

THE MOST INTERESTING FOOD EVER AT AOC

By Caroline Phillips

Forget Noma – Caroline Phillips heads for AOC, where you can get a reservation with an ease that belies the wonders you'll find therein...



If you're keen on gastronomy, there's a hot contender for your attention in Copenhagen. A restaurant that is not globally renowned, not regularly reviewed and doesn't have a big waiting list. Welcome to AOC.

AOC is centrally located – near the King's Square – in the vaulted basement of a 17th century palace. The restaurant has white walls, stone floors and white linen tablecloths. It has a monks' cloisters feel, aside from the wannabe-Rothko pictures, cut crystal and dipsomaniac's dream of a drive-in wine cooler. The décor isn't as good as its one-Michelin-star food – the lighting's too stark and the ceiling ones look like bulbous escaped molecules – although every restaurant should take its cue from AOC and have clips under the table for hanging ladies' handbags. Tables which (delightfully) are miles apart – for 50 covers – and supersized.

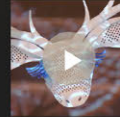


When you go to AOC, you know rising chef Søren Selin and his team will probably have been foraging in the mountains, valleys and down by the sea; picking up weeds, berries and bark. This is food in the New Nordic tradition: natural ingredients of incredible freshness and quality; simple food, all in season. The menu changes six times a year. Søren, 38, who was previously head chef at Alberto K, wants the diner to feel the link from nature to plate.

His aim is also to give clients (when we were there, Danes, couples, businessmen, the over 45s in jackets) 'a sensory experience' – stimulating touch, sight, smell, sound and taste. Steaming flannels arrive first. Then the menus come in a glass letter rack – one in a silver envelope, one in beetroot. When it comes to the food, Søren mixes textures, colours, tastes, unusual presentations and juxtapositions. Even the bread is presented like eggs in a nest, alongside the soured goat's butter.



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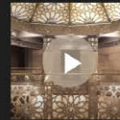
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My father gets offered a choice of three champagnes to start – I don't drink – and I hear him mumbling happily about 'fruity' and 'powerful.' Christian Aarø, the gentle Nordic giant of an owner, is also the sommelier and flies the flag for Old and New World wines. I have the juice pairings including berries with odd names and sublime tastes like red apple and woodruff, and buckthorn juice.

The appetisers are made with love and artistry. Razor clam 'sandwiches' with a 'snow' of clams and foam of horseradish – light, like mouth-watering snow. Then langoustine tartare with red berry chutney, sour cream, tangy red herbs and pancake with a langoustine reduction on it – food I could eat forever. My heart starts to flutter each time a tray comes towards me. Flutter, flutter, here comes smoked bone marrow, rye bread crumble at the bottom and parsley cream on top – served in wax paper inside brown. Now here's a deep fried sweetbread served on a twig. There's also a stone pebble on which to rest our spoons. 'I like the way we re-use our cutlery,' says my father.





After a delightful hour, the appetisers are over and we start on the courses. There are two tasting menus – of six and nine courses; I opt for the former.

On offer tonight is squid, daikon, oysters and wild cress, with foraged beach mustard – vegetarian nirvana – paired with juice of cucumber and verbena; smoked sea scallops, tomato, dulce and Dashi with dried scallop roe in the snow – super fresh, zany and natural; and grilled greens, bleak roe and smoked egg yolk – paired with cherry juice (a whole bottle of every juice is made freshly for me. But I manage only a sip or two of each).



By 10pm, we're only onto our third course – and I'm pretty full already. But then the star turn arrives: turbot, wrapped in lard in a juniper bush tied with string served on pebble with a side dish of cream made of turbot roes. 'Take the scissors and cut it in the middle, the fish is inside,' instructs the waiter. 'Then dip it in the cream and eat it with your fingers.' The dish smells like forest and tastes like heaven; and the cream is good enough furtively to wipe the bowl with my finger.

The rest of the evening is a blur of delightful excess. Duck hearts, corn hair and hazelnuts; Danish beef, nettles and cep puree; and burned rye bread porridge with dark berries – the

pudding served in little flower pots with parsley ice-cream – paired with biodynamic hay milk (from happy cows which eat only hay) and hazelnut.



I've used nine glasses plus water ones. It has been an historic four-hour meal. I try not to imagine how much food we've each consumed. This is the sort of outing you should have only after fasting for two days. The food is a revelation. It can be added to Copenhagen's best, along with Hans Christian Andersen, its clean air, safety and all those egalitarian, polite folk on pushbikes.

It's not a snip – but nothing in Denmark is cheap. Six courses are £175 with wine pairing (£115 with juice); nine courses are £235 with wine pairing (£158 with juice). But it's worth it. 'The most interesting food I've ever had,' says my father. And he speaks as someone who's had 85 years of meals.

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HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WEEK

