

Hotel Pacai

Vilnius

Words: Heleri Rande

Set in the centre of Lithuania's capital city, Hotel Pacai is the first Design Hotels-affiliated property in the Baltic region, boasting 104 guestrooms and a trio of eagerly awaited F&B spaces in a sensitively restored Baroque palace. Four interconnected historic buildings have been transformed by local architect Saulius Mikštas of Forma while interiors have been designed by Lithuanian studio Yes Design, preserving many original features such as frescoes, statues and the impressive façade along the way. As for the hotel's distinctive name, it pays homage to the Pacai family, which relinquished ownership in 1831, although the buildings have only belonged to the current proprietor since 2012.

The three F&B spaces – Lithuanian fine-dining restaurant Nineteen18, contemporary brasserie 14 Horses and lounge bar Sofija – are all entrusted to Nordic Food Republic and take inspiration from the location's Baltic heritage, albeit with distinct Scandinavian overtones. With minimalist design aspects and crockery from the





A selection of dishes from 14 Horses
© Robertas Daskevičius



Nineteen18
© Giedrė Rozmanaitė

likes of Bent Brandt, the Danish influence cannot be missed in a move that clearly speaks to the collective strength of the operating team in which pioneering Danish food entrepreneur Claus Meyer of Noma fame is a partner.

At Nineteen18, Head Chef Matas Paulinas is more than capable of fusing together different influences in his menus, having grown up in the rougher neighbourhoods of Kaunas in Lithuania before criss-crossing the map to learn his craft. From making sushi in Lithuania and Monaco to opening hotel restaurants in Dubai – not to mention hopping over to Norway, running a food truck in Copenhagen and interning at Noma – this dynamic young character already has an impressive CV. He has spent the better part of this year researching his country’s remarkable diversity to understand the many differences that exist in terms of lifestyle and culture, although he freely admits that the process has barely begun really. “Only when you understand the clear picture of the regions can you compare them and start telling the story through food,” he explains.

On the opening menu, Paulinas and his team have tried to showcase all of their learnings so far. “The most inspiring thing is the ingredient itself, the undiscovered flavours for example,” he explains. “As soon as you unlock a new flavour, that’s it – you get the goosebumps and all these crazy ideas.” Rye bread, a staple in the region, is baked in maple leaves in order to prevent the sides from burning, while the potato

spaghetti with hay foam and blackcurrant wood oil puts a very different spin on an ingredient that has been at the heart of the region’s cuisine for centuries.

The restaurant’s name cleverly reflects the importance that the team places on the country’s storied history; Lithuania is currently celebrating the 100th anniversary of its 1918 declaration of independence. “Lithuanian cuisine does not exist as of now, but we are very curious to find it,” asserts Paulinas. The hope is that what they are doing today is effectively laying the groundwork for future generations, with the ultimate dream being that the hotel will be able to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the development of a recognisably Lithuanian culinary tradition in 2118.

The menus at 14 Horses and Sofija Bar, meanwhile, are overseen by chef Andrius Kubilius. Adhering to the same principals of seasonality and quality of ingredients as Nineteen18, the all-day brasserie offers comfort food from the region, albeit with several usual suspects added to the menu to keep less adventurous hotel guests happy too. Nevertheless, creative dishes such as wild forest mushroom broth, buckwheat risotto and Curonian Spit pike-perch in a fennel-watercress emulsion speak to the chef’s wish to display exciting flavours in a local setting. “I really want the guest to feel the happiness in the food,” reveals Kubilius. “So we use traditional products with a modern approach to them.” Housed in what used to be the stables belonging to the Pacai Palace, the venue’s

