

Scales of Delicious

What's in a Zagat score?

Does a 23 signify that a restaurant is very good, or just mediocre?

My colleague and I contemplated the questions above as we dined in Cambridge each night after our summer classes at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. We were fortunate enough to attend a program at the end of July at Harvard's Project Zero, founded in 1967 to promote arts education. So, along with discussing grand themes such as nurturing global and digital citizens, we conferred about fried squash blossoms and grilled octopus at the highly rated restaurants we visited.

We ventured to Alden and Harlow, Craigie on Main, and Oleana, all in Cambridge. Before our trip, I researched their Zagat scores and learned that they were 25, 26, and 27, respectively. As I am sure you know, these are noteworthy scores, 30 being the cap. I expected superb dinners as such scores in Philadelphia and New York equate to outstanding food. For example, one of my favorite restaurants in New York, Gramercy Tavern...a 28! My top restaurant in Philly, Sbraga...a 25! Yet, our meals were fair to good with the exception of Oleana, which was very good — tasty tapas with a creative use of spices and herbs.

The point of this analysis is that one must consider Zagat scores relative to the city. A 27 in Cambridge is not the same as a 27 in New York. I believe this is due to the fact that anyone can rate a restaurant on Zagat as long as he or she dines out and takes the time to submit a review. As a result, someone who rates a bistro in Cambridge may not have a point of comparison in Philly.

As a math teacher, I focus on numbers and wonder if Zagat scores should be standardized. To add to the dilemma, I am now unable to claim that a 27 in Cambridge would translate to a 21 in New York. As of the last week of July, no restaurant will be a 27!

When I returned home from Cambridge, I began my research for this article by checking Zagat online and was thrown for a loop. I discovered that while I was walking the Harvard Yard, Zagat revamped its entire rating scale. Now scores range from 1 to 5 rather than 1 to 30. The conversion permits for decimals so that Gramercy Tavern, which had a 28, now has a 4.8. And, Zagat still offers three separate scores for food, decor, and service. (Note: All scores mentioned in this article are for food.)

I expect that Google, which purchased Zagat (founded in New York over three decades ago), changed the scale to make it more user friendly. Zagat now states that a 4.6 to 5.0 is "extraordinary to perfection"; 4.1 to 4.5 is "very good to excellent"; 3.1 to 4.0 is "good to very good"; 2.1 to 3.0 is "fair to good"; and, 2.0 or below is "poor to fair."

Several years ago, in addition to researching Zagat scores, I began to rely on Michelin stars. This only works for some areas, as the U.S. restaurants reviewed by Michelin are limited to New York, Chicago, San Francisco and the Bay Area. For over 100 years, Michelin only rated restaurants in France and cities in Europe; however, about a decade ago, Michelin expanded its rating system to some of our top food cities. And, unlike Zagat ratings, Michelin reviews are based on reports of "inspectors" employed by Michelin and expected to maintain anonymity — they are unknown by restaurants and even their friends. The job qualifications include a degree in culinary arts, extensive experience in the hotel or restaurant industry, and formal wine training, to name a few.

Restaurants are awarded one, two, or three stars. Three stars means "exceptional cuisine, worth a special journey"; two stars equates to "excellent cuisine, worth a detour"; and one star represents "a very good

restaurant in its category." To put this in perspective, of the thousands of restaurants in NYC, six are currently awarded three stars, ten are awarded two, and about five dozen are awarded one.

My husband and I have been fortunate enough to dine in two three-star restaurants: Eleven Madison Park and Jean Georges. These are among our top five dining experiences ever. We have also found the one and two-star ratings extremely reliable; in fact, many overlap with the top Zagat-rated restaurants. In addition, Michelin stars have also caused us to explore a variety of cuisines in a variety of neighborhoods. For example, I found Junoon, a fine dining Indian restaurant with an excellent prix fixe lunch, by identifying it on the list of one-star restaurants.

So, if you are dining in New York, I would rely on both Michelin and Zagat (perhaps this is because New York diners are among the most sophisticated, with thousands of restaurants at their feet). If you are dining anywhere else (aside from San Francisco and Chicago), I would take into account that your idea of a 27 may not be the same as the diner at the next table.

Wow, that was a mouthful...now, I invite you to contact me at spoppiti@hotmail.com to share any interesting experiences you have had with highly-rated Zagat and/or Michelin restaurants around the country. 🌐



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