

Nordic's Next Wave

Lebanese-born chef **Wassim Hallal** is shaking up Denmark's fine-dining scene. Just don't expect New Nordic cuisine in Copenhagen, writes Lara Brunt

Copenhagen has been top of many gastronomes' must-visit list ever since Noma was first declared the world's best restaurant back in 2010. Yet, the country's second-largest city, Aarhus, is slowly beginning to stake its claim in the world of Danish gastronomy. And leading the charge is Wassim Hallal.

Earlier this year, the Lebanese-born chef was awarded his first Michelin star at Restaurant Frederikshøj in Aarhus, a dynamic city on the Jutland peninsula around 190km northwest of Copenhagen. It's the first time the city has been included in the prestigious guide. And while most people expected Hallal to get the nod, it was encouraging to see two other



Aarhus establishments – Gastromé and Restaurant Substans – each receive a coveted star, too.

As Copenhagen’s culinary reputation continues to grow, many in the industry have told Hallal that he should move to the capital if he wants recognition. “I told them that for me it has been important to stay in Aarhus, so that the day the Michelin guide want to see more than Copenhagen, we are ready. And when they showed up, we were,” he says.

The chef admits he has been hungry for the accolade. “Michelin stars are something I have always dreamed about,” he says. “It has been a long struggle for me, but I have always believed that it would be possible one day. It means a lot to me that I finally can be assessed in the same way as other Danish and foreign colleagues.”

While he may be unknown in these parts, Hallal is one of Denmark’s most recognisable chefs. The author of two cookbooks, his restaurants have twice been named Denmark’s best by the influential Danish Dining Guide (Molskroen in 2006, followed by Frederikshøj in 2012).

And in 2010 he appeared in the Danish version of Hell’s Kitchen, the reality television show created by the famously fiery British chef, Gordon Ramsay. As someone at the mercy of critics, did he relish the role of judge? “A film production is an experience I will not be without trying. But it’s not something I want to do again,” he says diplomatically.

Born in Lebanon in 1980, Hallal immigrated with his family to Thy in Denmark, around 400km northwest of Copenhagen, when he was four years old. At 14, he decided he wanted to be a chef. Although his father was a cook, this had no influence on Hallal’s own career choice. Instead, it was the concept that “every day is different from the other. I like the idea that when I meet at work, I don’t know what the day will bring,” he muses.

And while his Lebanese background has influenced his personality – “I am a person who does not give up and I fight to the end” – he says it has no bearing on the food he creates. The Frederikshøj website describes Hallal’s cuisine as “a sophisticated union of the pure style of nouvelle cuisine and the



dizzying and complex deconstructions of postmodern cuisine”.

His creations also draw upon “the raw primordial forces of New Nordic cuisine and the very advanced techniques and surprising compositions.” But make no mistake, Frederikshøj is not an Aarhus version of Noma, nor is it like any other Nordic restaurant for that matter.

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expects to get New Nordic food at Frederikshøj,” he says. “My style is my own. Preferably with local seasonal ingredients, but also ingredients from the rest of the world. I would describe my cuisine as advanced and eventful.”

On the menu are chicken egg ‘nests’, potatoes that look like pebbles and edible eggshells. Lobster from Norway and foie gras from France sit alongside meat from Australia and sea urchins from Iceland. When I ask about his

signature dish, or the one he’s most proud of, Hallal declares, “I am very proud of my entire kitchen and all the dishes I make. If I’m not proud of a dish, it will never come to my guests.”

When it comes to developing the menu at Frederikshøj, “I always think of food, new compositions and new dishes,” says Hallal. “My inspiration comes from my daily life, whether it is at home with the family, in the kitchen at Frederikshøj or cycling on the road.

Anywhere I can find inspiration.”

With Aarhus set to be the European Capital of Culture in 2017, we can look forward to hearing more about this emerging culinary destination. And at just 35, we’ll no doubt be seeing more from Hallal, too. Whose career would he most like to emulate? “The chef who has impressed me most throughout the ages is Alain Ducasse,” he says. “It’s amazing that you can be so many years at the top and still develop your food.”

