



Written by
Nick Lander
24 Mar 2018

Kettner's - a Soho townhouse revived



A version of this article is published by the Financial Times.

There were three separate occasions when as a restaurateur at L'Escargot in Greek Street in Soho during the 1980s I was concerned for my business.

The first was when Alastair Little, my initial chef, opened his own restaurant round the corner. The second was when several hitherto loyal customers combined to open the Groucho Club two streets away. The third and potentially the most dangerous was when Peter Boizot, the man who created the hugely successful Pizza Express chain, bought Kettner's a few doors down from L'Escargot on the corner of Greek Street and Romilly Street.

This was potentially a threat because Kettner's had everything: an impressive entrance; a glorious champagne bar; a piano bar; a restaurant that boasted a racy past; and a suite of

cabinets particuliers, small private dining rooms upstairs that have just been transformed into 33 bedrooms by the new owner, Soho House. This surely should have been a winning formula for the 1980s. Happily, for me at least, Boizot knew only about pizza and we continued to flourish.

By 2012 Kettner's had become an anomaly in the holdings of the Gondola Group, the owners of the Pizza Express brand, and they had entered into negotiations with a Chinese restaurant group when word that Kettner's was on the market reached Nick Jones, the CEO of the Soho House Group. Jones was in an ideal position – his original Soho House on Old Compton Street backed on to Kettner's, as did his French café, the now revamped Café Bohème. Jones also felt that he had a right to it. From the days when they were neighbours, Jones remembers with a laugh, 'If I were to put a bucket down that was slightly on Kettner's side, Peter would ask me to move it.'

Spurred on, Jones took over the lease and invested heavily. The corner site was covered in scaffolding for two years until December 2017 when it was removed to allow several private events. Jones, who was not pleased with the interiors, then made some radical changes before finally allowing Kettner's to reopen on 10 January 2018.

This personal touch, as well as the care and attention of the team that Jones has pulled together, was obvious from the moment I walked in. The champagne bar was to the left, where an imposing barman – bald head, white jacket and bow tie – was setting up the bar for a leaving party. On the right was the piano bar (below) with its comfortable low seating and the restaurant straight ahead. Everything appears to be as it ever was when Kettner's first opened its doors in 1867.



That is the impression that has so carefully been created. There may be a rabbit warren of small corridors, typical of the building's age and the locality, but that does not seem to bother any of the staff.

The seating is low in the restaurant too. The lighting, from one particularly impressive chandelier, is flattering. The flowers and plants that dot around the room give it a deliberately old-fashioned air, as do the uniforms of the waiting staff. The waitresses in particular, in their close-fitting black dresses complete with a rather sexy long black scarf, add to the slightly louche atmosphere that is, and I hope always will be, Soho.

That the restaurant, whose kitchen is now in the basement whereas Kettner's when it first opened boasted an open kitchen to which customers were given a guided tour (very twenty first century, in fact), has found its confidence so quickly must have quite a lot to do with the fact

that it is in the hands of general manager Conor Sheehan and chef Jackson Berg. Having grown up as friends in Liverpool, the pair turned their hands to restaurants, and pop-ups where the physical challenges were even greater. They moved their initial restaurant from Margate in Kent to Liverpool, and Berg obviously finds the prospect of cooking in a basement not too onerous.

His menu is ultra-modern in its layout, starting with bites such as gruyère gougères and smoked cod's roe served with a potato cake. Berg obviously anticipates his customers' search for a good time by offering 30 g of Exmoor caviar at £80 and Perigord truffle to be sprinkled on any main course at £50 for 10 g.

But we were here to test the cooking rather than the shaving and found ourselves impressed. Two fish first courses, cured sea bream with clementines and purple basil and my thin slices of raw Gigha halibut, farmed off the Kintyre peninsula in western Scotland, were the perfect foils for the warm Parker House rolls and good butter which the waiters offered with enthusiasm.

This was followed by Toulouse sausage served with well-prepared pomme aligot (£15) that satisfied Jancis's penchant for melted cheese, and roast Banham chicken with equally good pommes Anna (£24), a mousse au chocolat with pistachio ice cream and set buttermilk (panna cotta to you) with Yorkshire rhubarb (£8 each). Only the wine list presented a problem as in the restaurant's low lighting it is impossible to read the vintages of the wines, printed in such a tiny font.

But we enjoyed what we drank from the well-chosen selection offered by the glass as much as we enjoyed Berg's cooking, and wallowed in Soho nostalgia as we observed a room full of obviously happy, and loquacious, fellow diners.

Kettner's Townhouse 29 Romilly Street, Soho, London W1D 5HP; tel +44 (0)20 7734 5650