

Beyond Foraging

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are quietly developing a culinary identity that draws inspiration from the New Nordic Food Movement, but with a distinct Baltic twist.

Words: Heleri Rande

The culinary awakening in the post-Soviet Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania has been gathering pace for nearly a decade, with predominantly independent restaurants leading the way. But with tourism – and more notably experiential food tourism – on the rise, hotel restaurants have started to follow suit. The worldwide success of the New Nordic Food Movement has had a notable influence on the trio due to their proximity to the Nordic countries, but there is much more to the current gastronomic revolution than just gathering food from the wild.

In Estonia, on the magical island of Muhu, Pädaste comprises a luxury hotel, restaurant and spa. Dating back to the 15th century, the manor house was restored and brought back to life by hotelier and restaurateur Martin Breuer in the late 1990s. Many of the region's leading chefs started in the kitchen of its signature restaurant Alexander, named after Alexander von Buxhoeveden, a former owner of the property.

The focus has always been on rediscovering and reinvigorating the Nordic islands' cuisine by following five core principles – the coastline terroir of the Baltics, biodiversity of the island, imperfections of nature, local heritage craftsmanship and preservation. This philosophy proved enticing enough for current Chef de Cuisine Stefan Berwanger to make the move from Frankfurt to this tiny island. "The nature here is inspiration enough," he remarks, "everything we do needs to have relevance and meaning."

By getting to know the local small farmers and herders on the island, the chef is able to provide an honest food experience. Together with his team and a horticulturist, they pick ingredients from the lavish kitchen garden and improvise a daily three-course menu and nine-course degustation menu from March to October. Dishes such as kohuke, or Estonian cured cheese covered in chocolate and served with dried ants from the garden, and Muhu ostrich tartare are bound to surprise and delight in both their distinctiveness and authenticity. Coupled with the mesmerising silence of the island, it is no wonder that Pädaste gets a high number of repeat guests.





Scallop and freshwater bream at Hedon Spa &
Hotel's restaurant Raimond in Estonia



A dish being unveiled at Pädaste
on the Estonian island of Muhu



Kannas at Annas Hotel in Latvia



Vegetable Market at Stage 22 in
Grand Hotel Kempinski Riga

In Pärnu, a 90-minute drive from the capital Tallinn, is a stunning seaside property, Hedon Spa & Hotel. The popular spa is housed on the premises of restored mudbaths dating back to 1838, whilst the hotel rooms and two restaurants can be found in the adjacent new building. "Here we are all about carrying traditions forward, combining the old and the new," explains Sari Sopanen, General Manager.

Overlooking the sea and sharing a vast terrace in the summer are the two hotel restaurants, Raimond and Akord. The former takes its name from a famous local composer and serves up a more refined menu, whilst the latter lets the guest create dishes from a cleverly thought-out food card. "As a hotel restaurant, we need to have different dining options," notes Head Chef Marko Lumera. "We were one of the first in the region to have two concepts."

In the beginning, the culinary ambition was to be decidedly Nordic and follow the example of neighbours in the north and west, but due to the volatility of getting the necessary local ingredients on scale, the direction changed somewhat. "We now use more foreign suppliers but we are in no way letting go of the local touch," explains Lumera. "For example, I use Norwegian scallops but make the sauce with Estonian craft rhubarb sparkling wine Nudist."

In addition to a full vegan menu, which is becoming increasingly popular, the kitchen also makes sure that both starters and mains provide a balanced offering from fisherman, farmer, hunter and gardener. Summers are typically booked up well in advance, but there is nothing more satisfying than watching the salty waves wash up against the large glass windows on a brisk winter's day and tasting the results of a variety of pickling, drying and smoking techniques on Lumera's seasonal menu.

Buried deep in the Latvian forests surrounded by spruces, lindens, oak trees, ponds and lakes – and close to the Gauja National Park – lies Annas Hotel. With only ten rooms, the manor house-turned-hotel and spa dates back to the 18th century and attracts event crowds as well as foodies keen to try the constantly changing menu of its restaurant Kannas, headed by chef Dzintars Kristovskis.

The self-taught chef was discovered by the owners via Instagram and, with less than a year heading the kitchen, has already made a big impact on the Baltic food scene. "There was no pantry at all when I arrived, no possibility to make anything so we had to import a lot," he recounts of the rough start. "But now we are planting and I have started a full root cellar. I am collecting things for unknown purposes." He currently sources lamb, game, dairy and poultry locally, spends time in the central market in Riga, is establishing relationships with nearby farmers and bakes his own bread. But he is not a believer in going all local. "I was a bit brainwashed by this 100% local movement," he reflects. "There is some truth to it, but you have to acknowledge the limits."

This idea of local versus foreign is well reflected on both his menu and the wine list, the latter carrying some big

names from the Old World. The venison tartare served with pickled chanterelles and prunes marinated in calvados, and the hay custard dessert with quince and pineapple speak of the resourcefulness of Kristovskis' cooking. "The rule for me is to start with classic flavours and then push and know when to stop," he explains. "I have a list of ideas, I'm just waiting for the right time." And so is everyone else who has tasted his dishes.

The latest addition to the Latvian hotel dining scene comes from Riga. Right in the centre of the capital, across from the Latvian National Opera House and on the border of the Old Town, is Grand Hotel Kempinski Riga. The 141-room hotel – designed by Alex Kravetz, founder of the eponymous UK-based design studio – opened in November 2017, and the signature rooftop restaurant and bar Stage 22 followed in June 2018. The 120-cover restaurant occupies a corner of the top floor and boasts breathtaking views over the capital, which is a real draw for the locals; the name reflects its proximity to the opera house and the accompanying number signifies the address.

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Chef Dzintars Kristovskis of Kannas in Latvia

Stage 22's bar menu includes 22 cocktails, of which half are signatures and the other half classics. Interestingly, the first alcoholic cocktail in the Soviet Union was purportedly served in the very same building when it carried the Hotel Riga name. The food menu, overseen by Head Chef Edgars Balodis, has shareable items such as seafood platters, as well as starters and mains with Nordic influence. Establishing relationships with local farmers for a large city centre hotel is a challenge – bigger operations require a level of certainty that sets limits to the ingredients that can be used, but that is not holding the team back. The slow-cooked Latvian farm sturgeon fillet is a nod to the local whilst the creative dessert Vegetable Market includes items from the local market such as beetroot sponge, candied carrots and sorrel and yoghurt cream.

Separating out the cuisine of the Baltic states from their northern and western neighbours is not an easy task – even less so for hotel restaurants, where guest expectations frequently still define the menu direction. However, the fact that this region has accumulated so many different influences throughout history provides each chef with an opportunity to define his or her own path, and be far more than just a simple forager. ●