

# Beyond the Stars

Chef Kolja Kleeberg's work at Vau speaks for itself

By Farhad Heydari



Clockwise from left: Kolja Kleeberg shows off; *arancino nero* of octopus, purée of artichokes with squid, black vinaigrette, and blood orange; terrine of fruit with vanilla cream and raspberry biscuit

**EVEN IN THE UPPER ECHELONS** of the international culinary firmament, Michelin stars — prestigious honors bestowed on restaurants by the Michelin Guide — come and go. So it is with some pride that **Kolja Kleeberg** quietly commemorates a notable personal feat this month: 10 years at the helm of a Michelin-starred restaurant. Kleeberg heads up Berlin's perennially lauded **Vau**, a restaurant he's been affiliated with in one way or another since its inception back in 1997, first as head chef and more recently as owner-chef alongside his wife, Petra.

A decade on, the 43-year-old Cologne native remains in the vanguard of Berlin's still-nascent culinary scene. It's the high point in a professional journey that began back in 1986, when Kleeberg was 22. "I actually wanted to be an actor and had done

## five to try

**1 Facil.** 3 Potsdamer Strasse; [facil.de](http://facil.de). One of Berlin's great dining rooms, featuring a glass ceiling and a leafy inner courtyard, takes a backseat to the rousing French-inspired menu of Chef Michael Kempf.

**2 Schneeweiss.** 16 Simplonstrasse; [schneeweiss-berlin.de](http://schneeweiss-berlin.de). German food is served with a light Alpine touch in this arch-modern whitewashed space in the bustling Friedrichshain quarter.

**3 Restaurant Maxwell.** 22 Bergstrasse; [mxwl.de](http://mxwl.de). You'll be hard-pressed to find a bad dish on the menu at this cozy neo-Gothic brewery in the Mitte district, the heart of Berlin.

**4 Lutter und Wegner.** 56 Charlottenstrasse; [lutter-wegner-gendarmenmarkt.de](http://lutter-wegner-gendarmenmarkt.de). This grand, unabashedly German stalwart serves hearty favorites like Wiener schnitzel to a who's who of local connoisseurs.

**5 Schwarzenrabén.** 13 Neue Schönhauser Strasse; [schwarzenrabén.de](http://schwarzenrabén.de). The elegantly arching columns of this Renaissance-style bolthole are the perfect complement to the restaurant/bar's modern continental fare. — F.H.

some work in the theater but couldn't get a place in the actors' school," he says of the defunct career path that led him to a cookery apprenticeship. That somewhat belated schooling resulted in a succession of jobs and a meteoric rise through kitchens in France, Switzer-

## GO EAT

land, and Austria before he landed in Berlin in 1993.

When Vau opened in 1997 in Berlin's edgy Mitte quarter, then very much in its chrysalis phase, it was "a very pioneering move," Kleeberg says. By 1999, Germany's capital had relocated back to Berlin from Bonn, and Vau's debatable Mitte location was soon a huge hit, serving "pure market cuisine" to a who's who of guests, including politicians and diplomats as well as celebrities like Dustin Hoffman, Jodie Foster, Tom Cruise, and Lenny Kravitz.

Today, the city is home to just six Michelin-starred restaurants, and Vau's vaulted ceilings, large-scale modern art, and minimalist trappings help it continue as the front-runner. They serve as a stylish backdrop to Kleeberg's award-winning nouvelle Deustch fare, which inspired the late *New York Times* journalist R. W. Apple Jr. to call Vau Berlin's "indispensable stop for serious eaters."

Kleeberg is more modest. "I call it Berlin cuisine," he explains, "because I try to be a mirror on the city and bring all its ethnic influences into my cookery. We work with Mediterranean influences, so we have pasta dishes and risotto dishes. But we also have French-inspired, Italian-inspired, even Turkish-inspired and Greek-inspired dishes that we try to take to another level."

Tying all these flavors together, says Kleeberg, is a combination of fresh seasonal ingredients and locally sourced products. That wholesome ethos is evident in playful selections like crispy

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## Soup's On!

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**House of Nanking, San Francisco.** Try the menu. Just tell the owner you want to knock your socks off. It's a super-crusty-edged grilled beef, and a flower-infused green tea. It's lunch. 919 Kearny St., 415.421.1


**Balaton, Cleveland.** The go-to soup has been served here for more than 40 years. Regulars appreciate that this favorite is made from scratch, full of tender pieces of pork, chicken, or beef and dumplings, and all topped with sour cream or — if you prefer — sauerkraut. 13133 Shaker Square, 216.921.9691

— Gracie Cavnar



sea bass with sautéed chanterelles, pommes Pont Neuf, and shallots vinaigrette. The menu is paired with an expansive, award-winning wine list, half of which is dedicated to German and Austrian wines.

As for the next decade, Kleeberg has more than stars in his sights. "A second

Michelin star is not my first ambition," he admits. "Continuing what we're doing is. As the old adage goes, you're only as good as your last dish, and I want to make sure that that's perfect." 

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