An Interview with René Redzepi
Noma, Copenhagen

RR: Yes, but not as intensely as we do it now. I’ve always felt it’s a matter of getting the job done. If the food is ready, don’t just stand there and shout for a waiter. Serve it yourself!

Over the years of course I’ve tried to develop the kitchen and the concept, and to train the chefs to be better chefs. One way to do that is to make them serve. Also, the more famous you get, the more expectations people have, and the more nervous they become—dining at a place like this a big deal for them. So it’s also a way of showing that we’re on the guest’s side. When an awkward chef comes out…

UH: The spirit at Noma—this very warm, welcoming, relaxed feeling the minute you step in—is that a Danish thing or something you have especially worked to create?

RR: In Denmark we’re not so formal, we don’t have an upper class, which is in some ways good. But in Denmark we tend to be withdrawn, so I’ve tried to create a more open atmosphere, to update our way of being.

UH: At Noma the chefs themselves come out and serve. That’s the first time anyone has really broken down the barrier between kitchen and dining room, them and us. Did you do that from the start?

Above: Quail eggs at Noma.
Photograph by Andrea Thode (Seventy Oh © 2010)
**UH:** Oh, they are not awkward!

**RR:** They’re wonderful, but instead of having some kind of butler you have a person with rough hands and a little sauce on the apron coming out and saying “Welcome!” That is a very different approach from your usual waiter. The big thing with serving is psychology. It’s about confidence, and it’s about understanding people.

**UH:** Can you explain the idea behind Noma?

**RR:** It’s very banal really, but it took us a long time to come up with it. We want our guests to experience the sensation of time and place. So many times when you eat out you close your eyes and you could be anywhere in the world—Berlin, São Paulo, London. There is huge uniformity in the world of modern restaurants. Our job is to show people that we’re in the north of the world and the time of year that we’re in.
UH: The technical execution of each dish at Noma is impeccable, but what really got me was a certain lightness and sense of humor—your food made me smile the whole time, beginning with the slippery, bright orange fruit leather made from sea buckthorn and served on gray felt.

RR: That’s something I’ve been working on for the past seven years, to show where we are in everything we do. Felt is used a lot in our part of the world, so it’s natural for it to become the plate. Some people call the restaurant rustic. I don’t understand that, because everything here has been made by hand. There’s massive oak everywhere—so in fact when you think about it, it’s very luxurious. But it’s important to me that the restaurant should not be über-luxurious, with seven layers of the most expensive porcelain built up like a tower, and on top of that another porcelain dish with celery soup in it. Because then the link between the celery’s origin in the earth and the soup in the restaurant is completely broken.

UH: You worked with Ferran Adrià at El Bulli. Is your approach the next step beyond manipulating the material a lot? To be able to show the link to the earth?

RR: I’ve always been interested in this. Working at El Bulli pushed me farther in that direction, because I left with a great sense of freedom: good food didn’t necessarily have to be French oriented or involve foie gras and truffles from Périgord. It can be whatever you think.

UH: You restrict yourself to Nordic ingredients. That reminds me of a kind of experimental research laboratory: what happens if…

RR: We have discovered that by limiting ourselves, once you break through the initial difficulties, a whole new world opens up, and you start to see the possibilities instead of the restraints. That has been a big part of shaping our cuisine.

UH: How about lemon, or spices? How far does the experiment go?

RR: Well, of course we were Vikings. We can’t deny that we’re a country of sailors and traders and therefore have a culinary history that involves spices like cardamom. And of course we use chocolate for our petits fours, and we serve coffee…It’s important to mention that it wouldn’t make sense to use exclusively Nordic products forever. But as long as we’re still exploring our own natural environment—for instance, looking for our own oils to use, such as rapeseed—we will not put a drop of olive oil into our food.

UH: So what you mean is you first have to find your own identity…

RR: Yes, and then we can reach out and see what makes sense.

UH: You are making quite a lot of basic products yourself.

RR: We are growing our own grapes for white wine [on the island of Lilleø], we have beer, we have aquavit, we have liqueur and fruit vinegars. We pickle and dry a lot ourselves.

UH: Is this because you can’t find these things anywhere else or because you want to make them yourself?

RR: There is nobody else who does this, so we have to do it. The pickling, for instance, is important to get us through the winter. Wine we simply wanted to try, because people said it would be possible. And we try to find out how it works in the kitchen, which took a while to get used to, because we had been working with fruit-driven beers or light vinegars all the time. We also work with the actual grapes, and with grape juice. Unripe green grapes are incredible.

UH: Who are your restaurant partners, and how involved are they?

RR: There are three of us. One is a designer whom I basically see only once every three months, at board meetings. Then there is Claus [Meyer], a famous entrepreneur in Denmark, a TV personality who is very good at developing quality projects in gastronomy. I only see him at board meetings, too. Of course, when we started I was a nobody, and Claus was super-famous in our part of the world, so very quickly the story revolved all around him. But the initial idea really was his. The three of us have a very good relationship. The other two completely trust the decisions we make here at Noma. Of course they make suggestions, but we run the restaurant the way we think we should. I definitely don’t want to be part of a corporate identity, because once you begin to enter this world or allow it to encroach, you’ll start making other products and compromises, and you won’t be able to keep things pure.

UH: But the temptation is strong, if you look at many of your colleagues…
RR: Of course it is, and the truth is that you simply don’t make money on restaurants like Noma. At one point it would be good, with all our hard work, to make some money. But I’m still trying to find a way where you don’t compromise, where you stay true to what you do.

UH: How about opening a second Noma?

RR: That’s always a big issue. But as long as I am here, it’s not going to happen. I have the opportunity to be part of something special, something I don’t think I am ever to see in my life again, so I am not going to ruin it just to make more money. Next time I’m involved in a restaurant, I won’t be a virgin anymore. Everything will be different. I won’t have the same pioneer spirit—or at least I really doubt I will. As long as I’m here I just want to focus 100 percent. To make sure that our cuisine is being developed at the highest gastronomic level and to inspire others within our region…

UH: Could you describe one of your favorite dishes?

RR: Oh, I love them all! Okay, let’s take the steak tartare. It was created five years ago, at the height of the high-tech era and that dish was like, well, let’s see what we can do without electricity. So it’s a dish where you use only your knife. You scrape and you pick; it’s simple. It’s not an assembly of textures created by machines; it’s an assembly of craftsmanship and products. To enhance that experience you should eat the meat with your fingers. Some people get provoked by eating with their fingers at a fine-dining restaurant, others love it. I think it’s wonderful because it breaks down the barriers. The same thing with the langoustine we serve on a big stone gathered from the beach, with an emulsion of fresh oysters and dulse for dipping. Those two dishes are quite important dishes for us in our repertoire.

UH: On the Noma Web site you talk about culinary legacy, but your own roots are not exclusively Danish.

RR: No, I am half Macedonian—my father is Macedonian and Albanian. I feel Danish, but it’s a good thing that I have not grown up the way most people in Denmark have. I think having a different background helped me to see some qualities that a 100 percent native Dane wouldn’t have. When we stayed four months in Macedonia every summer, there were eight of us in one room. We ate dinner, then took the table out and slept on the floor. You go places on horseback; there is no refrigerator.

UH: How about the food?

RR: Food was a hundred times better than what you ate here in the 1970s and ’80s, all that frozen food, microwaved food, fish sticks. There you slaughtered a chicken if you wanted a chicken. If you wanted milk, it was freshly milked. You ate much more simply, but the food was a lot fresher. I remember on Sundays having freshly laid eggs, cracked on bread and done in the pan. Or, in season, chestnuts roasted with cold milk for breakfast.

UH: Are you transferring any of these memories into the Nordic context?

RR: It isn’t intentional, but, obviously, that part of me is a part of this.

UH: Let’s talk about the New Nordic Food manifesto, which appeared quite soon after you opened Noma in 2004. It reminds me of the Danish filmmakers Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg and their Dogma 95 manifesto for a new film. They wanted to go back to their roots, rediscover a simpler way—do you feel a certain affinity to them?

RR: No. The Nordic manifesto was inspired by what the Basque did in the 1970s. The Dogma consisted of rules, whereas I never ask anyone in the kitchen to read the Nordic manifesto. It was an inspiration back then, when it first came out, but now I find it a little too political and too commercially exploited. Meeting Susanne, one of our farmers in Gotland, has been much more important for Noma. For a whole year she was our muse in the kitchen. She picks a lot of wild food, she has duck eggs, incredible berries, her son has a little farm where she produces fruit and vegetables, she has lamb that is out of this world… However, for the development of a regional Danish cuisine on a larger scale, the manifesto has been very important. For our restaurant it’s only been a small step on the way.

UH: Who are the people you work with in the kitchen, and how do you find them?

RR: People come and try. We get around eight applications a day, seven days a week.

UH: So how do you choose?

RR: They find us. We get around eight applications a day for the kitchen, seven days a week.
decide if it’s the right thing for them. It doesn’t matter if they have umpteen Michelin stars on their résumé. At the end of the day it’s about a certain kind of involvement and energy. With the right attitude and the will, the rest will follow. We have seventeen nationalities working together in the kitchen.

UH: You mentioned Ferran Adrià and El Bulli. Who are your heroes besides him?

RR: My biggest hero in the world is actually a French guy, which surprises a lot of people. Every time I feel I’m a little lazy, I think of him. Philippe Houdet is French, he lives in Denmark, he used to have a small, one-star restaurant, Pierre André. I did my apprenticeship there. He is the one who lit a fire in me.

UH: How did you initially get into cooking?

RR: Coincidence really. A friend started culinary school and I didn’t know what to do, so I joined him. I was fifteen. After going to school for six months you had to find an apprenticeship and stay there for three and a half years. I really learned a lot. Then I went to Jardin des Sens in France, in 1997. And then I read about El Bulli. I went there to eat and I thought—wow! Because everything that existed for me back then was French cuisine. El Bulli was a real eye-opener. Right after that meal I went up to Ferran and said, please, I want a job. The next season I worked there. During that time I met Grant Achatz, who now runs Alinea in Chicago. Back then he worked as sous chef with Thomas Keller at the French Laundry, and he told me a lot about him. I found it extremely interesting to hear about an American chef who worked some kind of Americanism into his food, instead of the French chefs in America you always read about. And so I went to the French Laundry for a stage after El Bulli. It was a brilliant time. Thomas Keller was a great inspiration.

UH: Nowadays, what do you do to re-energize?

RR: I spend time with my family. I have work and I have family and that’s it, really. I don’t do sports. I used to…the flip side of success is that the more success you have, the more work you’ll have. Maybe at some point I will reach a level where success will enable me to work how I want to.

UH: You opened in 2003, you got your first Michelin star in 2005, the second one in 2007. Does that define success for you?

RR: It’s part of it. I think every chef has the dream of making it to that level, right up to the third star. It’s not important enough for me that I would ever change anything, though. Perhaps one day they’ll think our food is good enough.

UH: Ferran Adrià has announced that he’ll close El Bulli at the end of 2011 for good. How long will Noma stay open?

RR: At one point you’ll just be empty, you’ll start repeating yourself, and then it’s time to leave. And my gut feeling is ten years. I can’t see myself here in twenty years. It’s very demanding in terms of energy. That’s another backside of success—you get a new level of attention focused on you and that makes you go forward even faster. So, ten years.

UH: And then what? Could you see yourself doing something along the lines of Noma but in a completely different place?

RR: Perhaps. I certainly couldn’t do a Nordic restaurant again. But taking the mindset to another place, why not. At thirty-two I am young, I have a young daughter, I don’t want her to grow up only in this country; I want her to be open to influences from around the world. For a long time in Denmark we have had great designers who make wonderful tables and chairs, beautiful linen, great porcelain, silverware, and glassware. But we have had nothing to put on them. This is slowly happening now—instead of only form we have some content. But let’s take it easy. Let’s see if we can develop this, if we can grow. This is just the beginning.

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