

DÉLICE

DÉLICE NETWORK

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

GOTHENBURG, SWEDEN / OCTOBER 2018

RATINGS & RANKINGS: WHO HAS THE POWER?



The hot topic of restaurant ratings and rankings was fiercely debated at **the Délice Network Annual General Meeting** in Gothenburg, with the event setting a record for global participation.

Twenty-two of Délice's 27 members were represented in Sweden's second largest city for a packed three-day programme (October 8-10) that featured educational visits and lectures, gastronomic insights, learning opportunities and partner networking events.

The central aim of the study visit was to look at the sometimes controversial way in which restaurants, and therefore cities, are judged by guide books, restaurant critics, bloggers, social media users and user generated websites such as TripAdvisor.

Good reviews about a city's food scene can have a lucrative, positive impact on the number of short-stay trips and longer vacation visits made by tourists and the image citizens will have of their

city. In turn, this can help drive economic prosperity and employment in the hospitality, food and tourism sectors, so there is a lot at stake.

But who really has the most power and influence when it comes to capturing the public's attention? Ultimately, who makes travellers and local diners part with their hard-earned money when it comes to deciding where to eat out?

This fundamental question informed the Gothenburg visit's key debate, as well as a subsequent follow up seminar that drilled down into the detail of the topic.

For the main plenary session, Délice assembled a strong panel of international experts at the 200-year-old Chalmers House. Led by British journalist and food writer Richard McComb, the speakers included: Kris Moon, chief operating officer at the James Beard Foundation, USA; Peter Hansson, CEO of The White Guide; and Felicity Spector, a prominent Instagram influencer in London.



Richard provided historic context for the debate, looking at the emergence of restaurant industry influencers in France from the early 19th century and taking delegates through the explosion of mass digital communication via social media channels such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, and online review platforms including TripAdvisor, Yelp and Zagat.

Richard told the audience that TripAdvisor and Michelin, the latter deemed to be the world's most influential restaurant guide, had been invited to attend the debate but had declined. For his own part, Richard said he did not know a single chef who valued TripAdvisor for its "crowd-sourced" reviews. Conversely, he did not know of a chef who did not regularly check the website to see if his or her restaurant had been "reviewed" and rated.

The James Beard Foundation (JBF) remains the most influential food organisation in North America due to the legacy of the celebrated cookbook author and teacher. The JBF's annual awards for excellence are eagerly awaited on the continent.

Kris shared the new strategy for JBF and stressed how many industry-watchers had lost sight of an essential element when assessing dining out – the importance of "deliciousness."



“In the clamour to see pretty pictures of dishes on Instagram, we run the risk of forgetting about flavour,” observed Richard.

Kris explained that the restaurant sector had to change and adapt following allegations of bullying and sexual harassment, and the rise of the #MeToo movement. The foundation has used its strong influence to champion the spirit of the age. As a result, 11 of the winning 15 chefs of the James

Beard Awards were women or people of colour. It appears to have been a break-through moment.

In four years, Felicity’s Instagram account, which specialises in desserts and baking, has grown organically to attract 64,000 followers. Her original motivation had been to indulge her love of food and photography, and to make friends, but her account has become a powerful platform to boost small, independent cafés and restaurants in London.

In an amusing exercise, delegates tracked how Felicity’s picture of a Swedish sourdough cardamom bun continued to attract “likes” throughout the session, smashing through 3,000. She described Instagram as the “restaurant address book of dreams” but admitted her own account only features positive reports, for which she is not paid.

Although The White Guide is currently restricted to Nordic countries, it is developing its traditional restaurant review offer to cover cafés, hotels and bars. Limited Information is provided free via the website but people are happy to buy the printed guides and make purchases via the app to access detailed information. Customers value the honesty and credibility of the reviews, which are conducted anonymously and adhere to a strict judging criteria. All meals are paid for.



Panellist took question from delegates about their own experiences and views on the wider food influencing agenda. Could Instagrammers and bloggers be trusted to give a fair representation of Délice cities, particularly if their posts were sponsored by third parties? And should cities expect some editorial control if they were paying the blogger’s expenses?

Delegates agreed there was a need for greater transparency and honesty in all discussions surrounding “who has the power”. Similarly, cities should not merely look at a blogger’s number of

followers before engaging with them. They should find out more about them as individuals. What are their motivations and credentials?

The theme was revisited when Délice members shared their own experiences and best practice during a workshop at Sjömagasinet, a standard-bearer for outstanding Gothenburg gastronomy.



Members agreed that “word of mouth” recommendations and positive local reports still had an important role to play in influencing dining decisions. It was vital to keep a sense of perspective and resist becoming obsessed by social media and the prestige of international ranking operations such as Michelin and The World’s 50 Best Restaurants. Quality will always speak for itself and is demonstrated by the sourcing of exceptional food products, strong

cooking techniques and the training of staff.

Interestingly, during a specially commissioned video looking at influencers in Délice cities, a young female chef from Gothenburg observed that quality (in cooking and service) will always triumph over the hype of Instagram.

For part of the study tour, Délice members joined delegates from the Tomorrow’s Food Travel conference at Gothenburg University and heard about new trends in food and beverage tourism. The session was preceded by one of the many great gastronomic experiences of the annual meeting – a seafood lunch prepared Sofia B Olsson of Gothenburg’s restaurant vRÅ. Olsson presents high quality Swedish ingredients with Japanese flavours.



One of the culinary highlight of the visit was a special dinner prepared by the Gothenburg Restaurant Association at Privata Rum, a private dining experience that complements the celebrated Thörnströms Kök (Kitchen) restaurant. The evening saw all six of the city’s Michelin star restaurants present courses including Swedish squid with grilled tomato and elderflower, wild mushrooms with pungent Wrångebäck cheese and dried

lingonberries, and smoked and baked cod with leek and frozen horseradish.

The chefs from Koka, Bhoga, Restaurang +28, Upper House, SK Mat & Människor and Thörnströms Kök were warmly applauded for their instructive, inventive and delicious dishes. No one was left doubting why Swedish food is so highly regarded and guests enjoyed the relaxed experience, being invited into the kitchen to see the food being prepared.

Informality was also the order of the day when members sampled the quintessential Swedish celebratory dining occasion – a traditional crayfish party. Guests travelled by boat to the heart of the Gothenburg archipelago to try the most exquisite seafood on the island of Donsö.

It was the second visit out to sea for those who were fortunate to join the visit a day early for an optional lobster “safari” off the island of Marstrand. The fine quality of local seafood, in this instance pearly white cod, was enjoyed at lunch at Grand Tenan at the Grand Hotel before the party set off in a boat and inspected local lobster pots. A tasting of lobster was then prepared on the dock of a pretty cottage, the shellfish being cooked in a bubbling pot with dill just hours after being caught. If any city in the world needed a graphic illustration of the link between quality produce, freshness, tradition and culinary authenticity, it was found here in the late afternoon sun of an autumn day in Western Sweden. Surely that speaks far more loudly than any rating, ranking or review?



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