a friend of the Elizabeth David, he has for more than 30 years run the Walnut Tree Inn near Abergavenny, Gwent. Five years ago, he kicked the Michelin inspector out of his restaurant, and in spite of importuning from Michelin head office, refused to be listed in subsequent editions of the guide. "For years I had watched young British chefs go bust trying to cook absurd pseudo-French Euro-fodder. The poor man appeared with his checklist and I just couldn't stand it," he says.

As for Michelin-starred restaurants in Italy, for a man of grandfatherly kindness, Mr Taruschio is uncharacteristically scathing. "It is like leaving Italy and entering somewhere else," he says. This is his account of a meal had at the starred restaurant L'Approdo in Palermo: "There was caponata - made with aubergines and capers and so on, served with squid, but with powdered chocolate and sugar on top. It was a huge place, no customers. I felt pretty miserable and dejected. And sick."

Mr Taruschio is the first to admit, however, that the Michelin guides do understand French food. This shows in the ratings. Now in its 86th edition, the guide to France lists 20 three-stars, 77 two-stars and 445 one-stars.

As for which is better, British or Italian food, I suspect the Italians would be madly opening English-style restaurants if there were any credence to this media swirl. As it is, outside of the weird and rarefied Michelin circuit, Italy has almost no "ethnic" restaurants. They know theirs is best, and so do we.

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