Gallic revenge hits Knightsbridge

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Revenge is often described as a dish best served cold. But in the case of two renowned French chefs, Daniel Boulud and Pierre Koffmann, who have recently opened restaurants very close to the location that marks the last military confrontation between Britain and France, revenge is now served hot, warm and cold.

Bar Boulud in the Mandarin Oriental and Koffmann's, almost directly opposite in The Berkeley hotel, are both less than a kilometre away from Hyde Park Corner. Here, on the northern face is the splendid Apsley House, once home to the Duke of Wellington, who defeated Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, and was subsequently given the unrivalled address of Number One London.

It is unlikely that any vengeful sentiment featured too prominently in the minds of these chefs, but their almost simultaneous openings reveal several distinct common characteristics as well as some very personal differences.

Firstly, both restaurants feel, despite their novelty, as though they have been in business for far longer than just four months, a tribute to the numerous individuals involved in their openings. And both, despite their location in prime Knightsbridge locations, offer extremely good value for money. This is because neither is the most expensive restaurant in their respective hotel. Koffmann is supposedly the less expensive alternative to the more pretentious Marcus Wareing restaurant in The Berkeley, while Bar Boulud is designed as the more casual alternative to 'Dinner by Heston Blumenthal', the formal restaurant that will open in the Mandarin Oriental at the end of the year. Bar, wine list and menu prices at both these restaurants reflect this. Bills of £50-£60 per head for three courses including wine are the norm on both sides of Knightsbridge, yet the experience of each chef is very different.

Daniel Boulud hails from Lyons in south-east France but has spent the last 26 years in New York, a city that worships his restaurant Daniel and has obviously imbued his style of cooking with an infectious sense of fun.

The first Bar Boulud opened at a great location opposite the Lincoln Centre, concentrating on charcuterie, plates of cheese, a good range of cooked dishes that combine freshness, piquancy and protein and a wine list, cleverly chosen by Daniel Johnnes, that concentrates on the food-friendly wines of Burgundy, the Rhône and the Loire.

It is an extraordinarily intelligent and sympathetic approach to how so many people want to eat today and the London outpost has managed to maintain the buzz of a central New York establishment despite the fact that it is considerably larger. One reason for this, I couldn't help but notice, is that it has already attracted quite a number of excellent waiting staff from other top London restaurants, including an eagle-eyed maitre d', who, having spotted that one of our party was pregnant, promptly found us a table even though we had arrived early.

Bar Boulud has the capability to traverse the world, following the example set by Joel Robuchon with the equally informal and swift service offered by L'Atelier du Robuchon. This management style is recognised by the menu that carries the names of Nicolas Maragout, Dean Yasharian and Rudolphe Tron, respectively charcutier, executive and pastry chefs. Nothing swells a chef's chest with pride or binds them so closely to the restaurant for the future as effectively as this under-utilised practice.

A second meal, six weeks after the first, showed a distinct improvement on an already promising beginning, in particular three first courses: octopus with aubergines and chickpeas; a Dorset crab salad with avocado; and the market salad of fresh vegetables. The lightness of touch in these dishes revealed the experience of New York, where demand for such dishes is so high. The Lyonnaise sausage in brioche; the Isle of Skye mussels and the shellfish in general; and the coq au vin are of the same high standard.

I left with only two minor quibbles. No pastry chef should be allowed to adulterate the classic French dessert of iles flottantes with lemon curd. And David Vareille, the head sommelier, should be given a name check on the wine list as I have rarely seen anyone recommend wine with such experience combined with boyish enthusiasm. He seemed almost beside himself with delight at our enjoyment of a Canadian 'ice wine', made by Leduc-Piedimonte in Quebec but from apples rather than grapes.

While Bar Boulud can be seen as a staging post in Boulud's peripatetic career, Koffmann's is definitely, and quite justifiably, a resting place for this 62-year-old chef who has been cooking in England for the past 38 years.

What distinguishes this restaurant is that Koffmann's partner, Claire Harrison (an expert on potatoes), patrols the floor, although it is firmly under the direction of Eric Garnier, who has worked in many of London's top restaurants since starting as a barman at The Connaught Hotel in 1979.

Garnier is thin, invariably dressed in a grey suit and continually pulling at the back flaps of his jacket as he supervises his staff. What he does, he does with alacrity, such as noticing customers' approaching the top of the stairs down to the main dining area. When he chooses not to interfere he will subsequently have a quiet word with the waiting staff after they have served their customers and he has spotted something not quite right.

Through a large window into the kitchen I was able to watch the more rotund Koffmann evidently enjoying himself. His repertoire one night ranged from calling the orders to strumming a carving fork on the main service table during a brief lull in the service. I then saw his normally genial countenance change colour as a whole roast chicken came out of the oven to be basted but was accidentally knocked to the floor by a passing chef. Both doors to the kitchen were fortuitously closed at the time.

The menu, a model of clarity, immediately conveys Koffmann's Gascon heritage as well as an innate sense of generosity. The leeks vinaigrette are a perfect foil for the much stronger smoked eel; the rendition of the scallops with beautifully seasoned squid ink is extremely well judged; as is the heirloom tomato salad with a goat's cheese and basil sorbet.

As autumn and winter approach, the main courses should seem less daunting, as they are constructed for very healthy appetites. But it is most unlikely that anyone will feel the slightest twinge of hunger after Koffmann and his team's rendition of wild salmon with piperade, calf's liver Lyonnaise, braised beef cheeks or the spiced duck breast. The frites wrapped in L'Équipe, the French sports newspaper, add an extra Gallic twist, but the precision of the pastry section is unquestionably traditional in the very best sense of the word.

As we left, our guest pronounced that this had been a terrific meal and claimed already to be looking forward to eating there again.

While I look forward to doing so at both these restaurants, I will be even more excited when two equally talented British chefs open so close to the Arc de Triomphe in Paris.