

The French CONNECTION

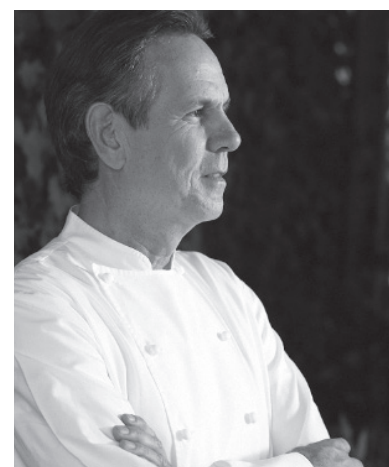
Famed for his innovative blend of fine French cuisine and American ingredients, Michelin-starred chef Thomas Keller is set to open an in-store pop-up of his restaurant The French Laundry

BY AMY BROOMFIELD

Despite the fact that he is considered one of the world's best chefs, Thomas Keller is a remarkably cool guy. He speaks softly and thoughtfully, with an unexpected modesty – there are no scripted answers, nor does he show even the slightest hint of celebrity-chef ego. Though he'd be forgiven if he did. Keller is the man behind the triple-Michelin-starred restaurant The French Laundry, which *Restaurant* magazine has named as Best Restaurant in the Americas every year since 2003, and Best Restaurant in the World in both 2003 and 2004. His culinary achievements in the small town of Yountville, California and beyond have been no mean feat.

Keller first laid eyes on The French Laundry back in 1992, having left New York in search of a new venture. Once an old steam laundry, it was then operating as a restaurant run by the local mayor and his wife. Keller had the idea to convert the rustic two-storey building into the kind of place he had always dreamed of, inspired by the many French country restaurants that he had worked at as a young apprentice. Now in its 17th year under Keller's leadership, The French Laundry continues to receive great critical acclaim, delighting diners with dishes that deliver a powerful explosion of flavours.

Before his apprenticeships, as a teenager Keller entertained ideas of being a major league baseball



FROM TOP The exterior of The French Laundry; Thomas Keller

player. It was only after spending a few summers working in the kitchen at the Palm Beach Yacht Club that he turned his attention to food. In 1997 he was in Rhode Island when he was spotted by the master chef Roland Henin, who taught him the art of classical French cooking and laid the foundations for Keller's passion for French cuisine.

Although clearly in possession of a natural talent, it's rare that Keller takes credit for his success. Instead, he emphasises the importance of his ingredients, explaining that the way they are produced and how they are affected seasonally often dictates the menu at The French Laundry. "The two major components of good food are the ingredients and the execution," he says. "While ingredients on their own are easily definable, what's important is their quality and where they come from." Keller champions the foragers, fishermen and farmers, calling them "the true celebrities" when it comes to food. Sourcing locally is important too, though for Keller the calibre of the ingredients is paramount. "I still support fishermen in Pennsylvania, even though that's miles away, but that's because it's about the quality, and not just about a trend," he explains.

Indeed, one of the things Keller is most passionate about is showcasing the quality of his ingredients to a UK audience. "I'm excited about sharing our dishes and our ingredients with our guests," he says. "Unless I can bring my own ingredients, you will only get my technical cooking skills, like you would

All photos Deborah Jones



from any other chef, but good food must be about the ingredients too." Signature specialities such as his "oysters and pearls" – an innovative dish of pearl tapioca with Island Creek oysters and white sturgeon caviar – will feature on the menu.

Many diners will also anticipate a taste of his famous savoury cornets, a treat that is a representative of Keller's gastronomic panache, which turns a simple idea like an ice-cream cone into a Michelin-starred delicacy. *The French Laundry Cookbook* details how to recreate one of the cornets; those who dare will almost always end up with singed fingertips, but it's worth it for a treat that evokes all the childhood joy of eating an ice-cream on a summer's day. According to Keller, making a signature dish such as this is as much about repetition as it is about skill. "Being excited about making the same dish over and over at a high level, together with commitment and dedication, are the benchmarks of being a great chef," he says.

It seems Keller has found the perfect recipe for success. Shortly after opening The French Laundry, he launched Bouchon, a more informal bistro serving French cuisine, just down the street – joking at the time that it was a place for him to go after a day's work. Bouchon Bakery opened next door a few years later, followed by Per Se in New York, which has also earned three Michelin stars – making Keller the only American-born chef to have been awarded simultaneous three-star ratings for two different restaurants. His more moderately priced restaurant



FOOD, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP "Gâteau" of toasted pine nuts with figs, mascarpone-pine-nut ice cream and 100-year-aged balsamic vinegar; sweet butter-poached Maine lobster "mitts" with bacon, red beets, pickled pearl onions, little gem lettuce and tarragon crème fraîche; opera cake with praline "namalaka", milk granité and coffee ice cream; ABOVE The interior of The French Laundry

Ad Hoc opened in September 2006 in Yountville, serving Keller's version of family-style comfort food. Originally intended to be a temporary project, the venture was such a success that Keller decided to make it a permanent fixture.

While he says that it's natural for him to enjoy his own restaurants, Keller is also a big fan of some of the UK's finest chefs. "You've got to go see Fergus Henderson – St John's is the one place I find myself going back to again and again," he says. "I also love what Jason Atherton's doing with the Pollen Street Social and what Heston's doing at Dinner."

In Keller's opinion, whereas dining out was once just a precursor to a play, concert or movie, eating in a restaurant is now considered an event in itself. Keller's focus on creating a good dining experience lies at the heart of his cooking philosophy. "Guests are going to taste our food and, hopefully, enjoy it. That's what we want," he explains. "We're not coming to the UK to try to blow people away with our techniques, we just want to produce and execute our dishes at a high level, so that people can take away a nice memory." ■

The French Laundry pop-up restaurant will be open in the Georgian Restaurant, Fourth Floor, from 1st to 10th October 2011. For more information, please visit <http://frenchlaundry.harrods.com>. *The French Laundry Cookbook*, £40, is available from Waterstone's, Third Floor