

how to spend it

F Høj and Nordisk Spisehus

The cutting-edge chefs at these two Aarhus hotspots continue to redefine Scandi cooking with exuberance



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Not so long ago, the idea of a gastronomic tour of Scandinavia would have been greeted with bemusement. What – apart from rollmops, watery bacon and knock-off French cheeses – did the Nordic larder have to offer?

How things change. At the top end, Noma, Faviken et al have redefined Nordic cooking: menus all over northern Europe now esteem pennywort, sea buckthorn and samphire more highly than San Marzano tomatoes or Amalfi lemons. Kale and oyster leaves are all the rage; black cabbage is the new Seville orange.

Outside these gastro-temples, things have changed too, as I discovered on a recent jaunt to Denmark's second city, Aarhus. Apart from eating and drinking very well, I found it had more than enough in the way of galleries, museums and other diversions to keep one occupied for a long weekend.

The best-known chef in Aarhus is Wassim Hallal, thanks to his appearances on the Danish version of Hell's Kitchen and his highly regarded restaurant, Frederikshøj. He also has a café-deli in the centre of town, called F Høj: an unassuming lunch spot, I thought, until I spotted seven vintages of Château d'Yquem basking under the macarons.

I stuck to smørrebrød (open sandwiches) which Hallal has fashioned into an art. His exuberant creations boast traditional Danish ingredients, but with a twist, and often a crunch: cured salmon, avocado and smoked cheese with horseradish; rare roast beef with remoulade and crisp-fried onions; roast pork with pickled red cabbage and puffed-up crackling, all served on malty rye bread, and all hugely enjoyable.

Dinner was at Nordisk Spisehus (pictured) – “Nordic Eating House” – a lovely place that offers a modern Danish lunch menu: shrimps with horseradish and dill oil; braised kalvekæber (veal cheek) with salsify and cabbage; local cheeses with pickled rosehips and crispbread – and a Michelin-themed dinner menu. On my visit, this meant dishes from five Michelin-starred Copenhagen restaurants in one tasting menu, cooked by talented head chef Jacob Freitag and his brigade.

Highlights were a fresh and harmonious plate of raw scallops with yuzu, celeriac and a vivid purée of green apple, from Clou; and roast breast of pigeon with toasted salsify (again!), truffled mushroom purée and a pigeon jus spiked with Gammel Dansk bitters, from Kokkeriet.

Freitag was solely responsible for the pudding, an insane McFlurry-like concoction of salted hazelnut ice cream, brown butter, crystals of white chocolate... and fresh dill. Yes, really: these days, if you are a cutting-edge Scandinavian chef, you can get away with anything.

F Høj, Grønnegade 2, Aarhus (www.frederikshoj.com). **Nordisk Spisehus**, MP Bruuns Gade 31, Aarhus (+45-8617 7099; www.nordiskspisehus.dk).