

The beautiful solution

IN THE MIDDLE OF THE SWEDISH FOREST, A CHEF IS TRIALLING A NEW WAY OF LIVING THAT'S AS SUSTAINABLE AS IT IS DELICIOUS. JONNY ENSALL GOES IN SEARCH OF ANSWERS



PHOTOS STINE CHRISTIANSEN - LEFT THOMAS KJELDS



BURNING AMBITION
Flemming Hansen and a pan ready for breakfast in his eco-campsite. Previous page: the floating sauna allows you to launch yourself into the lake before dinner



The world is on fire.

Cities are clogged with people and pollution. Plastic waste pours into the oceans. Industrial farming decimates ecosystems that have been balanced for millennia. Every day, in a thousand ways big and small, we contribute to this chaos, pushing humanity ever closer to the brink.

It's enough to keep you awake at night. Hard to think about, let alone do anything about, so instead we turn the telly on and the thermostat up and reach for the takeaway menu.

Flemming Hansen sighs at the idea. "You know, you actually do something very meaningful for yourself and your environment just by eating a good meal," he says. We're sitting in his barn in the middle of the forest of Halland, south-west Sweden, where young swallows are scooping insects out of the rafters. He's wearing a T-shirt with a slogan on it: 'LIVE SIMPLY'.

"I want to live in nature," he continues. "The beautiful solution to almost every problem in the world is eating well and being close to nature."

Flemming and his wife, Mette Helbæk, are the visionary Danish couple behind Stedsans in the Woods. Ostensibly it's a campsite with a restaurant, but the real project is about helping overheated city-dwellers, such as myself, reconnect with the Earth and its produce. That name, Stedsans, is Danish and almost impossible to translate. Like the French 'terroir', it refers to the unique qualities of the natural world and the good things that spring from the soil.

The word 'eco' could be applied here, also, but don't be alarmed, this is far from a hippyish commune. Stedsans is about making sustainability seem sexy rather than bland or austere. "It's about joy and friendship, and good >

PECKISH?

Chickens provide the eggs for breakfast, cooked over an open fire. Below: Flemming and his staff prepare for dinner service in the forest restaurant



taste,” says Flemming, before offering me a tour of the site.

We set off past beds of pesticide-free vegetables you can eat straight from the ground (I hesitate before biting into a dirt-covered radish, but it proves delicious), down a winding trail to a forest lake. It’s all as Swedish as meatballs and chips. There’s even a sauna, floating on a raft, tethered to a small jetty from which you can jump straight into the cool water. Nearby is a hot tub the colour of Earl Grey tea, in which you can stew along with the twigs, leaves and other natural infusions of the pine forest.

The whole set-up is a bit *Swiss Family Robinson*. Nothing is moulded from plastic or welded with metal, or controlled by bleeping LED screens. The hot tub, for example, is only as hot as the fire you light underneath it. But it all works implausibly well. The composting toilets are fresh and functional. The showers, which rely on lake water heated by burning sawdust, are refreshingly open to the elements and stocked with Flemming’s homemade, eco-friendly toiletries. My tour concludes at the ‘restaurant’ – really a giant greenhouse, hidden in the trees, where tonight I’ll enjoy a six-course meal of good (in every sense) food.

Flemming is the chef. He began cooking in restaurants in Copenhagen in 1997, at which >





“We got a litter of pigs that was half wild boar. They made some beautiful bacon”



time all sorts of dissembling culinary tricks were in fashion. “In the kitchen at that time, a carrot was not supposed to look like a carrot, have the texture of a carrot or the taste of a carrot,” he tells me. He and Mette set out to show that a carrot is, in fact, a carrot, first by opening a grocery that connected local producers with high-end restaurants, including the influential, Michelin-starred Noma, then with their own restaurant concept within a city-centre rooftop garden.

“It was very successful, but it was just not my dream,” says Flemming. “Here I can go all in.”

He and Mette bought the land a year and a half ago, and have built their community with the help of volunteers who’ve been drawn to Stedsans from across the planet. There’s now a 600-strong waiting list of people wanting to take part. “They

come from all over the world: Denmark, England, France, Mali, Iran, Taiwan, Guatemala...”

A litter of pigs also played their part. “We got this old breed which was half wild boar,” Flemming explains. “When they arrived, the soil was frosty and hard. But they put their snouts down and went through it as if it were soft butter. They dug up all the weeds and the pests, they fertilised it and produced some beautiful bacon at the same time.”

Now, a stream of guests arrives through the week, mostly from nearby cities Gothenburg, Copenhagen and Stockholm, to eat that bacon and more from Flemming’s larder, then stay the night in one of Mette’s artfully designed cabins and Bedouin tents. On Fridays and Saturdays, Flemming’s the chef; the rest of the week

CARRY ON CAMPING
At Stedsans, guests stay in cabins and bedouin tents in the forest



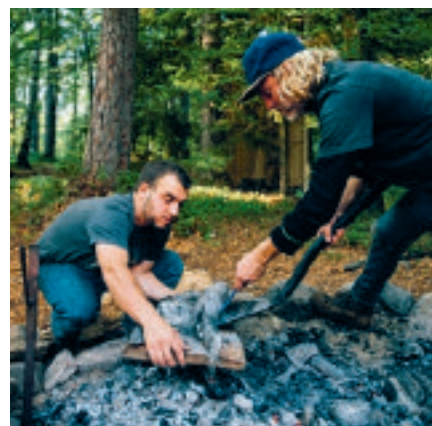
ASHES TO PLATTERS
Dinner often comes straight out of the fire pit

visitors are given a table's worth of ingredients and some saucepans and are shown to the fire pit, where they can cook their own sustainable feast. Think *MasterChef* meets Bear Grylls. Bear Grills?

That evening, there are already three fires hissing and popping by the time I arrive at the restaurant in the trees for pre-dinner snacks and some generous glasses of biodynamic red wine. All the cooking is done on open fires. Tonight our courses include beetroot simmered in big pots over the flames, confit brisket, roasted pumpkin and perch cooked under hot embers.

There are other challenges to contend with beyond making restaurant-quality food on a fire pit made of chicken wire and an old oil drum. For example: wasps. "Some animal has dug out the nest during the night," says Flemming, pointing to a buzzing patch of soil a few feet away. A bear? "We get some stray bears, but it's rare. There was a wolf caught just near here last year, though."

As he puts it, "It's nature, not a park." Meaning nothing at Stedsans is sanitised. There will be smoke in your eyes and wasps in your wine and dirt on your radish. But, somehow, that makes the experience all the better. >



Three more fantastic places for fired-up food

THE BUCOLIC ONE

Asador Etxebarri
Atxondo, Spain

At this retreat in the beautiful Basque countryside, self-trained chef-owner Victor Arguinoniz cooks everything on custom-designed manual grills, imbuing all from home-made chorizo and huge steaks to ice-cream with distinctive wood-smoke flavours. *Fly to Bilbao*

THE BIG SMOKY ONE

Temper
London, UK

Barbecue master Neil Rankin has been playing with fire in London for years. He now helms a trio of restaurants titled Temper which are the last word on cooking with smoke in the city. Fat and sparks fly at his bold, loud and lively flagship Soho outlet. *Fly to London*

THE PRIMAL ONE

Ekstedt
Stockholm, Sweden

It was nature-loving Niklas Ekstedt's Stockholm restaurant that ignited the trend for open-fire cooking across Europe. He takes Scandi cuisine back to its ancient roots. Try the arctic char with elderflower or the smoked deer with birch-fired leek. *Fly to Stockholm*



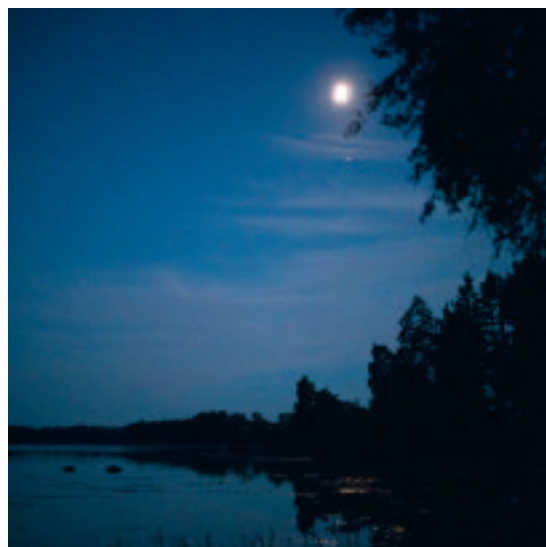
The other guests arrive and we sit elbow-to-elbow along long tables in the greenhouse and talk about our lives in the cities, while drinking lots of wine and cider, and scraping our plates clean of every perfectly charred morsel. There are bankers and nurses and software designers and other chefs. There's even an international footballer, all of us seeking a taste of the way of living Flemming and Mette promise can save the world. It turns out, their ideas are very easy to swallow. "We call this place a lab for the lifestyle of the future," enthuses Flemming, several glasses of wine later.

At midnight, I stumble back to my cabin through a thicket of young spruces. The night is cool. My bed is soft and inviting. The only sound is the slight rustling of the trees and the distant crackling of laughter and firewood. For once, I sleep like a log. A sustainably sourced Swedish log, of course. 🍷

stedsans.org



FRIENDS FOR DINNER
From above: guests sit by the fire at the end of a six-course meal; pudding proves that simple can also mean indulgent; nighttime in the forest at the end of a beautiful day



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