



Written by
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When a white rabbit met pasta



If there is one person who is extremely happy with FIFA's decision to stage the 2026 World Cup in the relatively uncomplicated countries of Canada, Mexico and the US it is K P Kofler.

This German-born caterer has had the concession – a somewhat mixed chalice – of catering for the World Cup during the previous three occasions it has been held.

There may have been plenty of sunshine in Brazil in 2014 but Kofler had problems with settlement of his final invoices. Russia is a country 'all on its own', in his words, where he will be catering for 70,000 customers over the coming month. Qatar in 2022 is terra incognita and nobody knows yet quite how the consumption of alcohol will be regulated. By contrast, the three North American countries chosen for 2026 appear relatively straightforward.

(All the hospitality at the UEFA matches that incorporate the European championships is hosted

by Austrian-born caterer Attila Dogudan and his company [Do & Co](#). And it was Dogudan who told me many years ago that the only way to execute a banquet for, say, 300 is to think of it as a dinner for 10 but one that has to be carried out to the same exacting standards 30 times!)

It was in his role as caterer that I first met Kofler, a gentleman more commonly known as KP to one and all [a bit like our Keller of the vine - JR]. I was working for the Serpentine Gallery in London's Hyde Park as it began its hunt for a company that could provide not only a café for its visitors but also the facilities to cater for many of its far more expensive private dinners. This combination was for many years the speciality of the companies based in Austria and Germany and I contacted both [Do & Co](#) and Kofler. Eventually, KP Kofler won the contract.

KP is no longer involved with the Serpentine, although he subsequently bought the long-established London-based catering company Mustard. And he has become even more involved with the emerging restaurants of London since a chance encounter with Chris Miller. Miller, who was commercial director for Nick Jones at the Soho House Group for over four years, has been an influential figure in expanding London's casual restaurants over the past decade with brands such as [Chicken Shop](#) and [Pizza East](#) and several Soho Houses, both nationally and internationally. KP recognised these strengths and made Miller an offer that, as the saying goes, he could not refuse. Thus was born their company [White Rabbit](#).

The duo's first venture was backing the Indian cooking of Will Bowlby and his partner Rik Campbell, who met while students at Newcastle University, in their first [Cricket](#), an Indian restaurant in Denman Street, Soho. They have gone on to open a second bricks and mortar restaurant in Brixton (where they began as a pop-up in a container) and write *Cricket the Cookbook*.

Then Kofler and Miller joined forces to back [Island Poké](#) and then to back the highly talented Chinese chef [Andrew Wong](#) in his second, more casual restaurant. It will probably be called 1908 (after the year the first Chinese restaurant opened in London) and is due to open in the Bloomberg Arcade in the City of London in late August.

But KP was not completely happy as in his opinion [White Rabbit](#) lacked an Italian, and specifically a pasta brand, a style of cooking that he knows to be universally popular. There ensued an introduction to Masha Renner, a strong Italian woman who had sold her restaurant in Italy and was moving into consultancy. Renner came to Berlin to cook for KP one Saturday and he was so impressed that he asked Miller to fly over on the Sunday. He did so and left equally impressed.

So far, [White Rabbit](#) had two of the four pre-requisites for a successful Italian brand: a style of cooking and a chef to front the brand. What they needed, however - a name and its crucial, first location - are equally important for any brand to launch. And in these two respects KP and Miller were to strike lucky.

Their first piece of luck came via an encounter with the two new owners of [Lina Stores](#), the Italian delicatessen that has been a permanent feature on the corner of Brewer Street in Soho for the past 75 years. They had just eaten at [Cricket](#) and were impressed. Keen to spread the word about their store, they quickly produced a licensing agreement whereby [White Rabbit's](#) new pasta restaurant adopted this long-standing name, and not just for the UK but also on a worldwide basis. This immediately gave what could have been yet another start-up restaurant the backing of a well-known, well-loved and long-established name.

Then came the location. Soho is top of every London restaurateur's wish list and Miller soon

found out two crucial facts about 51 Greek Street, a location that has for years, even during my era as a restaurateur at 48 Greek Street during the 1980s, been trading as Trattoria da Aldo. The first was that the then tenant had finally decided to cash in – and comments on the internet seem to reflect that this was long overdue, particularly those relating to the state of the lavatories – and just as importantly that the landlord lived in Berlin.

KP was alerted and immediately went into action. A deal was soon agreed and the builders moved in. What the builders soon discovered dismayed both Miller and KP, who have been through a lot of conversions. 'Everything that could go wrong in this 1,200 sq ft site, did so', were Miller's precise words but the builders finally moved out and Lina Stores, the restaurant, opened in possibly the most dispiriting month in which to open any London restaurant – May.

May starts with a bank holiday, ends with another and has the school half term attached to the latter one. All these contributed to modest numbers for the first four weeks, numbers that had KP and Miller slightly concerned, but since then these have improved significantly.

As they should, because this restaurant remains very clear in its aspirations: to feed and water its customers well, inexpensively and relatively swiftly.

The interior, the menu and the staff all sport the pale green that has long been the original Lina Stores' distinctive colour. Rener and her assistant stand behind the counter on the ground floor and, for each order, take the relevant pasta (made every morning at the original Line Stores in Brewer Street) out of the old-fashioned Precision fridge before cooking them on the stove. In portion size and cooking times, she remains unashamedly Italian. The pasta is served in one size only, not too much but definitely enough, and each type of pasta is cooked al dente.



We began with three antipasti, extra-sweet gorgonzola cheese with pears in mustard, aubergine polpetti and spicy 'nduja with ricotta, all of which packed a definite punch, before moving on to two impressive servings of pasta. First of all there was a great combination of gnocchi with new season's peas and ricotta, but better still was a dish of pici alla Norcina (named after the town of Norcia in south-eastern Umbria). This is my current favourite pasta, shorter than spaghetti so better able to absorb any sauce, served here with a creamy sauce of porcini and Umbrian sausage.

We finished our meal in true Italian style with a very good, very strong and very hot macchiato made in the basement that has been converted into a space that may not have the natural light of the ground floor but will definitely not disappoint.

Lina Stores 51 Greek Street, London W1D 4EH; tel +44 (0)203 929 0608

Closed Sunday