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FOOD

Cuisine's Forgotten Continent

Asia's Rich Culinary Offerings Ignored in Top 50 Restaurant List

By JOHN KRICH

THERE'S NOTHING like another "world's best" list to show how far we are from being one world. When it comes to restaurants, most people would argue over the 50 finest places to eat in their home city, let alone the planet. But in May, the brassy British trade magazine "Restaurant" dared publish its rankings of mankind's 50 leading dining venues. Some 600 industry insiders, chefs and critics chose their favorites from around the world in a fourth annual survey that continues to grow in scope and influence. Not surprisingly the top end is dominated by established names in the haute dining world, such as Spain's El Bulli, the French Laundry in the U.S. and the United Kingdom's Gordon Ramsay. But the only eatery in Asia that was found notable is one Hong Kong hotel's splashy Western showpiece—less known for its food than for its views and its toilets. If there's little room for Asia on this lengthy top 50, that hardly comes as a



Dazzling: Hong Kong's Felix restaurant

shock. Last year's list, for example, let all of the Indian subcontinent be represented by Bukhara in New Delhi, a hotel entry favored by ex-patriots for its hefty, non-Hindu kebabs. Still, in a global era where eaters zoom everywhere by jet or Internet, there's something limiting, to say the least, about a guide to earthly eats that never touches down in Tokyo, Singapore or even Taipei.

So why are the great restaurants and grand masters of Asia off the map? How is it that, decades after East-West fusion gave wide exposure to Asian ingredients and Japanese aesthetics helped trim the fat out of classic French cuisine, Asia remains a place to borrow from, but not to eat in?

The fault just may lie with Asia itself. Part of the problem with Asian cuisine, of course, is sociological. Though they might not admit it, many Western experts' first and lingering impression of Chinese, Indian, Thai or Vietnamese fare is gained in greasy, predictable neighborhood storefronts set up by new arrivals far from home who may or may not know anything about cooking.

Jiggs Kalra, New Delhi's most venerable. Please Turn to Page P2, Column 3

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ble food historian and restaurant consultant, believes there's a major cultural difference at work. "In India, or China for that matter, the food is more family oriented, about generations sharing at the table." This, he says, stands in contrast with the more Western restaurant practice of individual servings, where the emphasis is on elegant presentation and impressive portions. "(In Asia), we aren't about ordering individual dishes at the table, or taking them home in a doggie bag," he says.

And little is done to counter this home-style image, where chefs remain largely anonymous, more often put down for their lack of education than honored for their amazing refinement. How many restaurants in Asia are known because of a single dominant personality—as with the majority of this magazine's top 50 list? "Really ambitious Asian chefs are bound to make more of a name in Europe or the U.S.," points out Ian Semp, founder of London's Caffe Nero chain and now a resident of Kuala Lumpur.

Chefs in Asia, viewed more as interchangeable kitchen parts and school drop-outs, have to fight harder to establish themselves, creating a less cooperative atmosphere than elsewhere. "All the French chefs dine together and work toward the future of French cuisine," India's Mr. Kalra observes. "But here, the chefs fight with one another and bitch. It's sad."

Worse still, a great many of the great food artists in Asia end up toiling under the banner of hotel chains, where they are featured only in predictable promotions that pass by most paying guests—or the serious gourmet world, which, unlike knowing Asian patrons, would tend to turn up its nose at establishments that can't manage to make it as "stand alones." This top 50 has almost none.

Humble masters, meanwhile, labor in obscurity around Asia—sometimes happily—known only to local aficionados who have little means or incentive to share their finds. While many Japanese could name a handful of culinary



Notable: the Flower Drum

geniuses at work at the great *kaiseki* houses in Kyoto or the \$1,000-a-sitting VIP spots of Tokyo, these remain occult secrets to most outsiders. So few travelers in Asia would seek that certain country inn or culinary landmark worth a detour (though France and Italy, and the top 50 list, are full of them). "It would be difficult to think of a single true destination restaurant in Asia," says Mr. Semp.

The result: none of the attention-grabbing glitz that might impress a judge. "Our restaurants utterly fail to promote themselves beyond the country," bemoans Mr. Kalra, the restaurant consultant, speaking as much for the region as India itself.

Asia's Honorable Mention

For the record, "Restaurant" magazine's one Asian inclusion on the top 50, which ranks at No. 49, is Felix, in Hong Kong's Peninsula Hotel. The restaurant really does have some of the most beautifully situated and designed interiors but serves the sort of outlandish Pan-Pacific fusion best found in Honolulu or Los Angeles.

Not that Asian food doesn't get a bit of a nod in the top 50. It just isn't cooked in Asia. Japanese cuisine is represented by two chefs renowned by single names, Tetsuya and Nobu, and their prix fixe playgrounds in Sydney (ranked No. 4) and London (No. 20). London's Hakkasan (No. 30), named the finest in Chinese fare, was, when I sampled it two years back, also a statement mostly in décor—a Fitzrovia basement turned into a posh slate-green and black lair whose bamboo-like bars reminded me of an elegant torture chamber. The food didn't even rate my top 10 for Asian restaurants when I compiled my London entry in the "Eat" restaurant-review series (though it has been awarded a Michelin star).

John Krich's Own Guide to Asia's Top 10 Restaurants

1. Fu Yuan, Taipei
2. Peng Yuan, Taipei
3. My Humble House, Taipei
4. Guangzhou Jullia, Guangzhou
5. Kikunoi, Kyoto
6. Kahala, Osaka
7. Sanchon, Seoul
8. Dairy Queen, Bangkok
9. Cilantro, Kuala Lumpur
10. Chef Chan's, Singapore

At No. 33 on the list, Australia's Flower Drum in Melbourne has been winning accolades for decades, and is an acceptable choice in Cantonese cuisine embellished with luxury meats and produce, but lacking in true grit for my taste. Asked for his reaction by Personal Journal, Gilbert Lau, Flower Drum's humble founder, is diplomatic: "There are an awful lot of restaurants on this earth—really it boggles the mind. So I'll leave the choice to experts."

All this means that great Asian cuisine is, at least for now, being ignored by the international culinary elite. I can't pretend to argue the merits of each four-star venue on the list, having actually eaten at six of the 50. Yet it seems demonstrably true that one single reasonably serious Chinese banquet contains more complexity of flavor, variety of cooking techniques and subtlety of approach than many of these most elaborated efforts of Western cuisine. The Japanese are second to no one in their scrupulousness and their decorative sense of food as art. Thai and other Southeast Asian cuisines also contribute their playful tropical conglomeration of spices and fruits. And is India to be left off the map?

Since it was unveiled, others have

'Restaurant' Magazine's Top 10 (from a list of 50)

1. The Fat Duck, Bray, England
2. El Bulli, Montjoi, Spain
3. The French Laundry, Yountville, California
4. Tetsuya's, Sydney, Australia
5. Gordon Ramsay, London
6. Pierre Gagnaire, Paris
7. Per Se, New York
8. Tom Alkens, London
9. Jean Georges, New York
10. St. John, London

taken issue with the Restaurant's choices. A CNN Web site columnist tweaked the top 50 for its loyalty to "molecular gastronomy"—an experimental style of cooking championed by the list's No. 1-ranked restaurant, the Fat Duck, in Britain's Berkshire countryside, which serves concoctions such as "bacon-and-egg" ice cream. (This cooking as chemistry approach to food was made popular by El Bulli in Montjoi, Spain,—ranked No. 2—where the courses are largely foams and essences that seem to come more from a lab than from a grill.)

The magazine itself acknowledges charges that it hasn't been just Eurocentric but "London-centric"—more than 25% of its listings coming from a capital that once upon a time couldn't provide a good meal. The selection is largely useful, not so much as a dining guide—since anyone who had enough cash to actually pay for all these wouldn't bother to consult any such list—but as a thumbprint of what is considered "haute gourmet" these days.

"Restaurant" magazine's public relations people promise unofficially that each new year's list of selectors will become wider—this is the first year a majority even came from outside Britain—as the breadth of past winners expands and the depth of its experts grows. And they readily acknowledge the list's geographic shortcomings (although the magazine was unavailable to comment specifically on the lack of Asian restaurants on the list).

Asia shouldn't have to wait for anyone to have to discover or bravely speak up for its restaurants. The region has to begin to value and package its outstanding chefs and gourmet experiences in the manner they deserve. If some selecting body untainted by commercialism and self-interest could step up, the naming of an "all-Asian" top 50 might not be a bad place to start.

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