

Pilgrimage to Noma

How the “The Best Restaurant in the World” is Reaching Washington

by Justin Kennedy

Is there such a thing as “The Best Restaurant in the World”? I have my doubts. But for the last three years a list published by the UK-based *Restaurant* magazine has bestowed that honor on an unlikely restaurant located in an old warehouse on the docks of Copenhagen called Noma.

Noma—an amalgam of “Nordic” and “mad,” Danish slang for food—was opened in 2004 by chef René Redzepi and gastronomic entrepreneur Claus Meyer. By 2007, chefs like Fergus Henderson of St. John and Claude Bosi of Hibiscus, both in London, were treading a pilgrim’s path to dine there, while others, like David Chang of Momofuku in New York, began working there for free.

Since then, the avalanche of articles about Noma and its suave young chef has been nearly inescapable. The restaurant blog Eater aptly declared this “The Era of the ‘I Foraged With René Redzepi Piece.’” So it shouldn’t come as a surprise to learn that earnest chefs from Washington are making pilgrimages to Noma to seek philosophical guidance from “The Best Chef in the World.”

“René is among a handful of chefs pushing the boundaries of food,” says Tom Madrecki, chef and proprietor of Chez le Commis, a private supper club in Arlington, VA and a former stagiaire at Noma. “I don’t think there is anything like it in DC, or even in the States—maybe a handful of restaurants in New York, one or two in Chicago, and one or two in San Francisco—but you just don’t see the sort of boundary pushing, cutting-edge food.”

In recent years Redzepi has opened Noma’s kitchen to chefs like Madrecki who want to train under him. On any given day, around 20 stagiaires—unpaid temporary interns—work alongside about half as many paid cooks. The restaurant has just 12 tables. Stagiaires also train at the Nordic Food Lab, a small open-source research facility next to Noma whose aim is to “explore the building blocks of Nordic cuisine and traditional and modern gastronomy.”

“This is the third year that René has been voted Best in the World, and that means something,” says Ruben Garcia, the director of research and development for José Andrés’ Washington-based Think Food Group and a participant in MAD2, the second annual food symposium hosted in Copenhagen by Redzepi and the Noma team.

The theme of MAD2 was “Appetite,” and speakers included world-renowned chefs like Ferran Adrià and Massimo Bottura, artist and farmer Joost Bakker, as well as academics like University of Pennsylvania professor of psychology Paul Rozin.

“Listening to Paul talk about how people think, how they use memory, and how they react when you surprise them—that to me was much more interesting than seeing somebody cooking four or five dishes,” says Garcia. “It was really powerful because that’s what we do in our restaurant. We feed people, but we also feed their souls through memory and through humor.”

Washington chef Johnny Spero, who has participated in both MAD symposia, was a stagiaire at Noma in early 2011. He said it was Redzepi’s novel approach to food that initially attracted him to the chef. “René was the first person I saw as being about hyper-locality—really using what you have and sourcing from your immediate surroundings,” says Spero, who is opening a new restaurant called Suna in Washington later this year. “For me, it was that mentality that drew me in, and the way he based his philosophy on a sense of place.”

To create that sense of place, Redzepi sources over 90% of Noma’s ingredients from within a sixty-mile radius of Copenhagen; he and his staff are known to forage and gather much of it themselves. They have famously pushed the boundaries by serving small live shrimp in a jar on ice, and during a talk at MAD2 the audience was



Yogurt with Sorrel Juice
Photo courtesy of Charisse Turk



*Recipe foraging with stagiaires in Denmark
Photography: Tom Madrecki*

served live ants in order to demonstrate what different flavors come from different varieties. More than one attendee gushed about the lemongrass-like flavor of one species.

Madrecki said that MAD was the peak of his experience at Noma. “MAD is a very thoughtful expression of cuisine, one that René is taking and turning into something that touches on societal points—how to make society better through food,” he said. “There are other symposiums, like Madrid Fusion, but there is nothing that explores food at this thoughtful, almost philosophical level other than MAD.”

That meticulous, obsessive approach to food prompted Daniel Giusti last year to defect from his position as head chef at the Georgetown restaurant 1789 and relocate to Copenhagen, without the guarantee of a job or even a work permit. Earlier that year, Giusti had spent two weeks staging at Noma, where he swept floors and performed basic prep work. It was enough to inspire him to work there full-time.

More than anything, Noma and Redzepi have left a philosophical impression on visiting chefs. “MAD2 made us realize that maybe we’re not maximizing what we have around us,” says Garcia. “I felt a collective spirit in Copenhagen, and it’s something that inspires us.”

The same is true for Spero, who says, “When I’m developing a dish, I don’t think, ‘What would René Redzepi do?’ But I think being surrounded by those people and having experienced what they do, it’s affected how I think about food. It’s changed my whole mentality.”

For Spero, that mentality is about creating interesting local partnerships not just with farmers and food purveyors, but also artisans. He has collaborated with local ceramic and glass artist Amber Kendrick to create custom made dishes and tableware for Suna. “Noma was the first time I had experienced a restaurant who had designed

their own plates. But my intention wasn’t to come back and say, ‘Alright, I want that Noma bowl,’ but the idea of coming up with something unique really appealed to me.”

MAD has in many ways facilitated a dialogue within the chef community that has served to create unlikely partnerships with those outside of it. Garcia says that as a result of MAD, his group is now working with Dr. Rozin of the University of Pennsylvania to create new dishes and “dining experiences” that will appear with the re-opening of the new minibar in Penn Quarter. Still, Noma’s trickle-down effect still has a ways to go in Washington.

“DC is not a place that [historically] embraces things that stand out,” says Madrecki. “They embrace things that are go-with-the-flow, or meet expectation of what food should be. It’s conservative and it tends to also be a derivative town compared to somewhere like New York.”

He says that Washington needs something that is representative of the abundance of people that are coming into the city. “In a lot of ways, I think people don’t even know what that is yet. But we’re trying to capture that and be at the forefront.” P