



TEXT BY DAVID NIKEL | PUBLICITY PHOTOS

# Food from the Fjords

The new Norwegian cuisine





Surrounded by crystal-clear fjords, icy mountains and endless sky, western Norway is unquestionably a jewel on the rugged Scandinavian coastline. However, it is not just the landscape that deserves mention. The country's most exciting restaurants are forging a new and exciting path for Norwegian cuisine

To many, Norwegian food evokes images of family and tradition, with a focus on simplicity and preservation. Rightly so, as salted meats, dried fish, canned foods, bread and boiled potatoes still form the bulk of the diet for many older Norwegians. Mutton remains popular, especially in such traditional dishes as *fårikål* (stew with cabbage) and *pinnekjøtt* (smoked ribs), as do the matured fish dishes *lutefisk* and *rakfisk*. This diet harks back to the pre-oil days, when Norway was a poor country, and when preserving, salting, drying and canning food was the only way to sustain a family through the harsh winters. Such traditional fare is a frequent turn-off for tourists, many of whom prefer fast-food chains and kiosk hot-dogs.

However, a number of restaurants in the fjords are spearheading the development of a new Norwegian cuisine, and visitors to the country are taking note. The reason for the change, at least in part, is Norway's thriving oil and gas industry. Not only does it bring in talented engineers and their families from all around the world, it's also responsible for Norwegians being able to travel several times per year.

Sven Erik Renaa, owner of Stavanger's popular *Renaa Restaurants*, agrees: "Stavanger has been an internationally oriented city since the late 1970s, so the locals have learned to appreciate both foreign cuisines and inventive cooking. Norwegians have greatly expanded their food habits and interests over the years. They are also interested in locally sourced ingredients and in the history behind the food. Diners enjoy hearing about the farmer who has chosen to use a horse to plough his potato fields, and they love to discover the pleasures of high quality, hand-picked ingredients. The taste for local drinks, be it beer or fresh juices, has also developed a lot."

Renaa is a popular figure in Stavanger. His restaurant complex offers visitors something to eat at any time



of day, whatever their budget. Top-billing in the restaurant is *Circus Renaa*, a nine-course showcase of local produce that features crab, squid, lobster, sweetbread, deer and plums, while in the *Xpress* outlet, freshly-baked focaccia and home-made smoothies fly out of the door.

"I'd been competing for years, with my team winning the Culinary Olympics in 2008. That very evening, in Erfurt, I was approached by the owner of a really nice venue, who suggested that we join forces. By then I was ready to start my own restaurant, so the timing was good. It's no secret that a fine dining restaurant is costly to run. You need supporting activities to create a financially sound business. As they say in Sweden, you need a *bakficka*, a place where your guests can enjoy simpler, high-value cooking on the days when a gourmet meal isn't part of their plans. With three different eateries, we cater to all segments, from the quick and easy in *Xpress*, to the advanced but relaxed bistro *Matbaren*, all the way to the exclusive, sometimes extreme cooking in the restaurant. The city of Stavanger has done a lot to develop local interest in food as well, particularly with the annual *Gladmat* festival," says Renaa.

### Happy Food Festival

The literal translation of *Gladmat* is Happy Food, a fitting name for Scandinavia's leading food festival, held every year in July. Over 100 exhibitors, the vast majority from around Fjord Norway, showcase their wares to an international audience of over 250,000. The *Best of Gladmat* awards are a festival highlight and Renaa took home the "best restaurant" prize for 2013.

Food blogger Whitney Love from [www.thanksforthefood.com](http://www.thanksforthefood.com) writes: "Over four days, I

ate at nearly every stand at *Gladmat*. I heard farmers tell me passion-filled stories about their products. The festival reminds us that we are in the 'bread basket' of Norway. Much of the country's food is produced right in this region. *Gladmat* gives producers the opportunity to mix traditional Norwegian food with more modern flavours. This isn't a bad thing. It's all about how creative chefs can make their dishes. At this year's *Gladmat*, Anders Berg Marcussen, the head chef at *Straen Fiskerestaurant*, used homemade kimchi with oysters. Kimchi is a fermented vegetable side dish from Korea, which goes particularly well with oysters, and is one of my favourite foods. His dish was delicious."

In recent years, many Norwegian chefs have won global awards. Of the 14 winners of the prestigious *Bocuse d'Or*, four were Norwegian. The most recent Norwegian winner was chef and restaurateur Geir Skeie, who grew up in the fjords south of Bergen and now runs the *Brygga 11* restaurant in nearby Leirvik. The menu is typical of modern Norwegian cuisine, with a strong focus on high-quality fresh seafood cooked simply, such as oysters with a lemon and shallot vinaigrette, or the pan-fried catch of the day flavoured with thyme and served with pumpkin puree, pickled pumpkin, fried onion and brown butter chicken jus. How does he ensure the freshness of the food? There's a fishmonger right next door.

### Fresh from the fjords

Combining the freshest natural ingredients with cooking styles and flavours from around the world seems to be the hallmark of modern Norwegian cuisine, so it's no surprise that the fjord region leads the way, with fresh fish, mountain cattle, forest berries and



garden herbs all available in abundance.

*Smak av Kysten* (Taste of the Coast) is a network of 42 restaurants in Norway, where you can “experience the gratifying results of innovative cooking in an intense encounter with the treasures of the sea”. Among the network’s members is the *Lothes Mat & Vinhus* restaurant in Haugesund, which also manages the kitchen at the stunning *Høyeværde* lighthouse hotel, where it own sheep, chickens, a bakery, beehives and an herb garden.

Unsurprisingly, many Taste of the Coast restaurants are in Bergen, Norway’s second-biggest city. One of them is the *Fløyen Folkerestaurant*, where you can dig into a fresh shellfish casserole packed with chilli and garlic, while enjoying an unbeatable view of the city from atop Mount Fløyen.

Elsewhere in Bergen, *Lysverket* has added a stylish twist to gourmet seafood. Co-founded by Fredrik Saroea, frontman of the popular Norwegian electronic music group *Datarock*, the bar regularly welcomes live bands and DJs to play on weekends, adding a funky ambience that’s extremely rare in Norwegian dining. The atmosphere created by Saroea – together with the taste combinations served up by executive chef Christopher Haatuft and the cocktail creations of Joar Nicolaysen – has attracted the attention of the world’s media, and arguably done more to promote the Norwegian food scene than anything else.

Both Bergen and Stavanger are blessed with modern fish markets, offering the freshest possible produce in the heart of these cities. However, seafood is only one aspect of the new Norwegian cuisine. Local meats are popular too, particularly lamb and veal. Ingvild S.Bøge, head chef at Bergen’s *Spisekroken*, loves veal so much that she wrote a whole book about it. Her veal is sourced from nearby Sogn and served with stout sauce, smoked pears and chestnut purée, another great

example of traditional Norwegian produce offered with a modern twist.

A word of warning to visitors – Norway remains one of the most expensive countries in the world to visit. Having said that, the price you can expect to pay for a gourmet meal for two is no more than the equivalent at fine dining restaurants elsewhere in Europe. The



price differential is much more noticeable at the lower end, where a simple coffee-shop sandwich and cappuccino will set you back around 15 euro, while a main course at a run-of-the-mill chain restaurant comes in at about 25 euro.

While Fjord Norway still lacks a name to compete with the world-famous *Noma* restaurant in nearby Copenhagen, Norwegian chefs are continuing to innovate. Perhaps it’s only a matter of time?

Love agrees: “Although the restaurants here aren’t as famous as at other places in Scandinavia, the region has produced some of the world’s best chefs and cookbooks. Wider global recognition for the food culture here is definitely on its way.” **BO**

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# Norwegian restaurant reviews

*Baltic Outlook* offers some short reviews of restaurants, cafés and gastropubs in Bergen and Stavanger.



## BERGEN



### 1877

(Vetrilidsallmenningen)

Set in the old market hall in the historical centre of Bergen, *1877* is Bergen's must-visit restaurant. Each season, the popular set menu – featuring shellfish, fish, meat, cheese and desserts – changes based on the availability of local ingredients. Book well in advance to enjoy simple Norwegian ingredients brought to life.

### Spisekroken

(Klostergaten 8)

Local food dominates at *Spisekroken*, another restaurant where advance booking is essential. Try the popular *Aquavit* plate, a selection of three small starters accompanied by three appropriate shots of *Aquavit*. If veal, the house speciality, isn't to your taste, then try the reindeer from Jotunheimen or the smoked lamb ribs from Evanger.





### Lysverket

(Rasmus Meyers alle 9)

Covered extensively in local media thanks to its celebrity owner, the “neo-fjordic” *Lysverket* doesn’t disappoint. Enjoy the various tasting menus in the stylish atmosphere at the heart of Bergen’s cultural centre. Regular live music and a wide selection of locally-brewed beers are another plus.

### Zupperia

(Vaskerelven 12)

Popular with locals, the expanding *Zupperia* now offers its extensive menu from three city-centre outlets. The creative soup menu features such exciting combinations as creamy chicken with saffron, and reindeer with mushrooms and berries. Possibly the best-value restaurant in Bergen, although service is often slow.

### Brazil Churrascaria

(Olav Kyrresgate 39)

All the way from Rio Grande do Sul, the Brazilian passion for *churrasco*, or grilled meat, has come to Bergen. A meat-eater’s dream, the restaurant offers various types of *churrasco* that are brought to your table on request, while the vast side buffet includes the delicious *feijao* (black beans), fried bananas and asparagus.

### Pingvinen

(Vaskerelven 14)

Pingvinen provides hearty servings of meat, fish and potatoes in an informal bar setting. The selection of craft beers is impressive, so expect a lively atmosphere in the evenings. For party animals, a night menu of soups, stews and cured mutton is available up until 2 AM.



## STAVANGER



### Mogul India

(Verkskata 9)

After just one taste of this restaurant's bold, distinctive flavours, it becomes clear that the chefs at *Mogul India* possess a deep knowledge of Indian cuisine. The recently modernised menu features *Shorshe Machhi*, the local fish of the day simmered in a Bengali onion and tomato broth with mustard seeds.



### Rena

(Breitorget 6)

Three restaurants in one. Snack on a BBQ burger at the express bar or settle down for the nine-course taster menu in a fine dining setting. If you have a sweet tooth, then be sure to try the Smash sandwich, a corn-chip and chocolate parfait covered in caramel popcorn and *Coca-Cola* sauce.

### Fisketorget

(Vågen)

For seafood lovers, Stavanger's fish market is an absolute must. The fabulous setting overlooking the harbour is home to a seafood bar, where you can buy crab, shrimp and fresh homemade fish cakes. Nearby is an informal harbour restaurant, where chefs create simple tasty dishes based on the day's catch.





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## OUTLOOK / TRAVEL



### **Sabi Sushi**

(Pedersgata 38)

This place serves the best sushi in Stavanger, thanks to its incredibly fresh fish and creative flavour combinations. Along with sushi, be sure to try the seaweed salad and jalapeño sauce. The Pedersgata location is primarily a take-away, but it's possible to dine in, too. Order online at [www.sabi.no](http://www.sabi.no).

### **Sjokoladepiken**

(Ovre Holmegate 27)

Not a restaurant as such, but no list of Stavanger eateries could be complete without *Sjokoladepiken*. Its colourful exterior reflects what's on offer inside, from a fresh

chocolate mousse with passionfruit cream to the spicy Mexican hot chocolate – a perfect winter warmer. While the place can be quite busy, chocoholics will be willing to put up with the wait!

### **Tango Bar & Kjøkken**

(Nedre Strandgate 25)

Situated in an old yet airy building in Stavanger's old town, *Tango* offers a limited set menu. However, the menu does change daily and special requirements are catered for. You can enjoy steaks, fish, and smaller dishes in the bar, while a popular champagne lunch is offered every Saturday.

