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One of the World's Best Restaurants Gets an Update

Thomas Keller turned the French Laundry into one of the most admired gastronomic temples on the planet. Now, working with architecture firm Snøhetta, he's expanding the premises and improving the kitchen for the 21st century



REBOOT CAMP | “That’s what the restaurant needed, a total rebuild,” says chef Keller, seen here in the new kitchen of the French Laundry, scheduled to be fully operational this spring. *PHOTO: MARK MAHANEY FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE*

By
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“FOUR YEARS AGO we started out with the idea that we were only going to remodel the wine cellar,” says a smiling [Thomas Keller](#), standing outside the French Laundry, his landmark three-Michelin-star restaurant in Yountville, California. Dressed in tailored black trousers, leather clogs and his customary bespoke Isaia chef’s coat, Keller, 61, surveys what has become a much larger construction site.

Six buildings have now been demolished on the restaurant’s half-acre campus to make room for a new 1,981-square-foot kitchen; a separate 2,120-square-foot annex for offices, an area for butchering and 16,000 bottles of wine; and 9,000 square feet of [fresh landscape design](#), including a new dedicated pathway onto the property that leads into the dining room.

To enter the restaurant, guests will first pass through a row of Japanese maple trees and an open-air threshold cut into a wall made from local basalt. Beyond that, they’ll see the kitchen, skinned with contrasting materials. On the left: panels of fritted glass. On the right: gray-brown wood treated with a Japanese scorching technique known as *shou sugi ban*. “That wood is never painted,” explains Keller. “It’s beautiful because of the way it’s burned.”



Thomas Keller at his recently renovated French Laundry restaurant in Yountville, California, PHOTO: MARK MAHANEY FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Keller shrugs at the ambition of it all, as if the project, one of the most comprehensive undertakings of his career, were fated to happen. “It’s been a bit crazy,” he says, maintaining a zenlike tone. “But that’s what the restaurant needed—a total rebuild.”

The idea of renovating the French Laundry carries substantial weight. [Corey Lee](#), the San Francisco-based chef of the three-Michelin-star restaurant Benu and the newer In Situ, worked for Keller at the French Laundry for more than six years and helped him to open his East Coast flagship, Per Se. Lee describes the restaurant as a kind of national treasure, the sort of place that can be changed only with tender care. “It’s one of the most important restaurants in America,” he says, “especially because it’s a fine-dining restaurant that has been able to cross over to the mainstream and become an emblem of gastronomy for an audience outside of the usual gourmands. It’s like the Fenway Park or Augusta National of the restaurant industry. You don’t have to be a baseball fan or golfer to appreciate their significance.”

But whereas sports venues can skate by for years on mythology alone, restaurants cannot survive on lore. Pete Wells, reviewing Per Se, demoted it last January from four [New York Times](#) stars to two, deeming it complacent and static. Knowing that restaurants must remain dynamic in their striving, Keller has never stopped tweaking the French Laundry. Thousands of dishes have appeared on its menu over the years.

The kitchen itself has been quietly built and rebuilt several times, mostly without fanfare. (During the most recent phase of construction, it was set up in four shipping containers, which have been sold at auction.) “I’ve always tried to maintain this idea of a slow evolution,” says Keller. “So that it didn’t really shock anybody coming to the restaurant; they still felt as they did when they came the previous year, or the previous 10 years. I wanted to make sure it was slow. Of course, what you’ll get now is enormous in its evolution.”



BLUE HEAVEN | The front entrance to the restaurant. PHOTO: MARK MAHANEY FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

WHEN KELLER began thinking about changing his restaurant's footprint, only one architectural precedent came to mind: I.M. Pei's glass-and-steel pyramid at the [Louvre](#). That structure was commissioned by French President François Mitterrand in 1983 and added an element of timeless modernity to a 12th-century palace that's one of the greatest cultural attractions in the world.

The French Laundry has humbler origins. Built out of fieldstone and lumber in a utilitarian style by a Scottish stonemason named Alexander "Gus" Clark in the early 20th century, it opened as the Eagle Saloon, serving as a bar and brothel for residents of a nearby veterans' home. After liquor was banned within 1.5 miles of the home in 1906, the two-story building was purchased by a young French couple who turned it into a steam laundry. It's been known as the French Laundry ever since.

Keller's origins are equally humble. His parents divorced when he was 4; his father, Edward, who lived on property in one of the French Laundry's cottages for the final years of his life, was a captain in the United States Marines. During Keller's childhood in Florida, his mother, Betty, managed dining operations at the Palm Beach Yacht Club. Keller started his restaurant career there as a dishwasher. A later job at the Dunes Club, in Narragansett, Rhode Island, inspired Keller, in 1977, to pursue cooking at its highest level. "The chef there, Roland Henin, was French, and they were the most refined, the most acclaimed, they had the most skills, the most knowledge. And so—that was it. Fine dining. French. That's when I decided to become a chef."

In 1994, after working his way through the ranks in various kitchens in France (at Guy Savoy and Taillevent) and running acclaimed restaurants in New York and Los Angeles, Keller, something of a journeyman at the time, bought the 1,600-square-foot French Laundry building from its then owners, restaurateurs Don and Sally Schmitt. Including its surrounding land, the property cost Keller \$1.2 million. He was 38. That original building now houses the restaurant's dining rooms and can't be modified much on the outside because of its designation on the National Register of Historic Places.

In Keller's Louvre scenario, it's this original building, with its mandate for preservation, that's the palace. It's also where he began turning the French Laundry into a cultural attraction in its

own right, setting the tone for what fine dining would become in America: ingredient-obsessed (in a way that's now the norm), story-driven (one early dish featuring veal tongue and beef cheek molded into a squat tower of meat was listed on the menu as "Tongue and Cheek") and far less uptight than ever before (dessert offerings included fancy doughnuts). Keller did all this while paying homage to classical French technique with absolute clarity.



A detail of the French Laundry's new architecture. *PHOTO: MARK MAHANEY FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE*

Keller's two new buildings look like a pair of modernist Scandinavian barns, with asymmetrically pitched roofs and gables; a continuous strip of glass bisects the kitchen horizontally, wrapping around two sides to allow uninterrupted views of the chefs at work. While the architectural contrast isn't as dramatic as at the Louvre, Keller nevertheless seemed worried

about whether his new structures were a little disproportionate to the old one. “My impression’s that they’re too big,” he says. “But my architect assures me they’re not. So I have to trust him.”

It was another museum project—a three-year, \$305 million expansion of San Francisco’s Museum of Modern Art, completed last May—that influenced Keller’s decision to hire the [architecture and design firm Snøhetta](#) and its co-founder Craig Dykers. While considering possible collaborators for his project, Keller had been looking for a firm with Scandinavian sensibilities. “Simplicity of materials, simplicity of design, but very impactful,” he says. He wanted to dedicate even more of his property toward ensuring his restaurant’s 62 seats remain worthy of his legacy, without completely overshadowing his restaurant’s history. It also thrilled Keller that although Snøhetta has roots in Norway (the firm’s new design for that country’s paper currency goes into circulation this spring), Dykers is American and is based in Brooklyn. Conflating European and American architectural attitudes seemed to dovetail nicely with the restaurant’s approach to food and its strong ties to French technique.

Snøhetta had a number of significant commissions under its belt: the Pavilion at the National September 11 Memorial & Museum at the World Trade Center in New York City, a revival of the ancient Library of Alexandria in Egypt and the Norwegian National Opera & Ballet complex. Restaurants, however, aren’t exactly Snøhetta’s sweet spot. “We’ve done several in Oslo,” Dykers points out, “but none that you would have heard of. This is simply in another league altogether. I don’t think anything in restaurant design really compares to the French Laundry kitchen.”

Keller himself is consumed by questions of design—especially kitchen design. “The dining room is a beautiful place to work,” he says. “We’re trying to make our kitchen the same.” Getting to that point has required a collaboration—between Keller, Snøhetta and the Berkeley, California-based design and architectural firm Envelope A+D—as well as the efforts of the kitchen specialists at Harrison & Koellner LLC, whose principal, Tim Harrison, has worked with Keller for more than 20 years.



AMUSE-BOUCHE | Macarons and chocolates, among the thousands of items and dishes that have appeared on the French Laundry's evolving menu over the years. *PHOTO: MARK MAHANEY FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE*

Everyone associated with the \$10 million endeavor, however, confirms that Keller remains its leader. “Architects have their own egos,” says Dykers. “But I think in this particular case, you’re working with someone who knows their craft so well that they’re able to guide us.” Keller, in return, refers to his collaborators as interpreters, “draftsmen,” he says, “drawing the things we tell them to draw.”

Before becoming a chef, Keller considered making architecture his vocation. “I designed Rakel, my first restaurant, myself,” he says. He has since had a hand in designing the 13 restaurants and bakeries he currently owns, including his upcoming riff on a classic American steakhouse that he’ll open in Manhattan’s Hudson Yards development in 2018 (other serial

collaborators include the designer Adam D. Tihany and Laura Cunningham, Keller’s fiancée and vice president of branding for the restaurant group).

Keller has also designed a line of cookware for All-Clad, silver servingware and barware for Christofle and porcelain dinnerware for Raynaud. Not every design has been open to the public. When Keller moved to New York City in 1982 and found the size of his one-bedroom Upper West Side apartment a little confining, he sketched and commissioned an all-in-one piece of furniture to relieve his spatial issues. “It was walnut veneer and had eight drawers, two side tables, bookshelves and a pull-down desktop that I could use while sitting in bed,” he says.

Since construction began in earnest in December 2014, Keller has put his know-how into practice at the French Laundry’s weekly contractors’ meetings, held mostly on Wednesdays in a trailer toward the back of its 3.1-acre farm. While bundles of greens are being harvested for dinner service, Keller sits inside, at the head of the table, weighing in on decisions about drain width, drywall, Dekton, roofing and whether the terrazzo flooring has enough slip-resistance to keep chefs from losing their footing on wayward consommé.



WAVE THEORY | A section of the glass-fiber-reinforced gypsum ceiling in the new kitchen. *PHOTO: MARK MAHANEY FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE*

During one meeting, the big news is that the fritted glass panels have finally been approved. They've taken months to produce, having started out as sketches the Snøhetta team made while watching chefs grind through lunch and dinner services in the kitchen at Per Se. (Although on different coasts, Per Se and the French Laundry have a kind of symbiotic relationship; they inspire and push each other, and the chefs at one can always see the chefs at the other via closed-circuit TV.) Keller wanted the exterior of his new French Laundry kitchen to be clad in glass to suggest transparency. Dykers proposed adding an element of abstraction. "We tracked the chefs' fingertips," says Dykers. "That's the print you see on the glass. It's not immediately obvious, but

you can feel the movement. Then, we colored the movement in, in green and brown so that it would blend with the garden outside the restaurant and kitchen. It's two metaphors working together. The nurturing garden, the movement of the chefs' hands."

Inside the kitchen, which diners will be able to tour upon request, there's more symbolism at work. "We're calling the ceiling The Cathedral," says the restaurant's 36-year-old chef de cuisine, David Breeden. Made of glass-fiber-reinforced gypsum, it drapes down like a piece of suspended linen, partly concealing the hoods and vents that typically hang exposed, just above the cooking surfaces. Generous skylights are carved into the apex. The design resembles the curved cuff of Keller's Isaia coat, but he points out that it's a statement about tablecloths and aprons, too, fabrics at work in both the front and the back of the house. He says the material will feel linen-like to the touch.



Satsuma mandarin oranges, a Bosc pear and Fuyu persimmons. PHOTO: MARK MAHANEY FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

BEFORE BREAKING ground, Keller had considered another approach entirely. "There was an idea to just move the whole thing across the street," he says—dig up the farm and plant a restaurant in its place. "We did a sketch for it," Dykers adds. "I was conflicted with the whole thing," says Keller, "because the restaurant has a reputation for being one of the top restaurants in the world. And it doesn't represent that sense of luxury, like when I walk into Michel Bras, where you have these extraordinary architectural buildings. We don't have that. It's just a very modest building that we've had to kind of nurse along."

One reason the start-from-scratch approach didn't happen is that Keller got stuck on the restaurant's name. If it moved, would he have to change it? "At the end of the day," says Keller, still visibly relieved he chose to build around his original structure, "that's not the French Laundry. What would I call it? The French Laundry Across the Street?"

As months passed, Keller, whose kitchens are all adorned with a clock captioned with the words "sense of urgency," had to come to terms with the fact that his slow evolution had become even slower than expected. He originally envisioned a fully updated French Laundry for the beginning of 2016. "My timeline was unrealistic," Keller recently told me, explaining that things like drilling 500-foot-deep geothermal wells, getting the bullnosing on the Dekton just right and his exacting production standards for the fritted glass panels conspired to nearly double the length of

the project. “It’s all required a kind of patience I don’t necessarily have,” he says, “but I’ve had to learn to develop it.”



REAR WINDOW | A view into the kitchen; the window bisects fritted glass panels, at top and bottom. *PHOTO: MARK MAHANEY FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE*

Dealing with the fallout from the New York Times’s negative *Per Se* review also demanded Keller’s tolerance and time during an already intensely busy year. Besides working on the French Laundry, he was building a chocolate factory in Napa with Italian olive oil magnate Armando Manni and concluding three years of research with scientists in Florence to develop a process for manufacturing chocolate that preserves more of its antioxidants. Still, he made the

effort to pen a public apology that ultimately read like the restaurant-world equivalent of a Coach Taylor halftime speech from *Friday Night Lights*. In it, Keller swings from sincere contrition (“We are sorry we let you down”) to impassioned motivation (“When we fall short, we work even harder”). He also flew to New York to address his Per Se staff in person, before traveling to each of his 11 other establishments to give the same speech. In November, 10 months after the *Timestakedown*, Per Se retained its three-Michelin-star rating, meaning Keller remains the only chef in America with three stars in two places.

Still, anxiety was a byproduct of all the waiting to complete the new kitchen, especially at the construction site. “There were a lot of fears,” says Keller, having admittedly spent many hours second-guessing his design decisions and worrying over what he might have missed. He also feared that his 22-year-old restaurant was vulnerable to its age. “We hope what we do still has great value for guests who want to see us,” he says. Further, Keller got tired of looking at samples and renderings. But one day late last year, as his team began to remove the fritted glass’s protective wrapping for the first time, Keller delighted at finally seeing his vision in real life. “It was this magical moment,” he says, “glimmering, shimmering and quite impressive. I felt a huge relief to see all the planning pay off.”

Last winter, long before the construction site had begun to resemble the new French Laundry, Keller already had ideas about its next phase. He looked to the edge of his property, out beyond where the Japanese maples would go, where he’d recently purchased an adjacent inn. Keller said he’d soon be building a small hotel there. “It’s just a natural extension for the restaurant to have rooms available, too,” he says. “My goal is to be able to retire from my other stuff and reimmerge myself in the French Laundry—even more than in the past.”