Staff from Lebanese restaurant Tawlet serve lunch

Food in a world gone MAD

René Redzepi's annual Copenhagen food festival is a culinary utopia, writes chef and restaurateur **Aoibheann MacNamara**

MAD Symposium is a Danish food festival now in its third year, a grassroots event that brings farmers, academics, food writers, chefs and activists together in the hope that something interesting or inspiring might come of it.

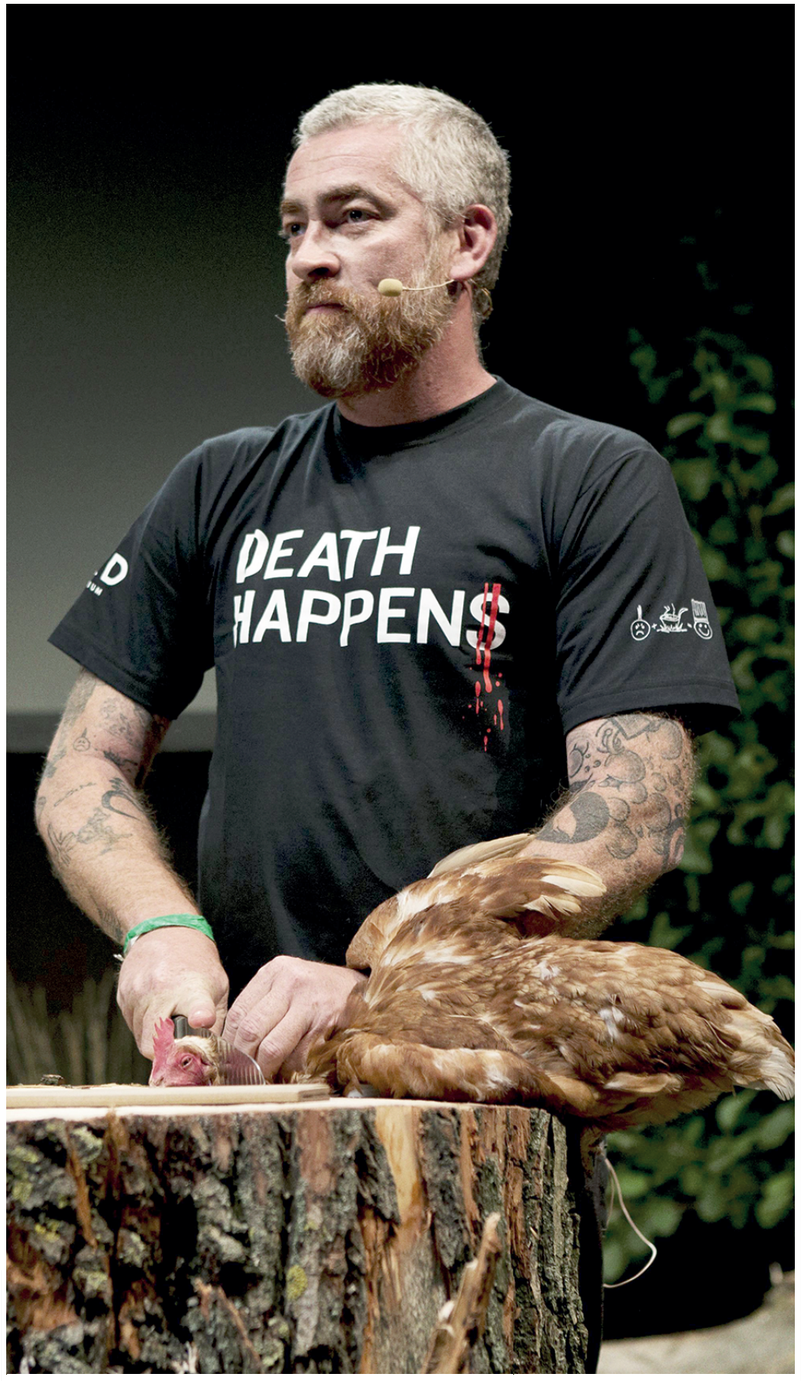
Headed by René Redzepi from Noma, one of the most influential chefs in the world, this year's event was co-curated by David Chang, the Korean-American chef and entrepreneur behind the Momofuku restaurant group, adding a definite sense of American realism.

The theme was 'guts' – both the practical term for insides, and the emotional sense of the passion and persistence all of us need to get things going.

On a glistening Copenhagen morning we took the boat to Refshaleöen, where the red circus tent – the MAD stage for the next two days – lit up the skyline. As we came off the boat, René was there to shake all of our hands. The best chef in the world, the main man of this event, and he still took the time to shake all our hands; he did the same on the second day, and also personally greeted the almost 600 people who attended the closing dinner.

After a typical Danish breakfast, we entered the tent, which was like an Icelandic rave with a dead pig hanging where the disco ball should have been.

The opening 'act' was Italian butcher Dario Cecchini, who carried out a full pig dissection – entrails and all – while reciting Dante in Italian. With his American wife translating, he encouraged us to be conscious carnivores and to respect the gift of meat, the most sensitive of the food chains. It was a weighty and impressive start to what was undoubtedly going to be a profound event.



Day one included fermentation revivalist Sandor Katz, author and sustainability activist Diana Kennedy – now in her 90th year, and still a powerhouse – Roland Rittman, the Swedish forager who had such a strong influence on Noma, and the makers of the food documentary The Perennial Plate. But for me, the real highlight was a ten-year-old schoolgirl from Scotland.

Martha Payne raised thousands to feed schoolchildren in Africa after a benign blog post about her school dinner went viral. So young and too shy and overwhelmed to even speak, her Dad came to talk for her. It was incredibly moving.

Lunch on the first day was made by my friend Kamal Mouzawak from Lebanon and 20 cooks from his restaurant, Tawlet, and the Souk el Tayeb, Lebanon's farmers' market. This is an organisation that is all about bringing together fractured communities through food, land and agriculture.

Some of these women had never been out of Lebanon – Raja, a Palestinian woman, doesn't even have a passport – but they cooked beautifully for the most important people in the global food scene, and their motto "make food, not war" carried huge resonance.

Day two was gutsier and edgier than day one. Roy Choi of the viral street food phenomenon took to the stage like a rap star, driving the audience wild. Choi is heralding a whole change in street food in America, a nation he considers to be starving, both literally and metaphorically.

He is attempting to exert real change at a ground roots level while being totally self-deprecating, equalling Martha Payne in terms of humility and achievement.

With less fanfare in terms of acoustics but with just as much momentum, Alain Ducasse came on stage. While introducing him, Redzepi recalled that while most boys of 18 had posters of naked girls on their walls, he had a picture of Ducasse, the most significant French chef of all time. The admiration which the chefs of all ages in the room had for this man was tangible, and he spoke about a global vision with local expression, advocating cooking with awareness of resources.

Balancing that was the gifted and brilliant visionary Danish chef Christian Puglisi, previously sous chef at Noma and now owner of Manfreds & Vin and Relæ, two of the hottest food tickets in Copenhagen. He told stories of opening both operations and how he likes to take people on a culinary adventure which is still completely accessible, one that pleases the palate and challenges the mind.

It was interesting that while having lunch in one of his restaurants the following day I saw Alain Ducasse come in to eat, and watched those two worlds meet – the old that has led to the new and the different.

From my perspective, as a restaurant owner, a cook and a woman, my favourite speaker of all was a very nervous, yet thoroughly endearing Margot Henderson, introduced by her adoring husband Fergus of St John in London. She was flying the 'feminist in the kitchen' flag and referred to her detestation of the "bloke-dom" that dominates kitchens.

She talked about all the things I love about food – cooking simply, allowing the ingredients to shine, feminine cooking, celebrating old cooking styles and traditional ways. I loved her honesty, and the guts it took to stand up in front of an audience full of those same blokey chefs to say what she really felt.

This was everything that the lunch that followed was not. The unstoppable Mission Chinese Food ripped up lunchtime with blaring music, bandana-clad American Asian chefs firing up woks with gutsy food, and lashings of testosterone.

To bring the cycle full circle – death to start and death to end – Alex Atala, the South American culinary warrior with the fourth best restaurant in the world, walked onto the stage carrying a live chicken. We know he doesn't mess around – we instinctively knew what was going to happen – and yet we were all oddly put out by it. All of us work or are involved in the production and sale of meat, but we rarely witness the actual killing, so when he simply twisted the chicken's neck it was shocking, and many were challenged by it.

This is the man who will head up the next MAD event – watch this space.

In the late afternoon sun, we boarded boats that would lead us to dinner for 600 served under a bridge in the middle of town – where else? Blood sausage hot dogs cooked from a chipper unit brought in from Malmö, then a three-course pitch-perfect dinner, and then the ice cream units pulled up – one liquorice ice cream had the deepest flavour I have ever experienced.

A DJ from LCD Soundsystem played a set as Margot Henderson tore up the dancefloor, and then the police arrived. And that was the end of it.

We left this culinary utopia of bliss and beauty frantically trying to secure our tickets for next year, exhilarated by the breadth of knowledge, humility and passion of the speakers and in awe of the best chef in the world. Redzepi is not prepared to sit around and simply run a great restaurant, but is determined to create the kind of dialogue and exchange that can inform real global change.

My quote of quotes from the event came from the Danish writer Knud Romer, who said: "I don't believe in God, but I do believe in people."

Over the course of MAD, I really felt there were people to believe in who have and will exert significant change as a result of the event, just as the organisers have always hoped.

Aoibheann MacNamara is chef and proprietor of Ard Bia restaurant in Galway city; ardbia.com

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Main picture: Alex Atala and a hapless live chicken. Above: the big top at MAD 13; butcher Dario Cecchini dissects a pig

René Redzepi (left) and the MAD crew take a bow; right, food writer and restaurateur Margot Henderson