

lifestyle

Eat Your Way Through Copenhagen

How does the Danish capital continue to reign as a gastronome's paradise?

by
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PHOTO (NOMA) DITTE SÆGER



Brace, Copenhagen's pioneering Italian-Nordic restaurant, has a Michelin Green star for its sustainability.

(Opposite page) Until May, Noma's seasonal menu is a showcase of Scandinavian seafood.

Few were surprised when Noma in Copenhagen, Denmark, took the top spot on the World's 50 Best Restaurants list last year. It has now held that position five times. Geranium, also in Copenhagen, took second place. Each has three Michelin stars.

Alchemist, located down the road from Noma in the warehouses of Refshaleoen island, is No. 58 on the top 100 extended World's Best list. Five restaurants in Copenhagen have two stars, and seven have one Michelin star—a healthy crop for a city of around 800,000 inhabitants.

Food writers, industry players and gastronomes make regular pilgrimages to the city, where even restaurants without stars or other accolades serve memorable meals.

This is the big attraction for Singapore-born Kenneth Foong, Noma's first Asian head chef. He says, "The energy of the Copenhagen dining scene is unique. It isn't as erratic as NYC, but it's not like

Japan either, where the best restaurants are closely guarded secrets. It has its own brand of accessibility and a wide variety of food venues, from natural wine bars to bodegas, and hole-in-the-wall places to white-tablecloth establishments," he says. "There is, of course, also the geographic location, which offers some of the best seafood and produce in the world."

Copenhagen's recipe for success has been built on the concept of local produce since 2004, when the New Nordic Food manifesto was drawn up by chef Claus Meyer, Noma's co-founder, along with René Redzepi. It included 10 principles that focussed on locality, seasonality, and sustainability, and was signed by chefs across the Nordic region.

There was little new in the manifesto's values. Nicola Fanetti, chef-owner of Brace, Copenhagen's pioneering Italian-Nordic restaurant, which has a Michelin Green star for its sustainability, points out that this approach to cooking is similar to

that of the Mediterranean.

Despite this, it was revolutionary for the region: "They may not have invented something new, but having these ideas in the cold region of Scandinavia, and using the wild ingredients of their region, looking at and being inspired by the nature around them, that was their genius," Fanetti says.

To turn the movement into a lifestyle, the Nordic Council launched the New Nordic Food Programme in 2005 with 3 million Euros in support. Summits, workshops, and educational projects in schools have been held. Even a Nordic food-themed fashion show was staged in Shanghai to promote the concept in 2013.

From foragers to fermenters, and organic farmers to sustainable fishermen, the movement created a new local ecosystem. In 2011, Redzepi set up the MAD Symposium, an annual gathering of some of the world's best chefs, transforming Copenhagen into a cutting-edge culinary destination.

A decade on, many of the original founding principles remain deeply etched in the region's gastronomic heart, even if only a smattering of restaurants could still be described as strictly New Nordic.

Rasmus Kofoed, head chef and co-owner of Geranium, believes evolution is a sign of maturity. He says, "At the time, it was important to recognise our local ingredients, to see the carrot right before our noses. Restaurants may have matured, but we are still eager to explore and discover our country. Cooking is also a reflection of ourselves and our personal values, rather than a manifesto. I don't think too much about a movement from over 10 years ago."

Earlier this year, Geranium reopened after a refurbishment and with an entirely new menu. With new spices, such as cinnamon and nutmeg, not seen in the Geranium pantry before, the dishes are as stunning as ever, elegant and precise. The kitchen also went meat-free, reflecting Kofoed's values—he grew up vegetarian—although the restaurant still serves seafood.

Given the city's strong sustainability



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01 As with so many top Copenhagen restaurants, Brace's success is built on its reverence for local produce.

02 Chef Rasmus Munk's Alchemist is a full sensory restaurant that combines theatre and politics on a plate.

03 Alchemist's tasting menu includes a "Tongue Kiss", which invites the diner to lick toppings off the prosthetic.



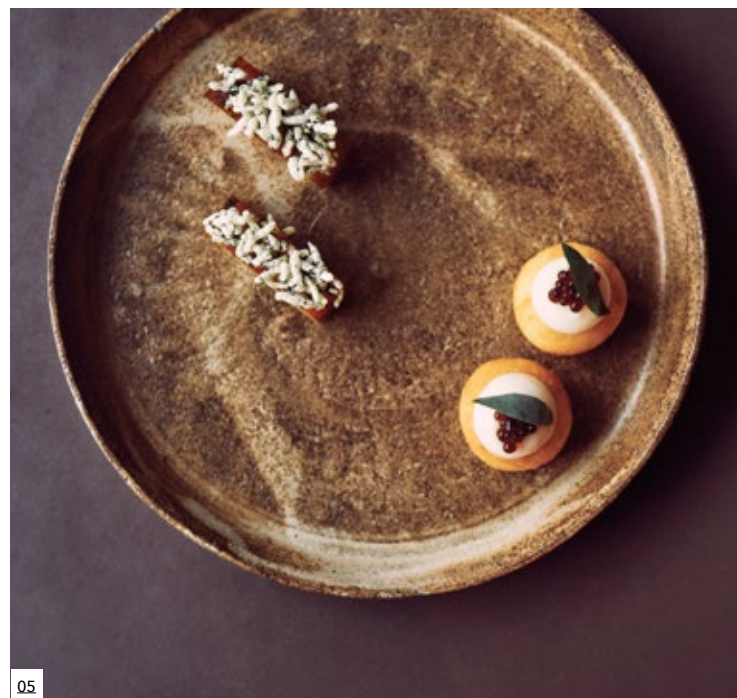
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ethic and gastronomically informed diners, it is surprising that Copenhagen has only one vegan fine dining restaurant, the Michelin Green-starred Ark.

The journey to where he is today was not what Jason Renwick expected. “When I opened Ark six years ago, I thought vegan food would be booming by now, but it dropped off after its initial novelty,” he says. “But we’re growing and improving every month. We have a great team of chefs, regular interns, and people who want to work with us.”

After the success of Ark, Renwick opened Lupa, a plant-based bistro, last year. To get people to eat less meat, however possible, he has partnered with “mushroom king” Kyle Cometta of Funga Farm to grow hyper-local, organic and sustainable mushrooms.

Cometta started growing mushrooms at home in a spare bedroom, much to the dismay of his wife. The business quickly expanded to

dedicated premises, and is now moving to an even bigger warehouse to keep up with demand. At Ark and Lupa, mushrooms are plentiful. They also appear on some of the finest plates across the city.

Funga Farm is one of many initiatives that have sprung up in Copenhagen’s dining ecosystem. Small, innovative suppliers help keep the scene alive.

The transfer of skills to the next generation of chefs is another key reason for Copenhagen’s long-standing position as a global dining mecca. Graduates of Noma, Geranium, and other iconic restaurants have opened their own, sometimes backed by Redzepi.

Jonathan Tam, a Noma alumnus and former head chef of Relae, a sustainable and organic hotspot that shut its doors last year, launched Jatak, offering Cantonese-influenced dishes made with Nordic ingredients.

Thanks to Noma, Tam says a generation of diners is more knowledgeable about local ingredients and more interested in learning about other cultures. “Copenhagen does not have a great deal of ethnic food, and this has opened up possibilities for chefs to present their interpretations of it,” says Tam. “People here are open to ingredients. That makes it fun for us, since it is a new concept and approach.”

Another Asian-inspired restaurant, Propaganda, is headed by Youra Kim. By using organic ingredients from Danish farmers, paired with natural wines, Kim takes a non-dogmatic approach to South Korean food.

Silberbauers Bistro, by ex-Relae chef Mathias Silberbauer, opened last year. An industry favourite, it serves rustic French bistro fare on vintage crockery and checked tablecloths. Silberbauer sources the finest organic ingredients, specialising in fish and seafood.

Alchemist takes dining to another level as it occupies a former set-building workshop of the Royal Danish Theatre, a state-of-the-art, computer-controlled four-storey building. There are around 40 dishes, edible cocktails, and music and theatre performances served in

04 Michelin Green-starred Ark is the city’s only vegan fine dining restaurant.

05 Seasonal dishes and natural and/or biodynamic wines can be discovered at Ark.

06 Head chef and co-owner Rasmus Kofoed re-opened Geranium this year with an entirely new menu.

07 At Jatak, Jonathan Tam offers Cantonese-influenced dishes such as *you tiao*.



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five different spaces, including under the planetarium’s dome. Lars Seier Christensen, who also supports Geranium, invested US\$15 million (S\$20.4 million) in Alchemist.

Rasmus Munk, its 30-year-old chef and co-owner, says that while the new crop of chefs are standing on the shoulders of the New Nordic giants, he is firmly looking forward.

“When I was an apprentice chef, Noma was the best restaurant in the world, and it is still the best now. The old generation—Noma and Geranium—will pass at some point,” says Munk. “Lars [Christensen] would like to invest in this new generation.”

Within a year of opening in 2019, Alchemist received two Michelin stars, a rare achievement. Its provocative menu, which includes pig’s blood ice cream and toppings licked off silicone casts of human

tongues, has also been hailed as a success.

Alchemist, however, may have to wait to take the mantle. The secret to Noma’s success, according to Foong, is innovation, which has been part of its culture since its inception.

“We have become individuals who are uncomfortable with the status quo, regardless of what it may be,” he says. “This constant need for change manifests itself not just solely in the menu but also areas outside of it: improving the work lives of our team members, relooking traditional structures of restaurants, and the greater conversation of restaurants and their impacts.”

The success of Noma continues to influence global gastronomy. With new and established culinary personalities contributing their voices, Copenhagen looks set to shine even brighter.”

PHOTOS (ARK) CHRISTOFFER ROSENFELDT; (GERANIUM) CLAES BECH-POULSEN; (JATAK) VICTORIA BURROWS