



Allan JENKINS



THIS WEEK ALLAN HAS ALSO BEEN EATING...

perfect homegrown Purple Calabash tomatoes. The "anti-Tesco" tom is too misshapen and dark-skinned for supermarket shelves, but grows great in pots.

Restaurants

Leave it to Pierre

With Pierre Koffmann at the stove and Simon Hopkinson at the table, it was always going to be a lunch to remember

I am sat in a happy sandwich. On one side, sharing my corner table at Koffmann's, is good egg and great cook Simon Hopkinson. On the other an elderly English roué, oozing impeccable manners and silky charm over two ancient American sisters on their way to a ship at Southampton – it's like a scene from a PG Wodehouse. "And next door is the *second-best* cook in England," he exclaims loudly enough for Marcus Wareing to hear him upstairs at the Berkeley. And, at that moment, three hours into a near-perfect lunch, you know he is almost right.

It has always been a regret that I had never eaten at the legendary La Tante Claire in Hospital Road with Simon, but while he was dining on his first trotters à la Pierre Koffmann in 1980, I was teasing organic carrots out of clay in an eco-commune on Anglesey while my hippie wife was being spat at by stunted locals. Now, 30 years on, here we are, tucking into too many pre-starters of sweet, melting onion and anchovy pastries.

Simon has opted for the *prix fixe*. Where else in England, he says, can he find a fish terrine, followed by his favourite kidneys and brains and then floating islands for pudding all for £22.50 – or at all? As a belated Koffmann virgin with an experienced guide at my side, I am going for the greatest hits and eating à la carte.

My coquilles St Jacques à l'encre



KOFFMANN'S

The Berkeley, Wilton Place, London SW1
020 7235 1010

Three-course lunch
£22.50; à la carte for two with good-value wine **£150**



The simple dining room in the Berkeley hotel. Below: the coquilles St Jacques

has been on La Tante Claire menus since the early days and it's immediately easy to see why. Three slices of just-so scallop sit on a raven-wing sea of squid ink. A scant orange slick of coral heightens its beauty. My only problem is how to get all the intense sticky sauce into my mouth without licking the plate. Hoppy is happy with his mackerel. The fish marinated not cooked, in a delicate jelly studded with sultanais; the potato salad the right side of soft.

We ask the waiter to slow our meal for a few minutes to give us more time to savour our coming main courses and to soak up our surroundings. The room is fine, not great. Across from us sits a large table of chefs who look more like they're planning a bank heist than making a pilgrimage to this Knightsbridge shrine to peasant cooking. Rowley Leigh has brought his "boys" in, too. Our flannel-suited, club-tied neighbour has meanwhile made a move on one of the sisters. He slithers into her banquette, leans in, holds her hand and tells her she has beautiful legs. She looks a little shocked, disbelieving but pleased.

My daube de joue de boeuf arrives. Another Koffmann classic, the meltingly soft, silken beef cheek falls apart with a fork (they also

supply a spoon to sup the rich, deep gravy). Simon, always braver with offal than me, has opted for kidney with brains. Never having had much success with brains, I take his word that they are beautifully cooked with a crisp crust yet moist and yielding inside.

For dessert I order croustade aux pommes et Armagnac as Simon had beaten me to the oeufs à la neige. His floating island of room-temperature meringue sits in a proper "dangerously sweet" cooler custard. But I urge you to try the apple pie (have both, maybe, or go with someone who won't mind when their companion continually steals from yours, as did mine). This is country cuisine of the highest order. The apples cooked down and down and down. The sublime sugary pastry tasting like a real French patisserie smells. (Simon later learns from Rowley Leigh that Koffmann himself was working pastry that day.)

I am shocked to see that it is now nearly 4pm and that none of our fellow diners have left either.

"We have been wine and dined and it was wonderful," purrs an American sister as she places her platinum card on the table. My contented companion and I can only smile and agree. ■

Jay Rayner is away; Allan Jenkins is the editor of Observer Food Monthly

SIDE ORDER A REAL FUNGI

If you go down to the woods today... you've a good chance of finding cepes.

These finest of British fungi grow near birch and pine. Short and squat with fat, creamy bodies (the mushrooms, not your fellow foragers), they are to be found all over the country in the autumn. Look



out for mainland Europeans walking very slowly and staring fixedly at the ground carrying baskets or paper bags. But be a bit careful of being poisoned, please. Buy a good guide to foraging for mushrooms or hunt with an experienced friend.



Email Jay at jay.rayner@observer.co.uk or visit guardian.co.uk/profile/jayrayner for all his reviews in one place