

Should restaurant reviews have star ratings? Our critics face off

By BILL ADDISON,
PATRICIA ESCÁRCEGA
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RESTAURANT CRITICS

As America's dining culture has emerged and continuously evolved over the last half-century, so too has its notions around food criticism. One endless debate trails restaurant reviews: Do star ratings have any real worth? Our restaurant critics Patricia Escárcega and Bill Addison weigh the pros and cons of assigning stars during this golden age of Los Angeles dining.

Against stars — Patricia Escárcega

At the beginning of our tenure, Bill and I took up the question of whether to reintroduce star ratings to the dining section. Bill leaned toward reinstating them; I wanted to leave them in the dustbin. Our predecessor, Jonathan Gold, did away with starred reviews in 2012. I've many reasons to be grateful Gold, a man I never met in life, but whose legacy I reckon with every time I sit down to write a review. Gold was not just a great critic, but also one of our best contemporary American prose stylists, and he used his gifts in service of charting the beauty and richness of Los Angeles. He shaped and enriched my understanding of Los Angeles food and culture more than any other writer I can name.

I'm particularly grateful to Gold for helping dismantle the star system from the L.A. Times' Food section. The thing I feel most deeply in my bones is that stars reinforce a framework of thinking about food and dining that is systematically faulty and wrongfully weighted toward fine dining. You are no doubt familiar with the complaints lobbed at the most famous star rating system in the gastronomical universe, the 100-plus-year-old Michelin Guide: It's too Eurocentric. It overemphasizes formality and presentation, attributes that favor fine dining. Its fleet of super-secret restaurant inspectors, dispatched only to a handful of countries and cities around the globe, offer a painfully small window into the wide world of eating. Michelin has helped cement stars in the public consciousness as totems of haute cuisine and luxury.

Stars are especially incompatible with a city such as Los Angeles, which derives much of its identity and strength from the astonishing diversity of the people who live and eat here. For a star system to work meaningfully, we must define what we mean by a four-star restaurant.

So what does a four-star restaurant look like in L.A. right now? Is it the genre-defying food truck? The modest-looking strip mall gem? The swanky Beverly Hills spot that ties off your leftovers with a silken bow? Stars can't contain this breadth.

I will concede that stars can steer a meaningful conversation about the current food and dining landscape. (Remember Pete Wells' famous revision of Per Se's star rating in the New York Times? Remember the lively conversation that ensued? Of course you remember.)

The most compelling argument I've heard in favor of stars is that they are "servicey." They offer a quick snapshot of a restaurant's standing for time-strapped readers. The flipside, of course, is that they compromise the nuances of a review, reducing whatever complexity it contains to a few pointy symbols on the page. I don't think it's a coincidence that the only restaurant critic to be awarded a Pulitzer Prize is one who penned unstarred reviews. Gold's reviews allowed — maybe even forced — readers to engage with his sentences and, by extension, his insights, and the context he considered restaurants in.

In the end, I'm not convinced that even the highest star rating is useful to readers or restaurants. A low or high star rating can pigeonhole a kitchen in unhealthy ways. A colleague told me a story recently about a "five-star" restaurant that lost its high rating, but continued to advertise itself as a "five-star" restaurant far beyond the rating's shelf life. A star rating can be turned into a disreputable marketing tool. Conversely, a low rating can stymie a young restaurant on the verge of finding its sea legs.

Restaurants are closer to living organisms than static things. Trying to measure a restaurant in stars is like trying to quantify the value of a summer breeze, or a kiss, or any other (hopefully) pleasant, ephemeral experience you can think of. In the end, it is beyond measurement.

In favor of stars — Bill Addison

All the negatives commonly laid out about star ratings in restaurant criticism are correct. Stars are reductive. Their quantitative smallness is one-dimensional and arrogant and infuriating. It can be maddening to parse a critic's logic around star rankings from week to week. With their origins in André and Édouard Michelin's guidebooks, established in France in the 1920s, stars carry the whiff of old-guard patriarchy. They reek of exclusivity at a time when dining in America has never been more egalitarian. In Los Angeles, taco trucks and sushi bars and modern American temples stand in equal respect; a century-old rating system can't express or encompass the city's dynamic multitudes. Does that mean thoughtful restaurant critics should abolish any notion of a star system altogether? I'm not yet convinced.

Stars circle our heads whether we want them there or not. We can't avoid them. Sites like Yelp, OpenTable and TripAdvisor encourage users to assign stars, no matter the ambitions or affordability of the restaurant. Who says professional critics are beholden to assigning stars mired in anachronistic notions about dining? What if critics doled them out based on how they feel a business succeeds — within the strictures of its own ambitions and the larger context of the restaurant ecosystem — no matter what type of food it serves, or in what tier of modesty or fanciness the place exists?

As a case study, I'm thinking of two restaurants I've reviewed since recently arriving at The Times: Carnitas El Momo, a predominantly food-truck operation that makes the finest carnitas in Los Angeles, and Hayato, a seven-seat sanctuary that serves \$200-per-person multi-course dinners inspired by Japanese *kaiseki* traditions. I've been a restaurant critic for 17 years; I assigned stars as part of my job for a dozen of those years, and I preferred a five-star rating system. Zero stars equaled a poor rating, and a full five signaled a truly extraordinary experience.

If we worked within those parameters at The Times, I'd likely have given Carnitas El Momo five stars. Beyond a friendly staffer taking your order through a truck window, El Momo has almost no service aspect to it; there may or may not be a folding table set up for customers. But that exquisitely rendered and seasoned pork? It is magnificent time and again. In the context of carnitas within L.A.'s universe of Mexican restaurants, these are, to the best of my knowledge, the ultimate.

Hayato serves the most exhilarating, mind-expanding tasting menu I've experienced so far in Los Angeles. I'd be tempted to hand the restaurant five stars, yet it's only a year old; I might have held off to see if chef-owner Brandon Hayato Go would hone his talents and push his singular mix of modern and traditional influences even further

in the next year. I'd probably have given Hayato four out of five stars, a rating I'd consider "excellent."

Would those rankings make sense to readers? Certainly, assigning stars would have made me think harder in the actual review about aligning my words with the line of symbols. But offering both a star rating and a deeply considered critique could be of benefit — if only because the two-pronged approach might spark additional conversation.

I want you all to read these reviews into which I pour my whole self weekly. The job is, admittedly, less stressful since Times editors squashed my idea of reinstating a starred rating system. But — can I be this blunt? — I hope people really are reading, rather than simply looking elsewhere for quick-hit takeaways. This is an age in which media with the staff, the budget and the integrity to run restaurant reviews keep dwindling. Food criticism is also, much belatedly, addressing complex facets of our culture (race, appropriation, gender, class) like never before.

In a moment of evolution, newspaper critics risk being left out of some restaurant discussions altogether. There is not a single daily or weekly publication in Southern California, nor in the Bay Area, currently publishing starred restaurant reviews. Which brings the debate back to Michelin: The tire company comes out with a guide covering the entire state on June 3. There will be stars. People will be talking. Local critics' coverage will be entirely reactionary; we've ceded ownership about which restaurants earn how many stars to interlopers.

Maybe that's OK. Maybe new levels of nuanced criticism will make our voices more relevant than ever. Maybe stars are done. But also, before we chuck the spiky icons altogether, a new generation of California critics could employ these same instincts for storytelling and inclusivity and take a swing at re-imagining an entrenched, flawed, exasperating, but universally recognized system. It might be useful for our readers and for us. If critics can rethink what a review is, we can rethink what a rating system is too.