



Photo by Claudia Goedke

RENÉ FRANK: “YOU NEED TO TAKE THAT RISK”

BY EMMA ROBERTSON



Mr. Frank, as a pastry chef and the owner of CODA, a desserts-only dining experience, you’ve often described dessert as the most emotional of all the courses. What kind of emotions are you feeling when you eat a good dessert?

Although I think dessert is something everybody has a different understanding of, across all cultures and countries, I think overall, it’s something which connects you with your childhood. It takes us all the way back to drinking our mother’s milk, which is a bit sweet. For me, it reminds me of the cakes and cookies my grandmother and my mother made for me — certain chocolates and sweets at Easter or Christmas, cake for birthdays, when I eat this, it conjures such a strong memory. I think it’s so emotional in that very nostalgic sense, but it’s also exciting because there’s always something new to discover.

For me, there’s also a bit of indulgence or even greed in eating a good dessert, no?

You’re right, for sure, but at CODA, although we use dessert and pastry techniques, it’s not like eating a brownie or ice cream where you have that indulgence that you mentioned. It’s about discovering what else dessert can be. It’s an experience that I think is very new, because although everything is inspired by dessert, we are serving something different. Most of our dishes are savory, in fact. We have a lot of dishes that play on the traditional dessert form, for example, our caviar popsicle, which is made to look like this classic kids’ treat here in Germany called Nogger, it’s vanilla ice cream covered in ganache and chocolate with crushed nuts. It’s pretty iconic, and that was my inspiration for our own popsicle, it really recalls the same look — and it’s also playing with the contrast of a cheap ice cream with expensive caviar.

“It’s not about going to a dessert restaurant, it’s about having an experience which is completely unique.”

It must be fun to really surprise your clientele in that way.

It’s fun! I like to test my guests! You do need to be quite open. If you come here, and you look at every dish wondering, “Oh, why is this called a dessert? Is this really dessert?” Then it doesn’t make sense because in the end, it’s not about going to a dessert restaurant, it’s about having an experience which is completely unique.

How can you balance that nostalgia you mentioned earlier with the new and unique experience you’re offering at CODA?

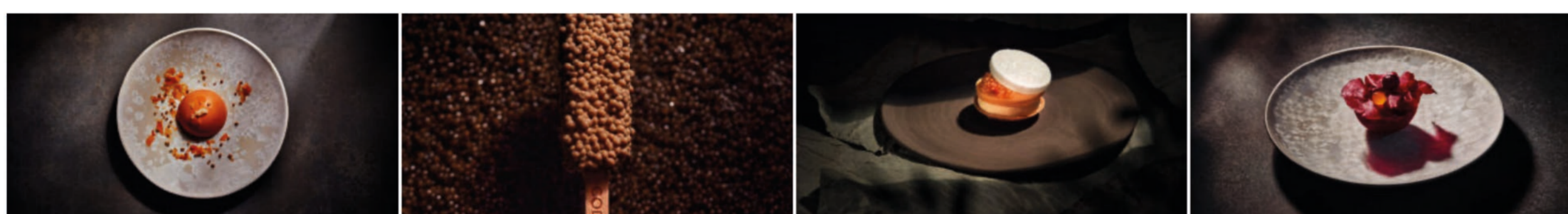
To make something new, you need to have a good foundation. If you want to make something totally crazy, you need to start by knowing how to make the basics. This is the same for us. When I create something new, I always try to stick to a base for me that I know works, whether that’s with the flavors or textures or techniques or even the service. We start with small snacks, drink pairings, then you have your courses, and at the end, a bit of chocolate. People are familiar with this from other restaurants, it’s just that the un-conservative part is the food.

Do you prefer when people have done some research and know what to expect from CODA, or is it also fun when somebody comes in and is expecting to eat a brownie?

Honestly, I don’t like it at all! Sometimes we have guests who say, “Oh, we don’t want to see the menu. We don’t want to hear anything, we just want to get surprised.” I mean, you’ll get your surprise anyway! It doesn’t make sense to come in and not listen to the introduction to the ingredients, the techniques, the process, and how to eat it, which we offer for each dish. If you walk through an art exhibition and you don’t get any explanation, you need to know a lot about art to understand it by yourself. It’s the same here. We make everything by scratch, including our chocolate, we don’t use industrial or processed ingredients. We don’t use white sugar. That information, it’s just important. Otherwise you’d be sitting there asking yourself, “Why does it look like this? Why is this or that missing? What is this supposed to be?”

I guess it’s also important for you to do things differently in terms of technique and creativity, because you wouldn’t have been awarded two Michelin stars for serving a simple slice of cake.

Well, I used to work in Japan, in a couple different Michelin restaurants. One of them served only tempura, and it had two Michelin stars! Tempura is just literally everything fried. Some of the best sushi restaurants also have two or three Michelin stars, and technically that’s just cold fish on some rice. I think the thing to think about is the technique and the ingredients. For example, how can you fry something so that it is not at all greasy? With sushi, when you only have rice and fish, it’s much more difficult to make this perfect than if you had a big plate with like 15 components on it. So it’s not just about what you serve, but how you treat it. It’s not just about innovating, it’s about: how can we make our waffle fluffier? How can we get a bit more cheese inside? How can we improve the flavor? How can we make it more consistent? Consistency is more important for our business than innovation, I think.



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But the reviews for your restaurant nevertheless use words like unusual or innovative or experimental. What do you think of that?

I mean, of course I want to entertain people, and I want to show that things can be different. At a typical Michelin restaurant, all their dishes are on Instagram and everyone ends up taking influence from everyone else. I didn’t want to follow trends, I just have a different opinion about how things should be.

Is it difficult for you to maintain your views or stay your course when everyone around you is doing something different?

It’s very difficult, especially with things like not using industrial products or stabilizers... Business wise, that’s difficult. But I don’t care!

Before CODA, you were a pastry chef at several other high-end restaurants. Do you think it would have been possible to make this concept while working under someone else?

I think it would have been possible, probably, but it’s very difficult because you need to change the whole way you work. Everything. You need to step out of your comfort zone, and not every chef or restaurant owner is willing to do that. It’s a risk. But at the same time, 10 years ago when I was working as a pastry chef elsewhere, that was a different time. Nowadays, it makes a bit more sense to do this style of pastry-inspired 16 course tasting menu, but maybe back then, it wouldn’t have worked.

It seems like as the owner of your restaurant, you get more control over the creative side, but you also shoulder all the responsibility and the risk.

Yes, exactly. But the thing is, I realized my dream when we opened CODA, and I didn’t care if it was a risk. I’m having the time of my life here, and especially in the last few years, the development has been amazing. So I wouldn’t care if it didn’t work out. It was never clear that this idea was going to be a success or recognized by Michelin, but you only live once. And if you don’t take the opportunity, then you’ll always think, “Okay, maybe I should have done this.” This is what I’ve wanted to do for a long time, so when I had a chance to do that, I took it. If you want to reach something, you need to take that risk.

SHORT PROFILE

Name: René Frank
DOB: 1984
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Occupation: Pastry chef, restaurateur

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LIFE

“The journey of an artist is a journey of discovery and some engagement with the nature of material, with bodily things and all that has led me to this place. I’m really interested in that as a process because the process moves you in directions that you couldn’t rationally put there.”



ANISH KAPOOR
UK, Artist

