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KOKKERIET – A SMALL RESTAURANT WITH BIG AMBITIONS

By Caroline Phillips

Facade via Adsbøl

A small restaurant with big ambitions – that's Kokkeriet according to its website. It claims also to be 'modern and old-fashioned, innovative and traditional, decadent and minimalist, pretentious as well as humble.' Well, that's all bases covered then.

The executive chef, David Johansen, focuses on seasonal, natural foods, using produce the Danes find in their backyards, the forest and surrounding water. Owner, head sommelier and GM, Sammy Shafi, is super charming. Plus the restaurant has one Michelin star. Additionally, we turn up on the wrong night, and they're endlessly accommodating. These are all good reasons to book.

Kokkeriet is on the corner of two grey streets of bleak buildings in Copenhagen's Nyboder neighbourhood – originally built as housing for the Navy. It boasts an attractive lounge area with a tall-backed sofa and Scandinavian-designed leather chairs. But the restaurant interior seems unrelated – a long, thin, low-ceilinged room with wallpaper imprinted with large diamonds, and black tablecloths: the vibe is daring suburban. That's before I notice that hanging along the ceiling is a discarded ladder, or a curious artwork.



Maybe this is meant to be a place to turn diners' preconceptions upside down, somewhere a ladder doesn't feel out of place overhead. After all, Kokkeriet offers new renditions of classic Danish dishes – a rethink of their gastronomic heritage. But it's a bit like Heston Blumenthal's cookery – although not as good – in that both chefs' creations set me thinking afresh about food. Heston has Michelin stars because his work shows a consistent and reliable level of brilliance – but I don't enjoy his mixtures and textures.

As for Kokkeriet, do I really like beetroot and duck liver with chocolate? (Even if it is pickled beetroot and based on the traditional Danish 'flødebolle' or petits fours). Or lamb, shrimp and

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pickled salad? Or spring cabbage with clam juice and buttermilk? David's talent is undoubted, but I find some of the texture pairing odd, the flavour combination bizarre and I'm not even sure I like the juxtaposition of temperatures. Do raw wood sorrel and lemon verbena leaves really work with meringue? And what's appealing about tepid bouillon on a cold crab starter?

The restaurant is heavingly popular, though – not a table free and difficult to get a booking. There's a gathering of seven ladies on business; a table for one, as is the trend with extreme foodies; plus couples – and there's a lot of Danish being spoken here. The dress code is smart casual – I feel overdressed in a black evening dress. Upmarket trainers wouldn't be out of place. A succession of black bedecked, white-aproned staff is busy delivering things. 'I like the way people keep coming out carrying just one fork or whatever,' laughs my octogenarian father, who's dining with me. But although he asks a couple of times for some more wine, something gets lost in translation and it doesn't arrive.



Kokkeriet offers seven or eleven course menus. Top marks go to the oat, Havgus cheese and almond snacks – a deconstruction of a traditional Danish porridge breakfast. They're presented imaginatively like a tangle of twigs, alongside lichen-covered real ones. The 'frikadeller' – meatballs originally eaten with potatoes – are reworked as a wild game appetiser, and get the thumbs up. And, towards the end of the meal, I love the tangy, refreshing sorbet of green grape and celery. The pudding of anise mousse, berries, beetroot sorbet and nougatine is a winner too (both unusual but good combinations). But I'm less keen on some of the bits in between.

It's not just that I'm not a great fan of classic Danish dishes. Certainly the cod traditionally served on New Year's Eve with bacon, capers, egg, beetroot and onion wouldn't be my first choice (David's update is tapioca fish with cod stock, squid ink seasoning and caper powder.) Nor would I rush to order the cabbage in white sauce that's usually paired with meat – and which David 'gourmandises' by producing it instead with fish – scallops – drizzled with tarragon and white sauce flavoured with mussel juice and buttermilk. It's just that some of the dishes are not perfectly executed either.

The cabbage dish is too salty. Then there's the pork belly inspired by a dish called 'burning love' – classically served with mashed potatoes with caramelised onions. Instead, David's pork belly is braised for 24 hours and modernised with aquavit, onion 'ash' (glazed, grilled onions), thyme and bacon – and it's too dry. Before each course, we're instructed to 'enjoy,' after each one, we're asked whether it's good.



For my juice pairing, they offer cucumber and grape, Jerusalem artichoke and fennel, and beetroot and cranberry juices. Or even carrot and cabbage juice – which takes a brave punter. I don't tell them that the carrot juice is fermenting and a tad fizzy.

But, hey, this is the world of overhead ladders. I've been earlier to see the weird area of Christiania, a freetown and self-proclaimed autonomous neighbourhood of Copenhagen where 'medical' hash is sold openly in kiosks by tattooed hippies. We've visited the Rosenborg Castle and gawped at fist-size precious stones and Crown Jewels. And now, yes now, the waiter is serving us salted caramel chocolate eggs in a bird's nest on hay, good enough to tweet about.

Suddenly hundreds upon hundreds of roller bladers – with torches on their helmets – are speeding through the dark streets, some leading kids along by the hand and pushing babies in pushchairs ahead of them. They blade, stream and tear past the restaurant window. It's fun to behold and lifts the heart. If you go to Kokkeriet, book your table for a night when there's this Friday Night Skate. And make sure you raise your eyes and glass to the ceiling ladder too.

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The 11-course menu 1.200,- £129

The 7- course menu 900,- £97

Additional option of 10 gr. caviar 250,-

Additional option of cheese 150,-

www.kokkeriet.dk

Caroline Phillips is an award-winning freelance journalist who contributes to publications from Sunday and daily newspapers to glossy magazines and various luxury websites. To see more of her work, go to www.carolinephillips.net.

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