

# RENÉ FRANK

# THE PIONEER



A sweet-savoury dessert at CODA, created from parsley root, black garlic and pistachio

Right: René Frank

IMAGES: JUNI, JAKOB NAWKA



WELCOME TO BERLIN'S CODA, THE WORLD'S FIRST MICHELIN-STARRED DESSERT RESTAURANT, WHERE CHEF RENÉ FRANK CHALLENGES DINERS' PRECONCEPTIONS WITH HIS EXPERIMENTAL CREATIONS. WORDS: BARBARA WOOLSEY

Would you like to see the dessert menu? The answer to the age-old question is so often, "No, thank you, we're far too full." But what if there was no dinner to fill you up beforehand? What if dessert *was* dinner? That's the concept behind CODA, a puddings-only restaurant in Berlin, where the whimsy of the Wonka factory meets earnest, fine-dining finesse.

At the sophisticated 28-seater spot, hidden down a street of graffitied apartment buildings in the district of Neukölln, it's best to leave any expectations of sticky toffee pudding or tiramisu at the unmarked door.

Instead, diners are served a four- or seven-course set menu of puddings that might include charcoal-grilled peaches (which slice like a juicy steak) in sweet pepper sauce. Or waffles stuffed with raclette cheese, dunked in tangy yoghurt and dehydrated gherkin powder, served with a pear cocktail. Or sour cream ice cream and five spice-braised mango, followed by cironé cheese with celery, doused in a coffee-almond emulsion.

The man behind the wood smoke and the smashable chocolate domes is René Frank. CODA's head chef and co-owner is credited with leading a revolution in the world of pastry and desserts by combining contemporary presentation and techniques with an experimental approach to ingredients. The restaurant's philosophy is never to use white

sugar, chemicals or additives — all of which are typically found in puddings. "Industrial sugar has a history of being used in desserts, but it doesn't have to define the craft," says Frank. "If anything, it limits artisanship and the ability to work with ingredients."

Instead, he creates natural sweetness by using techniques such as the reduction and fermentation of fruit and vegetables. His desserts are therefore never intense sugar hits; rather, they walk the line between sweet and savoury, and sometimes even feature ingredients as unusual as bone marrow and fermented fish.

CODA is a departure from traditional fine-dining menus, where desserts are always a final course. This approach is problematic, says Frank, as puddings are often left uneaten because they're too rich (leading to food waste), or if they are finished, the diner is left feeling uncomfortably full. "You shouldn't feel like you're ready to take a nap after eating at CODA," says Frank. "You should feel ready to go out dancing in Berlin."

For all he enjoys having fun with his creations, Frank is a product of a disciplined classical training and eye-opening stints at fine-dining establishments. Growing up close to Lake Constance in southern Germany, near the Swiss border, he always wanted to be a chef, and his first job as a teenager was





A dish made with yellow tomatoes, chickpeas and five spice

peeling potatoes in a restaurant kitchen. He completed his training at a vocational school before winning awards and scholarships that would allow him to train further in Japan, Paris and the US, and eventually work at Michelin-starred restaurants across Europe.

It was while interning at a confectionery in Spain that Frank began to question the use of sugar and fat, which had traditionally been added to prolong desserts' shelf life, but which he considered unnecessary in a fine-dining establishment. Meanwhile, in Japan he was struck how amazake — a sweet rice drink used to ferment miso, soy sauce and sake — could be used as an alternative to white sugar. It's since become a key component of several CODA dishes. "Amazake is being used more in savoury gastronomy these days, but it's still uncommon in desserts," says Frank. "The strong flavour of the fermentation needs to be balanced against other flavours."

The philosophy of only working with natural sugar means all of CODA's chocolate is made from scratch, as the types commonly used to create desserts and confections contain high amounts of refined sugar and fat. Chocolatiers who work 'bean to bar' prefer to use raw cacao beans for increased control over quality and flavour, and Frank's own 'bean to plate' concept reflects this.

Another of Frank's key experiences was the several years he spent working at La Vie, a now-closed three-Michelin-star restaurant in northwest Germany. Here, he experimented with creating lighter desserts and developing his contemporary take on pastry.

"As a chef, I felt there was a responsibility to make sure the guests at La Vie could finish their 10-course menu and still be able to have a dessert and chocolates at the end," he says.

This is where his vision — to create a new variety of pudding that "people could actually enjoy" — began.

In 2016, he quit his position as La Vie's head pastry chef and moved to Berlin to realise his dream of opening a restaurant centred around desserts. A few years on, and CODA has two Michelin stars, while Frank can be found judging aspiring pastry chefs on the German TV programme *Master of Sweets* and sharing his culinary philosophy at conferences, in addition to working at CODA, where he oscillates between running the pass and welcoming tables of diners with the odd deadpan joke.

"We've stopped explaining the concept to everybody," he says, recalling some bewildered looks in the past. "At the beginning, one of the most difficult parts was explaining why people should eat seven desserts instead of one and why they couldn't come for just one dessert after dinner. Now there's an acceptance to try something different."

While Frank intends to continue breaking boundaries in the world of desserts, his plan for the future also involves creating a new establishment. It will feature a more casual, pared-down version of the CODA concept, focused on products such as chocolate and ice cream made with all-natural ingredients.

Most importantly, though, he wants to be a better kind of restaurant owner. Frank has experienced harsh back-of-house atmospheres in the past, and staffing shortages caused by the pandemic have demonstrated a need for restaurants to become more attractive workplaces. Frank aims to be part of the solution. "[More than] I want to get a third Michelin star, I want to make sure my staff are happy," he says. ☐



## Signature dishes

### CAVIAR POPSICLE

Frank is often inspired by reimagining traditional convenience products from scratch, and the caviar popsicle (above) is one of his most talked-about creations. Vanilla and Jerusalem artichoke ice cream is layered onto a wooden stick with pecan ganache to create a lolly, which is then rolled in caviar sourced from a sustainable producer in Aquitaine, France.

### FROZEN BEETROOT WITH CRANBERRY AND TOFU

This creation focuses on beetroot's natural sweetness, almost treating the root vegetable as a fruit. Beetroot juice is reduced down to a smooth sorbet, which removes its usual earthiness. Ingredients with contrasting textures then bring balance to the dish: pieces of dehydrated beetroot, cranberries, a sour verjuice jelly and tofu mousse made using biodynamic soya milk from a German-Japanese producer based nearby.

### GRILLED APPLE WITH OAT SHALLOT AND SULTANAS

This dessert was the result of experimenting with the natural sugar in oats. To create the dish, Frank ferments the oats using a traditional Japanese amazake-making technique, which transforms natural starch into sweetness, and the mixture is then turned into ice cream. It's rounded off with apples cooked at a low temperature on a charcoal grill, plus a hazelnut cookie crumble, semi-dried sultanas and a shallot jam made with amazake caramel.