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LIVE FOR FOOD

Tom Parker Bowles

RETURN OF THE MASTER

He trained some of Britain's best chefs: now **Pierre Koffmann** is back, trotters and all

When a beautiful, fresh wild fish comes into the kitchen, I feel as if I want to kiss it,' says Pierre Koffmann. 'The beautiful bright eyes, the gleaming skin. Just filleting the fish is an act of love, of respect. You have to respect the ingredients.'

It's the mid-afternoon lull at Koffmann's eponymous new restaurant, and the great Gascon chef is relaxed, gazing out over his new premises. His grey beard and hair are neatly trimmed and his whites pristine. He speaks slowly, in a soft Gallic baritone, and doesn't waste a word. Although he radiates a warm, Zen-like calm, he commands immediate respect. He's physically imposing and in good shape. All those years in the kitchen have given him the air of a veteran general, the sort of person you're desperate to impress, hanging on his every word.

Koffmann's, in The Berkeley Hotel in London's Knightsbridge, has only been open a few days. They're taking it slowly to start with, running at 75-per-cent occupancy, to ensure everything is right. But get in while you can. Because Koffmann and his brigade are cooking up some of the finest French food ever to pass my lips. Nothing overly elaborate; no incongruous smears or ill-thought-out towers. Just food to bring a tear to the eye.

Which is no surprise, as Koffmann is, alongside Raymond Blanc and the Roux brothers, one of France's greatest exports. He arrived here in 1970, cooking for the Roux brothers at Le Gavroche and then The Waterside Inn, before opening his own place, the three-Michelin-starred La Tante Claire in Chelsea, in 1977. In 1998, it moved to The Berkeley, where it stayed until 2004. And now Koffmann is back, albeit across the lobby.

His kitchen was notoriously exacting. With Marcus Wareing, Jason Atherton, Tom Aikens, Bruno Loubet and Tom Kitchin all training under him, it produced some of Britain's finest chefs. 'Sure, I had a lot of good chefs. But I didn't make them great chefs. Those who are famous and successful, that's all thanks to themselves.' He pauses. 'You can't make a horse out of a donkey.'

Although all of the above admit he was a stern master, nearly all are still in contact. 'Being a bit older, you approach things in a different way,' he says with a smile. 'I don't have so much to prove, and now it's like working in a school, like a teacher and student. When I was young, it was a kind of hell...' He shrugs. 'We worked long days, seven days a week. If you wanted to be a chef, you had to work very, very hard. Now, because of labour laws, you cannot work so hard. It's much easier.'

He has 20 chefs in the kitchen aged between 18 and 24. 'Last week, a beautiful wild salmon came in. And two huge wild sea bass. And they thought they were all salmon.' He shakes his head. 'That's bad. So now we spend time learning how to fillet a fish properly. It's the same with butchery. And we make all our own black pudding and *tête de veau*. It takes a long time. But they will learn how to do it properly.'

It was the 'pop-up restaurant' on the roof of Selfridges last year that propelled Koffmann back into the limelight. The critics raved, and everybody wanted more. 'The first week was hell. I lost 12 kilos. Over two months, we sold 3,200 trotters!'

At Koffmann's, the food is classic French, with Provençal fish soups, black pudding with sautéed apples, charcuterie and roasted black-leg chicken. A starter of *cassolette d'escargots et girolles à l'ail* (left) comes in a small Le Creuset pot. Plump snails and earthy girolle mushrooms loll on a bed of ethereal puréed potato, covered with a garlic-and-parsley froth. It is sublime, refined yet unmistakably rustic. Scallops, indecently fat and sweet, arrive with squid ink and red pepper sauces. You taste the sea in the scallop, which is then echoed in darker, deeper ways by the glossy black reduction.

The trotter, Koffmann's iconic dish, is burnished and sitting in a viscous sauce. There's real farmyard punch, yet the decadent richness is balanced by the delicacy of the sweetbread-and-morel stuffing. This is what great cooking is all about.

As for the daube of beef: dear God. Silken strands of meat, smoky lardons of bacon, browned pearl onions and a sauce you want to throw yourself into. Sides come free – beautiful French fries and buttered carrots. And pudding, too, is immaculate: perfect pistachio soufflés, impeccable *oeufs à la neige*. No one, even those with the most leaden of palates, can be unmoved by this food.

'When I start cooking a dish,' says Koffmann, 'I have the taste on my tongue, the picture in my head. With the daube, for example, you must caramelise the onions, and the bacon, and seal the meat properly, for extra flavour. I see melting beef, a sauce that isn't too liquid or too thick. You cook with your heart.' He smiles and licks his lips. Pierre Koffmann is back. And all across the land, tastebuds everywhere are rejoicing. ■