



TABLE TALK



AA GILL

You must nevah raht about zis place. Nevah tell another vital fellow. Swear it on ze nostrils of your children, or I, René le Tic Tac, will hunt you up and revenge mahself on your tripes."

The French take Cap Ferret very seriously. It's their secret. We took the twins there for a few days. It's a lovely spit of land, with the Atlantic on one side and the Bay of Arcachon on the other. Pine trees and long sandy dunes: the antidote to St Tropez. The bourgeoisie come here to tasteful wooden holiday homes. They cycle and saunter, wear cashmere over their shoulders and eat oysters from the salty beds in the bay. They drink local Bordeaux, and meander through the sort of summer holidays we always hoped to find in Cornwall or Dorset or Norfolk. But it's never there, because our seashores are full of retired maths teachers from Preston dressed in smocks and fishermen's caps, and Channel 4 executives missing their mistresses and being forced to have holiday sex with their resentfully needy wives, while their neurotic kids are plugged into the grid of teenage morbid vanity.

We all have to join in that collective act of wilful self-delusion, and pretend that everything we really hate and mock in the city becomes charming and marvellous because it's at the damp edge of the nation, including that most overrated and mythologised of all our foods, fish and chips. I can't think of a slice of indigenous culture that is harder to sell to unwary foreigners than sitting on an English beach looking at the grey sea as the clouds hang like wet laundry, eating coley and chips out of a Styrofoam coffin, with a pickled onion, a frankfurter in batter,

eight sachets of brown sauce and a wooden fork. Explaining that as a sensation and occasion worth waiting all year for is a gastronomic struggle.

The French version is so much better. The Frogs who go to Cap Ferret every year are svelte, quiet, pressed and polite. Their children are chic, attentive and play nicely. But like Dark Age monks, they all live in mortal fear that one evening, over the horizon, the long ships of the berserk *Anglais* will appear to despoil and pillage. The lanes will waft with the sour scent of crusty Red Bull vomit. The dunes will cackle with dogging *rosbifs*. Their spawn will stream over the beaches, mugging toddlers and leering at discreetly exposed breasts. You have no idea how much the French fear the arrival of Anglo civilisation; their only defence against it, like some strange flightless bird, is blank, haughty, eye-rolling ennui, which in Europe is the most powerful disrespect known to human etiquette, but is utterly wasted on the English.

We ate at a restaurant called Chez Hortense, overlooking the sea — "Please, please, we beg you, do not ever mention this place" — and had the French version of fish and chips, moules frites. It was pretty perfect: Audrey Tautou at the next table, the mellifluous burble of the French eating. As we walked back in the moonlight across the silver beach, while the night fishermen paddled like herons through the inky shallows, somebody said, "Oh, why can't we get a restaurant like that in England?", in the manner of Mole talking to Ratty. Actually, you can: there are lots of dining rooms like that in England. They just don't feel like it. The French understand the *terroir* is everything; everything grows from the earth. So now I've told you: Cap Ferret. Go, my children, go. Rape, pillage, vomit, burn.

Back in London, Pierre Koffman has opened a new restaurant that may not be big news to you — Koffman doesn't appear on television; he isn't a celebrity chef — but his restaurant La Tante Claire was one of the best that has ever been in London. He trained Marco and Gordon, Tom Aikens, Michel Roux Jr and Bruno Loubet. If there's a chef's chef, it's Koffman. He retired with a Gallic shrug — "It's not me, it's the portions that got small" — but now, like Arnie, he's back, in the basement of the Berkeley hotel, the site of the Boxwood Café.

KOFFMAN'S ★★★★★ FOOD ★★ ATMOSPHERE

THE BERKELEY, WILTON PLACE, SW1; 020 7107 8844. LUNCH, MON-FRI, NOON-2.30PM, SAT-SUN, NOON-3.30PM; DINNER, MON-SUN, 6PM-10.30PM

★★★★ PIG'S TROTTERS ★★★★★ HOT TO TROT ★★★ RISING TROT ★★ TROTSKY ★ THE TROTS

The Maybourne Hotel Group is quietly divesting itself of all its Gordon Ramsay restaurants, so the opening of Koffman's is a great big French deal.

The Blonde and I took Mark and Domitilla Getty, and Tom Ford and Richard Buckley. This is not a promising room: we were, by far and away, the most amusing things in it. It's a basement on two levels, low and lower, with unsympathetic proportions, and has been redecorated in a hurry with textured taupe wallpaper, some bijoux lamp fittings and photographs of food. It's adequate, but it doesn't have a personality or an opinion or any discernible style. All the elements are timid, so that it won't offend or run amok with a cleaver in a greasy thong, screaming, if I can't have you, nobody will. The menu is short and set out like a cafe, without pretension or élan. It's French with English subtitles. There's soupe de poisson (fish soup), coquille St Jacques (scallops) and foie gras (foie gras).

We started with fresh crab with celeriac and apple, and an eau de nil sauce that tasted freshly of sour apples. Tom hated the colour. "We've got to change the colour," he said. It's apple, I told him. "It's gotta go." Neither did he like the crab carapace, which came as an amusing cloche. The dish itself was wonderful. I had snails and girolles and pomme purée, which came in a dolly's Le Creuset dish. Orange Le Creuset reminds me of home-economics lessons, Aga fascism: The snails were fine, but the dish was muddy and slurred. I understand why it was made — I can see the natural affinity of the ingredients, but it was earth-bound without being earthy. The Blonde and Richard shared a chicken for two, which was pretty perfect: the flavours were fine and intense, the presentation simple and assured, though you need to know that the French black leg hen is like Edith Piaf, chewier than our own overpumped Charlotte Church.

I had the pied de cochon, or crubeens, if the menu had been translated into Irish, or tom tin moo, in Laotian. It was a pig's trotter stuffed with sweetbreads and morels. This is Koffman's most famous creation, copied but never bettered, an amazing dish, both rooted, peasant and honest, but also unctuous and refined and sophisticated. It's the perfect evocation of everything memorable and romantic about French cooking or, indeed, *la vie française*. It was as pleasing now as I remember it a decade ago.

Puddings were mixed; an odd meringue and strawberry thing, with fontainebleau cream, was ugly, and the meringue so hard it was almost inedible. But the peach melba was neat and correct; oeufs à la neige, that bistro staple, was an iceberg of egg white on a lake of custard. Everybody said how much they loved the food. The service was exemplary and solicitous.

But there was a disconnect between the concept and its delivery. The table furniture, the plates, glasses and flowers, were *affreux*, without a theme or thought. Now you may imagine that all a fork needs are prongs on one end and a fist on the other, but that's why I'm writing this and you're reading it. You're just wrong. The casual look of this restaurant sets up the food. It informs you what to expect, and it's lying. Here we have tablecloths, but the menu says retro cafe. What comes on the plate is far more accomplished. The kitchen is grander than this room implies; Koffman can't reduce his natural affinity with ingredients and method. This is Messiaen playing Johnny Hallyday hits. This is food that is full of technique and precision and well-modulated manners and wit, but it is without context, devoid of *terroir*. All over the world, not least in France, there are French restaurants like this, trying to pretend they're international, stateless, offering French food, western with a French accent. Koffman has said that he won't hire French chefs any more. They demand too much, need to be nannied. This isn't just a practical dilemma, and it's not just him. French culture is having a crisis of confidence; it's feeling sorry for itself, and the answer is not to be less French, but more. I want topless women with coal-black eyes ignoring me at the front desk. I want Joan of Arc burning in the corner. I want collaborators dining with the Germans. I want Piaf singing in tears. I want Sarkozy playing the accordion. France, get off your knees, arise, be a nation again. Grow some profiteroles. ●

THE FRENCH
BLACK LEG HEN
IS LIKE EDITH
PIAF, CHEWIER
THAN OUR OWN
OVERPUMPED
CHARLOTTE
CHURCH