

## Great Dane dining

Denmark may be at the forefront of a cooking revolution, but a night spent in a 13th-century castle eating foraged food proves the new Nordic cuisine has ancient roots

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**Lars Eriksen**

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Chef Claus Henriksen with some of the local produce and one of his creations, smoked milk ice-cream. Photograph: Jenny Nordquist for the Observer

I would probably have stomped right through the fresh wood sorrel had it not been for our guide's intimate knowledge of the soggy ground we were walking across. Claus Henriksen, the head chef at the Dragsholm Castle restaurant, was leading us on a foraging trip around the grounds and the adjoining forest, where we nibbled on the zingy sorrel leaves and some of the 120-odd herbs that end up on his dining table.

The 13th-century castle is located an hour's drive northwest of Copenhagen, on the fringes of the Lammefjord, a former inlet in the northwestern part of the Danish island of Zealand that was not fully drained until 70 years ago and now has some of the most fertile soil in the country. Here on this farmland you can find the agricultural treasure trove behind Denmark's current domination of the gastronomic world.

As if it wasn't enough having René Redzepi's Copenhagen restaurant Noma rated as the best in the world, Denmark claimed another notch on its culinary belt in January when Geranium chef Rasmus Kofoed won the World Cup for chefs, the Bocuse d'Or in Lyon. But while the accolades are piling up for the capital's restaurants and chefs, much of their produce and success can be traced to the land and the farmers of the Lammefjord region.

Henriksen used to prepare the famous Lammefjord carrots and asparagus for Michelin-starred dishes when he was sous chef at Noma. Now at Dragsholm he finds himself living next door to the suppliers, and while the high-end restaurants in Copenhagen have to wait for their daily delivery, the 30-year-old chef can drive up the road and pick the ingredients out of the ground himself.

"It is all about getting the produce from soil to plate, preferably within 12 hours," he says. "We are constantly out picking stuff. You get another feeling when you are holding it in your hands, getting soil under your nails, working with it. If you just get it delivered, you can tend to throw it out."

He is happy with the seasonal ingredients he gets to work with even though we are deep in the middle of a Danish winter. Wrapped up in a grey woolly hoodie and with his foppish blond hair sticking out from under a black beanie, Henriksen smiles as he looks across his "kitchen garden". "Just look around," he says. "It's winter and it should be sad, but it's incredibly beautiful."



The Bay of Nekselø, 10 minutes from the castle.

There is a thin layer of snow covering much of the ground around the castle, but the sun breaks through on this chilly afternoon to highlight a stunning panorama of frozen fields and the bay of Nekselø, which is only a 10-minute walk away.

In its 800-year history, Dragsholm has been home to royalty, nobles, prisoners and ghosts. In its latest incarnation as a baroque-style hotel with two restaurants, it is a haven for foodie tourists.

In 2008 the gourmet restaurant opened in the cellar where the original castle kitchen used to be, and you can still see the wear and tear of centuries on the floor. The exposed white brick walls that arch over the dining room have been sensitively renovated to retain the history of the stronghold. Last year Dragsholm added the Lammefjord Eatery on the first floor of the main wing as a more informal and cheaper but no less appetising alternative, where rustic country dishes include homemade sausages and creamy fish soup.

Dragsholm has done a marvellous job of blending history with sleek Nordic design aesthetics. Although the 34 guest rooms retain some period features, they have been refurbished to modern standards and equipped with Wi-Fi. Twelve of the rooms are located in the thatched porter's lodge next to the castle; ours is in the main wing, which offers views of the herb garden and the castle park, where one of Denmark's oldest rhododendron gardens blossoms in early summer.

In summer, Henriksen and the other chefs can harvest wild strawberries and violets from the banks of the castle moat, but in winter they have to dig a little deeper in the woods. Henriksen strays off the tractor tracks we are following to pick a couple of twigs from a slender brownish tree called *hæ*. He breaks one and shoves it under my nose, and there is an instant aroma of liquorice and marzipan. He says he'll boil the twigs to make a tea for a bread he is baking. It seems that the purveyors of modern Nordic cuisine owe a debt of gratitude to their Viking forefathers.



Dragsholm Castle has 34 rooms.

Dragsholm normally makes a virtue out of championing the local herb and vegetable-driven terroir cuisine, but on the evening we are there, they invite a group of

Denmark's most talented young chefs from the Nordic Academy of Culinary Leisure (NaCL) to take over the kitchen and serve us some meaty treats. Many of the NaCL chefs have returned to Denmark after stints in some of the world's best kitchens. Among them is Anton Eff, who has spent time with the experimental chef Wylie Dufresne at wd~50, the restaurant in New York.

At first glance, Eff's tartar dish looks pretty conventional, but the meat has been substituted with tuna, the capers are finely rolled miniature balls of seaweed and the egg is yellow miso that has been transformed into a yolk shape thanks to a technique pioneered by Ferran Adrià at elBulli. For Nicolai Tram's dish – a tribute to his late grandmother – we walk across the courtyard to the castle church, where the lights have been turned off and an eerie soundtrack is echoing from the speakers. Here we are served tartar, burnt twigs and edible paper made to look like religious manuscripts.

Back in the more conventional setting of the Lammefjord Eatery dining room, we sit down to a main course of wild goose with cabbage from a neighbouring farm and puddings that pay homage to the nature surrounding Dragsholm. The first is a delicate, fluffy, malt ice-cream with raw licorice and wood sorrel presented on frozen bags of water, herbs and leaves (the next morning, when we cross the snow-covered fields on our way to the sea, we will find broken discs of ice that resemble these dinner plates).

For the finale, Henriksen evokes all the smells and sights of our foraging trip in his dessert of smoked-milk ice-cream, fir oil, ripe pears and a cup of rum toddy infused with red dead nettles which grow in the castle grounds.

The link between nature and the dining table is a key tenet of the new Nordic cuisine, according to [Claus Meyer](#), co-founder and co-owner of Noma. In 2004, Meyer and his colleagues launched a [manifesto for the new Nordic cuisine](#) in the wake of Noma's opening. The first of its 10 tenets was "to express the purity, freshness, simplicity and ethics we wish to associate with our region". It wasn't so much a blueprint for gourmet dining as a wake-up call for food culture and food producers. It secured the backing of the industrial and agricultural sectors, and was adopted by the Nordic council of ministers.

"There are many people who have realised new potential in our own landscape that they couldn't see seven years ago," says Meyer.

"Nordic cuisine is a style of cooking which isn't just novel but is to a large extent compatible with some emotions you have outside the kitchen – which, in a way, is not about the gourmet scene. It's everything from schools and large foundations researching health, and agricultural businesses acknowledging that what they were producing was not good enough."

Downstairs in the castle's gourmet kitchen Claus is inspecting a basket of cabbages and carrots in all shapes and sizes. He grabs a gnarly looking bright yellow carrot.

"Many people might call it deformed in some way, but it's nature. And that's what we are trying to work with, to create this sense of the natural. Why should we cut it into even squares or cylinders when we have got one like this? It is incredibly beautiful."

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## Essentials

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Dragsholm Castle, 4534 Hørve (+45 59 65 33 00; [dragsholm-slot.dk/en](http://dragsholm-slot.dk/en)). Double rooms start from £220 per night. A two-night stay with dinner at Claus Henriksen's gourmet restaurant and the castle's Lammefjord Eatery costs £295 per person. The castle also organises cooking courses and foraging excursions.

EasyJet ([easyjet.com](http://easyjet.com)) flies to Copenhagen from Gatwick and Luton from £16.99 one-way

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