

Chef Yves Le Lay Nordic Islands Cuisine

By Janice Nieder



The latest and greatest food movements seem to have more twists and turns than a Shonda Rhimes series. The "New Nordic Cuisine" began in 2004, when Noma's Danish chefs, René Redzepi and Claus Meyer, met with leading food professionals from other Nordic countries to promote a cuisine that would emphasize "purity, simplicity, freshness and seasonality."

Fast forward to Pädaste Manor, an exquisite 16th-century boutique hotel (the only five-star hotel outside Tallinn), located on the southern tip of Muhu Island, just off the coast of western Estonia. This beautifully renovated manor house, once the residence of a 16th century Danish king, has been turned into a 24-room, small luxury resort and spa complex, surrounded by acres of tranquil forests and waterways.

But the main draw is their wildly talented Chef de Cuisine, Yves Le Lay, a leader in a spin off of "New Nordic Cuisine" called "New Nordic Islands' Cuisine."

Le Lay creates his menus with respect to the local heritage, seasons and terroir, and then slips in his own touch of whimsy. His ever changing roster of fresh



Pädaste Manor Kitchen

ingredients might include roe deer, moose, juniper, morels, berries, Muhu honey and artisanal cheeses provided by the island's farmers, hunters and fishermen, as well as wild greens and herbs grown on the manor. Chef Yves then presents his flavorful finds by showcasing their natural beauty with creative yet simple adornments.

There is never a dull moment in the 3-4 hour, nine-course table d'Hôte dinner in Restaurant Alexander, Pädaste Manor's grand (yet without an ounce of stuffiness) dining room. Lightweights can show restraint by selecting a 7, 5, or 3-course degustation.

You will be delighted, amazed and perhaps even struck speechless by

the variety of indigenous ingredients, flavors, textures, and artistic presentations served to you in this fairy tale manor house setting.

Even its tableware is unique, since some of the more amusing pieces were designed by students from the Estonian Academy of Art.

Interview with Chef Yves Le Lay

Who or What inspired you to become a chef?

I believe my upbringing by parents who were dedicated foodies. Then in the end of my teens, I got into the restaurant business, and got hooked instantly by this high paced, sensory industry, and haven't looked back since!

Do you consider yourself part of the New Nordic Cuisine movement?

Yes and no. "Nordic Islands' Cuisine," which is our framework for our kitchen philosophy, shared similarities to the New Nordic Cuisine, as we source our produce in near proximity. For us, this proximity is the islands in the Baltic Sea. But I wouldn't define our cuisine as New Nordic. The best description I have heard so far on my cuisine would be: Contemporary Nordic, with French influences.

First thing you cooked?

I have from an early age taken part in cooking at home, so it's hard for me to remember. My favorite dish growing up, though, was grilled lamb skewers with cous-cous, chickpeas and harissa sauce.



Pädaste Manor private grounds

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Most exciting ingredient or cooking trend?

I have always had a great love for butter, as it complements both savory and sweet dishes with richness. I am using it to a less extent now though, as it often can cloud the pure taste of the produce.

Is there an ingredient or food trend that you hate?

Cilantro. It's a herb that really divides people. Some love it, some hate it. I am the latter, for me, it tastes like soap.

What is your proudest culinary moment so far?

We were recently included in the "Worlds Top 50 Best Restaurants - Global Selection." This doesn't mean that we are in the top 100, but an indication that we are close and on the right track. It meant a lot for me and the team to know that our colleagues in the industry see us as one of the best restaurants in the world.

Famous people you've cooked for?

I have had the pleasure of cooking for both celebrities and royalty. But the guests that I take the most pride in cooking for are food lovers, curious and adventurous diners, who, whether rich or poor, have a true love for good food.

If you were going to get a culinary tattoo, what would it be?

I already have a few. My one arm was recently covered with berries, on the other an octopus.

For your final supper, you'd choose?

A dozen oysters for starters; my childhood favorite of lamb skewers and cous-cous for main course; and probably Tarte Tatin with vanilla ice cream for dessert.

If you could spend a month studying the local cuisine in a foreign country, which one would it be?

I would go to Japan. Two summers ago, I spent 3 weeks there on vacation. But I would love to go back and study traditional Japanese cuisine under one of their many great masters.

What comfort food do you make for yourself after a bad day?

One of my addictions is a big piece of buffalo mozzarella, drizzled with olive oil, freshly ground black pepper and flake salt.

What did your mom pack in your lunch box?

Danish "smørrebrød," which is an open-faced Danish sandwich with a base of black rye bread. Toppings



could include smoked fish, cured meats or simply potatoes with chives.

What is the strangest food you've**ever eaten?**

In Japan, I was served half-raw chicken anus, and in Hungary, I was served glazed bull's penis. Both demanded a deep breath before digging in. But both were interesting and rather delicious.

If someone could only order one thing off your menu it should be?

Needlefish with glazed carrots and sea buckthorn sauce.

Who do you want to play you in the movie version of your life?

Charlie Sheen :)

What is something most people don't know about you?

From the age of 9-10, I was a ballet dancer at the Royal Danish Ballet.

Below is one of Chef Yves' culinary secrets for you to try at home: When cooking apples, artichokes, salsify, or other fruits and vegetables that you would normally put in water with lemon to prevent oxidization, you should use Vitamin C instead. Lemon usually dominates the taste, but Vitamin C has no taste, yet has the same attributes. What you do is buy a small jar of Vitamin C and pulverize a tablet in a coffee grinder and dissolve the powder in water.

To make reservations for this culinary getaway, visit www.padaste.ee

