On Campus

Nordic Nosh

By
Maya Rock
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“Taste the small vial,” says Mark Emil Hermansen, the concept developer at the two-Michelin-star-rated restaurant Noma in Copenhagen. “Vinegar brought from Denmark.” A wave of gentle clicks rolls through the Northwest Corner Building auditorium as more than a hundred people pop open the plastic vials.

Downed in a single gulp, the yellowish-green vinegar, given out at the start of Hermansen’s lecture, packs a punch akin to a shot of liquor — an attention-getting kickoff to the April 6 symposium, The New Nordic Cuisine in New York City,

presented by the Department of Germanic Languages.

“I felt like my mouth was completely cleaned of the flavors that I had eaten over the last ten years,” says Takeshi Kaji, a biological anthropology major, moments after the experience. “Brushing twice a day doesn’t clean out your mouth as much as pine vinegar. My mouth was born again.”

Clean is a word that comes up often in the New Nordic Cuisine, a movement started in 2004 with a manifesto signed by twelve influential Scandinavian chefs, among them Hermansen’s boss, Noma chef René Redzepi. The ten-point platform calls for preparing food that’s *pure*, *simple*, and *fresh*, in hopes of putting Scandinavia on the gastronomic map.

But this audience is interested in more than flavors: a crowd that includes a grad student in sustainability, a lawyer, a microbiologist, a Whole Foods vendor, an NYU professor, and a novelist asks questions about yeast strains and government labels. This response is just what the symposium’s organizer, Columbia adjunct professor Hanne Pico Larsen, expected, having advertised at Columbia, NYU, and all the Scandinavian consulates, as well as in *Edible Brooklyn* and *Edible Manhattan*. “Food studies is big in New York City,” she says, calling the symposium a “true New York City event.”

The presenter’s slides, though, are far from New York: in the beauty of the dark forests, swirling waters, and jagged cliffs of the Scandinavian landscape, one gets a feel for what’s known in the movement as the Scandinavian *terroir* — a French word roughly meaning “sense of place.” Nordic cuisine proponents seek to bring wild mushrooms and root vegetables to diners’ plates with their essences intact, which means using certain foods only when they’re in season. In this way, the cuisine resembles the growing farm-to-table movement familiar to Americans.

Hermansen shows a slide with a dish that he says can be seen “almost as a symbol of the New Nordic Cuisine: nature transformed into culture.” The crowd murmurs in surprise at bright red radishes half buried in dirt in a clay pot. It looks like a page from a gardening catalog, but it’s a Noma dish. Hermansen explains that the soil — really a mix of toasted malt and hazelnuts — is entirely edible.

During the break, there is coffee and small, delicate chocolates provided by the Danish-born gourmet chocolatier Fritz Knipschildt. A trio of women debate Hermansen’s confident assertion that all the Scandinavian countries are equal

members of the food movement. “Even if they talk about the Nordic region, there are big differences between the individual countries,” says Magdalena Herrgard, the cultural attaché at the Finnish consulate. Despite the rise in Danish and Swedish restaurants, “no one in the US knows Finnish food.”

But people get a chance to learn a *little* about Finnish cuisine through rye-bread baker Simo Kuusisto’s presentation. Kuusisto started his New York–based bread business, Nordic Breads, without a connection to the New Nordic Cuisine movement, but he still sees a link, in that rye bread is a Scandinavian staple and that he gets his rye locally from a farmer upstate — “the little terroir we have here with our own land.”

Siggi Hilmarsson ’04BUS, founder of the yogurt company Siggi’s, and Fredrik Berselius, chef and founder of Aska restaurant in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, got inspiration from their childhoods. Hilmarsson, while growing up in Iceland, lamented the traditional Icelandic snacks his parents forced him to eat. “I got potatoes and skyr, and I got it pretty plain. I got flatbread and rye.” But when he came to New York, he missed skyr — Icelandic yogurt — and went on a mission to replicate it. He found willing customers, and eventually quit his post-business-school consulting job to run Siggi’s full-time.

For Berselius, food is tied up with the suburbs of his native Stockholm, where “all weekend we would go out in the forest and pick berries and mushrooms.” He adheres to the New Nordic manifesto in his restaurant, using local and in-season ingredients, even if it means only being able to offer a herring dish once a year.

As the symposium ends, the audience receives samples of Kuusisto’s rye bread. The bread is hearty and filling, but when attendee Aïcha Konaté ’12CC is asked to name her favorite offering, she reaches back to the event’s beginning, in a sentiment perhaps influenced by the New Nordic Cuisine movement’s search for authenticity.

“The little vinegar vials — I think that was probably the best. The yogurt, chocolates, and the rye, that was nice, but the vinegar was great because we knew that it was made in Denmark.”

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