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DISH • PROFILE — RENE REDZEPI

the new Nordic frontier

A new style of food is taking the
culinary world by storm
— VICTORIA WELLS meets one of the
chefs leading the charge...

Photo by Tuala Hjarne

From left to right: Noma is in an historic warehouse in Copenhagen; Vegetable field with malt soil and herbs; Kingcrab and leeks in ashes; Rene Redzepi in the Noma kitchen.



When Spanish superchef Ferran Adrià tipped Scandinavia's burgeoning cuisine as the next big thing, the culinary world sat up and took notice. "If Spain was the new France in culinary terms," he observed in 2008, "then Nordic must surely be the new Spain."

"You can really say there was a 'before' and an 'after' that quote," says Danish chef Rene Redzepi, himself at the forefront of the new movement around Nordic cuisine.

Rene and his contemporaries can be credited with breathing new life into a style of food most often associated with potatoes and pickled fish, and the results have been stunning. Copenhagen restaurant Noma, of which Rene is chef and co-owner, soared to third place in the 2009 list of World's 50 Best Restaurants, behind Heston Blumenthal's Fat Duck, and Adrià's own El Bulli, which took top spot for the fourth consecutive year.

Three other Nordic restaurants also made the top 50 list: Chez Dominique (Finland) at #21, Oaxen Skärgårdskrog (Sweden) at #32 and Mathias Dahlgren (Sweden) at #50. Noma was also the Chefs' Choice for Best Restaurant, a win that highlights growing interest in the Nordic region.

It hasn't come about by chance – 32 year old Rene Redzepi is an ambassador for New Nordic Food, a government-backed program designed to showcase and further develop Nordic food and food culture.

When Noma opened in 2003 Rene was tasked with creating a menu that highlighted the best of local produce. After three months researching the ingredients available he says it became clear locally produced food was suffering, as it was easier to get imported products.

Rene says at the time, Nordic cuisine was not regarded as something inspirational.

"There was a food culture, there always has been, (but) the food culture of five years ago was mocked...it was something old and dusty that young people couldn't connect to. How can we expect anybody to know anything about our cuisine and our products when we don't know ourselves and don't take any pride in it?"

In an effort to start discussion around how the local food could be given fresh appeal and stand on a world stage alongside the cuisines of France and Italy, he and business partner Claus Meyer organized a symposium of chefs, food writers and food professionals from throughout Scandinavia in 2004. It resulted in the creation of a 10 point manifesto, which outlined how the New Nordic Cuisine, as it became known, could be developed.

It didn't take long for the new movement to attract attention from the political sector, and the ministers of food, agriculture and fisheries gave their backing. In 2006 the New Nordic Food program was launched, with €3 million in funding over three years. It covers projects across a range of areas, including the study of Nordic ingredients and cooking techniques, and strengthening the domestic seafood market.

The manifesto sets out to promote Nordic cuisine as one based on purity, simplicity and freshness, a cuisine that reflects the changing seasons and highlights ingredients that capture the distinctive climatic conditions of the Nordic region.

"Nordic cuisine is rooted in nature. It is more healthy," explains Rene. "It's a cuisine where you eat more vegetables, you eat more fish and shellfish – it's very seasonal and that works with nature's forces rather than against it."

Placing value on the simplicity of ingredients and their traditional uses is at the centre of the food he and his 25 chefs create at the

40-seat Noma, although modern techniques play a part too. Dishes combine elements that occur together in nature, such as snails served with a purée of moss and wild flowers.

He draws on ingredients from the Nordic region: mussels and deep-sea crabs from the Faeroe Islands; halibut, wild salmon,

Dishes combine elements that occur together in nature, such as snails served with a purée of moss and wild flowers.

seaweed and curds from Iceland, and lamb, musk ox, berries and drinking water from Greenland. Although when local birch sap comes into season for four weeks, it is served at tables instead of water.

"We tap into the tree in a certain way, it just drips out, and an hour later you have a full bottle. You have to serve it ice cold, because there's 1-2 per cent sugar in it, so if it's a little warm you taste the sugar. I love drinking it, and in the old days, before they had the medicines we have now, people who had hayfever drank this in order to prepare them for spring."

He also uses ash (made from burnt cucumber skins marinated in dill oil) as a spice, after finding reference to it in a 200-year-old recipe book. "They used to flavour brines with ash to spice them up."

The two Michelin-starred restaurant also takes the innovative approach of chefs bringing the food to the tables, an element Rene says is intended to remind them of the importance of what they're doing.

"We're actually cooking for the guests, so I thought it would give them a bit more joy in their very hard day that they also got to see a smile from a guest saying 'Thank you, this was just brilliant.' From day one it was a win/win, because the interaction between the chefs and the waiters suddenly was totally different. It was a whole new team spirit and the guests really like to see the chefs."

Food tourism is also an area in which Rene sees huge potential for growth. "Right now it's the most hard-core of the foodies coming through – food bloggers – and we see them at the restaurant every week, they fly in and out just to dine.

"Gastro-tourism is completely new in Denmark and if we can keep developing not only our restaurant, but if all the restaurants can keep developing their own unique way of doing things then it's a big thing in the future."

The New Nordic Cuisine is also having a wider impact than just on restaurants. Rene says off-shoot businesses are springing up too. "You have foragers today which didn't exist before – there are three full time foragers supplying restaurants in Copenhagen and several have employees."

And the foragers have their work cut out for them – Rene says there are more than 2000 types of mushroom in Scandinavia, and 159 types of wild horseradish. "Copenhagen is in touch with nature once again." ●

Noma Restaurant – noma.dk

New Nordic Cuisine – nynordiskmad.org

Rene Redzepi was a presenter at The Langham Melbourne Masterclass 2009. Victoria Wells was a guest at the Masterclass thanks to the Melbourne Food and Wine Festival. The 2010 Melbourne Food & Wine Festival will be held 12-23 March. Visit melbournefoodandwine.com.au