

The best 50 restaurants in the world?

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In late 2001 Chandos Elletson, Chris Maillard and David Lancaster, the then editorial triumvirate behind *Restaurant* magazine, which they had just launched, sat down and began to think of how to conjure up a mechanism to boost sales.

"We thought it would be great to do a list of the world's best," Elletson explained to me shortly before the 2007 50 Best Restaurants were announced in London last Monday night, "but what we wanted to incorporate was a very diverse range of restaurants. We thought it would be fun for the list to include the best fish and chip shop or the most wonderful but basic crab shack on a beach alongside one of **Alain Ducasse's** restaurants and **Le Gavroche**. Our criteria were that they had to be places where you could have a good time and that the list should be very much tilted towards the consumer."

Six years later the announcement of the World's 50 Best Restaurants bears only a passing resemblance to what the original editors (who are no longer involved with the magazine) had in mind. The award has skilfully captured enormous media attention and has had an obviously beneficial effect on all those who have come in the top 50, not to mention those who have actually won. Heston Blumenthal, the still modest chef/proprietor of **The Fat Duck** in Bray, Berkshire, admitted that the publicity generated from the announcement that he had been voted the World's Best Restaurant in 2005 generated as much, if not more, publicity than the award of his third Michelin star.

There is no doubt that the award has been hugely positive not just for the chefs and restaurateurs involved but also for *Restaurant* magazine (www.restaurantmagazine.co.uk), which has a fortnightly circulation of only just over 20,000. Joe Warwick, its current editor, has not only chipped away at the monopoly once held by the invariably dreary trade weekly *Caterer & Hotelkeeper* but has also injected a much-needed sense of fun into writing about the British restaurant industry. Given the long hours involved in the restaurant business, that sense of humour is a particularly welcome ingredient.

There is no doubt, too, that all of those who are invited to enjoy the Awards ceremony are there to have a good time. This takes place in London's Science Museum, which seems an appropriate setting while so many chefs are currently using modern technology to explore the worlds of flavour, smell and taste, although it was somewhat incongruous to talk to Ferrán Adria, the chef/proprietor of **El Bulli** who has won the Best Restaurant accolade in 2002, 2006 and again in 2007, in front of a vast cabinet containing boxes of scientific relics of the 1950s such as Kudos soap flakes, a Sirram picnic set and a copy of *The Living World of Science*.

What also brings many chefs to London is the opportunity to eat at **St John** restaurant (ranked 34th but to many in a class of its own) after the awards, where they feasted on the first of the new season's gulls' eggs, asparagus, sea urchins, pigs' head pie and tripe with lentils. And then to reconvene there the following day for a lunch to honour Alice Waters from **Chez Panisse** in Berkeley, California, the recipient of the 2007 Lifetime Achievement award for her unremitting crusade for sustainable food. Camaraderie and good food aside, the lunch was remarkable for Adria's progress from table to table, rather like the father of the bride, saying how proud he was to have won again not for himself or El Bulli but for Spain, and the fact that Waters declared that in front of such an audience of her peers, she was speechless for the first time in her professional career.

But if there is a competitive edge to these awards it is short-lived. Had there been any bookmakers present at the Science Museum it is more than likely that the odds on either Adria or Blumenthal winning again would have been very

short with all the others being rank outsiders, such is the reclame of these two chefs at the moment. (Thomas Keller, who was also there, is the only other chef to have won for his restaurant, **The French Laundry** in Yountville, California, in 2003 and 2004.)

And although these awards claim to be the 'World's Best', the database from which they are chosen is still very small. The magazine divides the restaurant world up into 22 geographical regions, most with 31 voters each (the Caribbean and Bahamas had only 15) with a chairperson and then a voting panel of chefs, restaurateurs and food critics, of which I was one in the UK and Ireland region. Each panel member can vote for five restaurants but only two within their own region, to which there is added the further sensible stipulation that each restaurant voted for had to have been visited by the voters within the past 18 months.

As a result, there were 651 voters with 3,255 votes cast overall. One release from the magazine admitted that despite all their efforts, the response from Asia had been disappointing and as a result no Asian restaurants appear in the top 50 - particularly surprising perhaps given the inclusion of London's **Nobu** and **Hakkasan** in the top 20 and the obvious popularity of Asian food generally. But as I mulled over these figures I began to appreciate quite how small this sample is.

El Bulli only seats a maximum of 50 customers a night, is only open for dinner and only for six months of the year, which means that it can serve a maximum of 9,100 customers during the voting period. These top restaurants are obviously not large; the Fat Duck seats only 44, a figure Blumenthal has confessed he would ideally like to reduce to 40 although it is open for lunch and dinner all year. It struck me that El Bulli's customers must have included a surely disproportionate number of *Restaurant* magazine voters over the past 18 months to have earned its top spot. Or the winning number of votes that have earned it the title of World's Best must have been quite small.

Warwick is aware that they need to address the issue of representing Asian restaurants better although he believes that in Japan in particular this may be a cultural issue, with restaurants listed for their particular speciality, such as sushi, eel or tempura rather than their overall excellence. And with France doing so well overall (there are nine restaurants from Paris in the top 50 as opposed to six from London), he would like to see a greater French presence at the awards and the lunch, in particular.

But there is no doubt that these awards have not only captured the headlines but also the backing of all the nominated chefs. After the dessert of custard doughnuts, Waters rose to speak again and reiterated quite how important, and yet how rare, it was for so many leading chefs to meet together to speak as one voice for slow food.

THE TOP TEN

1. **El Bulli**, Roses, north of Barcelona, Spain

www.elbulli.com Absolutely breathtaking - if you can get in.

2. **The Fat Duck**, Bray, Berkshire, England

www.thefatduck.co.uk Wonderfully stimulating with Blumenthal's far more accessible pub, The Hind's Head, across the road.

3. **Pierre Gagnaire**, Paris, France

www.pierre-gagnaire.com France's genial culinary magician.

4. **French Laundry**, Yountville, California, USA

www.frenchlaundry.com Thomas Keller's multi-course, much-revered experience.

5. **Tetsuya's**, Sydney, Australia

www.tetsuyas.com Japanese food combined with French technique from Tetsuya Yakuda.

6. **Bras**, Laguiole, France,

www.michel-bras.com This restaurant is top of my list to visit - soon, I hope.

7. **Mugaritz**, Gipuzko, near San Sebastian, Spain.

www.mugaritz.com Perhaps the most experimental of all the chefs in this exciting food region.

8. **Restaurant Le Louis XV**, Monaco, Monte Carlo.

www.alain-ducasse.com Justifiably, the highest ranking classic, luxurious French restaurant in this list.

9. **Per Se**, New York, USA,

www.persenya.com Overrated in my opinion but obviously liked by others.

10. **Arzak**, San Sebastian, Spain,

www.arzak.es Great cooking and hospitality from Juan Mari Arzak now with his daughter, Elena, in the kitchen.

