The Noma effect

21 Apr 2012 by Paul S Ross

See our new guide to all readers' restaurant reviews.

Here's the next in our series of restaurant reviews by readers of this website to fill the place left by our regular restaurant writer Nick Lander while he recovers from surgery. There's a bottle of ***Mouton 1996*** *to be won. See more details at Situation (temporarily) vacant - restaurant reviewer.*

René Redzepi meets me at the door and invites me in to Noma from the rain. It's a late October afternoon last year and a barge floats by - a flash of red against the grey sky. Copenhagen, a big city in a small kingdom, made global news in 2010 when chef René Redzepi's Noma knocked Ferran Adrià's elBulli off the number one spot as the world's top restaurant on the San Pellegrino World's 50 Best Restaurants list (compiled and presented annually by the British *Restaurant* magazine). Noma topped the list again as the World's Best Restaurant in 2011. (Adrià closed elBulli in 2011 to found a culinary foundation scheduled to open in 2014.)

Noma's setting is in a quayside 18th-century warehouse in Christianshavn overlooking the harbour surrounded by contemporary architecture - notably Henning Larsen's Copenhagen Opera House (seen on sunny evening almost exactly a year ago in the background below - JR).

Inside, diners wrap themselves in soft bearskins, relax on a careful selection of furniture by architect Signe Bindslev Henriksen, and welcome a new dawn of inventive Danish cuisine. The omnivorous René Redzepi is reinventing Nordic cuisine with an innovative gastronomic approach.

'We're just about to have our team meeting,' says Redzepi. He gathers the two dozen chefs around, and says while snacking on an apple, 'I think we need to start by introducing all the new faces we have here. So for those of you who started today as a *stagiaire* this is a great moment to introduce yourself to the full team.' Robert, from Edinburgh, starts, 'I'll be here for just one week - unfortunately.' 'As punishment you'll have to do haggis for us one night,' replies Redzepi. Nine other *stagiaires* - including two from Bolivia, one from Colombia, and three from Mexico - introduce themselves. 'Guess we'll be taking salsa lessons here on weekends from our Latin American section,' smiles Redzepi.

Noma books up three months in advance, which for a 12-table restaurant, reconfirmed as the best in the world, is understandable. The charismatic Redzepi is the kind of innovator who attracts talent from all over the globe; 16 nations are represented in the kitchen. As a result, Noma has become an innovation lab of ambitious young chefs which, in turn, has made Copenhagen a destination on the culinary world tour.

'News from the kitchen?' asks Redzepi. A menu change - crab as the first serving on the seven-course menu and razor clam on the 12-course - is announced. And, venison instead of hare for the lone meat course. On the tableside serving, the pile of herbs will be parsley and lovage. 'Right. Perfect. Let's have a good evening,' says Redzepi.

'Copenhagen [cuisine] today is very vibrant,' says Redzepi, as we walk through the state-of-the-art kitchen. 'It's at an infant stage. Of course, gastronomy has been here for a while but this idea that we're trying to explore our own history, our own culture, and our own soil is recent. There is this energy here that is quite special for our region and unique as well.' Noma is about wild produce foraged by hand, horse mussels sourced from the Faroe Islands, musk ox from Greenland, and skyr curd from Iceland.

Redzepi's culinary philosophy is sourcing local and sustainable produce whose characteristics are particularly excellent from the Nordic terroir. The Nordic countryside and cultural landscape is unique due to favourable climatic conditions, in spite of the northern location. Redzepi has reinvented Nordic cuisine by embracing indigenous seasonal ingredients to create an imaginative cuisine with distinctive flavours and a unique character. He works closely with many individual suppliers, many of whom forage produce exclusively for Noma. 'It's the ingredients that guide us, the dialogue we have

with people in the wilderness or farmers,' he says. 'Those are the ones who tell us what's in season and, with that, we change our menu.' I ask him what's in season now: 'Sea urchins just came into season - something I love; I've been waiting for this,' he exclaims. Redzepi is clearly an innovative leader. Innovation seems to be at the core of everything Noma does - new ideas and radical creativity in Nordic cuisine. Everyone at Noma lives and breathes it.

If you want to understand the big idea behind Noma - and new Nordic cuisine - you need simply to experience René Redzepi's signature dish: the hen and the egg (guests are invited to prepare it themselves). A plate of slightly wet hay is served, with a 280-degree hot pan on top. You are directed to add some hay-infused oil into the pan, and then crack a wild-duck egg into the oil. When two minutes have elapsed, you are instructed to add thyme butter into the pan and then sauté a few wild ramson and spinach leaves. After three and a half minutes, a chef brings over a saucepan of wild ramson sauce, which he spoons over the cooked egg. You then sprinkle herbs and wild plants over the egg dish, and crumble over some potato chips. This imaginative creation reflects sensory aromas of the natural Danish landscape.

Like all of Redzepi's dishes, his Nordic cuisine possesses a certain purity, an essential simplicity and the clever use of seasonal ingredients - with creative flair. These values are reflected in the composition and presentation of each dish and in the planning and preparation that underlies it all.

Noma's unconventional wine list, while largely French, compliments the unconventional cuisine and now includes wine from a vineyard that Noma co-owner Claus Meyer owns on Lilleo, one of the smallest islands in Denmark's North Sea. 'Here,' says Redzepi, handing me a bottle of 2009 Arwen, Lilleø Vin (Sydhavsøerne, Denmark). 'It's our wine named after my daughter.' A blend of Solaris, Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling, and Silvaner, the 2009 Arwen, Lilleø Vin is a collaboration between chef and winemaker Anders Selmer (a former protégé of Redzepi), Meyer, and Redzepi.

Redzepi, the son of a Danish mother and an Albanian father, grew up primarily in Copenhagen, began cooking when he was 15 and has worked all over the world including at elBulli and Thomas Keller's French Laundry in Napa Valley. He was approached by another Nordic cuisine pioneer, Claus Meyer, to open Noma in 2003, at the age of 25.

The vibrant restaurant scene in Copenhagen was inspired by Noma. A former protégé of Redzepi, Anders Selmer, has created Kødbyens Fiskebaren, which brings the spirit of Noma's light, fresh and flavorsome Nordic cuisine to a more casual setting in Vesterbro. Christian Puglisi, former sous chef at Noma, opened up his own modest-looking 'anti-luxury' restaurant Relae in August 2010 in the residential area of Nørrebro and is getting rave reviews.

The idea behind the new Nordic cuisine culinary movement is stimulating and current, and people around the world want to belong to it and feel inspired to involve others in it, too.

Redzepi hosted the first annual MAD Food Camp, a large-scale public event in support of the culinary movement, in Copenhagen in 2011. The aim is to further the quality of Danish gastronomy and produce. The festival aims to become a national food experience with an international scope welcoming thousands of visitors each year. The event received significant financial support from Nordic tourism and business - clearly hoping to recreate Ferran Adrià's 'elBulli effect' which helped attract culinary tourism to Spain.

There are two major culinary movements in haute cuisine at the moment: the use of local, sustainable, organic, and seasonal ingredients; and the use of innovative technologies in modernist cuisine. Noma, with its commitment to quality ingredients from the Nordic environment and modern techniques, has fashioned their own cuisine, which straddles both movements. At the age of 34, Redzepi is one of the most influential chefs in the world and has successfully used culinary innovation to build his brand. His drive and ambition will, undoubtedly, get him that next Michelin star. (Despite holding the World's Best Restaurant title, Noma failed to win a third Michelin star in the 2011 ratings. Its second Michelin star was received in 2007.) Redzepi has also published his first cookbook, Noma Time and Place in Nordic Cuisine and he is starting to appear on TV - he cooked on the BBC series Masterchef: The Professionals in 2010.

So as Redzepi has rolled out the initial part of his culinary movement, now what? His accolades are 'a great tool to fill up the restaurant,' but 'the end goal has to be the whole idea of shaping a cuisine and pushing this momentum forward.' Redzepi has one of the most distinctive and unique approaches to cuisine in the world. His New Nordic Cuisine is reaching a wider audience and for this he has our gratitude. And it's why Noma, in a converted warehouse in Copenhagen - where trading ships once unloaded fish and skins from Greenland, Iceland and the Faroe Islands - could be considered the best restaurant in the world.