

Michelin 2002

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The 2002 *Michelin*, the red guide to Great Britain and Ireland, is just out and can be summed up in three words - dull, dull and dull.

It is not so much that there is no change at the three- star level - neither the anticipated elevation of Gildleigh Park in Chagford, Devon nor the long overdue rise of Mayfair's Le Gavroche to this summit has taken place (in the latter's case is this Uncle Michel Roux keeping nephew Michel Roux firmly in his place?) - but the general lack of excitement about the whole business. The press release is dreariness personified.

And it really should not be like that. 2001, the year under review, was an exceptional for restaurants in the UK. An unprecedented amount of money flowed via a vast array of different backers into a record- breaking number of new openings and was accompanied by an overall increase in standards even if a shortage of well- trained front of house staff is still obvious. Sadly, there is no hint of this in *Michelin*.

Instead, the only major change is the elevation of the Fat Duck at Bray, Berkshire, to two stars which, although I am delighted for chef/ proprietor Heston Blumenthal and his team, is, because it contradicts *Michelin's* own ratings, a very odd move indeed.

The Fat Duck with two stars, which denotes excellent cooking, worth a detour in the guide's language, is less than half a mile from the Waterside Inn with three, which means exceptional cooking, worth a special detour in *Michelin* speak. Yet in fact this is completely the opposite of what the two restaurants deliver.

It is The Fat Duck which is exceptional. Blumenthal is an empirical cook prepared to break every conventional rule in the cookery book to find new flavours and combinations, many of which work and some of which definitely do not. Because of this it is not easy to recommend: some, even those who eat out a lot, find it too experimental and occasionally disappointing - but it is exceptional and British cooking is a whole lot better and more interesting because of him.

By contrast, The Waterside Inn is excellent, traditional French *haute cuisine* at its best and most expensive. When it opened 25 years ago it was exceptional as much because of its unique position as the standard of its cooking but now it has been joined by at least another 12/15 restaurants serving this type of food (many of them, like Pierre Koffman, trained at the Waterside). Excellent yes, exceptional no - except when your luck is really in and the sun is shining, your table has a view across the water and someone else is picking up the tab.

Other than this and the restoration of one- star status to new restaurants that have risen from the ashes of others (such as Nahm at The Halkin where Stefano Cavallini used to be) there are the usual stars where style triumphs over content. The most notable example is the absurdly named Foliage in the Mandarin Hyde Park - anyone in the hotel is strongly advised to eat in the less expensive and far more jolly café alongside.

Finally, spare a thought for Franco Taruschio, the greatest Italian chef Great Britain is ever likely to see (well perhaps Alberico Penati at Harry's Bar is his equal but at twice the price!)

For 30 years Franco and Ann ran the Walnut Tree Inn at Abergavenny unrecognised by Michelin. Last year they sold it to Stephen Terry, a talented chef but one - and he would be the first to admit this - without Taruschio's experience or innate taste. But Terry has introduced credit cards, bookings and tablecloths and all this, allied to good if not inspired cooking, has won the restaurant its first star.