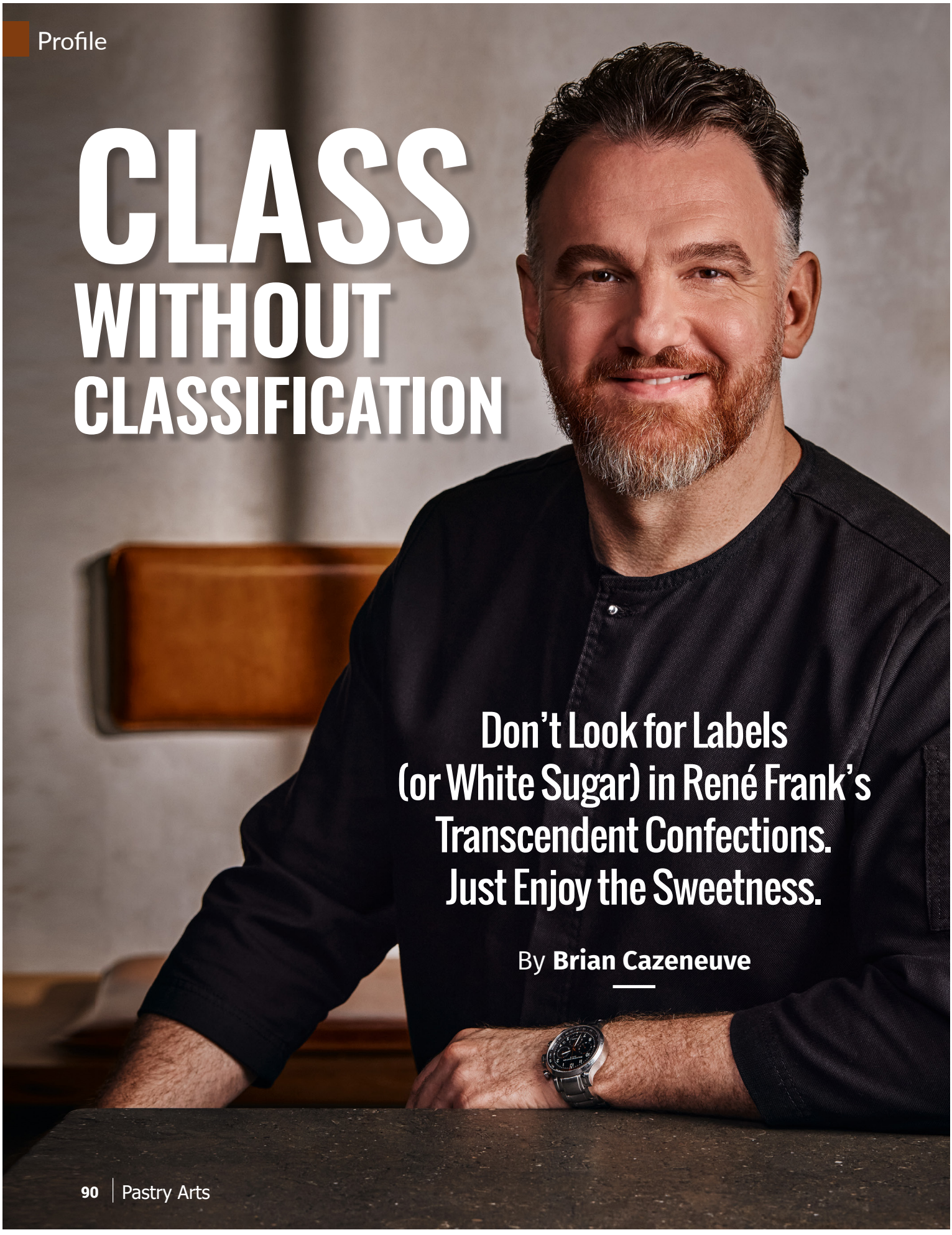
CLASS WITHOUT CLASSIFICATION



Don't Look for Labels (or White Sugar) in René Frank's Transcendent Confections. Just Enjoy the Sweetness.

By **Brian Cazeneuve**

On the walk from the unkempt metro stop of Hermannplatz in the Berlin neighborhood of Neukolln to the barely visible storefront sign of Coda restaurant on Friedelstraße, one passes two musings spray-painted in English. Both are telling. "*No War, Only Garlic*," one implores. Another that abuts an abandoned storefront and a kebab shop proclaims: "*No Unauthorized Readings Here*," as if Herman Hesse were holding a volume of Steppenwolf in one hand and a cooking apron in the other. The vibe of Neukolln is more Bohemia than Bavaria, a place where conformity was denied an entry visa and it is okay to look at life sideways. It may not seem like the right home for the world's best pastry chef, but when you meet René Frank, so honored by The World's 50 Best Restaurants as the planet's premier pastry practitioner in 2022, you see the fit between place and person.

Why do we need to have categories for everything?

Since 2016, Frank has been the mastermind behind Coda, the world's first restaurant classified as a dessert bar to earn one Michelin star and later a second. Yet to hear Frank describe his conception while overseeing a 15-course tasting menu, each plate more astonishing than the next, Coda isn't so much misclassified as it is lacking appropriate classification altogether. It is, after all, dessert for dinner or dinner for dessert, depending on your sightlines. "There is no category for Coda," Frank asserts. "Coda is a non-conforming restaurant and we do non-binary desserts. Berlin is a city about freedom, about equality, about diversity. Everybody can do what they want to do. Berlin is not a city about labels the way Munich is. So why do we need a label for Coda? Why do we need to have categories for everything? Do we need to sit at a table and say this is a soup, but that's a puree? No, just have fun."

Before Coda, no restaurant was so relentless at tearing the capes off the savory crusaders to reveal their sugary underbellies, all without actually using refined white sugar, additives or chemicals. Instead, Frank coaxes the natural sweetness that others often ignore in vegetables, grains and even some fruits, Extractions here, fermentations there, and suddenly courses with savory names and visages morph into confections as though the kitchen staff has bought Halloween outfits for the food.

Frank actually offers a strategy for eating his creations. "Some people are traumatized by what their parents force them to eat," he says, "so if you can be open and you don't have fear, you can come here and be super relaxed. Some people are very nervous if they cannot put into a category what it is. It is not a typical Michelin starred place with white tablecloth. It's not a place for a business dinner."

In a sense, Frank's very career started with his parents . . . and without them. "My parents divorced when I was eight," he says. "I was a bit of a trouble maker with some not good ideas. I struggled with a lot of things. My father said you need to learn the piano. When the teacher arrived, I hid behind the sofa because I didn't want to learn it. As a kid I was on my own. I played by myself, so I dreamed about having things the way I wanted them."

Frank's search took time to succeed. It was his grandmother who had given him ample attention, and she was a talented cook, inviting René into the kitchen. When it came time to pick an apprenticeship at 16 — two-thirds in the kitchen lab and one-third in the classroom — he chose the one that reminded him of her. He began winning competitions with broader reaches: local, national, regional and eventually international, including the world championship of vocational skills in Helsinki in 2005. Frank earned time in kitchens of Michelin starred restaurants in Spain, Switzerland and France.

He reveled in the concept of umami, the impossible-to-define assault on the 52 peptides and taste receptors that turn broths and sauces into ethereal elevations.

In 2008, he spent six months in Japan, working at a pair of restaurants with three Michelin stars: Nihonryari RyuGin in Tokyo and Kikunoi in Kyoto and the stints would shape his creative philosophy. "Here in Germany, they throw everything in a box and somebody makes a jam out of it," he says. "In Japan at a high-end restaurant you can get a simple slice of melon, but it can be a great slice of melon because of the care they show it, how they know how to bring the best flavor out of that melon. It takes an advanced knowledge about umami to know when and how to show each ingredient at its best. You don't need a hundred elements. They had sushi restaurants with two Michelin stars, even tempura restaurants. They put food in a fryer and have two Michelin stars. But the care, the feeling that you are eating the best tempura, it changed my understanding of umami. Coda could not exist without my six months in Japan."

Frank studied further at the Centre de Formation Alain Ducasse in Paris and the branches of the Culinary Institute of America in New York and Napa.

He spent six years as pastry chef at La Vie in Germany's Osnabruck, winning his first of four designations as Patissier of the year from Gault & Millau in 2013, but it was his respect for umami and disdain for conformity drove Frank to a perilous venture in 2016.

"I had a great job at La Vie, but I just had a feeling I wanted to change something," he says. "I had no plans to get a Michelin star or two. I was tired of these Michelin-starred restaurants. I wanted to make something casual, but special. In Germany, we say sometimes you have the pink glasses. You're in love. You don't think about anything else. People thought, oh, they will close in six months. But I was so passionate about it. My dream was always to open a restaurant and then to combine it with my passion for pastry. I had the glasses."

With his business partner Oliver Bischoff, Frank first needed to find a location. “I knew there was not one single person who wanted us to open a dessert bar,” he remembers. “If you Googled dessert bar, what came up? A chocolate bar. Nobody knew what a dessert bar was. We wanted to serve dessert, but we also wanted to serve drinks, so everything was open. We wanted to find a place that was developing. We could not be in the center of Berlin where if you don’t do well from the first day, you have to close after two months.”

Instead, they picked Neukolln, a nook that doesn’t wear makeup or comb its hair. It is unrefined and unbounded by expectation. Frank and Bischoff opened Coda in a converted bakery. They chose the name to acknowledge the end of a meal, as a coda ends a piece of music, though their offerings would ultimately comprise the whole meal. Most new restaurant owners took the keys to the new store; Frank wanted the keys to people’s thoughts.

Some said Coda didn’t look like much. Customers had to ring a doorbell and wait for a response behind the shaded door. The inside was dark with closed curtains, 24 seats divided among a bar and small tables, and lights focused only on the food. “Coda is nothing you’re used to,” says Frank. “You ring the bell and it makes you a little insecure. You don’t see us inside. I can see the guests outside. It’s uncomfortable. Then you come in and it’s a different world.”

Frank preferred to spend money on cooking equipment rather than design features. The pair opened without investors. Over the years, they changed formats several times, leaving guests to order individual courses, then five courses, then seven. Then came a tasting menu at 6 p.m. followed by a period with a la carte options.

Photo by Chris Abatzis

At first, Frank helped mix drinks, while Bischoff acted as server and dishwasher. To this day, Bischoff does carpentry while Frank handles plumbing, electrical work and alarm systems. “Yes, it was a risk,” Frank admits, “but there are many other ways you can lose your money that have no passion.”

The coda of Coda was edgy. Frank unshackled the natural sweetness that others ignored in fruits, grains and vegetables. “We wanted a place with a different approach, a unique thought infrastructure,” he says. In its early years, Coda featured tomato and chickpea; beetroot and tofu; and parsley root with pistachio and black garlic. Frank had also dabbled with red shiso and chocolate, and with banana and miso. To the closed-minded, the dishes sound destined to fail . . . until they succeeded.

There are many other ways you can lose your money that have no passion.

Coda became the first dessert restaurant to earn one Michelin star and later a second in February, 2020. Then Covid struck, shoving Coda and other restaurants into the deep freezer. When Frank's restaurant re-emerged, the dining and entertainment landscapes had changed. "The night scene was different," he says. "People didn't go out so much to clubs. They stopped staying out so late. We had been doing two seatings. I mean, in New York restaurants, you can have three seatings. But we settled on one with 15 servings. Coda is not a part of people's evenings; it is the full experience. But it has to live up to two Michelin stars."

Coda makes its own sauces and ferments both rice to make sake and oats to make congee. The amazake from Japan's traditional sweet rice drink has become a staple for Coda's sauces. Against the kitchen's back wall is a machine that makes chocolate from nibs and unrefined sugars, performing multiple functions over three-day intervals while industrial chocolate makers would employ machines to divide responsibilities and minimize time. Coda even made its own tofu before farming that process to a local artisan who specializes in it.

What Frank's fresh ingredients provide in taste, they lack in shelf life. "In a pastry shop, you see food with your eyes and maybe you eat it the next day, so it needs sugar and fat and stabilizers," he says. "We don't need sugar as a stabilizer. We need things that are sweet, a reduction of fruits and juices, for example. Beetroot and root vegetables have a lot of sweetness. Even parsley root has some starch inside, and you can ferment the starch, so you have more sweetness. Try parsley root ice cream. Sometimes we have a dessert made from just the sweetness of carrots. Also, sweet potato has a lot of sweetness. We use grape juice as a basic ingredient. We have a clear Chardonnay grape juice. For us it's like a basic chicken stock or a vegetable stock. We use honey, maple syrup."

Highlights of one particular meal began with a beetroot gummy bear and built from there: eggplant with pecan and maple balsamic finished with licorice salt; a gooey raclette-filled waffle served with dehydrated kimchi and yogurt; grilled apple with oat shallot, hazelnut cookie crumble and sultanas; and the signature dish, the caviar popsicle, a vanilla pop dipped in a smoky, freezing vat of nitrogen with frozen Jerusalem artichoke and pecan ganache, then rolled in D'Aquitaine Oscietra Caviar. It is a brain-blast just to look at it. Sips of alcohol or alcohol-free drink accompany most courses. Somehow, guests leave sated, but unstuffed, and clearheaded enough to reflect in awe. In lesser hands, the culinary theater would be experimental and even tiring; in Frank's, it is extraordinary.

"It's true, I get inspired by art," he says, "but more by people. I'm not an extroverted person. I don't express myself through my clothes, but when I see people who do, I'm inspired. Some make art on themselves, like with hair or tattoos. If I hear people who talk differently, this is also fascinating to me. I'm not blessed with so much talent that I can represent this in myself, just in my work."

René Frank's work is part aesthetics and part physics; part awe and part wonder; part memory and part fantasy; part savory and part dessert. All that's missing from the recipe is definition.

Photos by Claudia Goedke