



RETURN OF LA TANTE?



Well, no, but [Pierre Koffmann is returning to the Berkeley](#), where La Tante Claire held sway from 1998-2002, and where, until recently, Gordon Ramsay's Boxwood Café was located. *As to staffing, he more or less had to start from scratch.*

By the time you read this, Koffmann's should be up and running but in early June it was "a building site" according to Eric Garnier, who will be looking after front-of-house. Meanwhile Pierre has chosen his former associate Tim Payne, who was with him at La Tante and who returns from Wallace & Co. in Putney, and Koffmann will oversee a brigade of 24 in the kitchen, and Garnier a staff of 45 out front, most of whom have had to be recruited from scratch. How do you do that in such a short time?

"It's a question of knowing your agencies," says Garnier. "We've worked with all of them over the years and they've got a pretty good idea of what we're looking for. At the other end of the scale, we have to provide incentives to get the right calibre of people." So are we looking at people who have worked at Michelin-star level? "Not necessarily. It's not going to be La Tante II, but just a really good French restaurant, not a brasserie either, but somewhere in the middle. Of course, if the guides come they'll be very welcome, but that's not the first objective."

How does he select his staff? "We give the agencies a very precise brief: those who know us know that there's no use sending us people who aren't cut out for the job. Frankly we've found newspaper advertising to be pretty useless and the trade magazines not much better. Over the years we've built up good contacts and we're looking for people with a good track-record, the right attitude and personality and, of course, the right level of service skills. If we don't then we're wasting people's time and our own. I don't want people who won't work with me, who won't be managed. I manage people first, and that's the way we do it. We've been offering good levels of pay and perks, food of course, smart uniforms and a proper changing area – and the right people can go a long way in the industry. They know Pierre's food, that he's going to be full-time in the kitchen, and that success will reflect on every member of the team. That's what we wanted, and I'm confident that that's what we've got: a really good bunch of people. Pierre interviewed all the chefs except those who are staying on from the Boxwood, and I interviewed all the rest. We have the makings of a great restaurant – happy, confident, stylish, quick and able to make the magic flow."

One of the agencies which is used by Garnier regularly is Part & Company, which is run by Simon Part: "we've worked with Eric for many years and, indeed, almost every level of restaurant from two-rosettes to three-stars, and we've seen how the industry's changed. The old guru chefs have handed on to a new generation, and there's a fair amount of flitting around. People don't

stay for two or three years working under the same head chef and we have quite a lot of people on our books at any one time, some of whom don't have the skillsets that an operation like Koffmann's requires. That's why we have to be doubly careful about selecting the right candidates for the job."

"We absolutely don't poach staff," he replies emphatically, "that's an awful way to do business. We work with the industry, get to know each individual establishment, work out exactly what they want and then select suitable candidates."

Where do the candidates come from? Do they just turn up or does he put out feelers if he thinks there's someone suitable? "We absolutely don't poach staff," he replies emphatically, "that's an awful way to do business. We work with the industry, get to know each individual establishment, work out exactly what they want and then select suitable candidates. Sometimes people approach us, occasionally somebody might suggest someone they think is ready for promotion or a new challenge, but we're very lucky to have been in the business long enough to have an excellent rapport with our customers and our candidates."

How did he get into the agency business? "I was a chef – I cooked with chefs such as Roux, Marco, Rhodes and after nine years of 17-hour days, six days a week, I switched to FOH. I never wanted to be a head chef, I just wanted to learn how to cook. Once out front I started to use agencies and I was generally disappointed with the candidates they sent me, which is why I eventually started my own."

Was the job completed on time? "Yes, most of the new staff had started by the 14th June with a projected opening on the 18th. The whole operation between us – Pierre, Eric and us, took three weeks from start to finish. Like so many things in business life, it's often a question of 'who you know'."