

PERFORMING TASTY HERITAGE

Danish Cuisine and Playful Nostalgia at Restaurant *noma*

Hanne Pico Larsen

At *noma*, a gourmet restaurant in Copenhagen, food is a performative medium. While renewing the Danish cultural heritage it also adds to it a very trendy life. By both regenerating and updating the Nordic Cuisine, the chef gives his unique interpretation of the New Nordic Kitchen. The performative experience is based on the narrative of *terroir*, ingredients, heritage and authenticity of place. In turn, *playful nostalgia* arises. Through limiting itself to one place, or region, emphasis is focused on the embodiment of the Nordic heritage. Restaurant *noma* is simultaneously playing with nostalgia and innovation. Nostalgia provides justification, material and sheer force, while the innovativeness makes the heritage playful, fun, and, above all, tasty.

Keywords: performance, food, heritage, *terroir*/soil, playful nostalgia

For what is food? It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usage, situations and behavior. Information about food must be gathered wherever it can be found: by direct observation in the economy, in techniques, usages, and advertising; and by indirect observation of the mental life in a given society. (Barthes 1979: 167)

Food, and all that is associated with it, is already larger than life. It is already highly charged with meaning and affect. It is already performative and theatrical. An art of the concrete, food, like performance, is alive, fugitive and sensory. (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1999: 1)

Theoretically, an accomplished chef could establish a first-rate restaurant anywhere that the necessary

ingredients can be obtained, and where a potential source of clientele to financially support it is present. As will become evident in what follows, the Danish restaurant *noma* could come into being only in Denmark. Perhaps *noma* could have happened anywhere in Denmark, however, a warehouse on a canal in the historic merchants' harbor in Copenhagen provides the optimal setting for the performance and further enhances this cultural heritage project. Guests come to the restaurant to eat, but they also come to be part of an overall theatrical production, and of course each night's performance is slightly different and depends on how the audience affects the feel of the performances. As in all performances, many elements must come together for a successful result. It is through tracing these elements that this particular heritage performance will be examined.

The name of the restaurant is a combination of the two Nordic words "nordisk" (Nordic) and

“mad” (food), which reflects the goal of seeking the essence of Nordic gastronomic tradition. Chef René Redzepi is looking both to the past and toward the future, striving to create something new and unique by way of interpreting *Danishness* in the context of the kitchen.

What follows is a commentary on contemporary cultural heritage creation. In order to accomplish this, the chef relies on the narrative of *terroir*,¹ ingredients, heritage and the authenticity of place. Two dishes will be analyzed to demonstrate how the traditional aspect of this poetic project resides in the Nordic landscape and its ingredients, and how innovation is introduced in the cooking methods and the presentation. It is nostalgia without overt sentimentality – it is nostalgia and innovation combined and used playfully to create a new heritage. The concept of *playful nostalgia* will be introduced in the context of gastronomy and heritage-making, which seems to be lacking from the list of different kinds of food nostalgia, as recognized within the study of food/culture (Holtzman 2006; Mannur 2007; Sutton 2001).

Method and Premises

I was introduced to noma in 2005 when it had just opened and not yet received any Michelin stars; at that time they were already cooking Nordic food. I have been following noma ever since, and it seemed the obvious choice and focus for my ongoing work on sensuous representations and displays of Danishness in different settings. It serves as a contemporary example and shows the immediacy and constant renewal of Danish culture from within.

The staff at noma have had a welcoming attitude and patiently answered all my questions, allowing my research to be partially based on interviews with the people behind the restaurant: Chef and founder, René Redzepi; co-founder, Claus Meyer; director, Peter Kreiner; sous-chef, Victor Wågman; sous-chef, Søren Westh; and photographer, Ditte Isager. All interviews were carried out during the summer of 2009 and 2010. Future work on noma is also planned.²

There has been no shortage of studies on food since Roland Barthes noted how food had become

important in every aspect of life, and he urged scholars to study food from different angles. His rhetorical question “For what is food?” (Barthes 1979: 167) is still being pondered by scholars from various academic disciplines. This article relies upon the discursive and performative aspects of food, especially as promoted within the field of performance studies. Elements such as embodiment, action, behavior and agency are key questions, which are dealt with interculturally (Schechner 2006).

This work rests on a panoply of scholars who have studied food as both a part of everyday life and aesthetics (e.g., de Certeau, Giard & Mayol 1998; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995; Warde 1997), and as the meaning of food in more festive, or ritualized, situations and settings (e.g., Fine 1995, 1996; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1999, 2007. See also Västriik & Vösu, this issue). Besides taste, economy, the nutritious benefits of food, and the pleasure or discomfort experienced in consuming it, it should be remembered that an inherent element of cooking is the performativity of the food itself, its meaning and presentation; its ability to shape identities and/or underline the “authenticity” of either a region or an ethnicity (e.g., Amilien 2003; Appadurai 1988; Lu & Fine 1995); and its intrinsic ability to drive different kinds of nostalgia whether it is slow cooked in grandmother’s kitchen, served raw directly after the hunt, or presented in the beautiful, often theatrical, surrounding of a restaurant. In each case, surroundings and participants are of great importance (e.g., Holtzman 2006; Mannur 2007; Sutton 2001).

The performance is the purpose for a visit, and the performance draws upon various aesthetic aspects. As described by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, food and performance converge conceptually at (at least) three junctures: to do, to behave, and to show “– in other words, all that governs the production, presentation, and disposal of food and their staging” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1999: 1). A visit can evoke and involve various aspects of performativity even before the visit takes place (through advertisements, websites, cookbooks etc.). However, the focus here is on the staging of the actual dishes and the underlying narrative about soil linked to heritage.

While the term “heritage-making” is of intrinsic importance, the general assessment and frame of reference is inspired by the writings of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998; see also Gradén 2003). She writes about various locations turned into destinations, which in turn promise to deliver heritage. She stresses that even if heritage is presented as something old, it is a new production and it provides a second life to an otherwise dying cultural location and phenomenon.

Ethnicity is protean, amorphous and seemingly ubiquitous, and “Ethnicity is, has always been, both one thing and many, the same yet infinitely diverse” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009: 1). In addition, ethnicity is often made true to fit the experience economy, and is thereby economically driven: “Ethnicity often becomes a marketing tool, part of an entrepreneurial market” (Lu & Fine 1995: 535). In the present case of Danish culinary heritage, ethnicity is being defined by a chef for a primarily gourmet audience.³ Questions about who rightfully has access to the culinary heritage to be shaped, and whose identity is represented in this project are both interesting and valid. However, investigating them would detract from this unique example of a new production, which is providing a second life to the Danish culinary heritage.⁴

Restaurant noma

Restaurant noma opened in 2004 and soon became a highly popular destination in Copenhagen. It achieved rapid success and by 2010 the restaurant had been awarded two Michelin stars. In 2010 it was rated first on the list of the world’s best restaurants by *Restaurant Magazine*,⁵ and thereby gained its current recognition as one of the most influential restaurants in the world. In addition, it has also won international acclaim for its larger purpose of developing a Nordic gourmet *cuisine*, a previously non-existent phenomenon.⁶

The location is a former warehouse on the waterfront in central Copenhagen. The building, situated at the Greenlandic Trading Square, historically served as a center for trade to and from the Faroe Islands, Finnmark, Iceland, and Greenland. For

200 years dried and salted fish, oils, and skins were among the goods stored in and around the warehouse waiting to be dispersed to the European markets.

In 2004 the warehouse was converted into the North Atlantic House, a center established for the purpose of displaying and promoting the art and culture of the North Atlantic region. The frame of this project therefore has a double level of history. The history of the warehouse now gives its heritage new meaning, as the center itself is no longer designed for function only, but rather for display and pleasure of a new audience consuming aestheticized Nordic heritage in various ways.

The rustic outer walls and the general setting are underlined by a carefully chosen interior design, which draws upon the Nordic “spirit” and aesthetic values. The brick walls of the original building have been exposed, wood is dominant and the style is unmistakably modernistic. The tables are set with Royal Copenhagen, a nostalgic yet modern feature, a modest bouquet of cut wild flowers, and perhaps a thick-cut candle. Fluffy sheepskins are casually draped on the Scandinavian-designed chairs. The waiters wear grey shirts, and the overall color scheme is attenuated to both the immediate setting, as well as its geographical location. Regarding the color scheme one reviewer noted: “There are fundamentally three colors: brown, grey and green. There are touches of other colors, but the most dominant are these three, in a bewilderingly subtle variety of shades and nuances.”⁷ The earthy tones remind the patrons of the Nordic landscape. The modernist decor is in itself historic, and obviously enduring, much like the ingredients used in the kitchen. The audience that noma is likely to attract is well aware of the fact that the Nordic countries were the avant-garde of the modernist movement. In fact, it has almost become a Nordic heritage, trademark and brand (Fiell & Fiell 2002; Hansen 2010). Hence the interior of the restaurant works to reinforce the history and nostalgia of the past with a wink and a nod, and becomes part of the playfulness of the space.

Outside is the water and one can see the city centre

in the near distance. Herbs used in the kitchen are grown in flowerboxes while the name of the restaurant – barely visible – is written in a minimalist font on the wall by the main entrance. The unassuming location, the minimalist presentation, and even the writing on the wall are characteristics reflecting the subtle features of Scandinavia, which is promoted throughout, helping to make it a heritage destination. They convey a sense that it is clean, fresh, new, and “down to earth.” Yet, it has always been there. Not the restaurant, *per se*, but the North.

Within the Nordic cooking tradition of the past, there was no gourmet kitchen. Instead, it was a kitchen based on survival (Bringéus 2001). The common perception of the Nordic kitchen was probably best summarized in a remark from the provocative American TV chef, Anthony Bourdain, who exclaimed that: “Scandinavian Food Sucks.”⁸ In 2004, in an effort to combat this perception, the people behind noma brought together Scandinavian chefs, philosophers, politicians, private investors and academics for a discussion about the prospect of a New Nordic Kitchen. Part of the agenda for the New Nordic Kitchen is to create a new image of Nordic Cuisine, while still serving traditional items such as beer soup. These discussions culminated in the Ten Commandments of the *Pan-Scandinavian Manifesto* containing new rules for the Nordic Kitchen, signed by twelve of the most influential chefs from all the Nordic countries. Currently, this manifesto is in use in several restaurants in the North.⁹ The statement of purpose of the manifesto reads as follows:

As Nordic chefs we find that the time has now come for us to create a New Nordic Kitchen, which in virtue of its good taste and special character compares favorably with the standards of the greatest kitchens of the world.¹⁰

The ideological overtones embedded in the manifesto are slightly reminiscent of that of the Slow Food movement headed by the Italian Carlo Petrini. The *Manifesto on the Future of Food* is dated 2003 and has a different and more political focus.¹¹ Most gourmet restaurants today have a similar *philosophy* to show

the audience what values and judgments are applied when selecting the products, what techniques are used in the kitchen, and some may even go as far as to share their creative process. That is all part of the larger performance.¹²

In 2005, the Nordic governments added their official support to the manifesto establishing the New Nordic Food program by focusing on almost everything related to food such as: health, exports, tourism, etc. The program is still functioning, and Redzepi is one of its ambassadors.¹³

One of the projects arising from this initiative was the establishment of the NordicFoodLab (established in 2008), a test-kitchen located next to the restaurant. The NordicFoodLab is a non-profit, self-governed institution founded by Redzepi along with another of the founding figures of noma, Claus Meyer. The purpose of the NordicFoodLab is to find alternative ways in which to prepare Nordic produce by using both old and new techniques.¹⁴ The test results, recommendations and recipes will eventually be made public both for other restaurants and for the food industry in the Nordic region.

In recent years the Danish Government has undertaken initiatives to make Denmark greener by improving the environment (both wildlife and agricultural areas), by promoting exports, through the branding of Denmark and by portraying Danish products as healthy, ecological, tasty, and innovative. This has had an impact on various aspects of the Danish economy and culture, such as the experience economy, exports, science, and everyday diet and food culture. Currently, Denmark is heavily promoting itself as a gourmet country, and Copenhagen is showcased as the capital in the world with most Michelin stars per capita, and noma has been utilized as a flagship for branding Denmark and for the export of vegetables (Grøn Vækst 2009; Fakta om Gastronomikonsortium 2010).¹⁵

In spite of noma's involvement in various programs establishing a New Nordic Kitchen, it is first and foremost a gourmet restaurant promoted as introducing and broadening a new concept of an exciting Nordic food culture. The manifesto can be seen as a script, and the menu reflects Redzepi's personal

interpretation. The Nordic component of the overarching project has been toned down since the opening in 2004 and the restaurant has become more distinctively “Danish.” Danish produce now accounts for 95 per cent of the menu whereas only 5 per cent of the exotic delicacies come from the larger Nordic region. Although this may in part be due to the complicated export lines within the region, it is also the result of the chef developing a personal relationship with his gatherers and farmers, who are all located in the northeastern part of Denmark and southern part of Sweden. From the performative perspective, this was a strategic move, since it is no longer only the food and its preparation, but also the personalized local background of the landscape, that is intrinsic to the performance. The dialogue between the chef and the farmers along with the land and the ingredients in season is repeatedly emphasized by the chef:

When I’m not here I can’t go and visit my suppliers and I need to because our menu is constantly changing. We set ourselves a goal of a minimum of four new dishes a month. Every day you want to make yourself do a little better than the previous day.¹⁶

This image and progression of the narrative is also reflected in the resultant cookbooks. Whereas the first cookbook featured photos of the pristine and somewhat exotic northern landscape (Redzepi & Meyer 2006), the focus of the new cookbook (Redzepi 2010) is on the produce itself and on its producers. This broadens the overall performance and enhances the experience of the restaurant visit. While it carefully avoids the smell and blood of the farm and slaughterhouse, it still brings authenticity to the table and adds the personal dimension to the menu; the patron almost knows the farmer (Zukin 2008).

Restaurant noma as a Nordic Space

A gourmet restaurant is by nature a somewhat elitist project and this one has induced curiosity, joy and pride among ordinary people. It has also made many a Dane raise an eyebrow in wonder, ambivalence and

skepticism. An example is the average Dane’s reaction upon seeing the infamous traditional dish *øl-lebrød* – a porridge made of beer and old rye bread known mainly by Danes for its nutritious values rather than its good taste – (see also Bringéus 2001: 138–148) turned into a pricey gourmet dish, which makes food critics rave with joy. One food critic wrote:

Our meal ended with a take on “Øllebrød,” a traditional Danish porridge. Served with frothed milk, skyr (an Icelandic cultured dairy item, similar to strained yoghurt) sorbet and toasted rye kernels soaked in beer, it’s not how your mother made it (if you were Danish!), but every spoonful reminds one of home. This humble looking dish was my favourite dessert by far.¹⁷

The “take” on this traditional dish has changed it. It is no longer identical to the one in mother’s kitchen: heritage has been altered and given a new incarnation as a gourmet dessert. The question is how much change a dish like this can undergo before it no longer represents what is traditionally Danish (Lu & Fine 1995). Nostalgia is still evoked by hinting at the humble character of the predecessor made of regular everyday staple ingredients. Admittedly tastes change, but the location for the consumption of the beer soup is equally important. The surroundings are an essential part of the experience, and here the meal is eaten not as a matter of survival, but as something strange and “ethnic.” The chef has played with culinary tradition. He revived, revitalized, and somewhat exoticized beer soup by giving it a new context. As a Dane it is hard to believe that anyone ever felt a longing for beer soup, yet, this new version can inspire nostalgia.

Redzepi became a controversial figure in 2008 when the Danish Public Radio and TV (DR) aired a documentary about noma entitled *Noma på Kogepunktet* (Noma at the Boiling Point).¹⁸ During the program, the temper of the chef was on display causing some Danes to raise concern about Redzepi’s ethnic background. It provided a chance to vent frustration because of the fact that a son of a Dan-

ish woman and a Macedonian guest worker was undertaking such a national task of recovering, or even inventing, a new Danish national cuisine. Whereas Redzepi's name and partly Balkan heritage is an issue for some, he himself has used it to recall an image of a childhood memory of his Balkan summers, where milk came directly from the cow and the chestnuts were roasted over an open fire. Hence he makes his ethnic background an advantage rather than a subject for racial polemics. According to Redzepi he grew up in communion with nature, roaming in the open fields of watermelons during the day, and playing with fireflies in the dark (Redzepi & Meyer 2006: 16–26). This image of a young boy, who understands and makes use of his native environment, may help to cement his authority as a chef, even if the analytical eye will recognize the grandiose in such a nostalgic fantasy.

It is interesting to ponder why noma, as a phenomenon, is happening now rather than ten years ago.

Will it still be here ten years from now? Why has the Nordic Space it promotes become so powerful, and such a success story as an example of a re-invention of a Nordic Space? Romanticizing the North, and the Nordic landscape in particular, has been done many times before via landscape paintings and poetry (see for example Amilien 2003). However, this culinary example and the rise of Nordic gastronomy in general, which so quickly caught on like wildfire, seems to be used both politically and within the booming experience economy to re-install a strong Nordic identity and pride.

When visiting the American talk show *Charlie Rose*, after being voted number one restaurant in the world, Redzepi was asked what it is that makes noma so important right now. Redzepi suggested that part of the noma success is due to timing and trend. The ambition from the outset was to create a new Nordic Cuisine using only local and regional products. Later sustainability became a big mantra. At the



Ill. 1: Even if the menu is Nordic, the staff behind noma is very diverse. Here the doors are being polished for the next performance. (Photo: Morten Sørensen, 2010)

same time an overall trend in the world dictated, “If you are not doing something for the environment, you were doing something wrong.”¹⁹ By the time that trend was picked up by the culinary world, noma had already built up a network of producers working for nature and thereby put itself ahead of that movement, which Redzepi calls a *natural cuisine*. The natural cuisine follows a decade of innovation and manipulation of produce in the culinary world. In the kitchen of his restaurant there is always an unbroken link from the environment in which the ingredient is found, to when it is served. In that way you taste both the immediate place and time. This is a new and interesting story in the culinary world, which was quickly picked up by the large crowd of hungry, ever trend-spotting food critics – after all, “What is new in a story about another French restaurant in Copenhagen,” Redzepi asked rhetorically.²⁰

The Performed Narrative of Terroir, Ingredients, Heritage and the Authenticity of Place

As the Ten Commandments of Nordic Cuisine underlines, one of the leading trends in gastronomy today is a cuisine that is first and foremost natural, local, seasonal, and has a focus on superior ingredients, allowing for continual variation by time and place, and reference to the environmentally friendly. For example, one finds herbs and weeds grown in the wild, species of vegetables labeled “heirlooms” and the use of other traditional, and/or artisan-made products which implicitly bear promises of local “authenticity” and the application of moral values in the process of food production (see for example, Ferguson & Zukin 1995; Jordan 2007; Zukin 2008). A personal and stable relationship between local farmers and restaurants like the one mentioned above in connection with noma has almost become the norm for many restaurants and restaurant-goers today. Restaurants that follow this trend go out of their way to offer a unique insight into their *terroir*. “*Terroir*” means “the sense of place” and it includes everything from the soil composition, light, wind, temperature, rainfall, etc. *Terroir* can be said to define the character and taste of its products. Large parts of the Nordic *terroir* are still pristine, less polluted

than other areas and comparatively undiscovered by outsiders, and especially by those interested in food. For example, the NordicFoodLab has found certain underwater resources such as various seaweeds to be rich and unexplored, and it intends to make an attempt to tap into this new field. At noma, ingredients from such untouched areas are advertised as a trademark; they are presented as representing particularly “Nordic” qualities such as cleanliness/freshness, purity, healthiness, honesty, and authenticity (see also Meyer & Ehler 2006: 168–177). It is important to point out, that these qualities are written into the food and the way it is presented, or made to perform. Regional cuisines are shown to be dependent on their *terroir*: Scandinavian cuisines are bound to Scandinavian soil; French cuisines to French soil, etc. Whereas cuisines can borrow or interchange ingredients from other cuisines, the duplication of products might only result in what Luce Giard labels “pale copies,” referring to watered down or diluted tastes of certain produce grown outside of their *terroir* of origin (de Certeau, Giard & Mayol 1998). Foreign ingredients and produce are transported rapidly over great distances to complement what is locally available. Whereas this creates great export opportunities, it also intensifies the demand for local and more authentic consumption (Amilien 2003; Zukin 2008).²¹

Chef Redzepi of noma follows the approach in which every new dish deliberately explores the potential of the Nordic *terroir*, and in doing so seeks to reinterpret the identity of the Nordic kitchen. This places the focus on the ingredients, which are shown to have a character of their own, enhanced by the way they are presented in the overall performance, by the adverts, cooking books, or by the waiter as he presents the food: a carrot is seldom just a carrot; a berry is not just red, or green – it has a long story, and that story is brought forth and made unique, thereby making the performance itself unique for those experiencing it. The various narratives turn each and every ingredient into a cultural object of its own, both contextualized and narrativized before it is served and consumed. Furthermore, like an actor in a performance, it can be argued that the “starring”

carrot, beet, or leek has honed its craft by rehearsal: it has also passed through various culinary experiments by the chef, who is somewhat like the director. According to Redzepi, the role of the chef is not only to cook, but to “understand” the conditions of the raw produce, and to do as little as possible in preparing the food – thereby allowing room for the uniqueness of the birch sap, carrot, herb, or lamb to shine through. In other words, his goal is to draw only a fine line between the raw and the cooked, allowing the cultural to retain elements of the wild. The chef is unintentionally evoking the question raised by Lévi-Strauss about what cultures do to the raw before it is turned into culture (Lévi-Strauss 1969). In this case, the chef is trying to get as close to nature as possible, by doing as little as possible to the raw products, thereby taking a step back from the cultured to a nostalgic liminal stage. In short, he aims to recreate the “mere” traditional through innovation and reference to pre-traditional raw products: a culture that sells itself by getting “back to the earth.” The interest in celebrity chefs has now been carried even further and extended to the world of produce, handing over the stage to *celebrity vegetables*.²²

The following two courses were chosen by Redzepi in order to illustrate this natural Nordic Cuisine, and to exemplify the interplay among the terroir, its produce, the traditional and the artistic innovation, which join to create a deliberately performative heritage project. The two dishes serve as a prism through which to observe the following tropes and concepts: performance, terroir, ingredients, heritage, and authenticity of place. The concepts are complementary and overlapping, and the analyses of the two dishes interact and intersect, and together they present a more nuanced – and playful – presentation of the heritage project as performed at noma.

Glazed Sheep’s Milk Mousse and Sorrel Granité

The milk for the mousse comes from the sheep, and in that milk you taste notes of grass and acidic greens, which are the main ingredients in the diet of the sheep. The acidic sorrel granité gives reference to the field where the sheep roam, bringing the story full circle. The dish takes preparation, but the

amount of actual “cooking” is limited to the melting of the gelatin which goes into the mousse, boiling water and sugar for the granité as well as boiling the ingredients for the small piece of caramel, which goes on top of the dish. The dish is kept as raw and close to nature as possible, securing the authenticity of place, as well as of the ingredients.

Tartar Wood Sorrel and Tarragon Emulsion

This course has become one of the signature dishes (Redzepi & Meyer 2006: 89), and it underlines the raw and natural features. It is to be eaten with bare hands, and it brings forth the excitement and happiness of the guests by challenging the usual etiquette of the *haute cuisine*. The performative aspects of this particular dish are manifold, and correspond well with the three main features of performativity in foods described by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (see above). One guest captures it all in his very detailed description of his own consumption and enjoyment of this dish:

Tartar of Danish beef, arranged in a neat rectangle and besprinkled with toasted rye breadcrumbs and grated horseradish under wood sorrel and rings of onion, left a trail of ground juniper in its wake; a matching belt of vibrant tarragon emulsion shadowed the beef and its hoof prints. To be consumed without cutlery, one uses the heart-like leaves of wood sorrel to clasp the just-chopped meat, smear it through the tarragon then swab it in specks of juniper.

The initial pleasure came from the presentation. Vivid and colorful, there was also simplicity, freshness and purity on the plate. Roughly cut yet trimly set tartar; cluttered though carefully fixed sorrel; coarse, but deliberate sprinkles and daubs presented rustic precision. Additionally, the leaf-topped tartar over the green row immediately evoked a dynamic image of the animal itself grazing across the field.

The beef, mild yet clean and flavorsome, was enlivened by the lemony spark of the sorrel, spicy

horseradish and warmth of the mustard oil from Gotland. Aniseed tarragon and stimulating, woody juniper were both distinct and balanced delicately well; whilst the rye added crunch.

This course considered all the senses, pleasing more than simply the palate and provoking sensations both amusing and intellectual. Eating with one's hands makes this instantly more than just another dish. Foremost, it is fun; a challenge to social convention and expectation too. However, on a deeper level, it also connects the diner to the food – the textures manifest no longer only in the mouth-feel, but on the tips of one's fingers; or through the lemon scent that stains their hands, for instance. Moreover, there is the romantic vision roused; one realizes and appreciates that this is how our ancestors – and/or how the Vikings – long ago once ate. Raw food with bare hands.²³

The diner is practically performing the dish for us, touching upon all the ingredients, their preparation and presentation, smell, color, and taste. He uses plenty of adjectives (such as simplicity, freshness, purity, rustic) in describing the dish, and at the same time he evokes the “dynamic image of the animal itself grazing across the field.” The dish brings pleasure and amusement, and it challenges and defies social conventions. The consumer is physically connected to the food while eating with the fingers, and the food is connected to the soil and heritage. Heritage is also referred to by the image of the ancestors eating raw meat with bare hands.

National Cuisines and Playful Nostalgia

In 1979, Roland Barthes commented on the nostalgia involved in the creation of the myth about the French and their national cuisine:

French food is never supposed to be innovative, except when it rediscovers long-forgotten secrets. The historical theme, which was so often sounded in our advertising, mobilizes two different values: on the one hand, it implies an aristocratic tradition (dynasties of manufactures, moutarde

du Roy, the Brandy of Napoleon); on the other hand, food frequently carries notions of representing the flavorful survival of an old, rural society that is itself highly idealized. In this manner, food brings the memory of the soil into our very contemporary life; hence the paradoxical association of gastronomy and industrialization in the form of canned “gourmet dishes.” No doubt the myth of French cooking abroad (as expressed to foreigners) strengthens this “nostalgic” value of food considerably; but since the French themselves actively participate in this myth (especially when travelling), it is fair to say that through his food the Frenchman experiences a certain national continuity. By way of thousand detours, food permits him to insert himself daily into his own past and to believe in a certain culinary “being” of France. (Barthes 1979: 170–171)

Whereas the French nostalgia described by Barthes' views, traditions as customary practices and ways of acting, the Danish/Nordic nostalgia of noma, and similar Nordic gourmet restaurants, focus on tradition in the form of the historical landscape itself. Here, it is the pointedly Nordic qualities of the landscape that are being showcased. This performance of environmental heritage automatically evokes a strong hint of nostalgia since it is perceived as connected with an authentic and idealized rural past that is being threatened in the contemporary world (Amilien 2003). However, the consistent linking of the Nordic soil with the sensory experience of taste that draws flavor from the local earth would seem to be new and innovative in the culinary world – especially when it is coupled with the ability to taste, and discern, authentic Danishness. The idea that these taste sensations give an added performance dimension through their being linked not only to food narratives but also to places is particularly relevant to Barthes' quote. If a central theme of contemporary life is placelessness/being a nomad, then what is innovative here is the attempt to create a consumption experience that is strongly rooted in place, nature, history and tradition.²⁴ It binds people to places in contrast to trends of postmodernity, which focus

on the global with a lack of reference to a place, as for example in the various fusion cuisines. Visitors at noma are not simply consuming the place/food – they are making it part of their own bodies. This creates a heritage tourism with embodiment as the central issue, or even “gastronomic tourism” (Zelinsky 1985: 51).

Playful nostalgia is what is at work in the noma kitchen, and on display in the dining room, with its modernist decor. I use the term nostalgia with caution being well aware that it has its own body of theoretical literature, and applications. I apply the term hinting at its general use often related with marketing and consuming strategies in contemporary western societies. I use *playful nostalgia* only in the context of the food experience and base it on the growing literature on this subject. Most kinds of culinary nostalgia are found within the private settings of immigrant groups cooking in order to overcome feelings of displacement and dislocation, and to compensate for the longing for faraway places (see e.g., Holtzman 2006). Restaurant noma on the other hand, is right at home in its own terroir, making use of what grows in its very own backyard. The nostalgic aspect of the *noma* cooking is therefore not only about space, but also about the historic past, as attested to by the title of the recent cookbook. The project is about *noma: Time and Place in Nordic Cuisine* (Redzepi 2010). At noma the chef tries to revive and revise the diet of the past, making it look and taste good in new ways.

Sheep’s milk is given new shape and texture, and presented in new ways, yet pointing back in time playing on the very heritage of the place in which the food is served. It is a new production that provides a new life to the Nordic diet and image.

The nostalgia, the Nordic terroir, and history lend justification and material, whereas the innovativeness makes this cultural heritage project full of jest. The materializations of culinary nostalgia are served without overt sentimentality. It is performative and innovative yet backed by food historians and completely bound to the Nordic terroir.

The key issues of performance, aesthetics, terroir, ingredients, heritage making, and *playful nostalgia*

are all exemplified in the two examples of dishes. The scenography of the setting, the minimalist interior design which has become a brand, along with the innovative and fun presentation of food, the smells, the colors, the juxtaposition of the rustic versus the fragile, the traditional versus the new to be found in both the dishes served, as well as in the surroundings, are all carefully chosen elements evocative to the imagination of the visitors, who of course bring their own sets of expectations, and who are dressed to play their part. The dining room is kept quiet, no music is played, and no noise is to be heard from the kitchen, which is situated in the restaurant proper, so that the customers can see where the food is prepared. The waiters and chefs (who both prepare and serve the food) are waiting in the wings to help the visitors to be seduced and transplanted into the middle of the recreated Nordic terroir. In his attempt to create a particular form of nostalgic, earthy harmony the chef has chosen and prepared something of that beautiful North which is both rough and rugged, but simultaneously serene and almost fragile.

The Glazed Sheep’s Milk Mousse and Sorrel Granité is an example of the harmony between the ingredients and their environment (Redzepi & Meyer 2006: 25, 48). It is supposed to evoke the imagery and taste of the serene North and its products: a sheep, its natural habitat, and its milk. It is a short, yet complex narrative.

Conclusion

The case study described above presents Danish cultural heritage in food, and emphasizes a progressive stance that recognizes the need for a new and fresh image of Danish cultural heritage. It tries to follow current trends, but it also tries to create new ones. In this new approach to cultural heritage, Denmark and the Nordic region are presented as trendy, clean, pristine, and minimalist, with the emphasis being placed on the terroir by means of a focus on the narrative of each individual ingredient. As Barthes commented: “food brings the memory of the soil into our very contemporary life” (Barthes 1979: 170). Restaurant noma is the case in point: it deliberately (via a range of different senses) binds itself

to one place, or region, and it is exactly the diverse nature of this region that gives noma its *raison d'être* and its distinctive character. Restaurant noma could not have happened outside of the Nordic region, the strong narrative about the terroir-dependent ingredients underscores this fact. People will have to travel to the North in order to experience a culinary performance at noma. Produce from the Nordic region can be exported, and that is why places like noma become even more important on the national level. Politically, there is a lot to gain from the noma trend. René Redzepi admits that this success and position as number one in the world does not only mark the peak – it also prepares noma for the end: “The question is just, how long is this end going to be.”²⁵

“For what is food?” (Barthes 1979: 167). “Food, like performance, is alive, fugitive and sensory” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1999: 1). Food as a medium carries the ability to simultaneously play the nostalgic, as well as the innovative, part in heritage renewal. The nostalgia provides justification, material and sheer force while the innovativeness makes this cultural heritage project playful, fun, and above all tasty.

Bon appétit.

Notes

- 1 *Terroir* refers to earth, land, and soil. It is a term used in culinary jargon referring to the uniqueness of the soil from particular areas, which in turn affect the animals and plants belonging to these areas (de Certeau, Giard & Mayol 1998; Meyer & Ehler 2006).
- 2 This article is one out of three pieces planned on noma. The two subsequent articles will focus on embodiment and nostalgia. I follow the supply line of ingredients from the farmer/gatherer, through the hands of the chef, to the beautiful plate at noma. There is much playfulness in the relation between the chef and his suppliers. If a supplier sends bark to the restaurant, the chef will try to implement it in the menu, in a new way. If the chef wants to serve edible soil, the supplier helps inventing dirt to be consumed. My goal with these articles is to elaborate on the idea of playful nostalgia as introduced in this article, and to give an example of a sensory heritage, one that relies on the embodiment of terroir (dirt). At noma visitors are not simply consuming the place/food – they are making it part of their own bodies.
- 3 The perception of noma could easily be turned into a Bourdieudian project on taste and class (Bourdieu 1984), but this is not the primary object of this paper. Bourdieu's distinctions are often applied in the studies on food, and with regard to noma it could be argued that this is a case of “planned distinction” that indeed succeeded. For a discussion on taste, culture, and food as well as a discussion of Bourdieu's work on taste when applied to the study of food, see for example Bourdieu 1984; Fine 1995; Holt 1997; Jordan 2007.
- 4 For various useful discussions on the use of cultural heritage and cultural property in both local and national settings, see for example last year's special issue of *Ethnologia Europaea* (2009: 39:2).
- 5 See www.theworlds50best.com/, accessed July 12, 2010.
- 6 See for example www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2009/may/24/noma-restaurant-copenhagen-jay-rayner, accessed March 29, 2010.
- 7 From www.yype.co.uk/place/551601-Noma-Copenhagen, accessed March 29, 2010.
- 8 From http://seattlest.com/2008/06/09/appreciating_an.php, accessed March 29, 2010.
- 9 From www.noma.dk/main.php?lang=dk&id=3, accessed March 29, 2010.
- 10 From www.nordiskkoecken.dk/, accessed March 29, 2010. The annotat manifesto is on the same website.
- 11 See http://slowfood.com/about_us/eng/popup/campaigns_future.lasso, accessed September 10, 2010.
- 12 See for example Adrià, Soler & Adrià 2008.
- 13 From www.nynordiskmad.org, accessed March 29, 2010.
- 14 From <http://nynordiskmad.org/nyheder/nyheter/visning/arkiv/2008/maj/23/artikel/food-lab-for-the-world-of-nordic-food/>, accessed March 29, 2010.
- 15 The same trend and focus on gastronomy can be seen in all the Nordic countries. The focus on the New Nordic Kitchen, the increased interest in Nordic food products, and the use of nature as branding has of course attracted the interest of many Nordic scholars as well. See for example: Amilien 2003; Bursted, Fredriksson & Jönsson 2005; Christensen & Povlsen 2008; Jönsson 2002; Jönsson & Tellström 2009; Tellström, Gustafsson & Fjellström 2003; Tellström, Gustafsson & Mossberg 2005, 2006.
- 16 From www.decanter.com/news/299925.html, accessed March 29, 2010.
- 17 From <http://gourmettraveller.wordpress.com/2009/12/23/noma/>, accessed March 29, 2010.
- 18 To see the program go to: www.dr.dk/DR1/Dokumentar/2008/1105154542.htm, accessed March 29, 2010.
- 19 René Redzepi at Charlie Rose: www.charlierose.com/view/interview/11054, accessed August 6, 2010.
- 20 René Redzepi at Charlie Rose: www.charlierose.com/view/interview/11054, accessed August 6, 2010.

- 21 For two recent studies emphasizing the meaning and importance of terroir in branding and the progressive commodification of (national and regional) heritage and culture, see for example Christensen & Povlsen 2008; Høyrup & Munk 2009.
- 22 See for example Wood 2000.
- 23 From <http://chowhound.chow.com/topics/654057>, accessed March 29, 2010.
- 24 For a discussion of contemporary life of placelessness vs. settlement, see Bauman 2000: 13, 187f., 198f.
- 25 René Redzepi at Charlie Rose: www.charlierose.com/view/interview/11054, accessed August 6, 2010.

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- Hanne Pico Larsen is an adjunct professor at Columbia University, NYC. She is co-project leader with Lizette Gradén for the Nordic Spaces program, and she is affiliated with the Danish Folklore Archives. Her current research interest is culture on display. Last publication is "A Ferris Wheel on a Parking Lot: Heritage, Tourism, and the Authenticity of Place in Solvang, California" (in Britta Timm Knudsen & Anne Marit Waade, eds., *Travel Tourism, Places: Reinvesting Authenticity*, 2010). (hpl2103@columbia.edu)