

AIR

Food For Thought

The 50-course menu at Copenhagen's Alchemist blends food, theatre and politics. AIR chats to chef **Rasmus Munk** about his boundary-pushing new restaurant that has taken the culinary world by storm

WORDS : LARA BRUNT



Food for Thought

A tribute to foie gras producer Eduardo Sousa who figured out a way to produce natural foie gras from wild geese that land in Spain once a year to feast on acorns and olives before migrating further south.

Details: Sautéed foie gras in a Madeira casing topped with yuzu gel and aerated foie gras.
Photo: Claes Bech Poulsen

The second incarnation of Noma is just down the road, but the most-talked-about new restaurant in Copenhagen couldn't be more different from René Redzepi's terroir-based cuisine and minimalist, blond-wood dining space.

Opened last summer, Alchemist has already reached near-mythical status among gastronomes: three months' worth of reservations sell out in minutes, with a waitlist stretching to 20,000 people. Ferran Adrià declared Alchemist "one of the most memorable meals I have had during the last 10 years", while Denmark's influential *White Guide* has crowned it 'Restaurant of the Year' – knocking Noma off the top spot.

Housed in an old warehouse once used to build theatre sets in Copenhagen's former dockyards, Alchemist is the brainchild of Rasmus Munk, a 28-year-old Danish chef with a reputation for multi-sensory molecular cuisine. He has labelled it 'Holistic Cuisine', a gastronomic experience that stimulates both mind and palate by incorporating elements of theatre,

art, music, science and technology.

"For me, Holistic Cuisine is just focusing on the whole instead of only the parts," he explains. "It's common sense that you need the best cooking skills and the best ingredients possible, but I wanted to see if we could add more layers on top of that. Could we talk about important issues and use food [as a tool] to communicate? Could we use elements from the worlds of theatre, arts and technology to surprise guests with an even a greater sensory experience?"

Those lucky enough to land a table at the 40-seat restaurant pass through four-metre-high bronze doors and then enter a dream-like world of graffiti-splashed rooms, LED-adorned dancers and slow synth beats. The 50-course menu is divided into five dramatic acts; guests move through nearly a dozen different spaces, with the majority of dishes served beneath a planetarium dome illuminated by hypnotic video projections.

The five-hour experience is as thought-provoking as it is theatrical. Many of the bite-sized courses – called



Andy Warhol

An interpretation of Andy Warhol's iconic banana that first appeared on the sleeve of the Velvet Underground & Nico album from 1967.

Details: Under a crispy casing made from banana juice lies a sorbet made from Manzano bananas, paired with South American flavors like cachaça, tonka beans and caramelized egg yolk.

Photo: Søren Gammelmark

impressions – aim to spark debate about issues such as immigration, animal welfare, food waste and plastic pollution. “Restaurants have such a huge impact on our culture these days,” Munk says. “With that power to speak out, chefs have a responsibility, first of all, to create a positive food culture, and then I think, if you can, to add layers on top of it with activism.”

At Alchemist, development of new dishes tends to be informed by issues, rather than ingredients. “For most chefs, it’s about taking the ingredient first and then doing a dish. For me, most of the impressions are done with a lot of research on different subjects or things that touched me in some way, from climate change to hunger,” he says.

Plastic Fantastic, for instance, consists of grilled cod jaw topped with edible ‘plastic’ made from dried cod-skin broth. Served on a plastic plate, recycled from debris washed up on Denmark’s western beaches, the dish is accompanied by images of jellyfish floating among plastic bags projected onto the giant domed ceiling.

Food for Thought, meanwhile, features ethically-produced foie gras from Spain served inside a silicone human head with a removable skull. Danish Kiss is even more confronting; created to celebrate a friend who

survived tongue cancer, tiny morsels of beetroot puree, pickled blackberries and fermented plums are designed to be licked off a silicone human tongue. Does Munk ever worry he’ll push his experimental style too far?

“For sure. That’s really the balance we need to find, because we want people to come and have a great evening – not feel like a bad human being when they leave. When you provide experiences that cost this amount of money, along with the effort [diners] need to put in to get a table, then it needs to be more than just good food,” he says.

Not all dishes are quite so intense. “There are also a lot of dishes that are just inspired by cultures, technology and techniques – it’s quite a mix,” he says. A visit to MoMA in New York inspired an edible interpretation of Andy Warhol’s iconic banana – sorbet encased in a crispy skin made from banana juice – while a pristine white snowball made from fermented tomato and eaten with ski gloves conjures up childhood memories of playing in the snow.

It’s fair to say that a career as a maverick chef was not on the cards for Munk. He grew up in a family of non-foodies in Randers, a mid-sized city in the Jutland region, predestined “to become either a mechanic or join a biker gang,” he says. Instead, he

Amber

Red wood ants are trapped in a honey and ginger candy (pâte de fruit with a beeswax and sugar shell).

Details: On the coast of Jutland it is common to hunt for amber on the beaches. You often need to bite it, to test if it’s the real thing and not glass.

Photo: Søren Gammelmark



The Omelet

Rasmus Munk’s attempt to create the perfect omelette. After years at culinary school trying to create a perfect cigar-shaped omelette and eating hundreds of bad ones during his travels, he set his mind to creating the perfect rendition.

Details: A membrane made from egg yolk is filled with an egg yolk and comté cheese filling that has been carefully heated to 52 degrees to retain the flavor of raw egg yolk. The omelette is topped with paper thin lardo and black truffles.

Photo: Claes Bech Poulsen



The Toast

A toast where the element of surprise lies in realising that it is feather light and actually not a toast at all when lifting it up. The flavour reminds Rasmus of 'kryddere', the crisp brioche toasts he used to eat as a child.

Details: The toast is made of aerated vegetable cellulose, and then sautéed in brown butter (no flour is used). It is topped with fermented almond cream and oscietra caviar.

Photo: Claes Bech Poulsen



Provocative dishes with ethically-charged messages won praise from diners and critics alike

followed his best friend to culinary school and serendipitously found his calling. After staging at restaurants including Noma and The Fat Duck, Munk spent several years working in the kitchens of top restaurants in London. Back in Denmark, he was appointed head chef at Treetop, a fine-dining restaurant in eastern Jutland, aged just 22.

Two years later, the young chef opened his first solo venture in the Danish capital – a 15-seat restaurant, also called Alchemist – and began experimenting with avant-garde cuisine tinged with activism. “It was a very tiny restaurant, the smallest one in Copenhagen at that point, with four chefs and two front-of-house [staff]. The philosophy was the same as now, but we didn’t put a word on it back then. Everybody was putting us in this box of molecular gastronomy and we just accepted that because we didn’t have a better description,” he reflects.

Provocative dishes with ethically-charged messages, such as Ashtray (king crab and potato topped with hay ash to resemble an overflowing ashtray) and Rotten Lamb Brain (mousse of brains and foie gras in an edible lamb’s ‘skull’), won praise from diners and critics alike. In 2016, Munk was named the *White Guide*’s ‘Innovator of the Year’ and Alchemist debuted on the

guide’s Top 10 list for Denmark.

But it was Organ Donation – lamb heart tartare served inside another whole lamb heart, sliced opened and doused with ‘blood’ from an IV bag – that convinced Munk about the power of the plate. Presented together with a leaflet about organ donation, the dish prompted 1,500 diners to register as donors.

“Organ Donation was the dish that really changed my perception about the restaurant,” says Munk. “I was still a little bit doubtful whether you could really communicate through food, and it was one of the dishes that really showed me that it’s possible, actually, to make a change and [to see] how far can you take it.”

The restaurant closed in 2017 after Munk accepted an offer to scale up his vision from investor Lars Seier Christensen, owner of three-Michelin-starred Geranium in Copenhagen. Twenty times larger than the original and with a staff of 50, Munk has ambitious goals for Alchemist 2.0. “I hope we will set things in motion. I want Alchemist to comment on the present and create something that can resound further than the restaurant industry. I want people to eat – and then think,” he says.

Reservations for April, May and June will be released on February 10; alchemist.dk

Thinking Outside the Box

Lamb’s brain is not normally eaten in Denmark and is otherwise discarded as waste. It was therefore quite challenging to work out the logistics of having it on the menu. The lamb’s brain is coated in a cherry sauce made from cherries from Frederiksdal cherry orchard. The brain is presented floating in walnut oil in a transparent box and is lifted up and sliced table side and then served atop an onion marmalade on a cherry meringue.

Details: The brain is salted and steamed for 7 minutes at 52 degrees to preserve the texture.

Photo: Claes Bech Poulsen

