

Writer Denise Cullen

New Nordic

Local and seasonal is the Scandinavian way of eating

Ah, Scandinavia. A collection of Northern European lands lauded for their collective social conscience, high happiness ratings, cool minimalist design and stylish noir literature. Now there's one more reason they're inspiring global envy – the Nordic diet. From blood red lingonberries and foraged dandelion to Baltic Sea-caught cod and wild reindeer, the Nordic diet emphasises local, seasonal foods enjoyed by residents of Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Denmark and Finland.

Research has established that the Nordic diet is associated with a host of health benefits – for your heart, blood pressure, waistline and even mood. Yet it's not so much a diet, as an overarching food philosophy, says co-author of *The Nordic Way*, Arne Astrup. He says, "It's an old-is-new approach to eating that will support longevity and health, result in slow, sustainable weight loss, and prevent age-related weight creep." Who wouldn't want a helping of that?

Proponents of the Nordic diet say it is as much rooted in tradition as it is cutting edge. For while it's tempting to presume that Viking feasts primarily featured joints of wild boar washed down with horns of ale, the archaeological evidence tells a different tale. According to Diana Bertelsen, who helped develop recipes for Denmark's Ribe VikingCenter, the Vikings enjoyed healthy, tasty food and a balanced diet. Think herb-sprinkled soups made with stinging nettles, smoked cheese, salted herring, wild greens, stewed blackberries with rosehip and baked apples.

Such traditional echoes have long since found their contemporary voice. In 2004, a year after opening their acclaimed noma restaurant in Copenhagen, chefs René Redzepi and Claus Meyer convened a symposium of their peers. The goal of the gathering was to tackle concerning mainstream food trends such as the public's increasing consumption of highly processed, refined food and factory-farmed meat.



SANDWICH WITH SALTED HERRING, BUTTER AND RED ONION ON OLD RUSTIC CUTTING BOARD/THINKSTOCK

What emerged was something called the New Nordic Cuisine – with its own manifesto, no less – calling for 'purity, freshness, simplicity and ethics' and local, seasonal, sustainable produce. The approach reaches its apotheosis in the newly reopened noma, which features a 20-course tasting menu themed by season and showcasing everything from sea snail broth to plankton cake.

It's unlikely most home cooks could emulate this. Yet by paying attention to a few general principles, Astrup says, the Nordic diet is accessible to everyone. Incorporating more fruits and vegetables in everyday meals is one of the easiest places to start. Colourful forest berries such as cloudberry, lingonberries, redcurrants and blueberries are brimming with antioxidants, natural plant compounds, which help protect against cardiovascular disease and cancer. So, too, are cruciferous vegetables such as cabbage, kale and Brussels sprouts, all of which thrive in cold Nordic climates. They are also rich in vitamins C, K and folic acid, as well as an excellent source of fibre.

Earthy root vegetables are also prominent in the Nordic diet and are

among the favourite ingredients of Helsinki chef, forager and farmer Sasu Laukkonen. Lamb from the Finnish Åland Islands, for instance, is served alongside nettles and parsnip at his innovative ORA restaurant. Laukkonen is also fond of wild mushrooms, foraged herbs like dill, and flowers like chamomile and meadowsweet, the latter of which adds a special note to roe deer and rhubarb.

Both lean and fatty fish, and seafood scooped straight from local lakes and oceans, as well as game like caribou, bison, deer and venison, offer leaner, more sustainable alternatives to meats like pastured beef. Nutritionally dense wholegrains, particularly oats, rye and barley, along with nuts and seeds, are also key elements of the Nordic diet. Fermented foods, including fish and dairy, contribute to good gut health. Skeyr, which is the Scandinavian answer to Greek yoghurt, is sufficiently versatile to straddle both sweet and savoury dishes.

Finnish-born food writer Dr Tarja Moles notes that different Nordic countries will tweak the diet to suit their heritage, the season and what's available locally. For example, in Norway and Iceland, cod is

Cod with Carrot and Hazelnuts (Serves 1)

For fans of battered fried fish this all-in-one tray bake meal offers a wholesome alternative, with chia seeds and hazelnuts providing the crunch, not doughy breading.

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Ingredients:

- 5 ounces skinless cod fillet
- 1 large egg white
- 1tbs chia seeds or sesame seeds
- juice of 1/2 lemon
- 2 carrots, halved lengthwise
- 1 wedge green cabbage (about 1/8 small head)
- salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 5 sprigs fresh thyme
- 2tbs low-fat plain skyr
- 1tbs coarsely chopped toasted hazelnuts

Directions:

Preheat the oven to 400°F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper. Dip the cod in the egg white, roll in the chia seeds, and place on the prepared baking sheet. Drizzle with the lemon juice. Add the carrot halves and cabbage to the baking sheet. Season with salt and pepper. Scatter the thyme sprigs on top. Bake for 7 to 10 minutes, until the fish is cooked through. Transfer the fish and vegetables to a plate, spread with the skyr, and top with the hazelnuts.



SANDWICH WITH HERRING FILLETS, ONION, PICKLED CUCUMBER AND DILL/THINKSTOCK



DANISH OPEN-FACE PASTRY SANDWICH WITH CREAM, PICKLED HERRING, HARD-BOILED EGGS, SLICED ONIONS AND CUCUMBERS DRIZZLED WITH DILL/THINKSTOCK

eaten regularly, whereas in Finland, it's more common to dine on fish like pike and perch, which are caught in freshwater lakes. That's good news for people who seek to follow the Nordic diet from their own corner of the globe.

"It might be extremely difficult to get hold of moose steaks or cloudberry, but if you use the principles above, you can shape the diet to suit where you live," says Moles. So, for this Australian-based writer, lean

meat means kangaroo, and local seafood means mullet, mud crabs and Moreton Bay bugs – a type of lobster.

But there is, of course, more to the Nordic diet than a list of ingredients. Trine Hahnemann, author of *Eat Nordic*, points out that Nordic conviviality adds immeasurably to the enjoyment of food. "Cooking healthy food from fresh ingredients, sitting down to share a meal: these are among the keys to healthy and happy living," she says. 🌿