



Calling all food lovers – take a sojourn to Berlin to discover a new offering from the Walford Astoria, and learn from French culinary master Pierre Gagnaire

WORDS: CLARE VOOGHT

FROM PARIS TO BERLIN

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WALDORF ASTORIA

Asking a 13-Michelin star chef for an impromptu cookery lesson is not exactly the done thing, but it's clear Pierre Gagnaire doesn't like rules.

The French master gastronomer – known by most Mayfairians as the chef behind Sketch – arrives half an hour late for our interview at his Berlin restaurant Les Solistes in The Waldorf Astoria, and it has taken weeks to pin him down.

He also avoids questions such as 'what's the best way to cook mashed potatoes?' – dismissing the idea as 'funny' and 'very English', reasoning that 'the best doesn't exist, the emotion is the most important', and insisting it depends on the atmosphere, the weather and the company – which brings me to the conclusion that Gagnaire prefers spontaneity, and might respond well to being asked to give a few journalists an on-the-spot demo of a dish of his choice.

I'm right, and ten minutes later we're in the kitchen watching the Picasso of cuisine whip up a smoked John Dory – 'For me, Germany is smoked' – with mashed potato, saucisse de Morteau, pancetta, apple, generous lashings of sauce made with butter and cream, artfully topped with paper-thin slices of raw mushroom.

Gagnaire and his team are unflappable; I wouldn't often describe a kitchen as serene, but this one is almost as relaxed as the hotel's beautiful Guerlain spa (which was so tranquil I nearly drifted off during my Radiance facial).

With three chefs assisting, they are like actors in a well-rehearsed play; running through every move in near silence, communicating seemingly through intuition.

They do this for 20 minutes, unfazed by four dictaphone and iPad-wielding journalists recording their every move, before Gagnaire calmly hands us each a plate of beautifully cooked, delicate white fish that's given brawn by the red meats and brought back with the mushroom slices and creamy sauce. When our plates are clean I'm almost a little sad it's over – until I remember we're due back in the restaurant for the seven-course tasting menu in a couple of hours.

With a precious snippet of time to myself I head back to my 28th floor tower suite. The marble bathroom and flashes of gold-leaf decor drop hints of the roaring 1920s, while modern features such as the Bose sound system, Nespresso machine and TV set into the bathroom mirror ensure 21st-century creature comforts aren't lacking.

But the city view is the biggest USP. From my east-facing suite is the famous Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church below – left after the Second World War to serve a reminder of peace and reconciliation – the Reichstag and the TV tower, as well as the elephants, giraffes and flamingoes in Berlin's famous zoo.

If you feel the urge to venture outside, visit the obvious Reichstag, Brandenburg Gate and Tiergarten park, then take a trip to KaDeWe, Berlin's answer to Harrods, visit KPM (Königliche Porzellan-Manufaktur) for stunning handmade porcelain,

or see the permanent Helmut Newton collection at the Photography Museum.

Today, though, I'm not leaving the relaxed surroundings of the hotel. After a luxurious soak in my suite's huge bathtub, made all the more delightful by Salvatore Ferragamo products, it's time to head back to Les Solistes.

The Waldorf Astoria is a fitting place for a Pierre Gagnaire restaurant, with the hotel chain responsible for some world-famous recipes: the Waldorf Salad, of course, Thousand Island dressing and red velvet cake. The hotel is currently holding The Taste of Waldorf Astoria, in which Gagnaire and other chefs are competing to create the next iconic Waldorf Astoria dish, which will be judged this month.

Gagnaire says the menu at Les Solistes, which won its first Michelin star in October 2013, is still a work in progress. It's French first and foremost, but Gagnaire believes every restaurant has to fit the city it resides in.

'To understand the city we need time. We try to feel the market, with the price, the product, the fish from the lakes. You must meet the people, you must feel what they want. The market is not like in London. Berlin for me, you feel the past, and also the future.'

The tasting menu at Les Solistes certainly showcases the finest of French cuisine, with Gagnaire's signature whimsical touch. Creamy foie gras with red tuna, hazelnut and kombu jelly, playfully mixes textures; roasted porcini is tempered with a cold coffee infusion and iced cream flavoured with thyme; and perfectly

pan-fried grouse with juniper nods to the restaurant's location with a little sauerkraut.

The sommelier expertly matches the wine to every course and the drawn-out dining experience concludes five hours later with French cheeses and several desserts: herby pastry canapés with desiccated coconut, sorbets, poached fruit, chocolate cake – each bringing a twist with an unusual flavour.

Pierre comes out to chat to us after dinner and the subject turns to what sets the Berlin restaurant apart from the rest of his ventures. 'It's not a dish, it's a spirit. A restaurant isn't only the food, it's a story,' he says.

'We're in the west. After 1989, all the new construction and energy was in the east, and now people are returning to the west. Each time I come here it's changing, and we're part of it.' waldorfastoriaberlin.com

