

Kettner's

Kettner's at 29 Romilly Street London W1 features prominently in the entertainment annals of Hampstead and Westminster Hockey Club.

It was therefore with much regret that it was learned that the restaurant was to close in January 2016. This was to allow for redevelopment that, by several accounts, was unlikely to return it to what it was and, in particular, its upper storey rooms, in which many early season Newcomers' Welcome Drinks events were convened by the Club, thanks to the generosity of the owner and Club President at the time, Peter Boizot MBE.

It was also used for fortnightly Monday selection meetings and for the preparation and copying of team sheets, still then sent out by post, generously, again, being provided the office facilities of Peter's businesses housed there. The Men's 1st XI coach, Greg Carr carried out his responsibilities for PizzaExpress and Peroni beer and in promoting the hockey club to schools from Kettner's. When Peter acquired *Hockey News* the magazine was also run from Kettner's. It became the place to be able to meet Peter and to conduct important Club business.

Kettner's was opened in 1867 by Auguste Kettner, the chef to Napoleon III. Originally comprising four Georgian townhouses, it was one of the first French restaurants in London and commonly regarded as exceptional in the quality of its food.

It also soon became associated with Lily Langtry. She was celebrated as a young woman of beauty and charm, who later established a reputation as an actress and producer. Her looks and personality attracted interest, commentary, and invitations from artists and society hostesses.

In 1877 the Prince of Wales, Albert Edward or Bertie, later King Edward VII, arranged to sit next to Lily Langtry at a dinner party given by Sir Allen Young. Although the Prince was married to Princess Alexandra and had six children, he was a well-known philanderer. He became infatuated with Lily Langtry and she soon became his semi-official mistress. She was later presented to the Prince's mother, Queen Victoria. Eventually, a cordial relationship is said to have developed between Lily and Princess Alexandra.

The affair lasted from late 1877 to June 1880. It was widely accepted that the Prince courted Lily Langtry at Kettner's, although this was not regarded as an exclusive venue for their liaisons. Nonetheless, it was reported that a secret tunnel was commissioned, to be built between Kettner's and the Palace Theatre, where Lillie Langtry performed. Rumour was that the tunnel was used to facilitate clandestine rendez-vous during intermissions.

By 1881, Lily had become an actress and starred in many plays, including *She Stoops to Conquer*, *The Lady of Lyons*, and *As You Like It*, eventually running her own stage production company. In later life she performed "dramatic sketches" in vaudeville. She became known for her relationships with noblemen, including, as well as the Prince of Wales, the Earl of Shrewsbury, and Prince Louis of Battenberg. She was the subject of widespread public and media interest.

Oscar Wilde was another prominent guest and regarded Kettner's as his venue of choice.

In the twentieth century, Kettner's remained open during both World Wars and survived the Blitz of the 1940's. Agatha Christie and Bing Crosby became regulars. This generated a growing fashionable crowd who frequented it. It gained a reputation as an establishment for an affair!

The Cocktail and Champagne Bar had an enormous range, with in excess of 100 champagnes on offer.

In 1980 Peter Boizot acquired Kettner's from Paul Raymond, the well-known owner of substantial parts of Soho. Peter said that Paul was a good friend of his and told Peter that he was tired of running Kettner's and asked if Peter was interested in talking it over. Peter was staggered by the suggestion and the opportunity it gave rise to.

Peter regarded Kettner's as "a restaurant of great splendour, garnished to the rafters with remarkable trinkets" but saw that it had "fallen into disarray in recent years". Despite "its undoubted quality, it had sadly become a bit run down."

Peter said that the thought of Kettner's "becoming somewhere that a waiter dressed as a pirate served you the daily *buy one get one free* cheeseburger specials filled us both with repulsion." Thus Peter agreed to buy Kettner's for what he described as a "modest fee" and decided to retain it as it was rather than absorb it into PizzaExpress "out of respect for Paul's hatred of chains". It was therefore acquired under newly formed Peter Boizot Franchise Limited that was independent of PizzaExpress.

However much of Peter's experience with PizzaExpress found its way into the day to day running of Kettner's. The basic idea was to serve *downmarket* food with *upmarket* drinks, that is, Pizza and Champagne. Peter's hunch was that being in the heart of Soho, surrounded by the film, music and television businesses, with the curiosity that a creative mind possesses, there would be a welcome for the purposeful contrast in cheap food and expensive drinks.

The wood-panelled reception area was retained with a door installed to the left with a completely refitted champagne bar that encroached on one half of the mirrored gold red and cream coloured dining room that housed a painting of Auguste Kettner.

The restaurant opened on a strict *no-booking* policy, Peter's aim being to make it a place at which people were happy to queue whilst waiting to enter.

Chandeliers were installed with laurel wreaths attached to the walls. There were 100 tables, including seats on pink banquettes that stretched around the walls in a style similar to the first PizzaExpress layout. Long tables were placed in rows in the centre of the room to seat 16, to accommodate a birthday party.

The second and third floors were painted in duck egg blue and silver.

The opening night was held on a Friday and despite a good number of celebrities in attendance in the presence of the *paparazzi*, Peter was disappointed that not a single photograph appeared in the national press next day.

However, on Sunday Kettner's featured in all the gossip pages. On being pressed by Peter, a photographer admitted that he and his peers had ditched their equipment in the cloakroom and retreated to the Champagne Bar, where they made a pact not to sell their photographs until the next afternoon so that they could enjoy a Friday evening and early Saturday morning.

Kettner's quickly became a popular spot for celebrities in central London. One high profile customer was Lady Diana Spencer, who attended with Princess Anne, a regular customer, in the winter before her marriage to Prince Charles.

Whilst sitting in the Champagne Bar with a group from Hampstead Hockey Club (as it then was) Peter recalled "an almighty cacophony in the hallway" and on investigating, standing there was none other than Marlon Brando. But he was soon ushered out before an introduction could be effected. In Peter's eyes, this merely emphasised that Kettner's "had a magnetic pull on celebrities".

PizzaExpress had started to supply the restaurant at the outset. Kettner's served a similar but extended menu, with large, more luxurious pizzas at slightly higher prices. It became the first restaurant in the PizzaExpress group to serve dough balls, not a product that Peter had initially regarded with great enthusiasm.

In 2002, PizzaExpress, then no longer owned by Peter, acquired Kettner's for £1.95m and it became fully incorporated in the PizzaExpress group. A new first floor Champagne Bar was launched. In 2008, the restaurant was refurbished and became a French brasserie, described by food critic, Jay Rayner, as "an act bordering on vandalism". It was still popular but to many did not enjoy the same caché it once enjoyed.

In 2015, Kettner's was acquired by Soho Home & Co. The buyers run the Dean Street Townhouse and Pizza East, as well as a number of private members' clubs. Its proposals for Kettner's include other adjacent land and buildings comprising 15 townhouses, of which 11 are listed. The buyer intends to create a Kettner's Townhouse, with a high quality restaurant and the reinstatement of the Champagne Bar. Included, too, is the refurbishment of the external vertical sign naming the restaurant on the corner of Romilly Street and Greek Street contained in the listing.