

## The Swedish Chef, in Chiswick

17 Aug 2011 by Nick Lander/FT

Mikael Jönsson has just opened his first restaurant at the age of 44. It is called Hedone, from the Greek word for pleasure, and is located in a former Lebanese grill and night club on Chiswick High Road, west London, equidistant between the West End and Heathrow airport.

Hedone is likely to give Jönsson as much personal satisfaction - after 25 years believing that his allergies would prevent him from fulfilling his dream career as a chef - as anyone fortunate enough to eat there.

The reaction from an old friend who has spent the last 30 years in a quiet village in Devon to that night's clearly printed menu was immediate and shared by all our table. 'How exciting', he said with a particularly large grin on his face. Everything we ate, and drank, lived up to that adjective.

Jönsson's menu currently lists nine dishes, and two options, either a five-course menu for £45 or an eight-course menu at £60, with two meat main courses to choose from, aged Angus beef or squab pigeon. The *maître d'* coped admirably with the request for two fish eaters to have the turbot instead and a series of excellent dishes ensued.

We all began with a small egg cup filled with an umami flan, more a custard in the French sense, topped with a seaweed coulis that proved a stunning appetizer. Some opted for the gazpacho with a chilled dill flower cream served in a half-moon glass bowl, others a slow-cooked egg with Scottish girolles before a trio of highlights: small, thick rounds of Dorset wild turbot with almonds, a symphony in white; one thick slice of well-aged beef; and, what was for me the star of the show, an Irish abalone, opened, sliced, steamed and then cooked briefly in its own juices so that it had all the flavour of the sea but none of the usual rubberiness. And all this before the aroma of the lemon madeleines that filled the room as they were taken out of the oven at 10.45 pm.

It is possible to see, sense and describe all this because Jönsson has created his corner kitchen in full view of his customers. Tall, red-haired and bearded with the requisite large hands that can prise the meat from a rib of beef, take a live lobster and put a knife swiftly through its back and then rather more gently take a swig from a pink bottle of water, Jönsson is obviously enjoying himself.

He is also, and this is equally important given the style of restaurant he has created, softly spoken; prepared to accommodate his customers' particular demands; and ferociously determined to find the very best produce. One supplier who had called in to see him ended up being quizzed for two hours about just how close he could get to growing the quality of fruit Jönsson had enjoyed in the south of France.

Hedone is, in fact, the embodiment of two interlinked strands in Jönsson's life.

The first, which he explained to me he would not describe as a passion for cooking so much as 'an obsession, a drug almost', has been with him since he was a boy growing up in his native Sweden. 'I baked my first sourdough loaf when I was 8', he recalled, and continued this calling as a teenager culminating in a stint in the kitchens of Johanna, in Gothenburg, then Sweden's most respected restaurant when he was 18. But allergies, particularly eczema, blocked this career.

Jönsson then turned to the law and business school and a successful entrepreneurial career ensued which took him eventually to settle in France, where he could, at least, indulge his love of food and wine, some of which has now been transferred to Hedone's well-priced list. Four years ago, a change in diet, which Jönsson described as the elimination of sugar, wheat and man-made oils, made him healthy and allowed him to dream at last of opening his own restaurant.

Jönsson aimed high. 'It was either going to be in Paris or London', he explained. 'The former appealed because of the produce and the contacts I had there already but I was very wary of the labour laws. London I knew would be more receptive to my style of cooking but I never thought that I would be able to find the quality of produce that I have been able to source even in the past few months. And I am very excited about what the autumn here will yield.'

Jönsson has been stunned by the quality of the beef he has been able to buy from O'Shea's in Knightsbridge and the speed with which fish suppliers have responded to his particular demands. 'I told them that I want the fish so fresh that if

there were a vet here by my side he could make them swim again. It is criminal, I think, for a fish to be still in rigor mortis because it has been caught so recently but then put in a polystyrene box and covered in ice. It simply ruins the fish.' The abalone, dived for off the coast of Ireland, came to him via a Japanese supplier, while he extolled the qualities of the scallops he is buying, dived for off the Dorset and Cornish coasts, as well as the lobsters from the same waters.

Rents and rates in central London led Jönsson to this unlikely suburban location in a row of shops and chain restaurants. But Jönsson has spent his £300,000 (which included a major electrical bill as the certificate he inherited with the building turned out to be fake!) sensitively.

The room is comfortable, while the views of this obsessive Swedish chef engaging with his brigade, and moulding them, and his produce, into the paradigm of the restaurant he has long dreamt of, are exceptional. It is all so quirky that somehow Chiswick High Street seems Hedone's logical home. Lucky west Londoners to have this land on their doorstep.