

★ ★ ★
MICHELIN
STAR
WARS

With stars in her eyes, our writer puts Michelin to the test in Paris, chomping through six stars in three days



This year marks the 100th edition of the world-famous Michelin Guide. It may have recently expanded to New York, Tokyo and Hong Kong, but the original Michelin France edition has been accused of cloudy judgment and lax standards. With foodie husband in tow, Kathryn Tomasetti put Michelin's Paris recommendations to the test by eating her way through the guidebook's three "star bands" (one, two and three Michelin stars). Then they dropped into a regular (unstarred) neighbourhood bistro to assess how the guidebook's suggestions really weighed up...



Benoit
 20 Rue St-Martin, Paris,
 tel: +33 (0)1 4272 2576,
 www.benoit-paris.com
Freebies gougères (savory cheese puffs),
 madeleines, chocolates
Three-course lunch menu €34
 ◉ **Instead you could buy a night**
 at the Travelodge in
 Clacton-on-Sea



Above: inside one-starred Benoit; below: tart bouquet de roses, aka apple pie; opposite page: writer Kathryn Tomasetti outside two-starred Le Table de Joël Robuchon

We started our "research" at Benoit in the trendy Marais

district of Paris. A bistro since 1912, **Benoit** was taken over by superstar chef Alain Ducasse in 2005. It's now among the cheapest one-star restaurants in Paris, particularly at lunchtime, when a three-course menu, courtesy of one of the world's most famous restaurateurs, costs just €34. As we're also slightly intimidated by the general Michelin scene, we hoped eating at Benoit would be an unpretentious introduction to the world of haute cuisine.

No need to worry: we order a dozen snails, ploughing through a basket of bread mopping up their garlicky butter. The homemade *cassoulet* (a creamy bean, duck and sausage stew) arrives in our own personal earthenware pot; meaty turbot is perched atop steamed

veggies. Bombarded by succulent flavours, I'm soon convinced this is the best food I've ever tasted.

Day two, and our next Michelin meal is the planned blow-out: chef Alain Passard's nine-course, lunchtime tasting menu at three-star **L'Arpège**. Passard's cuisine focuses almost exclusively on vegetables that come from his organic garden near Le Mans, 200km south-west of Paris.

Elegant, subdued and very, very beige, L'Arpège's ambience is a stark contrast to the buzz of the previous evening. However, my discomfort quickly dissipates as we're seated between a quirky couple from New York, who photograph each dish as it arrives, and a party headed by a loud gentleman who begins most sentences with, "And then the Ambassador said to me..."

Waves of tiny plates arrive in seamless succession, served up by



L'Arpège
 84 Rue de Varenne,
 tel: +33 (0)1 4705 0906,
 www.alain-passard.com
Freebies vegetable tartlets, macarons
Lunch menu €120 per person
 ◉ **Instead you could buy**
 two tickets to see Beyoncé
 at the O2



ultra-friendly staff. Three ravioli – one tomato, one beetroot, one spring onion and fresh coriander – float in a transparent vegetable broth; then it's a parade of Japanese currant tomatoes, an über-creamy risotto, baby turnips and carrots, a foamy warm vegetable plate, a cold vegetable plate, followed by a chicken roasted in fig leaves. The cheese course is so good that I sample every *fromage* on the trolley. Apple pie, with apple coils twirled into rose shapes, tops off the meal. The rest of our afternoon, spent in the gardens of the Rodin Museum across the street (€1 entrance to the gardens), can only be described as blissed out.

We'd done the one-star (delicious) and the three-star →



La Table de Joël Robuchon

16 Avenue Bugeaud,
tel: +33 (0)1 5628 1616,
www.joel-robuchon.com

Freebies veg mousse, salty caramels.

Lunch menu €59, including a 1/2 bottle of wine, per person.

▶ Instead you could buy a cool pair of stilletos from Topshop



Above: Joël Robuchon in the kitchen of his double-starred Paris restaurant; right: caramelised pork

(sublime); would we really be able to taste a Michelin two-star and slot it somewhere in between? The following afternoon, donning a loose dress to hide the extra pounds I seem to be lugging around already, we set off for **La Table de Joël Robuchon**, headed by one of France's most creative chefs.

In the residential 16th arrondissement, La Table is decked out in sexy black and gold. The set menu offers a choice of entrées, mains and desserts; we both opt for the sea bream tartare with chives, and I follow with a filet of *maigre* (a type of sea bass), while my husband dives into caramelised pork. After three hours of unhurried inventive eating, we head back to the hotel to digest horizontally.

A friend recommended **Le Repaire de Cartouche**, where chef Rodolphe Paquin dishes up a bargain €17 lunch menu. So, for our last day, we go off-reservation. Now

that we're accustomed to greatness, how will it hold up? My *brandade de morue*, a mix of potatoes and salt cod, is smooth and flavourful. My husband's lamb is pink and tender, and the wine list is excellent too. We linger in the laid-back bistro, analysing our past days' indulgences.

While the Michelin Guide can't cover everywhere, the quality restaurants it does include are stunning. By virtue of the credit crunch and France's recent drop in TVA (VAT), prices have dipped, so there are plenty of Michelin-starred lunch menus that don't cost more than €30. We also learned that, sometimes, it's worth chucking the guide and following the locals!

GETTING THERE

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“SOMETIMES IT'S WORTH CHUCKING THE GUIDE AND FOLLOWING THE LOCALS”



Le Repaire de Cartouche

8 boulevard Filles du Calvaire 75011,
tel: +33 (0)1 4700 2586,

Freebies bread and water
Lunch menu €25

▶ Instead you could buy up to five DVDs from Amazon.co.uk, including *Last Tango in Paris*

