

## Koffman and Pulze disappoint in St James

1 Jun 2008 by Nick Lander

Ever since Pierre Koffman closed La Tante Claire in The Berkeley Hotel in 2002, the talk has been that this highly respected chef has been looking for a site where he would cook not the two star Michelin food he had become known for, but the less expensive, bistro-fare that is so much a part of his native Gascony. Sites across London were mentioned but while others opened, Koffman remained resolutely under the radar.

That is why when I heard at the beginning of last year that Koffmann had started cooking for Robyn and Robert Wilson at their two sites in the City, **The Bleeding Heart** and **The Don**, I pursued them to let me know when I could report on Koffman's return. I did so [here](#) last October after two good meals there but it seems I was too hasty. The working arrangement did not last long and, annoyingly, anyone who went along to either restaurant expecting Koffman's cooking and influence would have been disappointed – although the wine lists at both restaurants are still worth travelling for.

I kept on hearing snippets – for example, only about a month ago that Koffman was the guest chef at **Mark's Club** in Mayfair for a week and when his partner Claire phoned to tell me this she did add that if anything more permanent came along that I would be the first to know.

I was therefore somewhat surprised to read an email on my way home last Friday night, on the top of the 24 bus, from Monica Brown, the ebullient PR at Lotus PR who has the enviable task of handling Heston Blumenthal and restaurateur Claudio Pulze, that **Brasserie St Jacques** had just opened at the top of St James's Street. This brasserie was not only to be Pulze's 51<sup>st</sup> restaurant but was in collaboration with Koffmann.

Having opened on 27 May, Pulze wanted to wait a few days before letting the press know that this would now be the new home for anyone who enjoyed Koffmann's food. The accompanying menu revealed all the brasserie staples: oysters, oeufs en meurette, roast bone marrow, skate, veal kidneys, confit de canard, crème caramel as well as a list of daily specials. As the following night we were heading off to see the re-release of *Jules et Jim* at the Curzon Soho, we made a dinner reservation afterwards, hoping to prolong the pleasure of savouring what France does best.

Perhaps I should have realised as soon as we saw the crooked blue awning above the restaurant that all was not going to turn out as we had hoped. But what ensued was not only extremely disappointing in terms of food, wine and ambience but also expensive not just in comparison with bistros in Paris but also to any meal at **Arbutus**, **Galvin**, **Racine** or **Wild Honey**, which have collectively raised the bar for this style of cooking in London.

Brasserie St Jacques occupies the site that was originally Petrus (which ironically took over from La Tante Claire in The Berkeley) and was then taken over by Pulze for Fiore, an Italian restaurant which proved to be one of his few failures. It's a deep, narrow room which has never been easy to make comfortable but this latest design is most unsuccessful. There is no sense of warmth in the room; the lighting manages to be both harsh and un-brasserie-like, and although there are some old French posters on the walls they fail to add any charm. Nor is any supplied by the management although the waiting staff were more friendly.

The menu and wine list are simply depressing. Rather than starting humbly with Koffmann's selection of what would be the most suitable dishes for the end of May/ early June – a time beloved by many professional chefs as being the best for fresh seasonal produce – this vast menu is packed with every French bistro dish that has ever been served. It's the kind of menu that makes your eyes glaze over, a fact not helped by an indistinct typeface and layout. It certainly does not set the gastric juices flowing.

So untillated by the first courses were we in fact that we shared one, a roast bone marrow that the menu declared was served with a parsley salad but instead came with salad leaves and a poor dressing. The bones were fine but not hot enough. Then we had a skate wing with a (poor quality) chorizo potato cake and veal kidneys with three types of mustard, both of which came with spinach that was well-cooked even though the manager had encouraged us to order some side

dishes which would have been superfluous had we bothered. Neither was memorable and although the portion of skate was generous, the serving of both our sauces was mean which meant that the overall result was dry. Our starter was £6, the main courses £17 each in a restaurant that had not been open a week. Unlike any French bistro I have ever been in, there was no set menu.

Our bill, without dessert and coffee, but including service and a bottle of good but not inexpensive 2007 Fleurie from the Charmettes' excellent Domaine du Vissoux at £33 came to £84.94. We found one Merlot Vin de Pays but otherwise reds seemed to start at £24. Château Gruaud Larose 2002 is £102 although [www.winesearcher.com](http://www.winesearcher.com) lists it at around £25 a bottle from several merchants.

I walked out of Brasserie St Jacques unable to distinguish whether I felt more disappointed or cheated. Was Pulze, a restaurateur I have always admired, just doing this to see through the tail-end of his lease on this restaurant? Was Koffman adding his name (the press release states he has full responsibility for the kitchens but Ashley Hancill, formerly at the Inn on the Park and whom Koffmann has known for five years, will produce his menu) or his heart as well? How could two such experienced practitioners open with such high prices in such an unprepossessing atmosphere?

London has moved on and is now blessed with a great number of good-value places, whether the French-influenced restaurants I have mentioned or others like the Anchor & Hope or 32 Great Queen Street, which offer far better food, value and fun. It is a strange thing to have to say, but on the basis of what we ate and drank at Brasserie St Jacques, Koffman and Pulze, despite their vast, combined experience, have a lot of catching up to do.

**Brasserie St Jacques**, 33 St James's Street, London SW1, 020-7839 1007. Open 7 days from breakfast until late.