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"BRACE"ING IT OUT

BY NICOLA FANETTI



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Italian chef Nicola Fanetti helms Brace, a Michelin-starred restaurant in Copenhagen that borrows from his Italian roots to present a Nordic-Italian cuisine. His Danish leanings can be ascribed to his earlier time at Noma. He writes about the challenges during and after the COVID crisis and preparing for the future.

I moved to Copenhagen in 2011 with the intent to build and expand my experience in high gastronomy - a passion since my childhood in Italy. All of my choices in life have been oriented towards a goal that, in my heart, I knew I would eventually reach. Ursula, my life partner, is of German-Brazilian origin; she too had dreams and moved to this splendid city, initially to study biochemistry. She fell in love with Copenhagen and decided to remain here, binding herself inextricably to the food and wine world, a world that we would soon share.

Several years after we met, we became partners in life, as well as in business. After years of apprenticeship and countless sacrifices, we took a risk in 2016 and opened the doors to our restaurant Brace in January of 2017. Denmark may seem like

a distant and cold place to some, but we saw it as a place to call home and build our future.

We found our place and created an identity within this city and its lifestyle and approach to work. It is a center of continuous gastronomic research promoted by institutions that make it one of the most economically and culturally advanced countries in Europe.

We went against the norm: breaking tradition to create the very first Italian-Nordic restaurant in the world. Brace is located in the heart of the city. We strongly wanted to give it this name, moving away from its literal Italian translation and instead wanting to recall its meaning in terms of construction: the strong will to build solid foundations, with solid principles underlying our cuisine

and philosophy. With passion and respect for the products derived from the earth, we carefully select the best seasonal, local, and organic ingredients. A continuous search for small local companies that produce with love, our deep-rooted ethical values, along with our strong knowledge of Italian cooking techniques, have allowed us to outline the clear identity that we wanted to give to Brace. This is a harmonic gastronomic combination of two worlds seemingly so distant, yet much closer than you might think. With my dishes I wanted to push Brace beyond its own roots planted in Italian cuisine: now it travels to a much different dimension, embracing the nature around us. It was my determination combined with that of Ursula, a woman of a thousand resources, and our entire team, that has allowed us to face and even overcome the difficult times of the last few months.

The pandemic that hit the whole world could not fail to touch, although with very different numbers, Denmark. However, the country knew how to act in time, with strict rules that every citizen prudently respected. Despite the efficiency of the government and the good results of the restrictions given, the virus has in any case affected Denmark, and, above all, the restaurant sector, which has paid for it and will unfortunately continue to pay greater consequences. But Brace did not want to stop - our team did not want to stop! It didn't seem right to our kids, to our own sacrifices, but most of



all to our passion that had to continue to feed itself in some way. Reacting could be the only plausible answer and we at Brace did it in the only way we knew: reinventing ourselves, giving us a new shape, testing ourselves!

The positive energies have been channeled towards a new format, a style of cuisine very far from what Brace has always known, so far that in other times, it would have been unimaginable: take-away! At that point, fine

dining restaurants had the same fear as ours - would it be okay for us to do take-away without damaging our name? We decided to put our best feet forward and create a gourmet take-away for the upcoming period. In just a few days we were able to create a menu that best suited the new concept, we organized new production lines, and we continued to search for top quality products, thus maintaining a high level of product quality. We also kept the morale of every single member of our team high, and we received enthusiasm

and loyalty in return. We started the take-away in mid-March delivering our dishes only in the areas close to the center, to those more easily accessible with our pick-up. Initially I was the one making the deliveries myself!

We worked well and kept perfecting and raising the bar by periodically offering new dishes that could entice customers. We controlled the prices and this allowed us to

make ourselves even more known and to be more appreciated. Within two months, we have had countless sold-outs days. Thanks to collaborations with some local delivery companies, we have been able to reach almost all corners of the city; every single acknowledgment from our customers has had an immense value for our team. Since opening, we were also blessed and humbled to have received five stars in all three national newspapers as well as write-ups in *The New York Times* and *Gambero Rosso*. All these recognitions gave us the determination to continue and above all to keep doing more and better.

From this determination was born the idea of the "Take-Away 4 Hands Edition", the 4-hand version of our normal take-away. The intention was to invite chefs into our kitchen who, like us, were going through this difficult moment. The support between colleagues, if done in the right way, can be a great stimulus for everyone. We thought that creating dishes by crossing the hands of our brigade with those of great colleagues could produce a unique "signed" tasting menu for diners: it was possible to create a moment of conviviality and serenity, in a safe and comfortable environment like only your own home can be.

We, along with our collaborators, discussed and reasoned how we could best organize and communicate this type of initiative. We made a list of chef friends to propose this collaboration to and contacted them personally. We wanted them to hear our reason for this initiative and what it would mean for us, for them, and for all the guests who would join. We wanted to create that nostalgic feeling that we all had of holding a special event at our restaurants. Something that we and our guests could look forward to, while shining a spotlight on us and colleagues who also needed support during these times. This involved sharing, collaborating, and supporting values to create a unique 4-hands tasting menu consisting of about five dishes, signed by

me and our guest chef. Each dish would represent our origins, our history, our cooking philosophy, and a way of feeling united in a historical moment that obliged us to remain physically distant for entire weeks.

Everything worked perfectly! We contacted several colleagues, some of whom loved the idea such as Christian Puglisi and Matt Orlando, but couldn't join as they were very busy figuring out how to proceed in their own businesses - suggesting to take it up in another moment when things are clearer. The first collaborations established were Claus Meyer and Steffen Villadsen, both of whom joined immediately. Claus Meyer's first response was, "It's a wonderful initiative that I am happy to partake in!" Their enthusiasm, skill, and professionalism were the key to the success of the 4-hands initiative. I was also really happy that my brigade, made up of very young people, got to know a pioneer of the Nordic cuisine like Claus and a man with a great personality like Steffen. I had never worked with the two of them, and it was so interesting to teach each other techniques and exchange our experiences.

We received countless emails from guests thanking us for creating such a special concept for them to enjoy during these dark times. They mentioned that we brought a period of light into their difficult days and allowed their minds to drift away from the current worries and uncertainties. This brought us all immense joy.

After these first two events which occurred on April 2 (Claus) and April 26 (Steffen), the work with our daily take-away had grown exponentially, and we began to see signs of reopening and returning to normal based on government directives. The return of Brace is a big and emotionally charged goal, it requires concentration and slow rhythms; therefore, we paused the 4-hands to focus on the reopening and I am sure that the special 4-hand edition





will return, not only for its success, for the results and gratification obtained, but also for the meaning, for the sense of belonging to the world of haute cuisine, for knowing how to put aside the ego - leaving room for collaboration between chefs of various kinds. We survived, and we did it with immediate reactivity and with the amazing support of all those who believe in Brace being built with hard sacrifices.

We had fun, and at the same time we savoured the satisfactory results of our new business, that after the due evaluations we decided, in agreement with our team, to keep up even after the reopening of Brace. We are studying the methods as well as the feasibility, but what we can say with certainty is that our take-away will have its own path to follow, parallel to Brace, and

will have its own identity and name: Brace-Out! It will be part of our future.

Instead, Brace will return to its true nature stronger than ever. The essence will not change; if anything, we have learned to reinvent ourselves and see ways to improve and mold into other shapes, colors, and dishes! We have some small and big changes in store: some inevitably concern the menu, which will change as it varies seasonally; others concern our structure, a small restyling that will give us the right energy to start again in a new environment; and some innovative surprises to be announced. What will not change will be the values, our cooking manifesto, empathy with the land and with the people so dear to us, the love for our work, and the passion for what we create.

