

FOOD AND BEVERAGE

Black Pearl vs. Michelin Guide: Culture and controversy in China's luxury cuisine industry

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The French guide is still popular in China despite criticism of its Westem-centric perspective and competition from Meituan-Dianping's "Black Pearl." Image credit: Cai Yi Xuan, Four Seasons Beijing

By [Zac Wang](#)

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Chinese cuisine might be 5,000 years old, but only in the last few decades has it truly come into its own in the fine-dining realm.

From lavish restaurants serving modernized imperial dishes, to quaint eateries sourcing the country's top ingredients locally, China's economic growth has given birth to a vibrant food scene for gourmands.

And so the world's dining guide par excellence, the *Michelin Guide*, entered China in 2016. Immediately, it faced a backlash due to its apparent cultural deafness.

In response, Meituan released the *Black Pearl* guide, which critics said more accurately represented the Chinese people's view of what fine food is.

But it is perhaps a sign of the current state of luxury in China that even amid this criticism, Michelin's popularity shows no signs of waning, according to industry insiders who spoke with *Jing Daily* suggesting that Western influence on Chinese luxury tastes is still alive and kicking.

"Initially when Michelin launched their first guide in China, there were lots of haters from the restaurant industry, since they are reluctant to be judged by a French company," said Kevin Chan, a food critic at the Fine Dining Explorer (FDE) blog and the first person to have dined at all restaurants on the World's 50 Best Restaurants [list](#).

"But for restaurants who got a star, it was life changing overnight," he said. "Suddenly, long queues of customers were trying to get a table. It's like winning a jackpot."

As Western brands from [Louis Vuitton](#) opening a restaurant in Chengdu, to celebrity chefs and fashion brands [launching cafs](#) and restaurants wrestle with how to capture their share of the Chinese market, they will do well to note the changing preferences of the Chinese palate and what they say about the state of the luxury market in the

country.

Why Michelin is still popular in China

When Michelin released its first Shanghai guide, local critics and restaurateurs alike sharply rebuked the move, noting the proportion of non-Chinese restaurants. They **questioned** whether it was appropriate to let Western judges dish out ratings on Chinese cuisine, whose standards for fine dining are often lost on Western palates.

The French company has since made it a point to emphasize that its food critics are largely Chinese, and in its latest guide for Beijing, for example, **30 of the 36** starred restaurants featured Chinese cuisine.

Despite all its controversies, FDE's Mr. Chan says the *Michelin Guide* delivers trustworthy recommendations.

"In comparison, non-Michelin starred restaurants in China have a huge variation in quality," he said. "You really need to do lots of online research to pick out the good restaurants."

Some restaurants, like fine-dining chain Xin Rong Ji, have managed to **garner the admiration** of both Western and Asian guides, having received the maximum awards from both Michelin and Black Pearl. Its success reflects a new paradigm in fine dining and luxury in China: patrons seeking authentic flavors and dishes, while eschewing flashy displays that do little for the flavor of dishes.

"The Chinese are definitely becoming more confident in local dining and local dining is getting better," said Jason Zhang, outlet manager at Cai Yi Xuan, Four Seasons Beijing's Michelin-starred restaurant. "But I think many people still respect the Michelin guide just as much."

Market maturing like a fine baijiu

Delivery and superapp giant Meituan-Dianping made a splash in 2018 when it released the first edition of its *Black Pearl Guide*, which was **billed** as a fine-dining guide "promoting the Chinese culinary culture and propelling the development of China's dining industry."

"Fine dining can showcase the strength of a country, because it shows that you can choose what you want to eat it's part of the culture," said Jocelyn Chen, a food writer and managing director at Allstar Communications, a communications agency serving the fine-dining industry.

The *Black Pearl Guide* rates restaurants similarly to Michelin, leaning on food critics and inspectors to rate establishments based on cooking quality, dining experience and how they innovate China's culinary traditions. It also leverages billions of data points collected from the Meituan superapp.

Black Pearl's influence resonates just as much, if not more, than Michelin's. Dozens of the restaurants listed in 2020 saw online orders and dine-in sales **surge**, and they all managed to weather COVID-19-induced lockdowns.

"To the consumer, the more endorsements a restaurant has, the easier their choice is," said Benny Lee, vice president of operations for Hilton Greater China & Mongolia, which operates several restaurants that have been awarded stars by both guides. "Their popularity in China is testament to the increasingly sophisticated palate of the Chinese diner."

This increasingly refined fine-dining landscape is, in the end, good for business: Meituan's latest *China Fine-Dining Report* showed that the market for fine dining **expanded** 40 percent year-on-year in 2021.

The company also pointed out that fine dining today is expanding beyond first and second tier-cities, which have access to the world's top ingredients: smaller cities are also seeing a renaissance in fine dining, driven by authentic, local food.

"Regional cuisines are growing in prominence in fine dining," Hilton's Mr. Lee said. "People are paying closer attention to the ingredients, nutrition, preparation and sourcing of their food."

Contrasting philosophies

While it is still unclear which guide will emerge as the people's favorite, it is indubitable that China is in the midst of a fine-dining revolution, amid a wider renaissance in its homegrown luxury industry.

On the one hand, the *guochao* trend's effects have permeated from fashion and **daily foods** all the way to architecture and **fine dining**, showing Chinese consumers' increasing desire to tap into the country's traditions and history, while distancing themselves from Western ideals of luxury.

"We as operators know more about Chinese tastes and can better cater to the tastes of local diners, and integrate the

food into the lives of locals," Four Seasons' Mr. Chan said.

On the other hand, newly starred restaurants often get booked up for months after receiving the award, indicating that when it comes to tastemaking, Western definitions of luxury likely still hold considerable sway among the Chinese public.

Notwithstanding these cultural differences, Monica Luo, director of communications at Ultraviolet, a Shanghai restaurant with three Michelin stars, thinks Chinese fine dining's future is bright.

"In the coming years, more well-traveled and trained Chinese chefs will establish their restaurants, and more seasoned diners will appreciate the value of fine dining," Ms. Luo said.

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