

A New Restaurant for (and of) the Berlin Art Scene

By GISELA WILLIAMS JUNE 23, 2016



Panama opens today on a gallery-lined street in Berlin. Credit Philipp Langenheim and Corina Schadendorf

There is a much-loved German children's book from the '70s called "Oh, wie schön ist Panama" (Oh, how beautiful Panama is) about a little bear and tiger who live in a tiny cabin by a river and forage for fresh fish and mushrooms. One day, an empty crate smelling of bananas and stamped with the word "Panama" floats by, convincing the pair that Panama must be the land of their dreams. So they set out — and, on the way, meet all sorts of characters. Eventually a crow advises them to climb a high tree in an attempt to spot the land of their dreams from above. At the top, they marvel at the amazing view and see an abandoned cabin by a river. They decide that the spot is so beautiful that it must be Panama. What they don't realize is that it is their old home. So they wander back, fix it up, add a sofa, and live there happily ever after.

“I read the book recently to my daughter and I realized what an archetypical German story it is,” said the Berlin restaurateur Ludwig Cramer-Klett last week in his new restaurant, Panama, which opens officially today. “It’s the perfect name for my latest venture. It has all the right references. I wanted the space, and in some cases the food, to be imbued with an exotic, tropical feel, with the dream of a place like Panama, but almost everything — the ingredients and materials — to be rooted here in Germany. Everything has been sourced as locally as possible.”



Ludwig Cramer-Klett in his new restaurant, Panama. Credit Philipp Langenheim and Corina Schadendorf

A two-story, expansive space hidden in a back courtyard off Potsdamer Strasse, Panama shares the street that has, in the last five years, become home to some of Berlin’s most prestigious galleries, such as Blain/Southern and Galerie Judin. Fittingly, Panama’s rooms are filled with the work of contemporary artists, many of them friends of Cramer-Klett: There’s a showstopping chandelier made of vintage lights by the artist Björn Dahlem, large-scale nature photographs by Julius von Bismarc, and a neon sign in the shape of bones by Kerim Seiler.

The breezy space was designed by the young design duo Karoline Butzert and Nora Witzigmann (the daughter-in-law of one of Germany’s most famous chefs, Eckert Witzigmann), who similarly turned to literature — and wanderlust — to create the interiors: “We looked at a lot of vintage books about Panama and South America,” Butzert said. “Ludwig would send us a picture from a bar in Brazil or of a vintage movie poster.” Handmade sea-green tiles look like they could have been sourced from Mexico, but were in fact made by Golem, a small German tile company located just outside Berlin. And the two levels of Panama are similar but distinct, much like the cottage in the children’s tale, as seen before and after the little animals’ adventure: “The downstairs is shady and moody with more hues of green,” Cramer-Klett said, “and upstairs is light and bright.”



Panama was inspired by a German children's tale. Credit Philipp Langenheim and Corina Schadendorf

The young female chef, Sophia Rudolph, was formerly the sous chef at the one-Michelin starred Rutz. Her focus is to elevate ingredients by both keeping them raw — venison tartare is paired with pickled shiitake and currants — and by plunging them into the restaurant's wood-fire oven — in dishes like smashed, charred potatoes with salted herring and Iberico ham. Having spent half her life in France, training under Alain Ducasse and at L'Arpege, this is the first time Rudolf is in charge. "The Panama story completely sums up everything we are trying to do: broadening consciousness to the paradise that we are living in now, that is all around. Not by telling everyone that they are doing things wrong, but to have them enjoy what is right," said Cramer-Klett, whose first restaurant, Katz Orange, was one of Berlin's first to champion slow-cooked dishes from organic and local ingredients, served in a stylish, laid-back atmosphere. "I want eating here to be a trip. I want people to open their eyes wide and have a great time and when they leave, they should feel better."

Correction: June 24, 2016

An earlier version of this article included outdated information about the name of the restaurant. After the article was posted, the owner decided that the restaurant will be named “Panama” instead of “Oh Panama.”

Potsdamer Strasse 91, oh-panama.com/en.