

# Reconceptualizing the Restaurant as a Psychedelic Space in Berlin

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From the striking chandelier by Björn Dahlem to the trippy neon installation by Kerim Seiler, it's clear from the moment I walk in that Panama isn't an ordinary restaurant. One would expect no less from Ludwig Cramer-Klett, the visionary behind some of Berlin's best-known and least-conventional eateries. Katz Orange, his first project and a darling of the *New York Times* since it opened in 2012, appeared before phrases like "locavore" and "farm-to-table" were de rigeur among the city's chefs. While it may not boast Michelin stars, its ballsy, rigorously sourced cuisine has arguably had a greater influence in town than most places that do. Contemporary Food Lab, his overarching organization, features an online publication and an academy that leads workshops on everything from fermented foods to urban beekeeping to the relationship between capitalism and bananas.

During our conversation, Sophia Rudolph, the Berlin-born, French-raised chef helming the kitchen, swoops by to say hello. Though only 29, she's worked at a trio of Michelin-starred restaurants, most recently as the sous-chef at Weinbar Rutz. It's her first time running the show and she's already making a splash with avant-garde dishes like brittle pigs' ears with saline oyster cream. Shared plates are no longer an anomaly, but when they contain desserts like smoked bell pepper with brûléed marshmallows or silken Bibb lettuce paired with dark chocolate, people start to take note. When asked about her use of regional produce and meats, Rudolph looks almost puzzled: "Why would we buy products from thousands of kilometers away when we have such good ones right here?"



The interior of Panama. All photos by Philipp Langenheim and Corina Schadendorf.

The menu may be her domain, but Panama's larger ambitions owe a great deal to Cramer-Klett's background. Born in Bavaria, the 38-year-old sunk his teeth into real estate development and finance, then wandered across a sizable chunk of the Earth's surface before deciding to enter the restaurant business. When I meet him, he's slouched on a bench wearing a powder-blue shirt, smiling but serious. He speaks with quiet conviction about everything from shamanic rituals to questioning reality to changing the world, one restaurant at a time.

**MUNCHIES: First of all, congratulations on the opening. Panama's rather unusual, but so was Katz Orange when it opened.**

**Ludwig Cramer-Klett:** With Katz Orange, we were one the first restaurants here to bring farm-to-table to the mainstream. At the end of the day, the work that is being done here is not about food. Food is just a medium. It's a really important medium, but it's about bringing consciousness about certain things—nature and our relationship towards it—to the largest possible audience.

**How do you reach that audience?**

We work to create places that feel welcoming. Simple aspects like having bars in the restaurants, which is something you have a lot in the States, but isn't that common here. It's not random; it's so that you can seat people without reservations. Ideally, we wouldn't like to send anyone away. We take the act of somebody coming to us very, very seriously. Our goal is to be radically inclusive.



**That sounds suspiciously like something you'd hear on the Playa.**

True. We actually used it before we knew that Burning Man had it as one of their principles. [Laughs] Maybe that's why Burning Man and I go so well together.

**Aside from the obvious, why is that so important?**

We are fulfilling a very important role. In urban society, restaurants are like temples. You have private space and you have public space. Private space is where you have to wait to be invited; and public space, you can go any time, but it's anonymous. Restaurants, which I regard as semi-public spaces, are places where you can go if you want to feel a connection to other human beings, if you don't want to be alone. They're the watering holes where we go to rub our backs on the other elephants' backs.



Ludwig Cramer-Klett.

**I hadn't thought of it that way.**

That's how I think of these spaces, but everybody does it in their own way. We've created a very love-filled space, because we're doing everything with energy and love. There's nothing where we say, "Oh, it'll do." There's no such thing as "it'll do." Everything is consciously done.

**Speaking of the space, could you tell me a bit about it?**

It's kind of a double reality, between what you feel and what it is. The way the art is curated is very much about consciousness expansion and augmented reality. If you follow the second hand on this clock by artist Alicja Kwade, you'll notice that it's actually changing speed. By pressing a button on top, you can choose where you want to accelerate time. The work next to you by Julius von Bismarck seems like a normal desert landscape. Actually, he went out there and spraypainted the whole landscape white, then gave colors and brushes to the locals and asked them to repaint it the way it was before from memory. Look at that and you start to understand that you're in a psychedelic space



### **Why “Panama”?**

We wanted something tropical, but also something that’s very relevant to right here, right now. It’s all based on [the children’s book] *Oh, wie schön ist Panama* by Janosch. It’s the story of a tiger and a bear that live by a river. One day, the bear finds a box that smells of bananas and says PANAMA. He goes to the tiger and tells him about Panama, how it’s the most amazing place and everything smells like bananas. So they go on this journey and meet all sorts of different animals. At one point, they meet a bird, who tells them to climb a tree. Up above, the bird says, “Look over there. Maybe that’s it?” And they see this beautiful little river with this abandoned house and they say, “Wow, we found it!” The thing is, they don’t realize that this is the house where they lived until they went off to look for Panama. They live happily ever after there. I was reading this story to my daughter and I thought, That’s perfect. “Panama,” the word, has the ring of something exotic, but at the same time it’s one of the most famous German children’s books.

### **Did your own travels contribute to any of this?**

Absolutely, like the tiger and the bear. I was traveling a lot—Africa, South America, Central America, Asia. A bit more weight on South America, which played a big role. The experiences that I had there doing shamanistic, ritualistic work gave me a lot of insights. The psychedelic experience is a very important aspect of the work I’m doing. At the end of the day, it’s about finding paradise wherever you are.

**Your menu incorporates a lot of different influences. Does that tie in at all?**

Germany is the “Panama” for millions of people around the world right now. We thought, why don’t we embrace this and create food from a time when we won’t remember whether Knödel or couscous is the “German” dish? Let’s create a food that is local, regional, but naturally integrates influences from around the world. A food from a fully integrated, multi-cultural, new Germany.



## **Why Berlin?**

In Berlin, there are a lot of creative, interesting, and driven people coming in. It's really interesting for me to meet new, fascinating human beings every single day who are exchanging ideas and loving the work that's being done here, because we all feel the necessity to do something.

## **Do something about what?**

I believe we need to seriously question the system we're living in and find ways to create new realities that feel better. We think we're in the most liberal times of human history, but that's bullshit. I really believe that our disconnect from nature is going to have a huge impact in our lifetime. Can I ask you a question? Do you remember a time before the internet?

## **Yes, but not for terribly long.**

The way we're using digital reality will change a lot, but this first generation has been overwhelmed by it. Everything's fast, fast, fast. And then there's the emptiness that comes from that. It's all digital. There's no physical connection. That's why it's so important to create spatial experiences, to create physical experiences, even something as simple as eating. It's a platform that is essentially about the relationship between human beings toward each other and toward other life.



**That's a whole lot to take on. Can you tell me about how you're doing that through Contemporary Food Lab?**

We're looking at issues around food, nature, human life, reality. In the Academy, we also do free educational projects, which we cross-finance through the restaurants.

**Do they focus on this sort of philosophy?**

We don't believe in any dogmas. Everyone has to find their own path. All we can do is to help each other to gain trust in our own inner voices and inspiration. It's not about some kind of dharma in the magazine or the workshops. Our work is very pragmatic. It's a restaurant at the end of the day. It's spiritual consciousness transported into the real world.

**What do you hope people will take away from all this?**

People have said to me, "Coming to eat with you is like going on a holiday." Yesterday, I had one of the most beautiful compliments I've ever gotten. This architect was sitting here and he told me that whenever one of his clients comes to Berlin, he goes to Katz Orange—sometimes by himself, sometimes with others—and just inhales the energy. Then he goes out and he feels inspired to do his work again. I just thought, Wow that's amazing. That's exactly why we're doing this.

**Thank you for speaking with me.**