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Noma is in residence

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On New Year's Eve 2015, a group of visitors was settling in to a new Sydney home. Beneath the giant starbursts of coloured light, Danish chef Rene Redzepi was unpacking his bags. So too was the entire team from Noma, his world-famous Copenhagen restaurant.

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For some in the jet-lagged culinary crew, including Redzepi's wife Nadine Levy-Redzepi, the Harbour City celebrations were the back-drop for much-needed sleep. For the others, the sky-show was a calendar alert for serious business ahead – pulling together the menu for the much-awaited opening of the incredible project known as Noma Australia.

First service at the restaurant “residency” is on January 26, Australia Day. While it may surprise those unfamiliar with Noma's stringently local focus, the menu will be a uniquely Australian showcase.

TASTING AUSTRALIA

“It's all about the flavours of Australia,” says Redzepi at his brand-new harbour-side kitchen, in the developing precinct known as The Streets of Barangaroo. “The last few months have been about experiencing first-hand where produce comes from, then trying to recreate it in situ, adding our own touch.”

With head chefs Beau Clugston (Aussie-born) and Thomas Frebel (from Germany), Redzepi has scoured the continent, travelling and tasting wild ingredients off-shore and along massive coastal stretches. From the tropical exotica of the Tiwi Islands off Darwin to the cool-climate beauty of Tasmania's Flinders Island, the surf-laced coastline of Margaret River in the West to South Australia's Limestone Coast and Victoria's wide Port Phillip Bay, Redzepi marvels at the extremes this country can offer – not only in terms of scenery but also, of course for its produce.

It was vital, Redzepi says, to see each ingredient in its native environment. And to meet the people behind the produce. “We began by getting an understanding of the landscape,” Redzepi explains, “Visiting the people, seeing what they eat and how they cook, filling ourselves with those experiences and images. Then we went on to decide the direction of the food and the cooking style.”

AUSTRALIA ON A PLATE

Next step was guaranteeing ingredient supply and setting up the kitchen – carefully designed in conjunction with their generous Barangaroo hosts, Lend Lease and with a distinctly Noma-esque flow. “Only then,” Redzepi continues, “could we start being creative with the direction we've given ourselves.”

That direction includes a focus on the Australian shoreline - “where the water meets the land” - and how Australians cook. From urban Australians to indigenous communities, Redzepi discovered a common theme.

“Lighting a fire, chucking something on it,” says Redzepi, “that hint of smoke...” It’s all about the Barbie.

Next came the search for the final layer of distinctly Australian notes... the “punctuation marks” of fruits, herbs and plants. “Australian flavours are very fresh, distinctive, with a lot of astringency... like a knife cutting through,” Redzepi enthuses. And while he is entranced by native ingredients (“so new, so extraordinary”), he also loves the lush tropical fruits of our northern regions.

AND SO TO THE KITCHEN

Scrawled whiteboard lists around the hidden kitchen (the hoardings are still up outside) read like an ode to Aussie-ness: “eucalyptus”, “pie, lamington, dumpling,” “lemon myrtle oil, Thai basil, emu eggs?”, “plantains, green mangoes, ginger” and more simply, “bay leaves” and “garlic”.

A customised charcoal barbecue smoulders against one wall, alongside sleek induction cookers and blast freezers. On one bench, plates and bowls in raw ochre and stone are piled alongside two providores’ chiller boxes protecting clams, abalone, even two muscular seahorses. “We won’t be using those!” says Redzepi, hastily.

Today, the chefs are intrigued by a huge snail in a gloriously decorative housing – a giant conch known as a bailer shell, fished off Sydney waters and prized by the Chinese. The ethereal delicacy of a ghostly white snow crab – found in the freezing waters around Albany, at the southern tip of Western Australia; the sweet flesh of black-lip abalone, fresh from a former diver on the NSW south coast, tiny raw mussels from Port Philip Bay... Whether they make it onto the menu is yet to be seen.

FINDING SOLUTIONS

The challenges are many. While local chefs have been generous with their support, contacts and knowledge, setting up supply chains across huge distances is proving costly and complex – without the community of producers the Noma team is used to in the Nordic region.

Eighty staff – including 40 in the kitchen - have travelled from Denmark, some with families. (Redzepi’s two older daughters are excited about attending the local school, and wearing uniforms – a novelty for these Copenhagen kids.) Whole kitchen areas have been transported too, pots, pans, linen and the all-important chefs’ knives.

But, like last year’s Noma residency in Tokyo, the experience will be life-changing, according to pastry chef Malcolm Livingston II, originally from the United States. As he works on a series of ice-cream flavours – experimenting with everything from pepper berry to kakadu plum – Livingston marvels at his leader’s constant curiosity. “I’ve never known anyone to move a whole restaurant like this. He is such a visionary. It’s unpredictable – arriving without knowing yet what’s going to be on the menu. And attacking things, ingredients, with a completely open mind.”

For Redzepi, ultimately, it’s all about excitement. “What do we feel is exciting to cook? We have to feel excited. We’re learning!”

And for the 5600 people lucky enough to score a seat across the restaurant’s 10-week life-span? “We want things to be very delicious. But also surprise people,” Redzepi concludes. “And who doesn’t like to be surprised?”

Noma Australia opens at Barangaroo on Australia Day, January 26 and closes on April 2. Tickets have sold out but for updates and any additional activities during the residency, see noma.dk/australia

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