



Ager's New Nordic Lovechild

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An Icelandic food craze hits the big time in New York City.

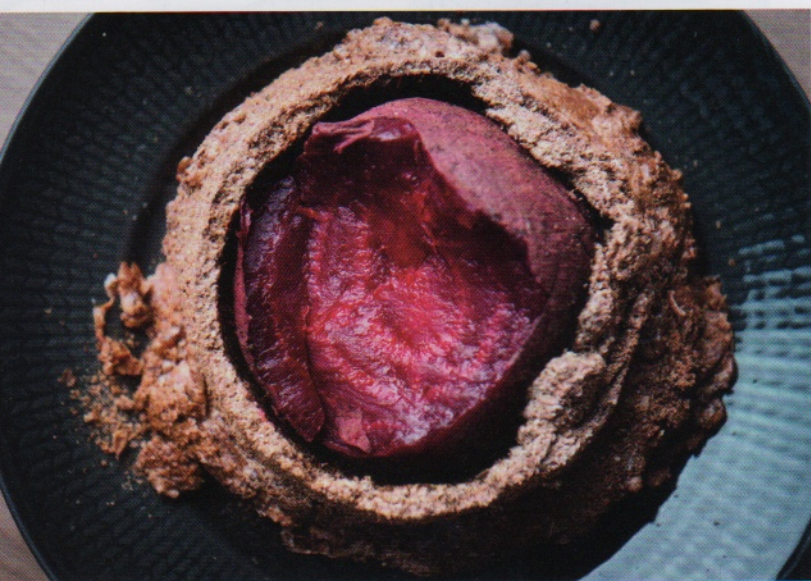


(FROM TOP) Some cream with knotweed and pulled kelp. The salt-and-egg-based beer roll.

Agern, the new restaurant at Grand Central Terminal, feels like the culinary offspring of a Viking and an energetic woodland fairy. Their big flavors and many-layered courses are adorned by gossamer flowers and served on minimalist plates at bare wooden tables.

Recently opened with great fanfare by Danish entrepreneur Claus Meyer, co-founder of Copenhagen's Noma, Agern is an exercise in thoughtful, if occasionally too cerebral, dining. Meyer pioneered "new Nordic" cooking in his 2004 *Manifesto for the New Nordic Cuisine*, and speaks forcefully about the importance of locally-foraged ingredients, minimal processing in preparations, and environmental health.

"Our cuisine is bright, fresh, and light, with beautiful acidity. We don't overload with cream and butter. We wanted to come to New York with something that is a celebration of where we come from, but also to reflect where we are," Meyer says.



Executive head chef Gunnar Gíslason, author of *North: The New Nordic Cuisine of Iceland*, is similarly meticulous, having won numerous awards at Dill, the 23-seat restaurant he opened seven years ago in Reykjavik. Running a kitchen in New York City affords him far more choices.

"There is simply so much variety. It was a mild winter and a cold spring, so it was a long wait for nice vegetables, herbs, and foraged goods. But when it came, it came," he said, his pupils widening with excitement. "Now I'm like a little child in a toy box trying to decide which ingredients to use."

Chef Gíslason's timing is auspicious: His traditional Nordic pickling and fermenting techniques have become coveted among a certain type of New Yorker, easily excited by the promise of probiotic benefits. For reasons moral and aesthetic, diners are also increasingly embracing "nose to tail" and whole-vegetable eating. It's an approach Chef Gíslason uses in his kitchen, roasting beets in a coating of salt, egg white, and ash from incinerated vegetable scraps. He cures the unused egg yolks to microplane into salads, where they scatter like petals.

An ambitious yet humble gourmand, Gíslason aims to make his own dairy as well as butcher all the meat and fish in-house by the year's end. Nearly all ingredients come from within 500 miles of the restaurant, including skyr, an Icelandic-style fermented dairy, which he buys from a local organic farm. The chef makes an exception to import Nordic preserved berries, dried seaweed, pear vinegar, geothermal salt, and dried wild Icelandic herbs. Sommelier Chad Walsh's wine list focuses on American producers, with nods to Scandinavian apple wine and aquavit.

THE VENUE

In the quiet dining room, the menu changes weekly, with minimal descriptions belying the dishes' complexity. Don't be shy to ask questions: Servers deftly describe every detail. This includes the provenance of the luscious upstate New York butter, which is whipped in the Agern kitchen with skyr, apple vinegar and salt, and served with two marvelous kinds of bread: a crusty sourdough-barley loaf and a diminutive sunflower seed-studded rye.

Service coddles and soothes. When a substitution to the tasting menu was requested, an earnest young waiter resembling Harry Potter scurried to the chef and returned, proclaiming, "The kitchen applauds your idea."

As for New York features, they've nailed a classic: The tables are too close. You'll likely overhear patrons, like the woman nearby who proudly declared: "I only eat once a day." Lucky for her, it seems entirely possible to ingest a full component of necessary daily nutrients in a single meal at Agern. Virtuous vitamins and minerals are everywhere, from the sheared micro leaves peek-



ing under an appetizer of carpaccio-thin celeriac slices to the sorrel and kombucha in pastry chef Rebecca Eichenbaum's sweet and savory desserts.

THE TASTING MENUS

Agern offers two tasting menus, one entirely vegetarian, as well as festive a la carte choices, beginning with a parade of small appetizers.

An oyster arrives spotted with fresh lavender leaf and dressed in the oyster oil that chef Gíslason invented after dehydrating surplus oysters; the skyr porridge, a sophisticated riff on Icelandic comfort food, is dotted with pansies and infused with thyme oil; salted zucchini half moons are tossed in pear vinegar. The most decadent item, fried potato bread, is a satisfyingly chewy mix of sourdough and mashed potatoes. You may find yourself consuming the accompanying dipping sauce, rich with smoked buttermilk and pickled lovage stalks, by the spoonful.

The waiter arrives with a palate cleansing cucumber and lemon balm broth, decanting it from a French press into tiny Scandinavian ceramic cups. After a slight pause, the feasting continues with a bitter salad of radicchio ribbons, Danish havgus cheese, which has an umami kick, and puréed almond oil. Heirloom cucumber and tomato salad, crunchy with small clusters of dehydrated, fried millet, is flecked with microplaned

cured egg. Chef Gíslason's salt-and-ash-baked beet roots, decorated with purple butterfly sorrel leaves, play to all different textures: crisp, raw, cooked, sliced thin, and roasted in chunks.

Halibut, so often a dainty and dull filet, comes out as a big hulking dish, smoked, roasted, and presented on the bone. Meant to serve two but generous enough for four, the fish is topped with delicate sprigs of thyme, and flanked with a Nordic chimichurri (an herbal blend of parsley, chive, and angelica, macerated in angelica oil), a light tomato consommé, and Icelandic salt flakes.

"Every bite should be different," our waiter says, urging us to eat the fish alone and then combined with condiments.

And every bite is.