

Nordic Treats in Los Angeles: Do L.A Diners Appreciate Good Smørrebrød?



From the outside, the Gravlax restaurant looks like an ordinary dive bar nestled in a street corner in Culver City. Once you step inside, however, you get a taster of the sensory delights that await you.

An exotic blend of aromas of seafood, beer and hot sauce infuse the rustic space of the dining area. The eye-catching wall décor include painted murals of reindeer herds, fish-gobbling bears and lynx, instantly transport patrons to icy Lapland's. Colorful pillows are strewn on painted wooden boxes that resemble miniature houses that line up on a Nordic coastal harbor.

The menu has an eclectic mix of Scandinavian and Turkish tapas that contain salmon, herring, house-cured vegetable, Skagen shrimp and gravlax, a concoction of raw salmon, cured in salt, sugar and dill.

The Gravlax restaurant is one of the few culinary gems that offer authentic Scandinavian dishes in Los Angeles. A handful of Nordic restaurants, deli's and breweries appeal to the taste buds of local foodies, with traditional fare like Swedish meatballs, smørrebrød, pickled herring and Danish pastries. They have faced challenges in competing with a range of Mexican, Chinese, Italian, Japanese, American restaurants and food trends that are popular among L.A. residents.

Olsons Deli, a tiny café that was established in 1948, struggled to woo enough L.A. diners to stay in business. The café that served a variety of homemade food, baked goods and coffee, had to shut its doors earlier this year and start a GoFundMe page to raise funds to re-open once it raises \$50,000. As of November 2019, it has collected around \$12,400.

Generous donations and heartfelt support poured in from loyal customers all over the city. Karlyn Lind called Olsens Deli an important part of the Scandinavian-American community in Los Angeles, while Reid Nystrom simply said, "I need my gravlax and O'Boy latte!"

Another Scandinavian restaurant that closed last year is Alta Nordic Kitchen, a high-end restaurant run by Swedish chef Christer Larsson. Larsson has held high-profile positions in several New York restaurants, including Aquavit, an upscale Michelin-Starred Scandinavian restaurant located in the heart of Manhattan. He moved to Los Angeles in 2015, working under the Carlson Rezidor Hotel Group where he developed restaurant concepts, before opening Alta Nordic Kitchen – his first standalone restaurant project.

Despite Alta Nordic Kitchen's central L.A. location in Melrose Ave., it was not able to draw in enough clients. "We didn't have a very strong following in our location," Larsson said. "Most people came from west side of town. The commercial success of any restaurant is very dependent on it's location in the city, and we weren't in the right place."

Larsson said that there is a lack of awareness about Scandinavian cuisine among Americans.

"It's not the easiest food to sell, especially in the competitive restaurant business in Los Angeles," Larsson said. "My clientele were mostly well-travelled Americans who wanted to know more about other countries through food. Also, most people tend to think our food is heavy and made of meat and potatoes, when it's full of fresh seafood and vegetables."

Larsson described Nordic cuisine as straightforward, fresh and seasonal. "Our food is driven by nature," he said. "During the summer, we catch fresh fish like salmon and swordfish from the North Atlantic Ocean and we eat vegetable and fruit grown in our farmlands. After the harvest in the fall, people used to get together and bake bread. During the cold harsh winters, we have to preserve our food through the practice of fermentation, pickling and drying."

Granted that it would take a passionate foodie to develop an appreciation for salted rotten shark, an Icelandic delicacy, there are plenty of people who would appreciate a delicious serving of kanelbulle, Swedish cinnamon roll, with a warm cup of coffee during fika, the Swedish term for a social coffee break.

The lack of Scandinavia foods mainstream appeal in Los Angeles may simply come down to the low representation of Scandinavian-Americans, according to Larsson. Although California has the second highest population of Scandinavian-Americans, they make up for only 3.6% of the state, which is a small proportion of the local population.

When it comes to culinary variety, L.A. locals are spoiled for choice. From spicy tacos served at food trucks to exquisite dumplings offered at Michelin Star Chinese restaurants. "There are so many choices in the Los Angeles restaurant scene," Larsson said. "Mexican, Italian and Chinese are all very popular and well-known. They also attract the majority of the ethnic groups here."

The owner of the Gravlax restaurant, Lars Magnus Stefansson, said that L.A. diners do appreciate what they offer but need to be willing to get out of their comfort zone.

“Americans still want to eat general food – they want a burger, pizza and chicken wings,” Stefansson said. “Even if they are visiting an exotic place like Thailand, many of them will search for a McDonald’s instead of sampling the local fare.”

Swedish-Ethiopian chef, Marcus Samuelsson, the owner of twelve restaurants in the U.S., Canada, Sweden and Norway, and who cooked for President Barack Obama’s first state dinner in his presidency, said in an interview that you have to learn to work with your customers tastes. “It’s important to adapt and globalize the cuisine to appeal to people’s tastes. No one says ‘Today I want to eat strictly Swedish.’ The key is to integrate a native dish, such as cured tuna, and integrate that with global ingredients that people are familiar with,” Samuelsson said.



Danish Open Face Sandwiches



Mark and Lene Houck, owners of Open Face Food Shop

While this progressive form of fusion cooking worked well for Samuelsson, Lene and Mark Houck found success with a different approach for their L.A. based Danish eatery, Open Face Food Shop, located in an industrial mid-city location on Adams and Marvin Ave.

“It was relationship-building and word-of-mouth that helped us establish a strong client base,” Lene Houck said.

“We say hi to people in our neighborhood all the time,” Houck said. “We tell people what we are about and how we cook things because we value openness and integrity. My husband and I talk to people every day and educate them about our food. And after they've been here once, they become loyal customers who show up two or three times a week.”

Even within the Danish community in Los Angeles, Houck said that their business has grown organically. “I didn’t realize that L.A. has one of the biggest Danish populations outside of Denmark until I opened my shop. The Danish consul general actually came over asked us why we didn't tell him about our restaurant,” Houck said. “Now, we have a steady stream of Danish tourists and Danish-Americans who visit us because he spreads the word.”

Houck said that the American diners that she's encountered in her circles are curious. "They find us on Google or hear about us from a friend, and they come to us craving our unique sandwiches. There are many people out here who want novelty. The key is to educate people – article features, social media, giving out samples in food fairs will help a lot. I just need to find the time to do all that in my busy schedule," she laughed.