

Winner's dinners

Going in for the kill . . . coming out full of praise

Sometimes I think I'm being too kind. I must kill, kill, kill. Restaurant slaughter is always good for a laugh. So I worked myself up into a frenzy of bloodlust. A friend told me he hated Koffmann's at the Berkeley hotel in Belgravia. I thought: I'll get the knife out. Things started well. I phoned the Berkeley. "Is Pierre Koffmann's restaurant open for Saturday lunch?" I asked.

A lady replied, "I don't know."

"Perhaps you could find out," I said rather icily. It was.

The Koffmann receptionist was polite. "Do you have any special requirements, such as dietary requests?" she asked.

"Just a large table, please," I responded. Three cars were parked in front of the Berkeley. I placed my Bentley behind them.

A doorman said, "We'll move it round the side."

"Why can't it stay here?" I demanded.

"Those other cars are in the front."

"I'm going to move them," said the doorman. Bet he isn't, I thought.

Before major hostilities commenced, a senior doorman, Taffy, appeared wearing a bowler hat. "I'd like my car to stay here," I said.

"Don't worry, Mr Winner, I'll deal with it," said Taffy. After lunch two of the three cars that I was assured would be moved were still there. A £1m-plus Bugatti Veyron and a £535,000 chromed-up Mercedes SLR McLaren. My 1975 Bentley added gravitas.

In the hotel I asked, "Where's Pierre Koffmann's?"

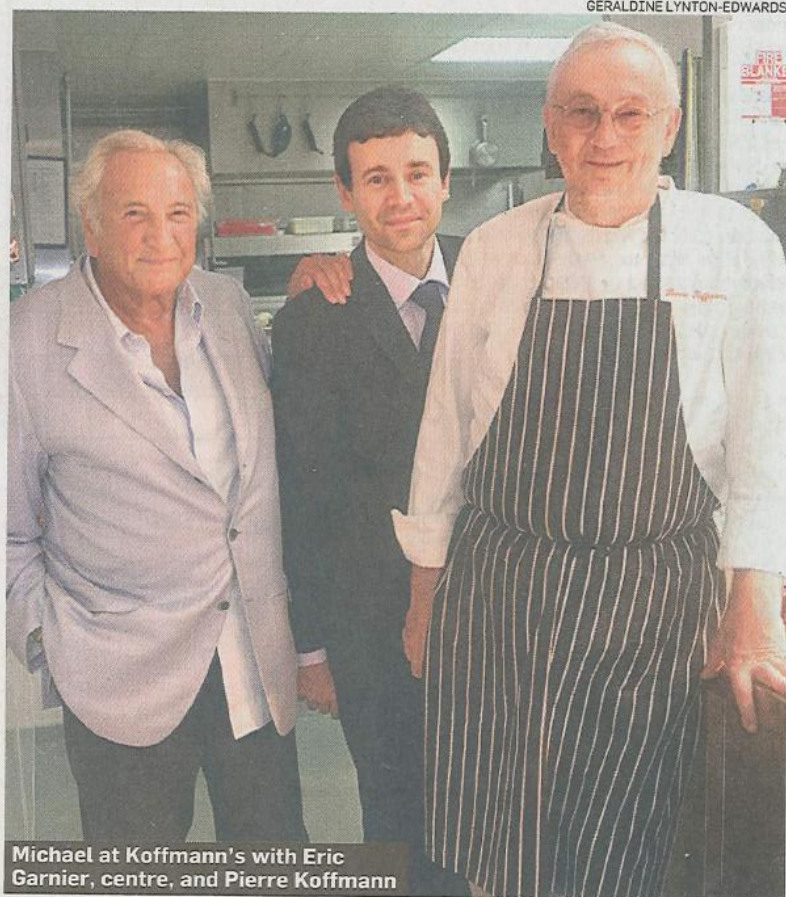
"You have to go outside and walk to the street entrance," said a concierge.

"Nonsense, you can go through the hotel," I responded. So I was shown through the bar to Pierre's pad. Why tell me I had to go outside?

The restaurant is drab. Corridor-like. Lacking in atmosphere. I was led to a comfy table by the restaurant manager, Eric Garnier. I liked him when he was at Racine.

The starter canapés of stuffed cheese were ghastly. Heavy, no taste. Water was the awful Tufa. Now removed from the Wolsley and Richard Caring's Ivy, Caprice and Scott's. The bread was only adequate. Great for the scalpel, I thought. Things are going well.

Then Pierre ruined it. My first course — fresh crab with celeriac and apple — was superb. Geraldine's foie gras with french bean salad lacked much foie gras. I asked if she wanted extra; she said no. Then I saw Eric going to get her some more. She



Michael at Koffmann's with Eric Garnier, centre, and Pierre Koffmann

said no to me and yes to him. That's beautiful women for you. She loved it.

Pierre could be seen through the glass wall, working away in the kitchen. Rare for the chef to be in for lunch on a Saturday.

My main course — cod with chorizo, white beans, tomatoes and a bowl of peas and carrots — was marvellous. Perfect chips, made on the premises, came in a cup of Le Monde newsprint.

I asked Eric how long it would take if I ordered pistachio soufflé. He said 12 minutes. Normally they ask you to order soufflé at 6am if you're coming for dinner. It was the best soufflé — texture right, taste fantastic, ice cream to go in it, incredible. A splendid meal. Simple, to the point, no plate decoration, masterful blend of tastes, not overpowering, not overworked. Service very on the ball.

Pierre Koffmann had three Michelin stars, took six years off, then returned. Next star time Michelin should give him eight.

Later, I took Michael and Shakira Caine.

They loved it. I had the best sweetbreads I've ever eaten. The horrid cheese puffs were off; my freebie starter was a delicious savoury pastry tart.

"The room needs mirrors," observed Michael. Just what I'd said on my first visit. Mirror the end and one side wall. Liven the place up. Take away the boring photos of food and have a mural of something jolly. It's a basement. Make it cheerful.

So this hasn't been a murder. I must leave on a low note. Let me think. Bill took too long to come. Eric, nice chap, gave me a number he said was direct to the restaurant but was to some woman in Bethnal Green. He took for ever to return calls to his mobile, so what was the point of giving me the number?

Summation: food, 99.9%. Atmosphere, -68. Room, -1,006. Pierre Koffmann, the greatest cook. A cook is better than a chef.

□ My local Blockbuster staff used to close the shop when it should be open,

GERALDINE LYNTON-EDWARDS