

NIKLAS EKSTEDT

THE PIONEER



Pike perch at Ekstedt;
Right: Niklas Ekstedt



AS GASTRONOMY BECOMES EVER MORE SOPHISTICATED, ONE SWEDISH CHEF IS GOING BACK TO BASICS, COOKING ON AN OPEN FIRE AND EVEN CHOPPING HIS OWN WOOD. THE RESULT? A MICHELIN STAR. INTERVIEW: STEFAN CHOMKA. PHOTOGRAPHS: LOLA AKINMADE ÅKERSTRÖM

In a world of gastronomy that has embraced classic French cooking techniques on the one hand and increasingly sophisticated kitchen gadgets on the other, Niklas Ekstedt is an outlier. At the 39-year-old chef's eponymous restaurant in Stockholm, the cooking is more homely than haute; dishes often feature tallow and lard rather than butter, while rich, heavy sauces and julienne vegetables are not on the menu.

There are also no water baths, induction hobs or rotary evaporators, nor is there even the faintest haze of liquid nitrogen in the air. "The whole industry was looking up to chefs who were using additives and complicated gadgets and I didn't see the point of it," says Ekstedt of his 'analogue' approach to cooking. "There was no romance, no philosophy. I had become very sick of the industry, which was moving in a very complicated direction."

In fact, at this unique fine-dining restaurant there's barely any need for electricity at all — save that used for fridges in which to store ingredients and wine. Instead, Ekstedt harks back to a time before the advent of electricity, when fire and smoke were the only tools of the culinary trade. To eat there is to experience a cuisine untethered from modernity.

This wasn't the path Ekstedt had initially intended to take. Like his contemporaries, he was trained in French techniques and taught to love the ingredients of Spain and Italy. By the time he opened his first restaurant, aged

just 21, molecular gastronomy had taken hold and he found himself serving the avant-garde food of his peers, a far cry from the rustic cooking of Jämtland, central Sweden, where he grew up. Then one day, at the age of 33, he felt the sudden urge to return to his roots.

This Naked Lunch moment informs the approach Ekstedt takes today. In 2011, while taking time out of the industry to care for his newborn son, he bought a wooden cabin and started fitting it out. "There were solar panels for light and to charge phones, but no stove". As a result, he started cooking using a wood-fired cast-iron stove. When his thoughts eventually returned to the restaurant industry, it was this old-school style of cooking that he knew he had to pursue.

Using this as his jumping-off point, and taking on a former Italian restaurant that already had a wood-fired oven, Ekstedt scoured 18th-century cookbooks to discover time-honoured cooking techniques. He then set about building a kitchen in which he could practise them — one that would have looked familiar to the Swedes of 200 years ago, with a fire pit, cast-iron stove and a couple of smokers.

Ekstedt opened in November 2011, a time when New Nordic cuisine had reached dizzy heights, with René Redzepi's Noma crowned the best restaurant in the world. But Ekstedt would be no Noma facsimile.

"There was a Scandinavian food boom but it was all about products and producers,



Left: Niklas Ekstedt in his eponymous Michelin-starred restaurant in Stockholm

Out with the new While most chefs' first daily interaction with their kitchen is to turn on their appliances with the flick of a switch, Ekstedt has to chop wood and fire up the stoves. "Sometimes it feels like I'm in a modern yacht race in an old-fashioned sailing boat," he says

which I thought was very strange," he says. "No one was talking about the technical aspects of Scandinavian cooking, it was all very prestigious and expensive. Sweden was one of the poorest countries in Europe in the 1910s and 1920s, and post-Second World War gastronomy focused on everyday food. It is not supposed to be fancy, it is very down-to-earth. Why not have a gastronomy that focuses on old Scandinavian techniques, and which goes back to its roots?"

Yet, this is no time capsule. Instead, Ekstedt is using old techniques and translating them into very modern dishes. For example, a meal might include delicate, hay-flamed mushrooms with sweetbreads and bone marrow; birch-fired lamb with cabbage; or seared langoustine with deer and celeriac, finishing with an intense wood-fired-oven-baked almond cake with pear and yeast.

"I wanted a restaurant that was contemporary," the chef says. "I didn't want it to be a museum."

With a Michelin star to its name, which it won in 2013, Ekstedt has proven to be the restaurant world that you don't need to be high-tech to be high-end — but its rise to acclaim hasn't been without its difficulties.

"So many things are complicated," he admits. "It is still a challenge using old techniques in a modern world. Technology's

picked up so quickly and we have forgotten about heritage and handcraft."

He describes his current situation as "liberating and frustrating". He's doing something that he not only loves, but that he can call his own. "People are looking for a more authentic experience and are pushing the industry into being more individual. They are tired of consuming things without soul."

But it comes at a price. While most chefs' first daily interaction with their kitchen is to turn on their appliances with the flick of a switch, Ekstedt has to "do a day's work just to fire up the stoves", thanks to the continual need for chopped firewood. "People don't understand the challenges they review me against other restaurants," he says. "Sometimes it feels like I'm in a modern yacht race in an old-fashioned sailing boat."

That said, he wouldn't have it any other way. Chefs are continually looking to broaden their horizons, and Ekstedt is no exception. Even within his own constraints he is pushing the boundaries, with the restaurant now using what he describes as the stone-age equivalent of a microwave (an iron box filled with burning embers) to enable him to cook different dishes.

"It's time to figure out where to take the restaurant," he says of his future plans. "I'd like to push it even further, to the next level. I am not lacking in ideas." ●

Birch coal-grilled pike perch with juniper butter, Jerusalem artichoke and endive

Fire up your charcoal barbecue for this dish from Niklas Ekstedt

SERVES: 2 **TAKES: 1 HR**

INGREDIENTS

500ml whey
2 Jerusalem artichokes, peeled
200g butter
1 lemon, halved
1 endive
10 green juniper berries
200g pike perch fillet
500ml concentrated fish stock
(reduced from about 800ml)

METHOD

- 1 Light your charcoal. While it gets hot, pour the whey into a saucepan, lightly salt and bring to the boil. Add the Jerusalem artichokes and cook for 15-25 mins, until tender; remove.
- 2 In a clean pan, boil 1 litre water with 50g butter and a lemon half. Cut the endive into small wedges, add to the pan and blanch for 2 mins; remove.
- 3 Mix 50g butter with the juniper berries. Salt the pike perch and grill over charcoal until cooked. Brush with the juniper butter, then set aside.
- 4 In a pan, boil the stock and whisk in 100g butter to make a sauce. Add salt, lemon juice and the leftover juniper butter.
- 5 Serve the pike perch with the artichokes, endive wedges and a spoonful of buttery sauce.

