

REINDEER GAMES

Jeffrey Steingarten ventures to the land of the midnight sun, the northern lights, and Santa's workshop to discover the lore and local cuisine of Lapland. Photographed by Nick Knight.



For the first time in our lives, we crossed the Arctic Circle and headed north. It was a moment to dream about, an expedition to Lapland, to the pristine world of glaciers and frozen tundra, of the midnight sun and the northern lights, of vast herds of reindeer and, yes, even Santa's workshop.

To be perfectly truthful, I can't swear that we actually crossed the Arctic Circle, because I was sleeping at the time, and anyway it was very dark. But it's a fair inference. We boarded the night train in Helsinki, capital of Finland, shortly before midnight, settled into a compartment in the sleeping car, and thirteen hours later, we were in Lapland, in the town of Levi, 100 miles north of the Arctic Circle. I can't imagine how we could have gotten there without crossing the Arctic Circle. Either way, it was extremely exciting.

We were part of a group of 30 or 40—sixteen celebrated chefs, most of them young, and an equal number of journalists, nearly all based in Europe—and we were supervised and well cared for by our two leaders, Alessandro Porcelli and Andrea Petrini. The culmination of our trip would be two grand dinners cooked by all the chefs with the wild ingredients of Lapland.

As soon as we pulled out of Helsinki's Central Railway Station, there were delectable sandwiches of salmon rillettes and dilled cucumber on dark rye bread and cured whitefish with crayfish butter on thick slices of whole wheat (a particularly tender and moist and airy whole wheat), and we discovered two old friends, Lydia and Alberto, and their two-year-old daughter, Naomi, encamped two doors down. Lydia is a fine food writer who publishes chiefly in Europe, and under the pretext of nourishing Naomi, she had brought ample quantities of cured salmon and smoked salmon and brown bread and insisted on sharing them with us. After only a little insisting, she was granted her wish. Alberto is a senior executive at Nokia and the holder of a Ph.D. in computer science

from Stanford (where he and Lydia met). As if by magic, icy bottles of Finnish vodka called Koskenkorva materialized, the purest and cleanest vodka I have ever tasted, only 75 proof but powerfully brain-enhancing and mood-improving.

Once in our narrow compartment, my wife, Caron, took the upper bunk and I took the lower, but only after she had engaged in her special and elaborate form of nesting behavior. When she had finished, our little cabin was cozy and familiar (even down to the toothpaste on the plastic sink in the corner). Very soon it was bedtime on the night train to Lapland as we sped across the alien and invisible landscape, snug and sheltered, with the sound of rain against the window.

We awoke an hour before reaching our destination, the train station in the town of Kolari, where a bus or two were waiting to drive us to Levi, famous in the winter for its many ski slopes. In a few months, the ground would be covered with snow six feet deep. But this was the beginning of September. Now there was no snow, and the temperature only occasionally dipped below freezing.

The land was mostly flat, carpeted with forests and dotted with myriad lakes and occasional groupings of small wooden buildings. Lapland is not a country but a region made up by the parts of Sweden, Norway, and Finland that lie north of the Arctic Circle, and the Kola Peninsula in Russia. But that doesn't mean we were in the Arctic. Most of Lapland is subarctic (now they tell us!). Lapland is named after the Lapps, a word that is considered politically incorrect for reasons I hope to fathom before I finish this article. But the adjective *Lappish* is commonly used and perfectly respectable. The aboriginal inhabitants of Lapland refer to themselves as the Sámi people.

Our Lappish home was a small ski resort called Levi Spirit, which consists of ten chalets, also known as villas, constructed in a seemingly boundless pine and spruce forest; the forest floor is covered with tiny plants,

SEASON'S EATINGS

Santa and his flying reindeer were said to be inspired by shamanistic visions sparked by hallucinogenic mushrooms native to Lapland.

Sittings Editor: Phyllis Posnick.



leaves, mosses, and lichens, an Edenic forest I had seen only in my dreams. The villas were handsome examples of contemporary Finnish design, all wood and glass and concrete, though nothing avant-garde; each had a spacious common living room and kitchen, Wi-Fi everywhere, five snug bedrooms, each with its own bathroom, and a sauna—all in the heart of the vast Lapland wilderness.



hat in the world were we doing here? This was the idea: Two years ago, a project was born and it was called Cook It Raw (although following the current fashion, it was spelled Cook-ItRaw. Was the book publisher HarperCollins the first to promote this sort of illiteracy?). A

dozen of Europe's leading chefs and two Americans gathered in Copenhagen at the restaurant Noma, which was then rated number three in the world and is now number one. (Who were the Americans? Daniel Patterson of Coi in San Francisco and Plum in Oakland, and David Chang of two Momofukus, one Ko, and one Má Pêche, all in Manhattan.) As readers of this September's *Vogue* will surely remember, Noma is the creation of chef René Redzepi, who has become the most prominent proponent of what has come to be known as the New Nordic Cuisine. But more than any other chef, René began to seek out ingredients that are found only in the wild, cannot be ordered from a supplier, and must be foraged for. Some grow or swim only on the outer fringes of Scandinavia and are not likely to be familiar to any of the restaurant's customers. On that first expedition, René took the visiting chefs to the woods and beaches and tiny farms where his raw materials come from, then turned over his staff and his kitchen to them.

The second time out, the cast was the same, but the scene shifted to Friuli in northeastern Italy, near the border of Slovenia. And this year we were among the Lappish people, many of whom, we were told, still live off the land and on the lakes. The expedition was subtitled "Into the Wild." Unlike the previous two trips, this time the chefs would work in assigned pairs; they would not bring ingredients and recipes but would be expected to improvise. In addition to René, David, and Daniel, the thirteen other chefs were Albert Adrià from Barcelona, where he and his brother, Ferran, are planning a new restaurant; Inaki Aizpitarte of Le Chateaubriand in Paris; Fredrik Andersson from Mistral in Stockholm; Alex Atala, my friend from São Paulo, Brazil, who forages in the Amazon region and brings back his discoveries to his acclaimed restaurant, D.O.M.; Pascal Barbot from the three-Michelin-star L'Astrance in Paris; Claude Bosi of Hibiscus in London; Massimo Bottura, an old acquaintance, from Osteria Francescana in Modena, Italy (who brought Yoji Tokuyoshi, recently voted the best sous-chef in Europe); Quique Dacosta, whose El Poblet restaurant is in Dénia, near Valencia, Spain; Yoshihiro Narisawa of Les Créations de Narisawa in Tokyo; Magnus Nilsson of Fäviken in Sweden; Petter Nilsson of La Gazzetta in Paris; Davide Scabin, whose Combal.Zero is near Turin; and Hans Vähimäki of Chez Dominique in Helsinki. One of my reasons for traveling to Lapland was to watch and spend time with several of these chefs, who rarely make it to the United States. Nearly all of them are known for their experimental or avant-garde cooking.

On our first night in Lapland, chefs in Levi, organized

by Timo Nieminen, the executive chef of a local restaurant group, put together quite a spread for us, laid out on a long table in the chalet used as a headquarters for our expedition. There were thin slices of smoked, roasted reindeer; smoked vendaces (a type of whitefish) from Lake Mieko; wild morels and other mushrooms and smoked-reindeer pie (which I don't recall and which doesn't show up in my many photographs but which Timo assures me we did eat); organic Lappish eggs; lingonberry bread, which I have tried to replicate back in Manhattan, without perfect success, and a flat white potato bread; Lappish cheese with beetroot shoots; and Puikula potatoes with pickled cucumbers, leaving me to wonder what *Puikula* means. Timo considers them the best potatoes in the world.

Is this what the people of Lapland eat every day at home? Or is this the diet of Lappish yuppies? Who *are* the people of Lapland? These and other questions plagued me as we walked back to our villa, where my painful doubt and ignorance kept me awake for upwards of 30 seconds.

The next morning, we all gathered on the shores of a cold and misty lake and joined fishermen in motorboats casting out their nets and gathering them in, harvesting a good number of smallish, floppy white fish, a staple of their diet. And then we were shown the range of other Lappish ingredients: reindeer meat, bear, snow-white snow grouse (which I had heard are the most delectable grouse), all spread out on the grass along the lake. There were white plastic trays of wild berries—golden cloudberries, blueberries, and scarlet lingonberries: three of the 50 berries of Lapland, 35 of which are edible—and the brilliantly orange roe of two varieties of whitefish. There were root vegetables, a favorite food in Lapland. And there was reindeer milk—rare and expensive because, we were told, the female reindeer gives very little milk. To those of us who were not skittish, the milk was a pleasure to drink; to those of us who were too skittish to try it, I would recommend shifting to a profession other than chef or food writer.

And there were amazing mushrooms. The chefs in our group walked inland from the lake, keeping their eyes trained on the ground, and returned a half-hour later with an abundance of local mushrooms. Caron went foraging on a different path and returned with a pair of robust, picture-book *Amanita muscaria*, five inches high and with a hemispherical cap of the most intense red speckled with white bumps. These are the world-famous psychedelic mushrooms associated with a variety of shamanistic religions, notably in Siberia and Scandinavia, whose holy men, in a trancelike state brought on by ingesting the mushroom, gain access to the spirit world. For reasons either benign or hostile, my wife was required to yield up her two perfect examples of *Amanita muscaria*. The stated reason was that amanitas are poisonous. Where are the sixties now that we need them?

The everyday Laplander is ethnically identical to inhabitants of the more urbanized areas of southern Finland and is not, from what I could tell, eager to embark upon ecstatic voyages to the spirit world. But as you travel north into the wilder, colder, more sparsely populated areas of Lapland, you encounter the Sámi people, whose religion combines their native shamanism and animism (a belief in the spirits that reside in animals, plants, rocks, and so forth) with Lutheranism from the south. In the traditional Sámi view of the world, human beings can change into animals pretty easily and vice versa. The barrier between men and women is more difficult to cross than that between human beings and animals. You can say that again.

There are reports that when Sámi shamans enter a trance with the help of psychedelic mushrooms, their spirits leave their bodies, travel for great distances, and, when they return home, fly down the chimney hole in the roof of their yurts, and that this may be the model for the story of Saint Nicholas. The modern Lappish conception of Santa Claus has been lifted from our benign American version; there's a Santa's Workshop theme park just north of the Arctic Circle that could have been designed by Disney. But the original Finnish image of Father Christmas is positively frightening. He has the head of a goat. He is hostile to children and demands gifts from them.

The bear meat, reindeer meat, and snow grouse we were served were all frozen because the hunting seasons for bear and grouse are highly restrictive. Reindeer are a tame variety of caribou. Lapland reindeer are not wild but, in a sense, farmed. They roam free, hundreds of thousands of them, throughout Lapland, until they are rounded up in the fall. They are all branded with a cut taken from their ears; the youngest reindeer are identified and branded according to their mother—the female reindeer they stick close to. This is also the time of year when reindeer are slaughtered. The Sámi's main source of income is selling reindeer meat, and

The original Finnish image of Father Christmas is positively frightening. He has the head of a goat. He is hostile to children and demands gifts from them

they have hundreds of words about reindeer—a word for a reindeer in its first winter, a reindeer with many-branched antlers, the reindeer's grunting noise, the reindeer's panting noise, a reindeer in its third winter, a sick reindeer, an exhausted reindeer. I haven't been able to find the words for Santa's flying reindeer, although this powerful image has been attributed to the shamanistic visions sparked by the hallucinogenic magic mushrooms once in Caron's hands.

For our edification and for the chefs' menus, one reindeer (whose ear brand was illegible and whose owners could not be determined) was slaughtered, several months earlier than he would otherwise have been, while we watched. I'm no stranger to slaughter, but this killing was particularly difficult to bear, and not just because Caron's tears were deeply distracting. The animal was young, it was cute and fuzzy, and unlike the pigs I've seen slaughtered, it was docile and trusting. The killing was humane—one bullet to the head—and the butchering was clean and quick. But I wondered whether eating reindeer yields enough pleasure to justify killing. Remember: We humans do not need to consume animal flesh in order to survive and even to thrive. We kill and eat animals because this gives us gastronomic pleasure. Does our pursuit of pleasure justify the killing of animals? Let's not get into that. But isn't it obvious that an unpleasurable, even unpleasant, piece of meat cannot justify slaughter?

On the other hand, both Timo and Heston Blumenthal have told me that fresh reindeer meat can be delicious. On a trip to Siberia for his BBC television series, Heston much enjoyed the heart, kidneys, and liver; Timo grows rhapsodic about rare-roasted loin. "You can taste the forest," he says. Caron recovered

after an afternoon visit to a farm where huskies are raised, often by interbreeding with wolves. Caron is addicted to puppies.

So, what is the native diet of Lapland? First of all, who are the natives? I asked Timo. The aboriginal Sámi are certainly natives. And a Caucasian born in Lapland who never left it for very long is considered a native. Beyond this there is fierce controversy. Timo, for example, was born in Lapland 40 years ago to non-Lappish parents who soon moved to another part of Finland. Timo returned briefly in 1994, and then, twelve years ago, he came back to take a job as head chef in the Sirkantähti hotel in Levi. Timo has been told by some other Laplanders that he is not a genuine Laplander. By this standard, there must be very few true Laplanders in Lapland besides the Sámi people. I'll admit I don't consider anybody who hasn't lived in New York City for at least 20 years an authentic New Yorker. But Timo lives above the Arctic Circle! Isn't that enough?

Some residents of Lapland eat in a cosmopolitan way, just like people from the south of Finland, from Helsinki. Although I've met some Laplanders who eat only local food, even the most dedicated among them are not complete locavores—they also eat food from the outside. After all, wheat does not grow in Lapland, nor sugar nor black pepper.

Our chefs were stricter. There were two climactic dinners on the final two nights. (Some of the chefs returned home early and cooked only at the first.) Massimo and Yoji prepared reindeer tongues cooked sous-vide in plastic bags packed with thyme and mushrooms and immersed in water heated to a very moderate 145° F. for 20 hours. Then Massimo raised the temperature to 167° F. for the two final hours; he was getting nervous that the reindeer tongues would be undercooked because he had never tasted or even seen wild tongues before. In a sense, he was being conventionally adventurous; back home in Modena, Massimo has been perfecting and modernizing the classic Italian bollito misto by cooking the various meats individually in sous-vide bags, for durations and at temperatures that his experiments have shown to be ideal for each one; then he opens all the bags and assembles them into the final dish.

For the first dinner, David Chang was paired with Petter Nilsson from *La Gazzetta* in Paris. His favorite was a dish that never went out to diners: potatoes cooked with spruce and the liver of the reindeer that we had seen slaughtered. In the second dinner, David assisted Davide Scabin, who cooked local Arctic char and trout buried in the ground in moss with hot oil that had been flavored in the smokehouse behind the restaurant; he served the fish laid upon an elaborate still life composed from the plants we had seen all around us. Pascal Barbot created a delicious but not completely feral dish—hare tartare and a mushroom cream with wild herbs and flowers—and then created a sauce or condiment, a brunoise from root vegetables, raw fish eggs, and sautéed bread, for Massimo's reindeer tongues. René helped out Claude Bosi and Magnus Nilsson, who made a stock of many mosses and lichens served with roasted carrots and salt-baked potatoes and many condiments. Magnus's restaurant in northern Sweden is open only in the summer; he cooks entirely wild food by himself for nine guests at a time. René considers him a major young talent.

Yoshihiro Narisawa created what was probably the most delicious dish—delicious in the conventional sense of bringing sheer sensory pleasure to the eater, (*continued on page 324*)

REINDEER GAMES

(continued from page 297)

not always the accepted goal of these days in which ideas and intellectual pleasure may be primary. Narisawa used nearly every type of protein the chefs had been given—two bear legs, six snow grouse, and ten wild hares, to which he added several root vegetables—to concoct the deepest possible broth. This was poured over slices of hare and mushrooms and wild herbs in large, white, steeply angled bowls that had been splattered with the crimson juices of wild berries, recalling the blood of the young reindeer whose slaughter had disturbed Narisawa and so many of us.

On our last night, after dinner, the northern lights put on quite a show. The sky was not perfectly clear, and the patterns were not stripes and streaks, as I've seen in photographs, but for a good half-hour, vast swaths of the night sky were luminous with bright veils of moving color, mostly varieties of green. One member of our group, who lives in Helsinki, said that he had seen a display like this only once before in his life.

And none of us had ever had a meal like this. Our mission in Lapland was to subsist on food that lives and grows locally, in the wild. These days, I think, television has conditioned us to expect that an event like this would be a competition, after which the losing chefs would be banished to the forests of Lapland. Chefs who have achieved what ours had are inherently competitive, and it is true that several of them split off to work on their own. (But not to cook competitively. One of them told me that he simply wanted not to present the very worst dish.) Some, who do not specialize

in wild ingredients and are not practiced foragers, did find it somewhat nerve-racking to be cooking improvisationally with their peers, and brought fixed ideas from home. But every chef I talked to said he found it exciting and inspiring to work with other chefs of such skill and originality. This seems to have been their main motivation for coming to Lapland.

The rest of us watched as each new dish was carried to the two long tables at which we sat, eager to see how new feats of ingenuity and technique had opened up new possibilities of cooking and eating wild. Most chefs in big cities (and especially in the United States) are content with ordering their daily provisions on the phone. But others, including many of those with us in Lapland, have been foraging for several years, and René Redzepi has been their inspiration. Is this the future of gastronomy? No, not in a practical or literal sense. If everybody foraged for his food in the wild, soon enough there would be no nature left. But as a way of bringing nature into the kitchen and the dining room, it seems indispensable. The purpose, as René put it, is for accomplished young chefs to see how things grow, to harvest and cook it themselves, and to acknowledge the vast diversity available to them. □

ASIA MAJOR

(continued from page 301)

native Mandarin. Now I usually have no trouble finding someone at any show.”

The daughter of architects, Juan also thrills to the shift she's a part of. “There still are brands or clients that would not consider using an Asian model, but things are changing dramatically

and quickly. I am not so sure if being Asian was or is a hindrance. In fact, I think it is a plus.”

As these women challenge the notion of what beauty is here, they're doing so at home, too. “Traditionally the Chinese favored a classic kind of beauty—big, round eyes, cute small mouth, a high nose, and very fair skin. The Chinese models who have made it internationally are not beauties in the traditional sense, so they are modernizing the concept of beauty in China,” says Angelica Cheung, editor in chief of *Vogue China*, which launched in 2005. “When I was growing up in the seventies, everyone wore a blue, gray, or green Mao suit—there was no chance for women to be glamorous or different. Now you see young Chinese trying to be radical by dyeing their hair blonde or blue, sporting tattoos. It is a combination of copying what they see is popular in the Western world and trying to stand out in a nation where almost all of the 1.3 billion population have straight black hair and brown eyes. I like to joke that in less than a decade, China has gone from Karl Marx to Karl Lagerfeld!”

The first time I saw a picture of Okamoto, I was inspired to cut my own hair into that statement, silken mushroom cap. She was my newly shorn Linda Evangelista, circa 1988. She gave me license to have fun with my appearance, instead of searching for an elusive ideal as I once did. “The hair was my idea. I tried to look like what I felt inside, to express myself,” she says. “I know it's difficult to find your way, but you need to believe in yourself when you do.” That, to me now, is what beauty is. —SAMANTHA V. CHANG

IN THIS ISSUE

Page 80 (cover look): One-sleeved silk asymmetrical column dress and silk-and-fishnet corset, both priced upon request; Tom Ford boutiques. **Vogue.com 84:** Bottom, from left: phone, \$6,500; select Versace boutiques. Green patinated copper-and-white-gold earrings, price upon request; hemmerle.com. Leather Neo Patch bag, \$870; Longchamp boutiques. **Excerpt 104:** On Mulvihill: Marni printed dress; select Marni boutiques. **Up front 142:** On Beal: V-neck cardigan, \$530; select Prada boutiques. Cashmere skirt, \$2,260; Chloé, NYC. **Flash 153:** Zippered top, \$345; Barneys New York Co-Op, NYC. **154:** On Maren,

far left: cotton pants with leather panels, \$530; Elizabeth Charles, NYC. **Life with André 176:** Flower-embroidered dress, \$3,200; Marc Jacobs, NYC. **View 179:** Tulle dress and patent leather heels; hm.com. **180:** Bags; (212) 604-9200. **182:** Black-silver bib necklace, price upon request. **188:** Top: cashmere sweater and laser-cut leather skirt. Bottom: Burberry Prorsum python belt, \$850; burberry.com. Manicure, Jenny Longworth at CLM. **190:** Green crocodile sandals. **192:** Platform heels; pierrehardy.com. **194:** On Sudano: Tom Binns Design earrings, price upon request; Tom Binns Megastore, NYC. Yves Saint

Laurent suede belt, \$495; Neiman Marcus stores. Giuseppe Zanotti Design platform wedges; www.giuseppezanottidesign.com. On Ramirez: Eddie Borgo necklaces; eddieborgo.com. Alexis Bittar oversize gold bangle, \$250; alexisbittar.com. Lanvin patent leather wedges, \$1,280; Jeffrey, NYC. Manicure, Debbie Leavitt at Cloutier Remix for Dior Beauty. **198:** Bracelet with rubies, sapphires, emeralds, and diamonds, \$78,500; also at David Webb, Beverly Hills. **Wear it now 200:** Minaudière, \$5,570; also at louisvuitton.com. 18K-white-gold ring, \$10,100. **Beauty 203:** Silk-georgette shirtdress, \$775; (212) 933-1674.