



Koffmann's Kitchen

Marking 50 years in the industry, we speak to celebrated chef Pierre Koffmann about hotel restaurants, pig's trotters and why retirement didn't suit him.

Words: Harry McKinley

Our first introduction to Pierre Koffmann isn't at a carefully arranged dinner table or coffee-ready bar. He's chopping vegetables in preparation for lunch service at his eponymously titled restaurant at The Berkeley Hotel, London.

This year the 68-year-old chef marks 50 years in the business, but unlike many of his peers he hasn't migrated to a comfortable job as the 'face' of a restaurant, enjoying long lunches from the guest side of the pass. No, the kitchen is still firmly his home.

Despite moving to London in 1970, Koffmann still has the easy, self-possessed demeanour of a Frenchman, not to mention the accent. Decades across the Channel and international reputation haven't pulled him too far from his upbringing in France's sun-kissed southwest.

When we do sit, there's little formality. He reclines into a chair with a comfortable nonchalance. He embodies the spirit of someone relaxing on a beachside lounge in Saint-Tropez, not a busy chef less than an hour from a fully booked lunch sitting. It's the kind of energy that puts others at ease. Whether those who work in his kitchen feel the same is another thing, but certainly on first impressions there's a warmth amongst the staff at Koffmann's, both front of house and back.

Food has always been a part of Koffmann's life from an early age and he's quick to recall how his mother would overfeed him and also time spent with his grandparents: farmers who had little interest in newfangled concepts. His grandmother would often cook over an open fire.

"At the time, in the 50s, food was very important," he says. "It was after the war and so there were few of the luxuries of today: cinema, or TV. Everything was about time spent around the table and food. As soon as my grandparents had finished lunch they would say, 'What do you want to have for dinner?'"

This relationship with food was merely a part of family life at the time, of course. It was only when Koffmann was in his teens that the prospect of a career in the industry presented itself. Even then it couldn't be said it was a path he chased. He was 'hopeless' at school, he says, except for sport. The headmaster would push and encourage him, assuming potential, but in the end – whether beaten down or recognizing that that potential lay outside of academia – he gave up. "The headmaster used to say I could do better. Always, that I could do better. But then eventually he simply said, 'perhaps Pierre would do better somewhere else'. And that was that," Koffmann says, with a shrug.

Although problematic at the time, it pushed him onto a



Soufflé aux Pistaches

journey with food. From a small town of 2,000 people where opportunities were scant, and not quite knowing what to do next, he applied for cookery school. Although he'd retained his love of food he made the decision because, ultimately, it was still a school. He didn't feel ready to tackle the world head-on as a teenager. He wasn't 'a man yet'.

After three years at the school Koffmann embarked on his regional studies, moving around France to learn the various cuisines and techniques. It was a different time, when regional food was truly regional and knowledge of different food cultures could only be gleaned by heading to their source, absorbing the spirit of the place and learning from those around.

It was not a love of food that took him to London, however, but a love of rugby. "I wanted to see the French

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against the English at Twickenham," he says. "That was the most interesting game, the only one to win - to beat England. I'm sure it was the same for the Irish, the Scottish and the Welsh."

That was 1970 and the plan, albeit a loose one, was to move to London for six months. Plenty of time to take in a game, continue working as a chef and then process paperwork to move on to Australia, or perhaps the USA. What he didn't bank on was falling for the country he so desperately wanted to trounce on the field. "I came and I enjoyed it," he says. "46 years and I'm still here."

Those 46 years have proved fruitful for Koffmann. First head chef of the Roux brothers' Waterside Inn in 1976, he would meet his late first wife who was the restaurant's manager. He subsequently opened his own restaurant, La Tante Claire, which would go on to earn three Michelin stars. During this period he also worked with the likes of Marco Pierre White, Marcus Wareing and Gordon Ramsay, all of whom went on to stellar careers in the kitchen.

Yet he speaks of the time in an offhand manner. His accomplishments were not, as he says, 'life changing'. As with most things work, Koffmann is unperturbed. When we bring up Michel Roux Jnr's comment that Koffmann is a 'chef's chef' he bats it away. It's a nice thing to say, but invariably meaningless. "It's lovely, but there is no exam to be a chef," he says. "People like titles and statuettes but

they don't really mean anything. Just as the best restaurant in the world can be the café next door if you enjoy the food, so a chef's chef can be anyone."

He may not enjoy titles or sycophantic praise, but it's hard to argue that 50 years in the business hasn't given Koffmann a distinct perspective on the evolution of the restaurant trade. He's seen London, in particular, develop from a city where the food was 'just terrible' in the 1970s - all 'smoked salmon and roast beef' - to a gastronomic capital. He's seen the world open up so that ingredients that would previously have been impossible or prohibitively expensive to obtain, are now available year round. And he's seen his own profession transformed from an unfashionable trade to a career that can turn chefs into celebrities. He's also seen the peaks and troughs of the hotel restaurant. "When I came to England the only restaurants that had good reputations were in hotels," he says, "The Connaught and The Savoy for example. But then hotel restaurants disappeared and the best chefs opened their own places. It was a big change. Now the hotels are hiring the top chefs to attract people. In some ways it's a full circle."

Just like hotel restaurants, Koffmann has had his own blip, albeit a voluntary one. In 2003 he decided to bid *au revoir* to the kitchen. Fed up, tired and with an insurance policy that would provide him a comfortable retirement, he packed up his knives and unpacked his fishing rod. "I went all over the world for a year," he says. "Then I came back to London and I was still in bed at 9 o'clock and waking at 9 o'clock. I would go for a cappuccino somewhere, think about where I could have lunch with some wine, go home to have a little siesta and in the evening see my girlfriend at the time. But I knew if I kept living that way in two years time I'd be dead. The problem with me is I know nothing and I don't enjoy anything except cooking."

Struggling with retirement and in an effort to fill his time with more than cappuccino and siestas, he took a consultancy job. The money was excellent but he found the role dull. Along the way he met Claire, now his wife. "You know women, they want to organise your life, so Claire found a job for me. It was a popup restaurant on top of Selfridges. It was supposed to be for a week."

The restaurant went on to stay open for eight weeks during which Koffmann worked seven days a week from morning until midnight. He lost 12 kilos and shifted 3,200 of his signature pig's trotters. "It was a bit like Frank Sinatra coming back from the dead," he jokes.

When they finally announced that the popup was to close he was inundated with offers. Almost two-dozen people offered to finance the opening of his own restaurant. In



Koffmann's at The Berkeley, London

the end, he would head to The Berkeley. “That was in 2010 and was supposed to be for three years. It’s 2016 and I’m still there, so you can see I haven’t learnt anything.”

Koffmann’s restaurant, the aptly titled Koffmann’s, is really a labour of love. Not interested in paperwork, recruiting or bottom lines, his one condition for taking on the project was that he ‘just gets to cook’. This caveat not only means that he gets to spend time in the kitchen but that he has the freedom and time to coach and nurture new talent. He believes that his prominence comes with an obligation to pass on his knowledge to a younger generation and he’s particularly proud of those he has mentored. “I had a beautiful young man, Ben Murphy, who opened a restaurant a few months ago in Woodford and he’s very successful. That’s lovely for me.”

Behind that joy, there is something else lurking, however. Over the years the industry has evolved and one gets the impression that Koffmann doesn’t rate some of the changes. “Now the food is not the most important thing. You’ve got to have food, service and ambience in equal measure. That’s the recipe for success but it does mean the food can be a little lost,” he says. There’s also the issue of having a public profile, something Koffmann, ‘couldn’t care less about’. When pressed on what has been his greatest lesson he turns despondent.

“You think we learn something? I don’t think we learn anything.

People are very stupid. We always make the same mistakes. I think if I had to start again tomorrow I would make the same mistakes,” he says, but then with a flicker of good humour, “I’m getting grumpy aren’t I? Let me put it this way, even getting three Michelin stars wasn’t the highlight of my life. It was nice, but not a highlight. When the restaurant is full and I see the same people coming back, that’s what I enjoy. So I don’t like to go too deep. It’s the simple things.”

Koffmann may love the kitchen, but at 68 even he is weighing up what the next step in his life and career will be. Firstly, before retirement he has to stop telling journalists he finds life at home boring. It annoys his wife. That being said he stands by his earlier thought that it’s important to keep busy and find a purpose.

“In March my wife and I spent a month in Australia for the Melbourne Food Festival. I had ten days of cooking and it was wonderful. So I’m wondering if we should retire there. Perhaps have a large garden and sell what we grow at the Saturday market. Or maybe a food truck: something original, not a burger. But who knows when this be, eh?”

And so, with dreams of Down Under lingering in the air and talk of retirement quickly fading back into oblivion, Koffmann departs for the start of lunch service. Donning his apron again and rallying his team, something tells us it may take more than the promise of regular sun and a large garden to take Koffmann out of his kitchen. ●