

# Restaurants

## Classic French food, classically cooked - and worth every penny, says Matthew Fort

**P**ierre Koffmann was in the kitchen, boning out a saddle of lamb. He worked with delicate, measured assurance. He was absorbed in what he was doing, oblivious, it seemed, to the restaurant bearing his name rapidly filling up.

Koffmann occupies a unique position among chefs in this country. He is the chef of chefs, the chef all other chefs look up to. For many years, his restaurant, La Tante Claire, was a place of gastronomic pilgrimage, London's only restaurant with three Michelin stars. When Koffmann hung up his apron for, he declared, the last time, there was a collective outpouring of grief among serious eaters. Then, last year, he was tempted out of retirement to man a pop-up restaurant in Selfridges for eight weeks and, having got a taste for the demanding disciplines of the professional kitchen again, he has settled once more - this time to the more measured pace of Koffmann's, in that part of the Berkeley hotel the Boxwood Café once occupied.

Anyone expecting the high aspirations of La Tante Claire, or even the dazzle-dazzle of Selfridges, will be disappointed. Koffmann's serves Koffmann's brasserie food. The creamy, mushroomy decor and the professional suavity of the service suggests something somewhere between a brasserie and restaurant, but the sans serif



SAMAH LEE FOR THE GUARDIAN

typeface of the menu immediately evokes la nostalgie des brasseries d'antan, the brasseries that have all but disappeared in France, taking with them that grand tradition of sublime charcuterie, garlic-laden snails, foie de veau lyonnaise, lapin à la moutarde and mousse au chocolat.

But there they all are, along with soupe de poissons, boudin gascon aux pommes caramélisées and côte de boeuf béarnaise. There are some careful contemporary modifications, too - terrine de maquereaux marinés aux herbes, bar sauvage rôti au jus d'agrumes and magret de canard aux épices. And, of course, Koffmann's hymn to gastronomic richness, the gob-smacking (literally) pied de cochon aux morilles, one of the

most imitated dishes in the modern culinary lexicon, but never bettered.

Whether cooking the elaborate structures of haute cuisine, or the rougher-hewn beauties of brasserie tradition, Koffmann is a cook to his fingertips. There aren't short cuts in his kitchen. The basics are done properly, attention given to details. And the result - well, when someone asked the great chef Fernand Point what the secret to good cooking was, he replied, "Du beurre, du beurre and encore du beurre." The secret of Koffmann's cooking is flavour, flavour and yet more flavour. Great breakers of flavour roll like thunder round your mouth. When you take on the soupe de poissons or tête de veau à la sauce ravigote, or the daube de joue de boeuf, then brace

yourself for a full-frontal assault on your tastebuds. These are big dishes, big on flavour, mighty on texture, magnificent in their generosity. It is as well to pace yourself. Don't rush. Sluice a little wine between each mouthful, then turn and take another pleasure-laden step.

Koffmann has a delicate touch, too. The mashed potato in the cassiolette d'escargots et giroles à l'ail was an extraordinary, ethereal, almost liquid cloud of tuber. The pipérade with the confit of wild salmon was refined and restrained. I would even go so far as to say the mustard in the lapin rôti à la moutarde was just a bit too delicately handled. Although the farmed rabbit, stuffed with its own offal, was perfectly roasted to a nutty succulence, I could have done with a bit more kick from the sauce.

Whether you go big, or go light, by the time you finish, you will know that you have eaten, and eaten splendidly. That was how I felt by the time I wiped the remaining smears of mousse au chocolat amer from inside the dish, and licked them off my finger. Bill? Well, there were three of us, and we drank rather headily. If I strip out the booze, the food came to £111, or under £40 a head. Is that a lot for classic food, classically cooked? I rather think not.

**Koffmann's The Berkeley**, Wilton Place, London SW1, 020-7235 1010. Open Mon-Sun, noon-2.30pm (3.30pm Sat & Sun), 6-10.30pm.

## SOLUTIONS

**Quiz (page 61)** 1 WikiLeaks. 2 Cardinal Newman. 3 Tchaikovsky's Queen of Spades. 4 Oliver Cromwell on the execution of Charles I. 5 Semtex. 6 20 (25/500). 7 Dead Sea Scrolls. 8 Avengers (Chapeau Melon

et Bottes de Cuir). 9 Wartime English-language broadcasters from Germany. 10 Tributaries of the Thames. 11 Acts in miming controversies. 12 Wines from Georgia. 13 Angelina Jolie's tattoos. 14 Mount Rushmore

carvings. 15 World Cup footballs. **Scrabble** See board, right. Answer: AERIAL. Word of the week: PAPILLON - a small dog with large ears. **Crossword** See board, far right.

