

A documentary about a beloved cuisine,
and its humble quest for its first Michelin Star

Stella*

Produced and Directed by Tyler Doehring
A Twin Coyote Production



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Kansas City | New York City – November 2021 – 79 Minutes – English | French | Italian – English subtitles

Synopsis

The Michelin Guide is one of the most influential and notoriously secretive institutions in gastronomy, and the awarding of its Michelin Star is steeped in glamor. There has never been a pizzeria anywhere in the world to receive a coveted Michelin Star. Passionate Neapolitan *pizzaiolo*, *Ciro Oliva*, hopes to change this.

Ciro took over his family's restaurant at 18. His years of efforts have transformed his family's humble pizzeria into a culinary destination with a tasting menu, sommelier, and an ever-present line out the door. *Ciro* and others believe the Michelin Guide will soon take notice, and award this cuisine a Star.

The Michelin tire company launched the Guide in 1900 as a practical travel book designed to encourage the new motoring class to travel and in turn sell more of their tires. Its suggestions for dining options while traveling gradually evolved to include their special designation of a Michelin Star, now one of the most elite awards in cuisine.

The neighborhood of Sanita, like pizza, has historically been seen as un-posh, and low-class, but rich in history. *Ciro* has devoted just as much to this community as to his eatery, and a Michelin Star would be a welcomed beacon of positivity. By focusing on the best ingredients, and improving of quality of service and ambiance, *Ciro* has committed to a more Michelin-centric experience not typically associated with pizza or with his difficult neighborhood.

The gravity of a Michelin Star is immense. The pressure of maintaining a Star often outweighs the pressure of earning one. With the Guide's inspection process so opaque, even chefs who have achieved a Star are uncertain exactly what Michelin is looking for. Michelin does not discuss their assessments with chefs.

In a rare interview, *Gwendal Poullennec*, International Director of the Michelin Guide maintains it is precisely this anonymity and the multiple deployments of inspectors to a restaurant that assures the quality and equity of their decisions for the customer. It is the position of Michelin to recognize talent and culinary heritage of all cuisines. The most beautiful dining experience is the one not yet had.

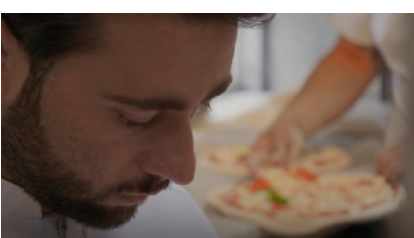
Globally, as the tides of fine dining change, the Michelin Guide is adjusting. Michelin declares they have "seen [chefs] in Italy engaged to push pizza to the next level," and when appraising pizza based on their five criteria — the very qualities *Ciro* has been devoted to in his restaurant — the perspective for Michelin is always, "Why not? Nothing is impossible."

Pizza is important to *Ciro* because it is a meal for everyone to enjoy, suitable for everyone's pocket, but at the same time can be quite complex. It speaks to the soul.

As Michelin celebrates the addition of 35 new Stars to the 2022 Guide for Italy, can a young chef manage the attention that comes from earning a landmark Michelin Star? Will he find peace if that Star never comes?



Gallery



Key Characters



Ciro Oliva - Chef, *Concettina ai Tre Santi*,

Naples, Italy. **Ciro** is a young and ambitious pizzaiolo, who has elevated his quotidian neighborhood pizzeria, to a restaurant with a sommelier, new and inventive pizza-centric

dishes, and a permanent line for a table. Named for his great-grandmother, *Concettina ai Tre Santi* also consistently strives to give back to the community, providing pizzas to those in need.

Nick Curtola - Chef, *The Four Horsemen*,

Brooklyn. Originally from California, Chef Curtola has worked around the states and Europe including at the world renown *Noma* in Copenhagen. He opened *The Four Horsemen* in 2015 with

several co-owners, including James Murphy of LCD Soundsystem. The restaurant quickly became a neighborhood favorite, and earned its first Michelin Star.



Jonathan Benno - Chef, *Benno*, New York. Considered one of the best chefs in the US, Chef Benno worked in some of the world's finest restaurants, most notably Thomas Keller's *Per Se* where he was executive chef for six

years, earning top marks from the NY Times, and receiving three Michelin Stars. His restaurant *Benno* received its first Star in its first full year of eligibility.

Gwendal Poullennec - International Director, *Michelin Guides*,

Paris, France. Mr. Poullennec oversees Michelin's global team of anonymous inspectors. He has been with Michelin Guides since 2003 and

was the main architect of the expansion of the guide into the U.S. and Asia. He is also a fixture of the Michelin Star awards ceremonies worldwide.



Other Participants

Willa Zhen Ph.D. and Beth Forrest Ph.D.

Professors of Liberal Arts and Food Studies at the *Culinary Institute of America*, Willa and Beth are experts on the history of gastronomy, how food criticism and travel have intermingled with cuisine, and have a broad understanding of how institutions like Michelin affect food and food criticism. Beth is also an accomplished author, having contributed to a number of periodicals, references, and biographies.

Stéphane Nicolas

Michelin Head of Historical Heritage, and overseer of Michelin's museum, L'Aventure Michelin in Clermont Ferrand, France. An expert on the history of Michelin and the Guides, Stéphane also facilitated the provision and use of many Michelin historical materials including images, maps and early Guides.

(continued)

Hillary Dixler Canavan

Restaurant Editor for *Eater*, she writes, assigns and edits stories about restaurants around the world, and covers much of the goings-on with the Michelin Guide for the network of sites.

Scott Weiner

Tour Guide and perhaps the world's foremost expert on pizza. He leads Scott's Pizza Tours in New York, and has an encyclopedic knowledge of pizza's history. He has been to hundreds, maybe thousands of pizzerias the world over, including *Concettina ai Tre Santi*.

Maurizio Cortese

Travel and culinary writer, based in Naples Italy. Maurizio is one of the champions of *Ciro* and his pizzeria receiving a Michelin Star. When world-renowned chef, Massimo Bottura, wanted good Neapolitan pizza, Maurizio took him to *Concettina ai Tre Santi*.

Jenn Rice

Culinary Arts and Travel Journalist who has written for outlets including *Food & Wine*, *GQ*, *Vogue*, and *Food Network*, she is intimately familiar with many Michelin restaurants, and is one of only a few people who has conducted a Michelin sanctioned interview with one of their inspectors.

Aaron Goldfarb

Author and journalist having written pieces for *Food & Wine*, *Esquire*, and the *Daily Beast*, among others, Aaron is a well rounded traveller and diner.

Filmmakers

Producer/Director: Tyler Doehring

Tyler Doehring has worked in non-scripted television since 2012, working on programs for Viacom, History Channel, NBCUniversal and others while based in New York City. *Stella* is his first feature-length film and directorial debut. Along with his producing partner Pablo Diego, Tyler has produced many short-form projects, music videos and commercial content. Tyler is also a Motion Picture Academy Nicholl Fellowship in Screenwriting Semifinalist.

Producer/Cinematographer: Pablo Diego

Pablo Diego was born in La Habana, Cuba and grew up surrounded by the beautiful artistic traditions. He emigrated to the United States in search of a better life with his family, eventually earning a master's degree from Full Sail University. He works with various artists and brands in New York City, and primarily shoots for non-scripted television networks and streaming platforms, included Emmy nominated programs throughout the United States and world.

Editor/Co-producer: Jeff Van Bockern

With over twenty years editing experience, Jeff is an Emmy and multi-Telly award winning editor at Wide Awake Films in Kansas City. Jeff is a long-time collaborator of Tyler Doehring having worked on personal projects together for over fifteen years since studying film together at the University of Kansas.

Director's Statement

When this documentary began, I was largely ignorant of the international impact of pizza and of Michelin Stars. While visiting family in Italy, we dined at a Michelin Starred restaurant and were wowed by some of the finest food we had ever eaten. "So *this* is what a Michelin Star is all about," I thought. The following night we visited *Ciro's pizzeria, Concettina ai Tre Santi*. Because of the experience there, now I largely cannot remember the Michelin Starred meal from just one day prior. I was beside myself. I asked *Ciro* right then if I could shoot a documentary with him. I had no plan, I just knew *Ciro* was especially talented.

Concettina was one of only a few pizzerias in the world to even be *listed* in the Michelin Guide. As I began researching, I learned there had never been a pizzeria anywhere in the world to receive a coveted Michelin Star. The story quickly evolved into that of not only young talent, but of a storied international organization that has come to be associated with sophistication and good taste, and a humble outsider that happens to be devoted to many of the same qualities.

The most common reaction I get when discussing Michelin and gastronomy is "The *tire* company?" Many people are not even aware of the Guide's existence, let alone its cachet or its history. It is essentially a secret society—a goal out of reach for most chefs and restaurateurs. Associated with "haute cuisine," and with traditional French and Italian white tablecloth dining experiences, Michelin do not discuss their inspection practices with anyone.

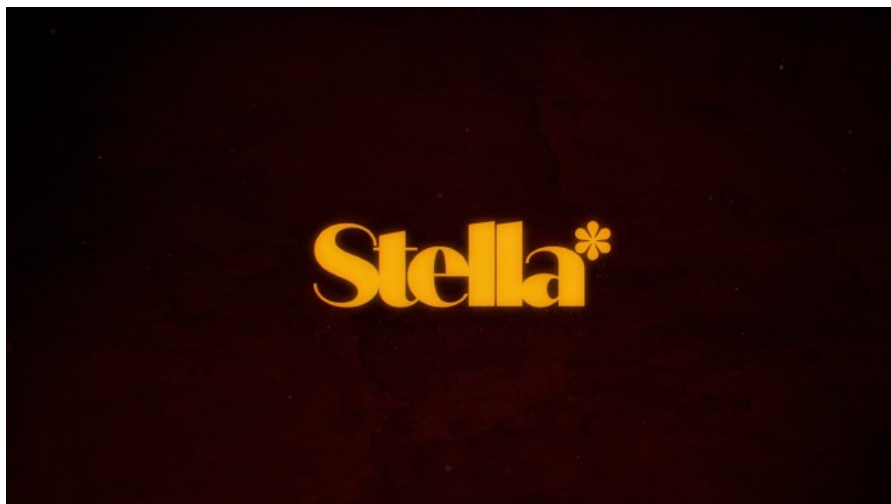
"*Stella*" is Italian for "Star." Michelin's icon for a Michelin Star is a stylized asterisk (*). The asterisk is typically used in text to note an additional consideration, which is the essence of Michelin's intent. These starred restaurants are worth additional consideration. My hope is that our documentary gives both pizza and Michelin additional consideration. Pizza is a beloved cuisine. It's a cuisine associated with community and celebration and fun. It transcends cultures and borders. *Ciro* says pizza is a simple meal, suitable for everyone and everyone's pocket. Pizza means soul.

I hope this documentary makes you hungry and want to call up your friends and family to have a slice. This is a celebration of food, and good times, and even a celebration of celebrating food. Pizza is a *nice* cuisine, and I hope above all else, *Stella* is a *nice movie*. Cheers.

Tyler Doehring
Producer/Director

Trailer

(Also available at vimeo.com/684354902)



Technical Specifications

Shooting format: Digital (Sony FS7, RED Epic)
Aspect Ratio: 16:9
Audio Format: Stereo (48khz 24bit)
Runtime: 78min 57sec
Language: English/Italian/French (English Subtitles)

Age restriction: N/A (some adult language)

FAQ

How secretive is Michelin, really?

Michelin Guide is *quite* secretive. It took almost three years just to get them to definitively declare whether or not they would participate in the documentary.

How did you get Michelin to officially participate?

After months contacting people at Michelin, and not making much progress, we sent a proof-of-concept and swung for the fences. We requested to interview International Director, Gwendal Poullennec, expecting a final and definitive “no, thanks.” Instead we were pleasantly surprised to be granted the interview as well as access to their head of cultural heritage and their archives.

How good was the pizza, really?

It was good enough to inspire the entire documentary. There were no plans of any kind until our director dined at *Concettina ai Tre Santi* and asked if he could shoot something, *anything* with *Ciro*.

Is the pizza in Italy really that different from the U.S.?

Yes. As Scott says in the documentary, in Italy pizza means one thing. In the U.S. it's a broad spectrum. They take it very seriously. They have legal regulations over it.

Which restaurant was your favorite to work with?

All three restaurants were amazing to work with in completely different ways. *Ciro* is young and so passionate, Chef *Curtola* is so easy going and artistic, and Chef *Benno* is such a quintessentially disciplined craftsman.

How long did the documentary take?

Almost exactly three years from the first time we hit record until we finished the edit.

How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the story/production?

Very early on we decided not to include mention of covid in the documentary. We knew everyone would be tired of restrictions and fine dining and tourism are supposed to be an escape. We shut down shooting for almost a year as restaurants and travel abroad were closed. Unfortunately for our friends at *Benno*, a staff outbreak of covid forced them to close permanently after we completed the documentary.

Did Michelin let you in on any secrets?

If Michelin told me any secrets, I'm sure I would now be legally required to tell you “no, they did not tell me any secrets...” Anyway, no, they did not tell me any secrets.