



Innovation

How the Best Restaurants in the World Balance Innovation and Consistency

by Daniel Ospina

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Summary. Despite being able to charge hundreds of dollars for a meal and being fully booked months in advance, top restaurants often still have a hard time turning a profit. And they face an added challenge of maintaining flawless consistency, while simultaneously... [more](#)

The restaurant industry is notorious for being competitive, risky, and low-margin. This is no less true for the world's most acclaimed high-end restaurants. Despite being able to charge hundreds of dollars for a meal and being fully booked months in advance, top restaurants often still have a hard time turning a

profit. And they face an even greater challenge: maintaining flawless consistency, while simultaneously being innovative and cutting-edge.

While cooking is seen as creative, high-end cooking is mainly about constant, rigorous repetition, in a highly controlled and hierarchical environment. To receive three Michelin stars – the highest rating given by the prestigious Michelin Guide – restaurants must deliver a consistently flawless experience over many visits. This means achieving precise standardization and strong quality control.

For example, at The Fat Duck in the UK (which has had three Michelin stars since 2004, except in 2016 when it closed for refurbishment, and where I worked on the innovation side), cooking temperatures are systematically controlled to 0.1°C, and most recipes are specified with up to 40 steps for a single component on a plate. Each cook is highly trained and selectively recruited, yet he or she will only be tasked with producing a few components, and will practice hundreds of times under direct supervision before achieving the necessary level of craftsmanship. The preparations, produced by small teams or individual cooks, are progressively assembled, with sous-chefs (akin to middle managers) controlling the quality at every step. Before the final dishes are served, the head chef personally tastes a sample from each batch, maintaining control over every single aspect.

However, this kind of rigorous repetition would seem to stymie innovation – by limiting opportunities to learn from mistakes, to

quickly prototype, or to search for new ideas – and innovation is another critical dimension for success in the high-end restaurant world. For instance, it's a main consideration for the similarly influential 50 Best Restaurants of the World list, which occasionally leads it to rewards different restaurants than Michelin. For example, Noma obtained the top spot in the 50 Best for its reinvention of Nordic Cuisine, while it was only granted two Michelin stars; and Paul Bocuse's restaurant, the oldest restaurant with three Michelin stars (keeping the ranking for over 40 years), has served virtually the same menu for decades and has never made the 50 Best list.

Of course, consistency and creativity aren't mutually exclusive. A handful of extraordinary restaurants have managed to deliver both the flawless standards of three Michelin stars and the innovation demanded by the 50 Best list – and they've managed to leverage this acclaim to achieve growth. In my work studying and consulting with innovative companies, I've found that this balance is best achieved through dedicated time and space for research and experimentation, as well as a thorough process for both iterating on and standardizing new inventions.

Let's consider an example. The first restaurant to achieve both lists was El Bulli in Spain. With only one Michelin star in 1987, the restaurant decided to try something new. Since the business was particularly slow during the winter, its owners, Ferran Adrià and Juli Soler, decided to close shop 2-5 months a year to travel and search for new dish ideas. In 1990 they gained a second Michelin Star, and in 1994, they became the first high-end restaurant to invest in a development team and a lab.

Akin to an R&D facility for a large restaurant chain or fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) brand, their lab hosted a small team of chefs, and occasionally other professionals, such as food

scientists, designers, or engineers, in a mixed kitchen and office space. Unlike test kitchens of large chains or FMCG products, the team would work in R&D during the winter and then resume restaurant operations during the summer. And instead of concentrating on cost reduction, shelf life, or replicability, they would focus on the creative process and the customer's experience.

Three years later, El Bulli rose to three Michelin Stars, and when the first edition of the 50 Best guide was released in 2002, they earned the top spot, positioning Spain as one of the main gastronomic destinations in the world. The company grew through consulting for other companies, opening new business lines (e.g. books and cooking gadgets), developing brand partnerships, and opening more restaurants. Though the main restaurant closed in 2011, they subsequently reopened it as the ElBulli Foundation (a sort of think tank), while the other restaurants and business lines are still operating today.

Other restaurants, like the Fat Duck and El Celler de Can Roca in Spain, also set up fully fledged test kitchens before attaining the top ranking in both guides. Like at El Bulli, the chefs working in these labs divide their time between the restaurant operation and R&D projects aimed at improving the customer experience. The projects range from developing new techniques and ingredients to designing final dishes and products. Some labs even partnered with universities to carry out research projects and explore subjects as varied as sensory perception, sustainability, narrative theory, and nostalgia.

For example, a popular dish by The Fat Duck Group called The Meat Fruit (a surprisingly realistic looking "mandarin," made of delicate mandarin jelly and chicken liver pate) was inspired by a recipe from the 15th century that was researched by historians at

Hampton Court. And a seafood dish called Sound of the Sea (enhanced by sea-like sounds coming from an iPod nano hidden inside a seashell) came from collaborations between the lab and an experimental psychology laboratory in Oxford called The Crossmodal Research Laboratory.

Although these efforts were expensive, the labs provided the capacity for numerous projects that generated revenue, like The Fat Duck's partnership with Waitrose (a UK-based supermarket), and helped attract a wide community of collaborators that led to numerous innovations.

But while a dedicated lab expands a restaurant's capacity for R&D, innovation more importantly has to be embedded in the DNA of the organization. High-end restaurants that cannot afford a team and space solely devoted to R&D still make innovation a key value alongside consistency. Whether or not they have a lab, all the top spots in both the Michelin and 50 Best list implement processes to encourage creativity and learning beyond the leadership or lab team, as well as processes to generate, prioritize, refine, and standardize ideas.

At The Fat Duck, a conceptual dish is developed each month by one of the restaurant cooks for the whole team to taste, while Italian restaurant Osteria Francescana (ranked #1 in the 50 Best in 2016 and with 3 Michelin Stars since 2012) holds frequent brainstorming and feedback sessions with the head chef and general kitchen staff. This collective culture of creativity multiplies the pool of ideas and softens resistance to new products and processes being adopted. Then after the ideas are collected, restaurants screen and prioritize them for development.

Let's look at how the Fat Duck Group (their parent company) does this. First, the company's leadership agrees on the core concept

for each of its business units (the restaurants and other commercial lines). Then a team – generally composed of the CEO, the company’s head chef, the head of R&D, and the head of the unit – generates a series of loose ideas that could become products or features of each customer experience. These ideas are then divided and assigned to the R&D team, the restaurant chefs for prototyping and testing, and in the case of consumer electronics (cooking gadgets), jointly to the business partner’s R&D and the internal R&D.

This isn’t strictly top-down. The members of the R&D team also explore pet projects according to loose “areas of interests,” occasionally getting help from other employees. The company’s leaders know what these areas of interest are, but they only see specific projects if the results are promising. While many projects won’t reach a final customer, they are carefully logged on a searchable data base that is frequently used to improve and accelerate assigned projects.

All the projects follow a specific development process, alternating between collective ideation or feedback and focused work by a small team. For restaurant dishes, the development team will quickly prototype and iterate through numerous versions of the dish and its components, either in the lab or if a lab is not available, in the main kitchen during slow hours. The trials can go over for months as numerous variations are tested in a race against seasonal ingredients.

Once the results start to approach a finished product, the team will seek input from senior and junior chefs, as well as sommeliers, waiters, and other staff. After a few cycles of improvement, the project team will hand the recipes to the line cooks to prepare. At this stage, the objective is not to hand down a finished recipe and test the line cook capacity to produce it.

Rather, the goal is to test the recipe's written instructions. Both the line cook and the development team taste the result and, when problems are spotted, work together to improve the recipe until the results are reliable, consistent, and delicious.

The head chef oversees each project from the early stages, and decides when to serve a first taste to regular customers for further feedback. This process reduces cultural clashes between departments, improves the quality of outputs, and bridges the gap between a raw idea and consistently producing a finished product at scale.

The most highly acclaimed restaurants imbed creativity and learning across the organization by creating spaces and processes for both collective input and focused development. They show that a culture of precision and attention to detail can co-exist with constant re-invention, and by leveraging this core competence to achieve prestigious rankings, partnerships, and associated businesses, generate growth.

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Daniel Ospina is an organization designer, founder of Conductal, and a visiting lecturer at Said Business School (Oxford University). He is a frequent speaker on platforms such as TEDx and Tech Open Air, and in a previous life was a chef. Follow him on Twitter [@_Daniel_Ospina](#).



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