



Going Under

Lara Brunt dives into conversation with **Nicolai Ellitsgaard**, head chef of the world's largest underwater restaurant



In the tiny coastal community of Båly on the southernmost tip of Norway, a 34-metre-long concrete monolith juts out of the icy waters of the North Sea. Bolted to the seabed five-and-a-half metres below, the half-sunken structure houses Under, Europe's first underwater restaurant. Guests enter by gangplank and descend an oak staircase to dine in front of a floor-to-ceiling window offering mesmerising views of frolicking seals and schools of fish.

In Norwegian, 'under' means both 'below' and 'wonder', and the eye-catching building certainly invokes the latter. Designed by Snøhetta, the Norwegian architectural firm renowned for the contemporary Alexandria Library in Egypt and the September 11 Memorial in New York, the 1,600-tonne structure has slightly curved, half-metre-thick walls to withstand the water pressure and wild waves.

The building has a dual purpose: besides a 40-seat restaurant, it will also serve as a marine research centre, with the aim of educating the public about the biodiversity of the sea. Textured concrete was chosen to encourage seaweed and molluscs to cling to its exterior, eventually creating an artificial reef that will help purify the water and attract even more marine life.

Under is the brainchild of fourth-generation hoteliers and brothers, Stig and Gaute Ubostad, who also own the Lindesnes Havhotell, just across the bay. The man charged with delivering a menu to compete with the view is Danish chef Nicolai Ellitsgaard. A veteran of Michelin-star restaurants, Ellitsgaard was working at a restaurant in Kristiansand, 70kms east of Båly, when he received a call from the brothers in late 2016.

"I was starting to get bored of cooking and wanted to find out what I wanted to do with my life and the rest of my career," Ellitsgaard says. "We had a meeting and they showed me Snøhetta's designs and talked about their ambitions for the restaurant. I was just like, 'Whoa, I have to be a part of this. Where do I sign?'"

Ellitsgaard spent the following year experimenting with ingredients and dishes for the new venture. The 70m krone (US\$7.6m) restaurant opened

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last spring, offering one, ever-changing degustation menu that focuses on locally-caught, farmed and foraged ingredients. Ellitsgaard champions sustainability and 'gill-to-fin' cooking, which uses parts of the fish that are often discarded, to reduce food waste.

"The owners had a lot of trust in me because we had the same philosophy. I don't want to cook with things that we don't have in Norway, for instance foie gras or truffles that we have to fly in. The more local it can be, the better it is," he says.

The Immersion menu consists of 18 or 19 seasonal dishes, with diners only given a written menu as they leave. "I really like the element of surprise because we use some different things that nobody else is using, or maybe just a handful of restaurants are using. It gives me a kick to show people these ingredients that many take for granted," says Ellitsgaard.

Dishes may include langoustines basted with fermented honey, brown crab head with sour cream and buckwheat koji, or Ellitsgaard's take on fiskepudding, a traditional Norwegian fishcake. "Fiskepudding is normally served with a white sauce flavoured with onion, but we make a sauce with mussel stock instead and serve it in an onion so you get the onion smell, but not the intense taste," the chef explains. "We serve it with herring roe, which many people overlook, that we have aged for two months with salt and then preserved further in a wood-roasted onion oil."

The menu also features lesser-known species that are frequently snubbed by diners and local fishermen. "For instance, squat lobsters are a bycatch of langoustine and shrimp fishing and normally the fishermen just throw them back into the ocean, which I think is a shame," says Ellitsgaard. "It took me about 18 months to figure out how we could get enough squat lobsters to include them on the menu, but now we have a really good system working with one local fisherman who has 200 traps to fish for [squat lobsters] for us."

While Under celebrates the bounty of





the sea, the menu also often includes dishes with meat and game. “We will have meat on the menu if it makes sense and if the farmer has the same philosophy as us,” says Ellitsgaard. “I don’t want to serve any corn-fed beef where the animal has been standing in a one-square-metre space for eight months. I want to know the farmer and know the entire story, because if the animal has had a good life then the quality will be good.”

“At the moment,” he continues, “we have two dishes with wild range lamb on the menu, which we get from a local woman who rears them on an islet 30 minutes from here.” Building relationships with local farmers and fishermen is one of the most rewarding aspects of his job. “It’s fantastic,” he says.

Ellitsgaard admits his hyper-local, hyper-seasonal approach can sometimes create challenges in the kitchen. New dishes typically take a month of development before they appear on the menu, but bad weather can interrupt the availability of

ingredients. “Then we have to do the dish in maybe two days. But we always have something up our sleeves if one of our suppliers cannot deliver something, although the fishermen are really good at telling us about the weather forecast,” he says. “It is a little stressful, but it’s also exciting. You always have to be on top of your game, thinking of new ideas and being two steps ahead.”

Under’s remote location is another challenge. In the southern Lindesnes region, Båly is a five-hour drive from Oslo and more than an hour from Kristiansand, the nearest large city. So, who is coming to dine under the sea? “Our customers differ from day to day. In the beginning we had a lot of local people, but it’s interesting to see now that we’re getting more people from abroad. Yesterday, we had 50 per cent from abroad – from the US, Japan, China, Belgium and France. We also have people coming from all over Norway, from the north to the south,” comments Ellitsgaard.

The restaurant serves dinner four nights a week, increasing to five nights

Opening pages: A dish from the menu © Stian Broch; exterior of restaurant © Marie Grini/ Bo Bedre Norg

This pages, clockwise from left: Another dish from the menu © Stian Broch; interior of restaurant © Ivar Kvaal

in summer, but Ellitsgaard is keen to promote a healthy work-life balance among his staff. “We’re trying to show that you don’t have to work 80 hours a week to have a good restaurant. It’s a difficult goal, and we are not there yet, but we’re working really hard to achieve this because happy chefs are healthy for a restaurant,” he says.

Meanwhile, a Michelin star – or two – is another major ambition. “Of course, it’s a big dream for us to get stars – there’s no secret about that anymore,” he says. “In the beginning, I didn’t really want to talk about it because you never really know what people will think about your food. But now, I think we are definitely at that level and we can start dreaming about it.” In this otherworldly environment, Ellitsgaard’s dream could soon come true.