



DISPATCH

Something Is Cooking in the State of Denmark

Noma's celebrated chef, René Redzepi may get all the buzz, but...

By Howie Kahn



Several hundred feet beneath Geneva, Switzerland, a 17-mile loop of a machine called the Large Hadron Collider smashes together subatomic particles at the speed of light. Protons rev up, crash, explode. Physicists, intent on understanding what constitutes and holds together our world, study the impact—all those marvelous bursts of energy that illuminate and transcend the tube. After a week of eating in Copenhagen, where dining is both intensely high-minded and dogmatically earthy, I found myself thinking a lot about the L.H.C.—all that beautiful matter and controlled force—which may be an abnormal thing to consider while



Clockwise from upper left: The bar at Kodbyens Fiskebaren; Copenhagen's cafe-lined riverside; in the kitchen at Kodbyens; pork with aronia berries, paisley and butter whey at Radio; snowcrab rolls at Kodbyens; forager extraordinaire Roland Rittman; lumpfish roe, smoked cheese, pea shoots and three types of bread from Kodbyens

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: THOMAS BUSK/COURTESY KODBYENS FISKEBAREN; COURTESY RADIO; MIKKEL BO/COURTESY KODBYENS FISKEBAREN; ©PER-ANDERS JØRGENSEN; MIKKEL BO (2); MARTIN SOEBY/GALLERY STOCK

digesting a kilo of wood sorrel leaves, but it's not at all off the mark. The big wonder in Denmark these days is an eight-year-old restaurant called Noma. Based on the scene that's emerged all around it, it must be a kind of particle accelerator too.

That the restaurant is "ranked" number one in the world is hardly what makes Noma significant. All champions one day lose their title, and their true importance can only be measured once its peak moment fully passes. With food, newness often hypnotizes and clouds value judgments. The issue for the most ambitious restaurants should actually be legacy. And while Noma will long be known for its groundbreaking treatment of Nordic cuisine, for chef René Redzepi's Whitmanesque-cooking style (contradictions, multitudes) and its deep, doctrinal concern with time and place—so built into its fabric that the installation artist Olafur Elliasson wrote the intro to the restaurant's cookbook as if it were a conceptual art monograph from MoMA, not Noma—what's most impressive about the operation now is how much force its exerting on its city.

Here's what I mean about the particles: Every day around 5 P.M., upstairs in the Noma prep kitchen, the restaurant's crew buzzes around scrubbing surfaces, washing knives, hosing down the floor. Purposeful music—"Ramble On," "More than a Feeling"—blares through speakers. Racks of turquoise-gull eggs and bunches of hay await attention. For a while it's all bodies zipping through tasks. The restaurant, which opened with just eight people in the kitchen, now employs 15 cooks and, at any given time, takes on an additional 25 to 30 interns who come to Copenhagen from as far away as Bolivia and Japan to work 17-hour days for free. Then, there are the extracurriculars, like foraging for elderberries to stack three feet high across the length of a 30-foot table—or staying until 2 A.M. on Saturday nights. After service, everyone gathers to present "projects," new dishes to workshop and discuss. At the end of one recent round, a purveyor made a presentation about his butter until three, sloughing flakes of skin off both male and female cooks' arms and using it as the active enzyme in competing, gender-specific butters. The question was:



From top: Chef Tkktk of Kodbyen; pickled vegetables from Noma; TKTK Kim Rossen of Ralæ nosing a TK wine

Do men or women taste better in a churned dairy spread?

Through all the devotional speed cleaning and the marathon geekery, what's represented by each member of the Noma corps—and what's now been actualized at new restaurants across Copenhagen like Manfred's, Relæ, and Radio—is the idea that any current cook could walk out the door and put their knowledge of year-old carrots, pickled beach plants and pine-needle desserts—all those scrappy, low-lit Nordic things—to use in their own kitchens. Each member of the team represents the potential for creating new matter elsewhere. In this way, Noma is not only an incubator for culinary talent, it's a prime example of how a restaurant, through its own intense, internal bursts of energy, can ultimately transcend its own walls and function as an act of urbanism—a way of transforming life, shifting space. Which is a very good thing for anybody visiting Copenhagen who's hungry for its new signature tastes. Getting into Noma is almost impossible. I begged for one of its 50 seats in ways both professionally aggressive and nauseatingly passive aggressive. Getting into the other places, however, can still be as easy as walking in the door; and what, with regard to bourgeois hunger, is more alluring than the freedom of a good walk-in?

Manfred's Sunday dinner crowd is made up of men who look like different castings of Ryan Gosling. Their women, in deifying knitwear, have blonde topknots and skin resembling milk in the moonlight. Outside, unlocked bicycles lean up against one another, clustered like snuggling campers. The restaurant itself, in Nørrebro, on a street where drug dealing was recently far more common than pouring organic wines from magnums, is named after a food stand that the principles—Noma alums Christian Puglisi, 29, and Kim Rossen, 37—put up one year at the Roskilde music festival. It served peas and pea soup. A "Manfred," they then decided, was a man with a white moustache selling peas on the shoulder of a country road. Where Noma compounds two abbreviations—"no" for Nordic and "ma" for *mad*, the Danish word for food—implying, it seems, a kind of edible jingoism, Manfred's is named for a fictional seed peddler whose goods



From left: The lively dinner scene at Kodbyen; NOMA manager James Spendbury before the dinner rush; Kodbyen's autumn mackerel fresh from the Baltic Sea

ultimately satiate stoned concertgoers.

“Working at Noma required a certain kind of intensity,” says Anders Hansen, now the wine director at Manfred’s. “Here I can do more what I want.” And while there is a kind of outer-borough looseness about the place—with its leather aprons, mismatched coffee cups and tiny sunken-seating area—there’s also something elementally Danish going on. In Copenhagen, so much of public and private living has to do with following all the inspired lines. Just on my walk over—from a hotel for which Arne Jacobsen created both the Swan and Egg chairs—I came across a brilliant pedestrian bridge followed by a park’s eye-catching yellow pavilion. Each would be prominent design features in other cities, but here, they blend into the master plan. It’s as if innovation is just another form of subtlety and simplicity is held to a higher standard of both elegance and functionality.

Some of the dishes are as smart as the furniture and the buildings. They, too, make me consider the integrity of the line. Kohlrabi comes shaved, the shape of double-wide pappardelle. But the cabbage cultivar’s rigidity allows for the strands to stack up in ribbons—Frank Gehry-style. Chunks of giant Limfjord oyster and its brine dress the cucumber-colored vegetable. Flecks of bright-green seaweed sit atop, like newly dropped confetti. A plate of veal tongue—salted for a day, cooked for nine

Flecks of bright-green seaweed sit atop an oyster LIKE NEWLY DROPPED CONFETTI.

hours, then sliced and served cold—comes garnished with tarragon and crispy rye crumbs, each containing a loaf’s-worth of flavor. It’s a spectacular city where things as mundane as bread crumbs and chairs consistently resonate as objects of beauty.

The whole conceit of minimalism falls away with the restaurant’s wine service. On top of being a good place to eat tongue and sculptural plants, Manfred’s is the only natural wine bar in Copenhagen, with over 350 bottles from producers, who, according to Anders, “just use the juice from the grapes.” Essentially, natural wines and the filtered ones with added sulfur that we usually drink don’t even taste like the same beverage. After a glass of Romorantin that smelled like ripeness and Aperol, I asked Anders for a flavor description and he sort of rolled his eyes, which was actually a perfect answer to my lacking question. Instead, he talked about what the wine meant to him. “You taste the risk,” he said. “The risk the maker puts into it when he decides not to use any chemicals. It moves me every time I open a bottle. It’s like life in that way: You lose

some, some work out. I relate to it.”

It should be noted here that Ulf, the other guy pouring wine—a tall, bespectacled Swede with a loose, dark ponytail and big glasses—looks not unlike a healthy David Foster Wallace and, also, that Kierkegaard is buried just up the street. This being the atmosphere, it’s no wonder the Gamay makes me think of the periodic table and the Beaujolais seems to be about the notion of dealing with challenging, fully expressed things. Describing wines like these with adjectives like “oaky,” “rubbery” or “shrubby” would be a misunderstanding, like calling a person of exceptional character and complexity “nice.” When wine is about risk, it’s not about figurative language that could only serve to make a thing more easily understood. And, actually, it’s a pretty awesome act of egolessness to just drink a glass and think, gratefully and contentedly, Damn, I just don’t understand any of this at all. As if that’s not good enough, some Leonard Cohen songs come and some Beatles songs follow, and Anders puts one more glass of the Beaujolais on the table. “Life,” he says, in a sing-song voice, “is very short.”

Puglisi and Rossen also own Relæ, right across the street. “It’s pronounced relay,” says Puglisi, “like the electrical device. It refers to our time learning at Noma, which was electric. It means the energy in the restaurant has to be electric too.” Puglisi was born in Italy, so electricity metaphors come naturally

to him. In Denmark, an electric atmosphere pretty much means the lights are on, functioning well and will continue to shine. But Relæ has a very real buzz about it.

Ulf, who previously poured wine at Noma and works at Relæ as well as Manfred's, starts me out with a glass of champagne. "Bubbles?" he asks. His affect is anything but bubbly. He brings some lettuces and wood sorrel in a celeriac wrapper to my seat at the bar. He shows me where to find my silverware: in a crisply designed drawer that slides out from beneath the countertop. Then, chummy after the last two days of service, tells me I'm treating my "autumn roll" incorrectly. "You're missing the point of how to eat it," he says, "so you get the salty first and then the acidity." I listen. Take an all-encompassing bite. And he's right. One should follow the other. Simple enough, but there are rules.

Bread comes next in a stout leather basket—a small, warm boule thoughtfully broken in half by hand. In Denmark, the whole don't-fill-up-on-the-bread thing has to be set aside. The bread here is simply too good to eat in moderation. In fact, meals in Copenhagen must be treated as two meals: the food meal and bread meal. You're to partake in both. No excuses.

Another important maxim is this: always eat dishes that look like the forest floor, the bed of the ocean, a scrubby tract of beachfront, part of a tree or anything that resembles a magical plant from Japanese animation. Sometimes, Nordic plating can go a little far, like at Noma, where the meat of one lone mussel is served amidst a plate of blue-black shells. The effect is that of a vanitas painting, and if you happen to be eating alone, as I was, all its emptiness brings too close to mind the idea of death. I know Noma is concerned with big ideas, but drawing so directly on mortality is perhaps a little much, even for "the best restaurant in the world."

At Relæ, the touch is lighter, though no less refined. A small dome of aerated sheep's-milk yogurt conceals jewel-like purple radishes. Nasturtium petals, their stems still intact, fully shingle its surface. All together, it looks like something urchin-y from the movie *Spirited Away* or, like Olafur Eliasson's idea of a toy. Even simpler is a plate of hand-ground beef, oysters and lovage. The



From top: Brill with bread crumbs and spring vegetables from Kodbyens; NOMA's famous dish, the Hen and the Egg; selecting wine at Kodbyen

meat is boldly red and cut into shapes resembling plump grains of rice. Its effect is mostly textural. The pureed lovage on the bottom is, by far, the more prominent flavor. Overall, the ingredients are fewer, the techniques are simpler and the meal is no less pleasurable for its editing. Where the food at Noma is constantly challenging notions of time and place, a meal at Relæ asks only that you're in the present.

The crumbled cauliflower looks like freshly fallen snow. Burned garlic takes on the tone of soil. I thought I'd get sick of these presentations after a while. Meals with endless diorama elements should become comical after a week, shouldn't they? Where's the taxidermied musk ox? Where's Margot Tenenbaum? I should be wondering; instead, I'm wanting more of that snow, more of that dirt.

RADIO is Copenhagen's newest accelerated particle. Claus Meyer, who founded Noma and literally wrote the manifesto for the New Nordic Kitchen, owns the place. Jesper Kirketerp, 32, one of its two chefs—Rasmus Kliim is the other—started out in Bethlehem, er, at Noma too. Dinner is similar to that at Relæ—impressionistically plated, ingredient-driven, loyally local and creative to a point. I think Radio has better light fixtures, but in Copenhagen that's like arguing about which supermodel is prettier.

That the food is like Relæ's, and influenced by Noma's, doesn't mean it's unoriginal. Calling out similarities isn't a knock and I'm not about to complain that too many places here are grilling lettuces, seasoning with pickled alliums and valuing fresh produce—even the weird kinds—over meat. All that just makes me want to stay. What's going on in Copenhagen right now is of a specific moment, but it's hardly trend-driven cooking. Rather, for the first time, a biodiverse national cuisine—it's replacing the old standard: pork-a-thousand-ways—is emerging and local chefs are all eager to start speaking the language. The restaurants here aren't exactly interchangeable, but they are of a piece. And they all have the same origin. On the one hand, it's Redzepi, his Noma army and the kind of energy a kitchen almost never unleashes on a city. On the other, it's a long overdue creative response to foods that have always been here and repressed desires like those will usually fall away with a boom.

FROM TOP: MIRA ARKIN/SPISLIV/COURTESY KODBYENS FISKEBAREN; DITTE ISAGER; MIKKEL BO/COURTESY KODBYENS FISKEBAREN