

A FORAGER'S NEW FLAVOURS

A Danish chef picks out unusual aromas from local flora and fauna

By FRANK BRUNI

When a cook is said to be in the weeds, it usually means he is tangled up in too many orders coming at him too fast.

But on a recent afternoon on the seashore, about an hour's drive from Copenhagen, the Danish chef Rene Redzepi was, quite literally, in the weeds. Up to his knees. And he was snacking. Like a rabbit, albeit a rabbit in charge of a restaurant that has set the culinary world abuzz.

Treating the windswept brush as an unkempt salad bar, he plucked a thin green blade.

"This is how the Vikings got their vitamin C," he said. "It's called scurvy grass. It has a horseradish tone."

Nibbling away

For 15 minutes he and a companion nibbled on various petals, leaves and shoots, attracting stares from onlookers who wondered at their sanity and zest for roughage.

"So much of what you see here is edible," said Redzepi, who dispatches his staff to collect the scurvy grass and sorrel, besides sea coriander, beach mustard and bellflowers. All of these make their way to his dishes.

He is omnivorous in his exoticism but restrictive in his geography. If the Nordic region doesn't yield it, Redzepi doesn't

Redzepi uses his laboratory — a houseboat, with an upper deck that's all kitchen — to put Nordic items through dress rehearsals



Rene Redzepi (centre) works with his team in Noma

serve it, with rare exceptions (coffee and chocolate).

That approach might seem a recipe for obscurity, which is what chefs, diners and critics predicted for his restaurant, Noma, when it opened in Copenhagen in 2003. Seven years later, Noma is an international sensation, as is Redzepi, 32.

Noma books up three months in advance and with just 12 tables accommodating 40 guests, it doesn't have much wiggle room.

Renewing tradition

Redzepi believes that the most special, inimitable contribution a restaurant can make is to serve the food that is freshest and truest on its given patch of the planet, to sift through that region's flora and fauna for unfamiliar flavours, to scour its forgotten traditions for ingredients that cooks have stopped using.

A visitor to Noma is likely to be introduced to the peculiar astringency of sea buckthorn, an orange berry with an outrageous tang. Redzepi pairs a pulp of air-dried sea buckthorn with pickled rose hips in one amuse-bouche. It's very colourful, eccentric and absorbing.

He makes a gallery of ersatz capers by pickling the buds of

ramson flowers, which have a garlicky perfume and taste.

One of his signature starters combines long, thin tubes of parsley-encased razor-clam flesh with what he calls "snow" of frozen, grated horseradish and an emerald juice of parsley and clam that, when poured on to the plate table side, skitters and bubbles, and eddies and swirls like something on a microscope slide.

Since he interprets "local" in a more ethnically thematic than literal way, the fellow Nordic country of Iceland is fair game and that's where he gets fat, exquisite langoustine tails. They are cooked briefly on a plancha and served amid dabs of emulsified oyster purée and drifts of seaweed powder on hefty, craggy rocks instead of plates. A diner is denied utensils and instructed to use fingers to drag the langoustine through its ablutions.

Natural connection

Redzepi likes to have people eat with their hands and creates a kind of theatre at Noma that underscores the connection he wants them to feel with nature — and that has the deliberate side-benefit of being great fun. He presents root vegetables in a flowerpot whose "soil" is a



Rene Redzepi, chef of Noma restaurant, picks wild herbs near Copenhagen

Photos by New York Times



Pickled vegetables and flowers with smoked bone marrow



Razor clams, parsley and horseradish



Orange sea-urchin powder, red shrimp and herbs

layer of malt and hazelnut flour over an emulsion of sheep's-milk yoghurt, tarragon and other herbs that functions as a dip. A dish of shrimp and sea-urchin powder, meanwhile, is arranged as a beachscape, with scattered stones and tufts of grass.

Cooks regularly stray from the crowded, relatively cramped kitchen into the dining room to deliver and explain such dishes. That's what Noma is largely about, though it's also about a

relentless questioning of what should and can be eaten and whether the usual experience of an ingredient is the best one.

Floating laboratory

Redzepi uses his laboratory — a houseboat docked about 250 feet from the restaurant, with an upper deck that's all kitchen — to put Nordic ingredients through dress rehearsals. That's where he and his team are working on a new venison dish.

"We imagine being the deer," he said. "It steps on snails and fiddlehead ferns. The flavours will go together. Snails and deer have a symbiosis."

He has placed an order for 2,000 snails from the professional foragers he uses to supplement what his cooks, on their days out of the kitchen, can scrounge up. He'll capture one or two himself. It's his instinct, his way.

— New York Times News Service



Fish stew by Giorgio Alessio

Lip-smacking alchemy

A hole-in-the-wall restaurant offers a blend of Yorkshire and Italy

By PASCAL WYSE

Good news, everyone: Finally some tangible proof that wormholes exist. To illustrate, imagine a napkin. If it is laid out flat on the table, the distance between the two corners is about 30cm. But fold it in two, corner to corner, and there's no distance at all between the two corners. If the universe is a bit like that napkin and has these folds in what is called the space-time continuum, large distances could be travelled in the blink of an eye down a connecting wormhole.

Foodies' paradise

All a bit hypothetical — until now. I've found one that takes you from Scarborough to Piedmont in seconds, without any fuffing about in the Channel tunnel. Here is where black pudding sits on polenta, winkles meet pasta and truffles get on with cuttlefish. My mother was also very excited about all this, not because she follows the science of quasi-permanent intra-universe travel corridors but

because she got to eat a fabulous bowl of home-made spaghetti with velvet crab, among many other treats, just down the road from where she works.

Popular with the locals

Although a band of locals are clearly devoted to Lanterna (I asked one couple if they had eaten well and they looked at me as if I had wondered whether the sea behind us was wet), chef and patron Giorgio Alessio is still getting in folk who have lived in the area for decades and only just discovered the restaurant, which he runs with his wife Rachel. Signed photos of stars peer down from the bar (Ned Sherrin and Barry Sheene — now there's a combo), many led here from Scarborough's Stephen Joseph theatre by Alan Ayckbourn, another local champion. The cover of the menu is a doodle by David Hockney, who clearly enjoyed his meal — or forgot his wallet. "When he left that, I thought, it's a ma pension," Giorgio said with a comic mash of Italian and Yorkshire accent. "These are to die for," said

The interiors of Lanterna lend it a homely feel



Photos by Tony Bartholomew

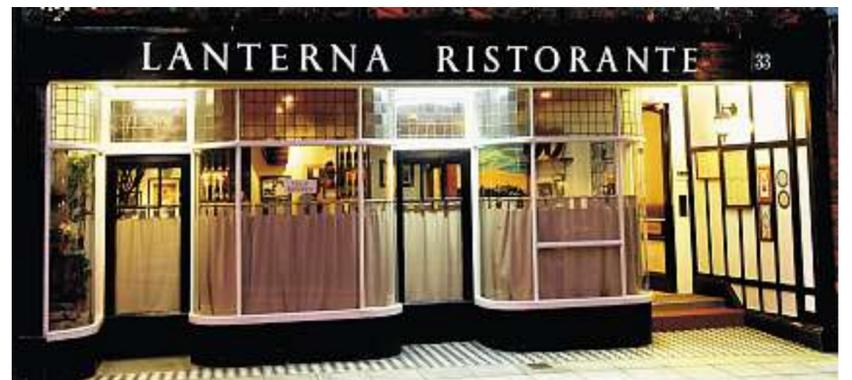
Mum from behind a battered langoustine — the first of many deaths she was to have during the course of our meal. The oozing, sweet flesh was testament to Giorgio's claim that if you have freshness, half the battle is won.

He cycles down to the harbour each morning to bid on what looks best. Four velvet crabs — an undervalued local catch that often gets dismissed to France, much to Giorgio's bemusement — go into that spaghetti sauce, which builds on chopped celery, shallots and carrot with cream.

From simple to complex

Despite summer having got its act together, chickpea and oxtail stew and venison ravioli proved too good to miss, before fillet of sea bass and porcini risotto for mains. The stew, pasta and risotto all ran deep with flavour — complex comfort food teased from simple components — while the fish lounged on a thick bed of sage, rosemary and thyme picked from the restaurant's two allotments.

And all the while, we eyed up the truffle menu and vowed to



come back in season (from October to January), when Giorgio's regular shopping trips to Italy will also bring back that smelly white jewel.

He'll probably tell you all about them himself when he emerges to greet his diners after cooking. This part of the meal ought to be listed on the menu.

As we finished nettle and chocolate ice-creams, Giorgio reported on local foraging and

Scarborough wool, diagnosed my pasta-making technique and tweaked Mum's Yorkshire pudding recipe — which, given that she's been making it for 60 years, is no mean feat.

Feels like home

"If I had to criticise anything, it would be the knives and forks," said Mum, robbed of the chance to explain a silver hallmark in some detail. But Lanterna's decor

is worn and loved, like a family home, so fancy forks are not the priority there. All the passion comes out in the food, which steams with pride for the products of Yorkshire and Piedmont.

Lanterna has that touch of alchemy that stands between an OK bowl of pasta and a dish that shoots you down a wormhole all the way to Italy.

— Guardian News and Media Limited