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Fork and the Road



# FOOD, FIRE AND ICE

CREATIVE NORDIC FARE IS PUTTING REYKJAVÍK ON THE CULINARY MAP. **BY ANJA MUTIĆ**

**B**eyond Iceland's famed lava fields, glaciers and hot springs, an inspired food scene has bubbled up to the surface in the land of fire and ice, with Reykjavík at its helm. Balls of ram, fermented shark and sheep's head jam surely won't please all palates, but there's plenty more cooking on the foodie front.

The buzz began in 2016, when Icelandic celebrity chef Gunnar Gíslason earned a Michelin star for his inventive Nordic fare at Agern in NYC. The following year, another of his restaurants, **Dill** in Reykjavík, scored Iceland's first Michelin star; in 2019, Michelin included nine Icelandic restaurants in its revered guide.

The food hall wave also has swept Reykjavík, bringing affordable bites to happy bellies. For creative street fare, head to **Grandi Mathöll**, located in a refurbished fish factory in downtown's

old harbor area. As you watch vessels unload just-caught seafood and fish, you can chow down on Icelandic lamb and smoked meats at **Fjánhúsið**, which sources meat straight from its farm in northeast Iceland; sample the unexpected pairing of seafood and sparkling wine at **LAX**; and savor Icelandic cod with a Japanese touch at **Fusion Fish & Chips**.

At Iceland's first food hall, **Hlemmur**, inside an old bus station, the casual counter restaurant **Skál!** offers a tasty twist on traditional dishes, such as baked arctic char with mashed potatoes and caper butter, the menu showpiece. It was a shared love of good grub and booze that propelled three friends—Gísli Matt, Björn Steinar Jónsson and Gísli Grímsson—to open **Skál!** in 2017 with the vision of providing "great meals that are also fair to your wallet."

For their culinary

**Above: Matur og Drykkur's bar (left) and its cod's head, cooked with blueberries.**

The chefs of ÖX: Georg Arnar Halldórsson, Hafsteinn Ólafsson and Þráinn Freyr Vigfússon.



creations, the trio sources many of its ingredients from local purveyors. For example, the salad greens come from a vertical farming company in Reykjavík. They use high-quality ingredients like Saltverk salts—produced in Iceland using geothermal energy. They’re big on the wild edibles that they forage in summer: angelica, which they blend with oil to make the mayo served with the skirt steak; licorice-flavored chervil used in cocktails; arctic thyme for the granita on a dark chocolate mousse; and birch leaves

for the housemade kombucha.

“Icelanders have gone through hardship over the centuries, and so they found creative ways to preserve food, such as smoking, curing in salt and pickling in whey,” explains Grímsson. “Icelandic cuisine today is about making our ingredients shine, like root vegetables, lamb and seafood, while respecting our traditions and creating a new chapter.”

At Skál!, seasons are also a major factor: If you show up in winter, you may get a chance to taste lumpfish roe. With such fine attention to detail, it should come as no surprise that Skál! nabbed Michelin’s coveted Bib Gourmand award last winter.

Everyone you talk to in Iceland, on just about any topic, will cite creativity as the key to survival. “In Iceland, we are located in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean. And so we have to be creative, both in regular life and in the kitchen,” says Solla Eiríksdóttir, who opened her first Gló health food restaur-

ant in 2007. Now, in addition to the flagship in the Fákafen neighborhood, there are two more in Reykjavík (with another on the way) and four in Copenhagen.

At Gló, known for its signature bowls, spinach lasagna, raw cakes (mocha raspberry is a delight) and hearty soups served with hummus and sourdough bread, everything is made from scratch. Chef Eiríksdóttir is a vanguard of raw food in Iceland (Phaidon published her gorgeous cookbook, *Raw: Recipes for a Modern Vegetarian Lifestyle*). The celebrity chef had a long-standing TV show and has her own organic food line, Himneskt. “The idea was to serve healthy, good-tasting food that you don’t have to wait too long for,” she says. Gló was a slow burn, but with the popularity of raw and health food picking up in Iceland, the lunchtime lines have gotten longer and longer.

Digging up old recipes and presenting them in new and inventive ways is also on the rise in Reykjavík—and the culi-



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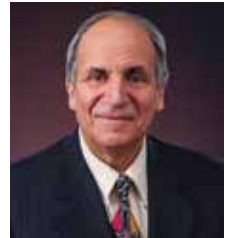
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FROM LEFT: Chef Solla Eiríksdóttir of Gló; Smoked carrots on sourdough bread with charred lemon, fermented garlic mayo, horseradish, seaweed salt and dill from Skáll.



nary team at **Matur og Drykkur** excels at it. According to Iceland's *The Little Cook Book for Genteel Housekeepers* from 1800, expensive ingredients are used for respectable people while cheaper materials are cooked for the more unseemly. To see that idea turned on its head—literally—order cod's head simmered in chicken stock and blueberries, the showstopper

at this cozy eatery housed in an old salt fish factory by Grandi Harbor. At Matur og Drykkur, you also can munch on finger food such as foal croquettes with blue cheese or order other classic Icelandic dishes with a modern edge (arctic char smoked with sheep dung, anyone?).

Preparing traditional foods in novel ways, with an emphasis on local and

seasonal, is among the tenets of the New Nordic cuisine movement. Though Dill lost its Michelin star this year, it's still a thrilling spot for a special meal out, with New Nordic-inspired mains such as rutabaga with *skyr* (Icelandic-style yogurt) and dill or dung-smoked trout with leeks and apples.

But the most exciting game-changer on Reykjavík's food scene is **ÓX**, a speakeasy-style restaurant in the back of another restaurant, the buzzy *Súmac*. Only 11 diners per meal get to take part in the inventive chef's table experience, a brainchild of Þráinn Freyr Vigfússon. Expect a free flow of wine and conversation in a timber cabinlike space for nearly three hours, with dishes coming out in an understated theatrical act presented by two chefs. No two meals are ever alike, though they all span 12 courses and include geothermal-baked rye bread, steamed underground for 24 hours. When in Iceland . . . ▼

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