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Restaurants

Noa, Tallinn: Estonian rhapsody

'I fell rapturously for Estonian bread — not just for the traditional dark rye but for the focaccia-style roll'



Noa has views across the Gulf of Finland © Johannes Hoimoja

YESTERDAY by: **Nicholas Lander**

As I was about to leave Noa restaurant, just east of Tallinn, Estonia's capital city, I could not help but notice two chefs deep in conversation. They were Isaac McHale, the Scottish chef who has made a great success of The Clove Club in Shoreditch, east London, and Daniel Berlin, whose restaurant in Skane Tranas, southern Sweden, employs his father as sommelier and his mother as vegetable gardener.

They were finishing their glasses of the Spanish red Pittacum 2010 and discussing plans for the dinner for 60 they were jointly cooking the following evening, to mark the end of the 2016 Sauce gastronomy forum.

Berlin had just heard that none of the ingredients he had requested would be available, notably cod. McHale was doing his best to reassure him by rattling off the list of ingredients he had brought with him from his London kitchen, which included homemade blood pancake batter, blood pudding and seaweed from the Isle of Bute. Berlin had brought some wild bird liver mousse to serve as a canapé and, in the end, the dinner turned out to be a great success.

If the restaurant where we were dining — a modern glass building with views across the Gulf of Finland to the city's Old Town — did not have cod in supply that day, fish of any kind would have been even harder to source during the Soviet presence in the Baltic states, which lasted until the early 1990s.

Tallinn's coastal position was a temptation to those who wanted to enter or escape the USSR, so access to the coast was strictly controlled. There are still parts of Tallinn that have commanding views of the water that would have been heavily built upon if this were anywhere else.

All of this conspired to present restaurateur Martti Siimann with an opportunity. In 2011, in partnership with chef Tonis Siigur, he had established Oko restaurant in Kaberneeme, a 30-minute drive from Tallinn. They decided they wanted somewhere closer to the city and

discovered a plot of land owned by friends was for sale. Planning permission, still difficult so close to the sea, was eventually granted and Noa opened in 2014.

Its design is triangular, planned initially around an ash tree that was, in fact, inadvertently knocked down by the builders. Its glass windows afford fantastic views across the water, and there are mirrors for those who have to sit with their backs to the sea.

The larger, more casual part of the restaurant boasts a four-page menu but we ate in the Chef's Hall, a private dining room that is the culmination of Siigur's culinary ambitions. It seats about 40 on two levels: there is an open kitchen on the higher part, where the chefs can keep an eye on their customers as they make their way through a five- or seven-course tasting menu.



Oyster with pomelo © Johannes Hoimoja

Certain aspects of the meal showed off an international air but, in one crucial respect, the meal at Noa could not have taken place anywhere else but Estonia. The bread and butter were quite exceptional.

This, I came to appreciate through other good meals I enjoyed in Tallinn — at Dmitri Haljukov's Cru and Janno Lepik's Leib (the Estonian word for black bread) — is a trademark of Estonian restaurants. But it was at Noa, perhaps because it was my first meal in Tallinn or perhaps just because I was so hungry, that I fell so rapturously for the nation's bread — not just for the traditional dark rye but also for the focaccia-style roll, topped with rosemary and served warm in its individual baking tray. The salted butter was an added bonus.

The bread, along with our three snacks of whitefish with dill, cobia with mayonnaise and a skewer of duck and beetroot, was almost enough for me. But there were several more dishes to come on the €79, seven-course tasting menu. Best of these were an oyster sitting on a garlicky cream sauce and topped with thin slices of refreshing pomelo; the breast and leg of a pigeon served with small onions and a pigeon jus; and a memorable dessert of a bowl of sea buckthorn, the deciduous shrub so fashionable in the culinary world. Here it was mixed with amaretto and infused with nitrous oxide to produce a sparkling, sweet finale.

The quality of the food, service and wine is of a high enough standard to keep both locals and visitors warm through the coming Tallinn winter.

Noa

Ranna tee 3, Tallinn, Estonia; +327 50 80 589; [noaresto.ee \(http://www.noaresto.ee/\)](http://www.noaresto.ee/)

Photographs: Johannes Hoimoja

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