

THE DEMOCRATIC DINER

Tim Zagat's successful restaurant guides are built on the premise that 2,200 mouths are better than one.

BY JOHN SEDGWICK

This fall the best-selling nonfiction book on Doubleday's list—and on several others around the country—was an improbable volume with a plain burgundy cover and a real clunker of a title, the *1987 Zagat New York City Restaurant Survey*. Yet for discriminating diners the book's contents are more desirable than fresh Scottish salmon; it consists entirely of clear, current, and candid (often utterly candid) appraisals of 707 of New York's better restaurants by more than 2,200 lay gourmands.

In the Zagat guide, the people rule. In place of the elaborate reviews of a Mimi Sheraton—which alternately wax lyrical over the *noisettes d'agneaux* and chastise the chefs for the lack of authenticity in their risotto—the Zagat guide presents a restaurant as it might be seen by a combination of *Consumer Reports* and the Nielsen Ratings.

This is dining by the numbers. A restaurant is given a four-part score; food, decor, and service are rated on a scale of one to 30, followed by a price designation that represents the restaurant's per-person average bill before wine and tip (though in the 1988 edition, which is now available, meal costs will include wine and tip). In about five lines a typical entry dispenses with a restaurant that the usual reviewer might prattle on about for a page or two. Lutece, the reigning No. 1, for example, ranks 28-25-26-\$60; the guide

concludes, "All but a few say that Lutece rewards the wait and the expense." By contrast, the celebrity hangout Elaine's gets an 8-8-8-\$30; the guide cites one diner's observation, "better a TV dinner," and sums it up: "No wonder Woody and Mia are so thin."

"Zagat's guide is a very clever idea," says *New York Times* restaurant reviewer Bryan Miller, himself the author of *The New York Times Guide to Restaurants in New York City*. "The notion of the diners voting has great democratic appeal."

Yet Miller is not threatened by Zagat's guides. "I feel his book is very complementary to mine," he says. "He gives a kind of skeletal account; mine's the flesh and blood."

More flattering to Zagat are the imitators that have started to crop up around the country, but he is neither alarmed nor impressed. "Their comments have no zing," he says.

As the ultimate form of praise, some restaurants have shown that they take the *Zagat Survey* so seriously that they have tried to raise their ratings by stuffing the ballot box. However, their efforts have been so transparent—comments only on their own restaurants using the same words and handwriting, for example—that Zagat has not been fooled.

One might expect such a book to be the product of a Madison Avenue whiz. In fact, the survey was conceived, masterminded, and edited by a lawyer named Eugene Zagat Jr. (known to friends as Tim) with a layman's interest in food and no business training. But, as he says in his defense, "Lawyers always think they

Photos by Ann McQueen

Tim Zagat, publisher of the best-selling Zagat Survey restaurant guides, takes a luncheon break at The Post House in New York City.

know everything." Zagat (pronounced zah-GAT) is, at 47, a tall, dark-haired, and easygoing fellow whose Yale-educated corporate lawyer's good looks have been thickened somewhat by a lifelong love affair with food.

The survey is produced in a cramped, five-room suite that, if it were judged for decor, would not get high marks. In Zagat's one-window office his desk is piled high with papers, the floor is burdened with five boxes of questionnaires that are

NEW YORK CITY:

Carnegie Deli 21/7/13/\$14
854 Seventh Ave. (bet. 54th & 55th Sts.), 757-2245

Featuring "enormous sandwiches," "perfect matzoh ball soup," "great blintzes," "top-notch cheesecake," "prototypical rude waiters," and "glorious heartburn," the Carnegie is "the quintessential New York Deli," generally considered "the best in town"; usually crowded and noisy, but who's to complain? "Broadway Danny Rose and Damon Runyon live here."

on their way to a New Jersey vault for safe-keeping—just in case Elaine's, for example, questions whether anyone really did say the place "should be burnt to the

ground"—and decorated only by one sad potted palm dubbed the "killer tree" after it recently toppled over on an assistant.

If the office seems disorderly that is probably an inevitable consequence of the way the entire enterprise began, which is pretty much by accident. The guide is an outgrowth of Zagat's one mad passion in a life that is otherwise remarkably orthodox, a passion he always assumed would never find a professional outlet. What passion is that? "Well," he says humbly, "I always loved eating."

The story begins in 1968 when Zagat was transferred to Paris by his law firm, Hughes Hubbard & Reed. His wife, Nina, a Cordon Bleu-trained cook and a lawyer at Sherman & Sterling, also managed to be relocated there. The couple lived in a small apartment across from the Sorbonne where, says Tim, they watched "more action than we wanted to see" as the student protests pushed the country close to revolution.

Fortunately, the strikes did not close Paris' restaurants, and the Zagats indulged freely in Tim's favorite pastime. To formalize their eating experiences Tim started taking notes for a small compendium, and he asked his lawyer friends in the city to help out. "All American lawyers entertain a lot," he says. "It's part of their job."

The result was a single sheet that represented, in embryonic form, the Zagat restaurant guides of today. Each restaurant was listed in alphabetical order on one line with its rank from 0 (fair) to 3

SAN FRANCISCO:

Stars 24/21/21/\$27
1050 Redwood St. (off Van Ness Ave.), 861-7827

Celebrated Chef Jeremiah Tower's "in place" is a cosmopolitan brasserie with a dash of elegance; a temple of California cuisine, this "trend-setting" Civic Center hangout always bustles; some say service is "spotty" and food "inconsistent," but this has some of the cleverest and most creative cooking in the country, especially when Tower is on the scene.

(outstanding) and a few words of commentary. For comparison the sheet also included the restaurant's rankings in Michelin and Gault-Millau, the two standard guidebooks. Zagat still updates the sheet annually. "I don't know if there is a piece of paper in the world that tells you so much so concisely about a city's food," he grandly proclaims.

The scene shifts to New York in 1979. The Zagats were sitting around with some friends who were discussing how hard it was to find a good restaurant. Zagat, remembering his Parisian tout sheet, suggested they all fill out surveys to quantify their impressions. Thus the first *Zagat New York City Restaurant Survey* was born. At that point it, like its Parisian forebear, consisted of a single sheet of

EATING BY THE NUMBERS

Anyone can participate in a *Zagat Survey*; all it takes is the will—and a hearty appetite. Just send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to Zagat Survey, 45 W. 45th St., New York, NY 10036, (212) 302-0505, and indicate which questionnaire you want to receive. Your choices: New York City, Washington, D.C., Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.

Each questionnaire is itself a pretty good rundown of a city's most-frequented and best-known eateries. The eight-page New York City questionnaire lists more than 700 restaurants alone, with room left over for write-in candidates.

The Zagat reviewer can rank any



The Zagat Survey collection

restaurant he wants—and as many. A typical entry includes ratings—from 0 to 3—for food, service, and decor, and the cost of the meal with one drink and tip. Then there's space for a pithy comment—a Zagatnik's

chance at immortality in the pages of a *Zagat Survey*.

Back in his New York office Zagat analyzes the reviewers' data and determines which restaurants were visited most often by his team of eaters; those are the ones that will appear in his next guides. He then pores over the comments and picks the few that best distill the dining experience at each chosen eatery.

Anyone whose comments turn into fodder for a Zagat guide—the questionnaire must be sent in by a deadline date—receives a \$9.95 *Zagat Survey* free. If that isn't motivation enough, perhaps you should have your stomach examined.

paper, and it was purely a hobby. Zagat tinkered with it at night and on weekends the way others might garden or paint. He passed out questionnaires to friends and acquaintances, tabulated the results, added a few words of choice commentary, and distributed the final product to everyone who had helped. "It was just for fun," he says.

Word soon spread about Zagat's guide, and the requests for copies exceeded the number of contributors. At first only friends wanted them, then friends of friends, then people Zagat had never even heard of. The costs of Zagat's little hobby were getting out of hand; in one six-month period he spent \$10,000—and that didn't include the considerable restaurant bills. And the expenses weren't deductible, either.

In 1982, at Nina's urging, Zagat began producing the guide as a book and charging \$4.95 for it, but he still thought of himself as a lawyer. (By then he was chief litigation counsel in Gulf & Western's legal department.) Three years later the Zagats landed on the cover of *New York* magazine, and orders for the \$9.95 guide jumped to 75,000 a month. Zagat was making more in a month from the guide than he was in a year from the law. He did the sensible thing; he quit Gulf & Western and became the publisher of the *Zagat Survey*.

LOS ANGELES:

72 Market St. 21/20/19/\$31
72 Market St. (bet. Pacific Ave. & the Pacific Ocean), Venice,
392-8720

High-tech American, owned by Tony Bill, Dudley Moore, Liza Minnelli and friends, many of whom show up nightly; the architecture alone is worth a visit; though trendy, the restaurant has good simple American food, such as salads, catfish, chili, and meat loaf—"the ultimate meat loaf" according to *Vogue*.

Besides its flagship New York guide, which Zagat himself edits, the survey has expanded to four other U.S. cities as well—Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C. Two more cities, Boston and New Orleans, are also in the works, as is a guide to the nation's better hotels, which would operate on the same principle, letting the people rule.

Zagat once even toyed with the idea of bringing his democratic philosophy to the theater; he produced a sample ranking of New York's dramatic offerings one season, but had trouble with distribution and

CHICAGO:

Ed Debevic's Short Orders/Deluxe 16/24/19/\$9
640 N. Wells St. (Ontario St.),
664-1707

660 W. Lake Cook Road (bet. Pfingsten & Waukegan Roads),
Deerfield, 945-3247

And then along came Rich Melman's nostalgic '50s diner with gum-chewing, bouffant-haired waitresses, tunes from The Platters, etc., and inexpensive diner fare (meat loaf, chicken pot pie, burgers, shakes, black cows); "my kids love it," "decor alone is worth the trip," "ultimate greasy spoon fun," "an experience rather than a meal"; no reserving often means waiting; projected to be a national, perhaps international, chain.

dropped the project.

As the title suggests, *Zagat Surveys* are Zagat's surveys. The raw information may come from an army of eaters, but the information is shaped and presented by Zagat himself, although he has had to turn to free-lance editors for help with the guides to other cities. Until recently he ran the operation out of his apartment on Central Park West. He still does as much as he can by himself and subcontracts the rest.

In New York, Zagat literally sniffs out new restaurants to review. He races through 30 restaurants a night, and can tell in a whiff if they are worth including in his *Survey*. He also does much of the selling. "I like that part," he says. "I get excited when somebody buys my book. Of course, I get even more excited when somebody buys a thousand. It's like an artist hearing somebody say, 'I want to buy your painting.' It's a thrill."

A data processor runs the numbers for him, a designer helps lay out the book, a few assistants handle the paperwork, and Nina goes over the final draft. Otherwise it is close to a one-man operation.

It is also an operation intended for one man: Zagat. He assumes (correctly, it turns out) that there are a lot of other people out there just like him: busy,

unpretentious, no-nonsense types who basically want to know one thing about a restaurant—thumbs up or thumbs down. "This is for the guy who is trying to decide where to go," he explains. "I want to tell him what each place is like, and I want to give it to him as quickly as possible."

Reading through the guides one can almost hear Zagat giving a busy professional the lowdown on a windy street corner, hence the numerical redactions and terse commentary. "The information is supposed to be usable," he says.

This impulse has also given the guide its unusual tall-and-thin shape. "It's designed to fit in a coat pocket or pocket-book," says Zagat. For the same reason, he has also included a handy wine-vintage chart in the back for diners to consult as they make their evening's selections.

Zagat draws a distinction between a survey and a review. "We're not trying to be critics," he says. "Critics have a valid role. They're there to evaluate. They bring a special expertise to the subject and they write a fairly elaborate critique. We're a consumers' guide. We don't say what a place ought to be but what it is."

Zagat emphasizes the guide's democratic virtues, and gets a little testy at the notion that professional critics might be better suited to the job of rating restaurants than 2,200 mouths. "One person can only travel so far on one stomach," he says.

Zagat points out that, unlike a single critic, his *Zagatniks*—as his eater army was dubbed by *People* magazine—cover a restaurant from many perspectives at many different times, and thus overcome any one reviewer's inherent prejudice or variations in the restaurant's service. "Some critics have a blind spot when it comes to steak houses," says Zagat. "They'll rave about a French restaurant, but ignore a great steak house."

Zagat's army eats just about everywhere. Also, major reviewers are often recognized by restaurateurs, and possi-

WASHINGTON, D.C.:

Dominique's 20/20/20/\$24
1900 Pennsylvania Ave., NW (20th St.), 452-1126

"Like a hunting lodge in a 1950s B movie"; this festive French Downtowner thrives on culinary showmanship (e.g., alligator, reindeer, and rattlesnake), friendly service (Diane, the kissing maitresse d'hotel, is legendary), and good values (especially pre- and post-Kennedy Center specials).

bly get a better dining experience than the average Joe. Now it's the average Joe's turn.

Initially, critics claimed that Zagat's guides were slanted toward the over-40 set, since those were the people Zagat knew. (Not a few of them, incidentally, are celebrities. Former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, former Giants' field-goal kicker Peter Gogolak, *Playboy* president Christie Hefner, and Congressman Barney Frank have all dutifully filled out Zagat questionnaires.) Zagat now produces numbers that show that his reviewers are evenly distributed throughout the age groups and are only slightly more likely to be male. He fully admits,

however, that his reviewers do not reflect the general population. "We didn't go out and try to get x number of blacks and y number of Hispanics," he says. The typical Zagatnik is better educated and is better off than the typical member of the population. "These are people who can afford to eat out pretty often," he says. Indeed, one insatiable fellow critiqued 250 restaurants.

Zagat makes use of the guide's democratic virtues in another way as well—for his own commercial ends. His myriad reviewers all feel that they themselves are the books' authors. Zagat frequently sees them proudly point to a phrase they believe—often wrongly—that they con-

tributed. Their chests swelling with an author's pride, they purchase 10 additional copies to give to their friends. And they probably sell 20 others by word of mouth. "The reviewers are an underground sales force," he says.

The happy result for Zagat is that he has never had to advertise his surveys. Of course, the media has done its part to spread the word; national magazines from *People* and *Vogue* to *Barron's* and the *American Express Corporate Traveler* have proved remarkably receptive to the story of how Zagat has brought power to the people.

Zagat has also hit upon the idea of producing special deluxe editions of the books for corporations and hotels to distribute. With a company logo on the cover, the book would appear to be the firm's own. In this way Zagat could indeed sell the guide a thousand at a time.

As the guide has expanded, however, it

Zagat's goal is to be the American Michelin—the one standard reference work for the nation.

has passed out of Zagat's exclusive control and has lost a little of his distinctive touch. It is one thing for Zagat to hire a designer, it is another for editors to compile entire guides for the cities in which Zagat has rarely eaten. "Each new book is a scary thing," he acknowledges. "It means bringing in somebody new to depend on."

While the New York guide is known to be highly reliable, questions are being raised about the guides in other cities where Zagat himself is not such an authority. David Shaw, restaurant reviewer for *Gentleman's Quarterly*, for one, takes issue with the non-New York editions. "It's great in New York, not bad in Washington, but in Los Angeles it's terrible," he says. "He puts L'Orangerie No. 1 in the city. L'Orangerie is not the best restaurant in Los Angeles. It's the prettiest and the most romantic, and if you happen to be there the day the fish comes in fresh from Europe, it's fine. But if the fish is three days old, it's not nearly so good. There are at least two or three better restaurants. And one of his top four restaurants—I'd rather not say which—is a real dump."

Zagat himself counters that one critic should not question the taste of thousands. "If a critic disagrees with so many

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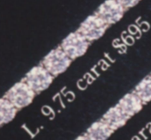
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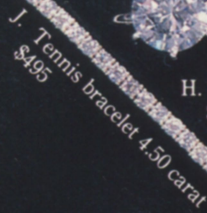
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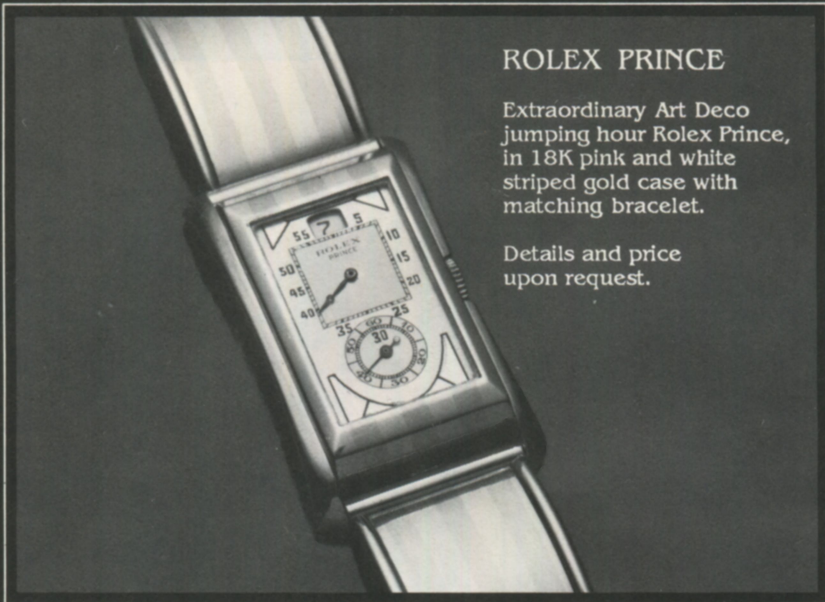
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people," he says, "then he'd better look at himself and his taste preferences." Zagat himself, however, has questioned the evaluation of at least one New York restaurant, La Cote Basque (27-26-25-\$53), and has even thought of including an editorial note disassociating himself from the people's choice because he believes it is ranked too high. And he also admits that in other cities he lacks the core group of committed, reliable palates that he has in New York.

Zagat's goal is to be the American Michelin—the one standard reference work for the nation. To judge from his rave reviews and hot sales, he may just be on his way. Certainly the country could use a succinct, reliable guide to the restaurants in its leading cities. And Zagat has hit upon a promising method

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—Tim Zagat

of producing one. For now, however, Zagat may have to content himself with being a true arbiter in New York and a best-seller elsewhere.

Still, Zagat's scheme to determine the best by ballot box is wonderfully American. It is hard to imagine a foreign country where it would work. Zagat's system is also the product of the computer age. In Zagat's hands, the people's judgment is data for him to look at upside down and sideways. Want to know the best places for decor, for parties, for food, for—as Zagat puts it—the biggest bang for the buck? One can find all this and more in the Zagat guides' many lists and appendixes.

Or, when in conversation with Zagat, one can hear the results in person, spoken with all the gusto of a scientist who has discovered the cure for cancer. In the end, Zagat appears to be less a democrat than a fact-freak, like a baseball statistician or a trivia buff. But unlike other hobbyists, he has turned his pastime into an occupation and has made a pretty nice living for himself. He has also gotten to eat in a lot of fancy restaurants—and to write off the bills.

John Sedgwick is the author of The Peaceable Kingdom, which will be published in January by William Morrow.