

Shmanners 412: Michelin Stars

Published June 14th, 2024

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[theme music plays]

Travis: Hello, internet! I'm your husband host, Travis McElroy.

Teresa: And I'm your wife host, Teresa McElroy.

Travis: And you're listening to Shmanners!

Teresa: It's extraordinary etiquette...

Travis: For ordinary occasions! Hello, my dove.

Teresa: Hello, dear.

Travis: How are you?

Teresa: I am well! How are you?

Travis: I think I pulled a muscle in my ribs from working out, getting too swole.

Teresa: Well.

Travis: Or from allergy coughing. It's one of those two.

Teresa: [simultaneously] It's one of the two.

Travis: Or maybe both! Why not both?

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Why not being old? Listen.

Teresa: Listen.

Travis: Listen. We could jibber jabber all day with all of our inanities. But instead... I want to talk about this week's episode, because I am a fan of The Bear, and restaurants in general.

Teresa: Yes. We both enjoy restaurants in general. I was—

Travis: I like eating food. I enjoy eating food. I'm brave enough to say it. Listen, call me a hero if you want. I wouldn't call myself a hero. But I like to eat food!

Teresa: I like the idea of The Bear, but it's not my cup of tea. I really—I couldn't—

Travis: Too stressful.

Teresa: Too stressful for me. More into Bridgerton at the moment.

Travis: We have been watching—we should do a whole episode on Bridgerton.

Teresa: We should.

Travis: Of just, like, breaking down all the social faux pas, like, episode by episode.

Teresa: I mean, yes. Okay. If we're gonna do an episode on Bridgerton, we have to make it very clear that we understand that it's not historically accurate.

Travis: Well, yeah. Yeah!

Teresa: Yeah. But we can talk about some—

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: —of the other stuff.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Okay. But that's not what we're talking about.

Teresa: No. We're talking about Michelin stars.

Travis: Okay. And are you ready for Schrodinger's joke?

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: I am going to ask you a question, and depending on your response it will either be serious or a joke.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: Does it have anything to do with the tires?

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: See, now it's not a joke.

Teresa: Nope.

Travis: Now it's a serious question I was asking.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Where if you'd have been like, "What are you talking about?" Then it's a joke. You get it.

Teresa: I get it!

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Totally. So... uh, the stars are a rating system from the Michelin guide. And receiving even one Michelin star is one of the highest honors if

not the highest honor that you can receive in the culinary world. And it was started by the Paris-based tire company.

Travis: Okay. So this is a little bit like—but also kind of the opposite of—the Guinness Book of World Records.

Teresa: Yeah, a little bit.

Travis: Yeah, okay. So Guinness Book—just to give you my thinking here, 'cause I'm sure I'll reference it again—Guinness, the beer company, was like, "Ah, we're gonna put together this thing of like, settle bar bets, right? This is the biggest mountain. This is the longest road. Whatever. Um, this is the biggest army, if we're playing Settlers of Catan."

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: And so they did this, right? To be like, a hand-in-hand compendium to go with, like, bars right? You're at a bar, you do this thing. But then it became its own entity, but also is kind of... not like—what's the word I'm looking for? It's not, like, legally accurate, right? You can basically pay them a lot of money to get a thing. Of, I could be the Travis McElroy with the most podcasts, right?

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: And they don't, like... they're not going to scour the planet to see if there's another Travis McElroy with more podcasts. If I pay them enough money they'll put me in the book and wait for someone to challenge it or whatever, right?

Teresa: Sure.

Travis: So the difference here that I'm talking about is if you get a Michelin star, it's actually a huge honor.

Teresa: Right.

Travis: Not like paying to get into the Guinness Book of World Records.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: We're gonna talk about the tire company a little later. But first, I want to describe the Michelin star.

Travis: Please. It's a complicated system, if I understand it correctly.

Teresa: So, having a—so you can be a fantastic restaurant and not have any Michelin stars. You can be a really great restaurant and only have one, right? Because it is a tiered system, but it's like the top tier, right? It's not like the Better Business Bureau ratings, right? That you see in windows.

Travis: It's like if you get a bronze in the Olympics, it's not 'cause you're a bad athlete.

Teresa: Exactly, exactly. Um, so the company continually reassess existing star restaurants as well.

Travis: You can lose them stars.

Teresa: You can lose them, right? So it's not like, one and done. It's like if every year at the Olympics someone breaks the record and then they take the slowest one away from somebody.

Travis: Yeah. And it's not like Diners, Drive-Ins, and Dive where once he goes there he doesn't take it away if he goes back and goes, "This is no longer a drive-in, diner, or dive. Give me back that plaque with my face on it."

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Yeah, okay, gotcha.

Teresa: And if you're familiar with the movie Ratatouille, which we are, the chef dies, and that's an automatic takeaway of one of the stars, because the

cuisine automatically changes when the person isn't there anymore to make it.

Travis: Well, yeah, especially if it—so this isn't like... this isn't like when you have a restaurant, uh... I'm trying to think of, like, a good—but a place where it's like, yeah, there's like, um, cooks that work in the restaurant. We're talking about a restaurant where it's like, this restaurant has, like, the equivalent of a movie star chef where they're the star of the restaurant, and you go to eat that chef's food, and they are the one that have constructed the menu, taught everybody how to make it.

Teresa: I mean, it's a little bit like the way that Food Network worked in kind of, like, the early 2000's, right? You had the stars of Iron Chef, right? So you have Cora, you have, um—

Travis: Michael Symon. You have Bobby Flay. You have, uh... uh, oh!

Teresa: Morimoto.

Travis: Morimoto. Yes.

Teresa: All those guys, right? So they were kind of like celebrity chefs, and they also had their own restaurants, right? So that's kind of what you're paying for.

Travis: Yes.

Teresa: And so, like, it's really good to get one. There are—you can lose it really at any time, and it's done by committee. That's the stars. Now to the tires.

Travis: Eventually we'll get to the system, right? How you get multiple stars and all that stuff?

Teresa: Oh, yeah.

Travis: Okay, great.

Teresa: So, uh, the—okay, if you want to talk about that, the criteria—

Travis: [simultaneously] I do. Yes.

Teresa: Uh, quality of ingredients. Harmony of flavors. Mastery of techniques. Personality of the chef as expressed through their cuisine. And consistency across the menu and over time.

Travis: But that's how you get your first one.

Teresa: Yeah. Well, but over time, right? That's how you are—those are the criteria for the judging.

Travis: Okay, but we can talk about—'cause you can get multiple stars, right?

Teresa: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Travis: Okay. I want to get into that. But first, do tell me about the tire company.

Teresa: Okay. When I hear the word Michelin, I think about tire discounters, right?

Travis: Oh.

Teresa: Michelin.

Travis: That is not where my brain goes.

Teresa: No?

Travis: I think of the Michelin Man.

Teresa: Ohh, okay.

Travis: A horrifying homunculus made of tires.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Who I guess likes to eat good food? We'll get there.

Teresa: I guess?

Travis: I don't get the connection yet.

Teresa: But the Michelin stars and the Michelin tires go hand in hand because of the way that it started, right?

Travis: Eating tires.

Teresa: No. No.

Travis: Our tires are so good you could eat 'em!

Teresa: No. It had to be the guide, right? That started it. The French industrialist brothers Andre and Edouard Michelin founded the company, and they're the ones who compiled the first Michelin guide that came out in 1900.

Travis: So it to be, like, a, you're driving around, you're touring, where to stop?

Teresa: Yeah, it's like a travel guide.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: And they really only published what they said where the best of the best, right?

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Um, and so—

Travis: This is intere—I d—listen. Not to fall into stereotypes. It is very French.

Teresa: It is very French.

Travis: To be like—like, if there was an American version of this, right? It would be like the Guinness Book of World Records where it would be like, it gets bigger and bigger every year. We've added 1000 new restaurants! Gotta check this place out when you're driving down Route 66 or whatever, right?

And it would be some burger place that just paid them \$10,000 to be in it. Right? But the idea of like, "No, no, no. We're only going to list the best of the—our book is four pages long." Or whatever, right?

Teresa: Yep. Something like that.

Travis: Like, that is very—the exclusivity of it makes it important.

Teresa: Um, and it included not just restaurants but also hotels, cultural shops, and plenty of listed places you could get your car serviced!

Travis: Sure.

Teresa: Uh, because this was a very, um—it was about the travel. Um, and so hopefully, you know, you would stop and get yourself some Michelin tires if you had a flat. And this was a real gap in the market. No one really had travel guides for motorists. So...

Travis: What year was this?

Teresa: 1900.

Travis: Oh yeah. Okay. Yeah.

Teresa: And by 1904, they were also expanding the guide to Belgium, then Algeria and Tunisia followed in 1907. In 1908, brought Italy, Switzerland, and the Netherlands. Then Germany, Spain, and Portugal joined in 1910. And by 1911 you could get a Michelin guide all the way in Ireland and the British Isles.

Travis: Okay. But not America.

Teresa: Not America yet. It worked well, until World War I.

Travis: Aww, man.

Teresa: Really, really put a stop to a lot of this.

Travis: Really threw a wrench in a lot of stuff.

Teresa: Intercontinental travel. Um, but 1920, they brought it back, making it bigger and better. And, you know, they felt like they had to, because the story goes, uh, that Andre Michelin showed up to one of their tire shops one day to find a copy of their beloved guide being used to prop up a workbench.

Travis: No!

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: No—*Zut alors!*

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Ahh, *mon Dieu!*

Teresa: They had to bring it back and bring it back big if they wanted to, you know, do the French thing, make it the best of the best, right? Synonymous with quality. So... this means... that you have to stop giving it away for free.

Travis: Oh, the guide?

Teresa: The guide, yes. Before this, the guide was free. But now, you make it exclusive by charging people for it. Um, and also—so, seven francs, which would have been about \$30 now, right? Uh, 35. And the idea, like I said, making it exclusive, making it expensive. You were paying for quality. And so they wanted to ramp up everything about the guide. They used higher quality materials. They added a list of Parisian hotels. They categorized the

list of the restaurants. And they pivoted away from the maintenance and repair and leaned harder into the cultural aspect, particularly the restaurant section.

It was always the most popular, because you gotta eat three times a day.

Travis: Yeah, right? And if you're looking for reviews, as important as it is to me where to get my car fixed, right? And where the shops are, that feels like something I could ask anybody. But if I'm interested in cuisine and the best of the best? That feels like a much more specific niche review kind of thing that I want to find out about.

Teresa: And what you want to do is you want to find people who will review and list firsthand accounts. So this is when they started to hire mystery diners to visit and review the restaurants anonymously.

Travis: And to murder people without getting caught!

Teresa: No—no?

Travis: Different kind of mystery. Got it. Okay!

Teresa: And we've touched on food critics, right? But your everyday food critic is very different from the Michelin inspectors. Um, the reviewers do not mess around. The goal is, you'll never know for sure whether or not your Michelin inspector or inspectors have been to the restaurant. They go to enormous lengths to look just like any other customer.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Uh, the stars—

Travis: But not to the point where it's like, they're so normal they stand out. Ahh, ooh la la, oh, huh. I don't know what that means.

Teresa: I don't know what that means either. Um, but star rating system was introduced in 1926. It was still limited to French restaurants, but if you

were deemed a fine dining establishment you could be awarded one star. The three star system didn't—

Travis: I wanna talk about that so bad.

Teresa: [simultaneously] Didn't come until in 1931!

Travis: Ugh! Okay, you got to finish the sentence.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: But first, how about a word—uh, thank you note for one of our sponsors, and a word from another Max Fun show?

Teresa: Nice.

[theme music plays]

Travis: This week we have a Jumbotron for... you! To visit triojam.com to play, or find Trio Jam in the iPhone app store. Trio Jam is a strategic word game, and all you need are three letter words. It's deceptively challenging and dangerously addictive. Will you be the first player ever to break 300?

Okay, I actually am now gonna have to check this out, 'cause I like the Spelling Bee. That's—oh, it's maybe the one I keep going back to the most on, like, um, the New York Times thing, and then to find another, like, word challenge to make words out of these three letters? I'm so way into this.

Teresa: You're invested.

Travis: Yes. Trio Jam. T-R-I-O J-A-M. triojam.com, or you can search for Trio Jam in the iPhone app store. It's out now. Go do it. What are you waiting for?

[music plays]

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[music and ad end]

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Dan: I'm Dan McCoy.

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[music and ad end]

Travis: Okay. I am interested because I looked it up—can I tell you something I just looked up?

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: The number of Michelin starred restaurants by country.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: Do you have this info?

Teresa: I do not.

Travis: Okay. So, this will not surprise you at all. The country with the most Michelin stars—can you guess?

Teresa: France.

Travis: France.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: With 600—this is as of 2024. France has 626 Michelin starred restaurants. Japan has 414. Italy has 381. Germany has 329. Spain has 248. And then the United States with 223.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: And the United Kingdom, 187. Belgium, 138. Switzerland, 128. The Netherlands, 123.

The thing I want to point out, everybody here in the US—just by sheer numbers and size and amount of space that restaurants take up in the United States—think about the size of the United States compared to France.

Teresa: I know, right?

Travis: And we're at about a quarter—uh, a little more than a quarter—or a third. Yes. A little more than a third of the amount of Michelin starred restaurants that France has. Now, is that the—

Teresa: How very French.

Travis: Is that 'cause they're focused on France and that's where a lot of their, like, where their headquarters are so they probably review a lot more restaurants there? Probably. But I also looked it up. Do you know how many three star Michelin restaurants there are in the United States as of 2023?

Teresa: No.

Travis: 13.

Teresa: Hmm.

Travis: 13 three star restaurants.

Teresa: And I bet that they're in New York, probably.

Travis: I think the majority of them are, yes. Okay. Anywho, I just found that interesting.

Teresa: So, we're in 1931. Shrunk again during World War II. Resumed again in 1939—I mean, for one reason that it contained maps very useful for the Allied Forces. But it did on purpose drop the rating system down to two because of shortages in Europe.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: They were like, "There's no way we can possibly let anyone have three stars right now, because nobody has good food."

Travis: That's fair. That is fair.

Teresa: 1955. They are back, uh, to three stars. Um, and the idea is, one star is worth a stop if you're around. Two stars is worth a detour if you're going there. And three stars is worth making a very special trip just to experience the food.

Travis: Okay, but how do you go from, like, one star to two star to three star and back down?

Teresa: Um... I mean, I think that it has to do with the criteria being, like, a longstanding thing, right? So, like, if you're a new and upcoming chef you can't have three stars because you haven't been in business long enough, because several of the criteria list quality over time.

Travis: What I've heard—and I'll have to look this up—but from memory, I'm pulling this from memory that like, one you achieve your first star, right? They then come back, like, the next year to do another assessment, and you can move up a star, stay the same, or lose a star. Right? And I think it's that way up to three. And then it's like, as you said, if the chef dies, right? Automatically drop down a star, and then they set up a reassessment for the thing. But I think it's about, like, continually being reviewed over time?

Teresa: Right. And like I said, one of the criteria is innovation. Right? So it can't just stay the same. You have to continually innovate. But you also have to have a kind of signature style. You know what I mean? So it's—it's amorphous, in a way. So, you know, continually being reviewed is really the only way that you could accrue three stars.

Travis: Yeah. I think... that's why it's like, go out of your way to do it, because it's basically like, over the course of time, the quality has not fluctuated. If anything, it's improved. Right? And when you go we can guarantee an exceptional experience.

Teresa: Right. And the experience does count, right? It's not just about the food. It doesn't have to be fancy. But it just needs to be in keeping with the aesthetic of your kind of theme, right? So there are—there are pizza restaurants that have three stars, because it is an all-encompassing star experience, right?

Travis: I do like that it's not it has to be super expensive to get the star.

Teresa: Right.

Travis: Right?

Teresa: It doesn't have to be expensive or fancy. The service is also important and needs to be flawless, because, I mean... the Michelin reviewers are pretty much like secret agents, right? And so—

Travis: Yeah. I wanna do that! How do I sign up to do that? I assume they pay for my meal?

Teresa: I don't know.

Travis: If you're listening—Michelin Man, if you're listening, I volunteer as tribute. I will go. And listen, if I have to eat in every fancy restaurant on your dime in the world, I'll do it. That's a sacrifice I will make for you, Michelin Man. Please, please let me do this.

Teresa: These inspectors—you probably couldn't because you're too well known. These inspectors are highly trained, and they go to great lengths to hide their true reason for being in the restaurant. They are encouraged to use fake names, fake phone numbers, not just at the restaurant but also at the hotel rooms and all kinds of things, right? So they really are trying to be completely anonymous. So you're too famous.

Travis: I'm going—aww, man.

Teresa: Yep.

Travis: I'm not that famous, baby. I think—if I go to France I think I'm okay.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Um, I do want to interject, because I looked it up on the Michelin guide and I was looking for something else but then this popped up. Question to the Michelin guide. If the head chef leaves, do you automatically remove the star?

Answer: Not necessarily.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: As Michelin stars are awarded to the restaurant and not the chef, sometimes the restaurant will promote the sous chef, who is of equal talent to his or her predecessor. Others might hire a talented chef from another restaurant. We will simply return to the restaurant and see how well we eat.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: So it is reassessed when they—I don't think they just go, "Oh." I think it's like when that happens it triggers, you know, a reassessment of it, I suppose? Now, that said... that's if they leave. If they quit. So I don't know. That might be different if the chef were to die suddenly, and they haven't trained somebody new, and the restaurant has to, like, scramble to find somebody qualified. Maybe that's a different circumstance, but that's what it says right here.

Teresa: There was a interviewer—sorry, a reviewer interviewed on Sunday Morning. Um, anonymously, obviously. That said, a restaurant being awarded a star is never a one man show, right? And so... it is about the entire experience. So that's why I... that makes sense that if the sous chef is promoted or kind of, like, under the tutelage of the head chef it might not lose a star. That makes sense to me.

Um, but also, they don't just visit once, right? Um, they compile multiple experiences into their review. And, like... like I said, the service and the food and the ambiance. And it's all gotta be cohesive, and yet innovative.

It feels so amorphous to me?

Travis: Yeah, because I'm looking at this—what I was looking up is they have the question here, what's the difference between one, two, and three stars?

And basically it's kind of the same thing you've been saying the whole time. But basically they just say, one star is when they use top quality ingredients, where dishes with distinct flavors are prepared to a consistently high standard. Two stars are awarded when the personality and talent of the chef are evident in the thing. And three stars is the highest reward given superlative cooking of chefs at the peak of their profession, blah, blah.

But here's the thing that even though it says that, it sounds like hypothetically, you know, a new restaurant that's just nailing it across the board could be awarded three stars on their first year or whatever.

Teresa: I don't know.

Travis: I don't think that's the case, right? That doesn't [crosstalk].

Teresa: Because so many of the criteria are over time.

Travis: Right. So even though it's like, "Yeah, you could. You could, you know, do that. But that doesn't happen."

Because, like—and especially if I'm the Michelin guide people, I wouldn't want to set it up that way, because then if we're looking at this place has been open for a year, yeah, it's incredible. And then we, you know, push it as a three star restaurant, and then service falls off, right? So I think that you could do it, but my bet is it's more like, "Yeah, this is great. It gets one star." And then we'll go back, and it gets two stars. And that's not codified.

Teresa: It's not uncommon to wait five years between accumulating another star.

Travis: Well, there you go.

Teresa: Right. Um, and that is if you get noticed in the first place, right? They don't just send a reviewer to every restaurant that opens. It's gotta have some kind of, like, street cred already.

Travis: Some buzz.

Teresa: It's gotta have some buzz. And that could take a long time. Right? I don't know.

Travis: I think it would probably help with, like in *The Bear*, to reference that, that he was a... he was at a starred restaurant previously and has moved to this restaurant. Right? Where if I'm a Michelin reviewer kind of deal, and it's like, okay, we already have an established precedent that this is a great chef who, like, worked at a place that earned a star, right?

So we're keeping an eye on this one and we're kind of seeing what the buzz is about, because this chef has a track record of that. Right? I imagine that puts you on their radar faster than just, like, opening a place at the beginning. But also if you're a chef that opens their own restaurant, hopefully you've worked at restaurants before.

Teresa: I'm...

Travis: Right, yeah, right? Like... or else you have a ways to go.

Teresa: Or else you have a ways to go. And I mean of course, we said it, there's a little bit of a perceived bias for French restaurants. But like I said, the cuisine definitely doesn't have to be French. It was started by two guys in France, so of course they, you know, there might be a little bit of bias. But the—

Travis: Of course there is!

Teresa: But they maintain—the organization maintains that there really isn't that bias.

Travis: Listen. I think that it's probably not just one factor, because you also have to think, like, how many more prestigious, like, cooking schools are there in France than in the United States?

Teresa: That's right. That's right. Or anywhere, really.

Travis: And, I mean, if you are a chef in the United States who wants to learn how to do it better than anybody else in the United States, you're gonna go to somewhere—another country to learn that cuisine that you want to cook, right? And I just think that there's probably a lot of factors to consider, though I did also want to include this. At the end of this Q&A or FAQ, the Michelin guide—"What advice would you give a young chef?"

"Three things. One: great cooking stars with great ingredients, so use the best produce you can find, whether that's a tomato or a chicken. Two: take pleasure in cooking for your customers, rather than cooking to try and win awards. Three: eat out as much as you can, but also eat your own dishes. Sometimes it's not until you're halfway through a dish that you realize it's not quite right."

There you go.

Teresa: There you go.

Travis: Thank you all so much for listening. We want to say thank you to our editor, Rachel, without whom we would not be able to make this show. Thank you to our researcher, Alexx, without whom we would not be able to make this show.

Teresa: Who actually relied heavily on our daughters, Dottie and Bebe, to help her click through a lot of the [laughs] the restaurants that she was looking at for the research.

Travis: There you go.

Teresa: They were like, "Ooh, you can eat those flowers?" that kind of stuff.

Travis: Yeah. They don't wanna eat the flowers. Let me—let me be clear.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: If we put a plate of edible flowers in front of our daughters, I don't think they'd eat them.

Teresa: I don't think so. But—

Travis: But they like the idea.

Teresa: They like the idea. They liked a lot of the sugar work that Alexx showed them. Um, and Dottie especially requested pictures of very fancy macaroni and cheese.

Travis: There you go. Um, and thank you to you for listening. I would never do this show without you. Teresa tries to make me. When you guys aren't around.

Teresa: [wheeze-laughs] That's not true.

Travis: She's like, "Let's do it." And I'm like, "No, we gotta wait for the audience to get here!"

Um... and also, make sure to go to bit.ly/mcelroytours to see where My Brother, My Brother, and Me and Adventure Zone is going to be this year. Um, and you can go to mcelroymerch.com to check out all the great merch there. 10% of all merch proceeds this month go to Equality Florida, so go check that out. What else, Teresa?

Teresa: We always thank Brent "brentalfloss" Black for writing our theme music, which is available as a ringtone where those are found. Also, thank you to Bruja Betty Pinup Photography for the cover picture of our fan-run Facebook, Shmanners Fanners. If you love to give and get excellent advice from other fans, go ahead and join that group today.

As always, we are continually taking your topic submissions, your questions, your idioms! Uh, send those to shmannerscast@gmail.com, and say hi to Alexx, 'cause she reads every one.

Travis: And that's gonna do it for us, so join us again next week.

Teresa: No RSVP required!

Travis: You've been listening to Shmanners...

Teresa: Manners, Shmanners. Get it?

[theme music plays]

[chord]

Maximum Fun.

A worker-owned network...

Of artist-owned shows...

Supported directly by you.