# LOFOTEN'S SECRET INGREDIENT

**In Norway's remote Lofoten archipelago, two entrepreneurs are braving Arctic waters to harvest one of the world's most prized delicacies: truffle seaweed. It's notoriously difficult to cultivate and painstaking to pick, so why are the world's top chefs so hooked?**

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IMAGES: GETTY; MAX EMANUELSON



# "WE CALL THAT THE SMELL OF MONEY,"

grins Tamara Singer, in response to my scrunched-up nostrils. To me, the aroma wafting my way smells less like endorphin-inducing 'dosh' and more like what it is: dehydrating fish corpses. 'Pungent' doesn't quite cut it.

I'm picking my way down the rocky shores of the remote Lofoten archipelago in Norway's Arctic Circle, trusting my footing to the woolly-hat-wearing, wetsuit-clad co-founders of Lofoten Seaweed, Tamara and Angelita Eriksen. As we walk, I can't take my eyes off the macabre scene: hundreds of stockfish hang from the *hjells* (wooden trellises) lining the road while row upon row of empty racks stand between them. I ask how many fish are hanging here. "There used to be a lot more," Tamara says, her response subdued. The large gaps in the racks speak volumes about the state of an industry that was once the economic backbone of the country.

Despite the decline in fishing quotas, Norway has the second-longest coastline in the world (after Canada) and its vast seas remain a source of great bounty and profit for those intrepid enough to wrest a living from them. The brisk waters in this region, like the ones I'm about to step into, are home to at least 30 types of seaweed, one of which has found itself at the cutting edge of the global gastronomy scene.

"It's actually an epiphyte (a plant that grows on another plant)," Tamara tells me while wading into the shallows, rifling through a huge orange bucket of recently foraged goods. She's referring to truffle seaweed, an algae that can retail for almost €1,000 (£860) per kilo, and has become popular in Michelin-starred restaurants across the globe.

"You have the knotted wrack, which is very round, and then this red algae," she says, pointing to small clusters of brownish balls attached to longer pieces of khaki-coloured seaweed. "When the waves smash the wrack against the rocks, it creates a wound, which makes space for the ocean truffle to attach."

Originally called *grisetangdokke* in Norwegian — meaning 'doll's hair' due to its appearance and texture — and known as blackbeard in Iceland, truffle seaweed had already undergone several accidental rebrandings before acclaimed Danish chef Nicolai Ellitsgaard gave it its name. The industry soon took notice. As well as mimicking the earthy, umami-rich flavour of truffles, this epiphyte is rich in nutrients including iodine, and contains compounds with antiviral, antibacterial and anti-inflammatory benefits.

As Tamara displays three other types of algae — the expansive wings of wakame, handfuls of reed-thin wrack and beetroot-coloured ribbons of pappardelle-like dulse — she tells me how harvesting truffle seaweed is in fact her least favourite job. "I'm not a patient person. Picking the truffle, that's a slow process. When you're finished, your basket's only this full," she says, holding a thumb and forefinger microscopically close.

With an exclamation, she opens her other hand, revealing clusters of what looks like reddish-brown alveoli. It's surprisingly pretty, formed of delicate, intricate fronds that appear almost feathery in the thin Norwegian sunlight.

Tamara and Angelita's small team of international harvesters gather for roughly three hours a day, three times a week (depending on the season), wading in waters as cold as five degrees to carefully tease this fluffy freeloader from the fronds of knotted wrack. They retrieve roughly half a tonne of truffle seaweed per year, compared to 16 tonnes of wakame (also known as winged kelp or *butare*). But it's more than worth the effort.

Today, this niche product happens to be one of the most expensive seaweeds in the world, and Lofoten Seaweed gathers it for export to France, Japan, Denmark and more, as well as delivering it all over Norway. Last season, they even had a dedicated harvester supplying Noma, Copenhagen's world-renowned restaurant.






**Clockwise from left: Traditional stockfish drying racks in Lofoten; Røst is a fine-dining restaurant on Hurtigruten's Svalbard Line Cruise; salmon tartare with gold eye chips and truffle seaweed mayonnaise is just one of the many dishes served on board; Douglas Spikk is the head chef at Røst Previous pages: Colourful wooden houses perched along Lofoten's shores; Angelita Eriksen is the CEO and co-founder of Lofoten Seaweed**

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## SIGNATURE DISHES WITH TRUFFLE SEAWEED

**Salmon tartare with gold eye chips, truffle seaweed mayonnaise & fennel sprouts**

Fresh salmon is diced into a tartare and served with crisp chips made from gold eye potatoes, a traditional variety from Northern Norway. Truffle seaweed mayonnaise combines the truffle's rich, earthy aroma with the salty character of the coast, while fennel sprouts add freshness and a light aniseed finish.

**Pickled halibut with radish, spring onion & truffle seaweed**

Halibut has long held an important place in Norway's coastal food traditions. Here, it's gently pickled to highlight its clean, delicate flavour and paired with sprigs of spring onion and freshly sliced radish. Truffle seaweed adds savoury depth and subtle marine notes of the Norwegian coast.

**Truffle seaweed brioche with viking sea salt**

This hot cross bun-shaped brioche is baked with truffle seaweed inside, until it sports a crispy bronzed top, then sprinkled with truffle seaweed sea salt. Pair with generous portions of truffle seaweed-infused butter.



Out here in my waders, inexpertly scrabbling through the shallows in search of this valuable crop, I feel as far from the elegant plates it will eventually grace as it's possible to get. Water sloshes over my boots as I follow Tamara and Angelita from rock to rock, their orange buckets bumping against their hips. The Arctic's less-than-balmy temperatures aside, the strength, balance and precision required to effectively do this work is demanding. After only a few minutes, my fingers are numb and I'm struggling to keep my balance on the slick rocks. Lucky then that both Tamara and Angelita have a long history in sports physiotherapy, Angelita having worked with Olympic champions such as Karsten Warholm. Despite this, she asserts that she's "never been in as good shape as when I'm harvesting".

This intensive hand harvesting is done out of both necessity and conviction. No one has yet 'cracked the code' to farming it — a limitation that only enhances its exclusivity — while also allowing Tamara and Angelita to stay true to their sustainable ethos, something of prime importance to the pair.

"Sustainability is at the core of our hearts," Tamara explains, as we haul our findings from the water. "We document everything so it's traceable, report our collections to the government and never take all the seaweed in one location."

Even so, the company's global reach creates an unavoidable tension. "We're trying our best to be as sustainable as possible," Angelita says in response to my probing. "If we're going to help people use more sustainable ingredients, it's necessary to get them out there. The fact is, we're living in the Arctic and we have to ship it somehow. If we're going to grow and have a business, then that's just a part of it."

As I take in the Arctic scenery — snowcapped peaks, slate seas and forested slopes — Angelita begins to tell me Lofoten Seaweed's origin story, which started more than a decade ago.

Angelita grew up in the tiny village of Napp (where Lofoten Seaweed is now based) cutting out cod tongues for her fisherman father while her mother brewed stews to feed the hungry hunters. "The ocean has always been a part of our lives, and it looked to be a lifeline for thousands of years," she recalls. Her studies took her to Australia, however, where she met Japanese-American Tamara and the pair formed a fast friendship.

On returning to Norway and "reading about the nutritional benefits, sustainability and umami" of seaweed, she wondered, "Why are we not talking about it? It's right outside our door." She began quizzing Tamara — and Tamara's Japanese mother — on what seaweed could be eaten and how best to cook it, realising that this could be big business.

Then in 2017, the duo convinced the managing director of the prestigious Bocuse d'Or Norway — Arne Sørvig — to try out the unusual algae, which led to the team sponsoring Norwegian chefs at the event. The rest, as they say, is history.

"Truffle seaweed has actually been on the podium three times with the national team," Angelita recalls. "We're proud to work with them."



## The Calm of the Ocean cocktail (seaweed gin fizz)

***MS Trollfjord* bar manager Nicolai Trevland had just returned from the Norwegian bartending championships when he came up with this tangy cocktail. He's a fan of seaweed-infused drinks because "it gives them a little salty touch that makes everything sing together". The Calm of the Ocean cocktail also sports more holistic credentials than others, featuring cucumber for hydration, lavender for calming, and essential salts and minerals from the seaweed.**

**SERVES: 1**

### INGREDIENTS

40ml seaweed gin (infused with truffle seaweed)
30ml lavender-infused sugar syrup
30ml lemon juice
10ml egg white, for the froth
Sparkling water
A long slice of cucumber
A long piece of wakame

### METHOD

1. Shake up the gin, syrup and lemon juice, then pour over a tall glass of ice containing the cucumber and wakame, until it's three-quarters full.
2. Top up with sparkling water, then the egg white.

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Indeed, it's local chefs that Tamara and Angelita credit with much of their original success. Initially, average Norwegians were "really sceptical"; it was professional chefs who gave it a go first. "They love the small species," Angelita says with a smile. "Truffle seaweed is a premium product because it's handpicked. It has a story."

## From Arctic waters to plate

On our return to Tamara and Angelita's homely, Scandi-styled shop in Napp, a veritable feast has been laid out by local chef Siriyaporn 'Mymint' Rithisirikrerg. Deep-fried nori, Norwegian salmon, seaweed crisps, truffle seaweed-infused brioche and more set my mouth watering. The gold Norwegian Jeunes Chefs des Rôtisseurs winner has woven seaweed into a dizzying range of delicacies, all of which taste incredible. If I ever doubted the versatility of this ingredient, I doubt no longer.

Mymint is one of many culinary professionals inspired by Angelita and Tamara's produce. At Kvitnes Gård, a newly Michelin-starred, zero-waste restaurant in nearby Vesterålen, head chef Halvar Ellingsen uses their sugar kelp, winged kelp and oarweed in his local cuisine. Luckily, truffle seaweed can be harvested on his doorstep, saving him some serious kroner.

"At Kvitnes Gård, we only serve ingredients that come from north of the Arctic Circle, which means actual truffles are off the menu," Halvar tells me. "Truffle seaweed, however, genuinely tastes like truffle and lets us serve something with that unmistakable aroma while staying true to our philosophy, which is built around making the most of overlooked and underused ingredients."

Halvar is also a culinary ambassador for Hurtigruten, the Norwegian coastal cruise company I've travelled here with. Lofoten is one of the stops on its Culinary Voyage, which follows Norway's coast and connects passengers to the food and producers of its remote communities.

"I think every menu I've created for Hurtigruten has included truffle seaweed — not because it has to, but because it genuinely makes the dishes better," he explains. "Sometimes just a tiny amount can take a dish in a completely new direction."

That evening, I head back to my ship stationed in Lofoten suitably stuffed, yet I'm still due to experience a five-course seaweed-inspired menu at its fine-dining restaurant, Røst. Despite my topped-up tum, I tuck into deep-fried winged kelp with oat cream and lemon, and baked celeriac with truffle seaweed hollandaise sauce. It all tastes every bit as vibrant as it looks, with flavours that are at once briny, earthy and delicate.

Until I came to the edge of the world and tried this unusual fluffball of flavour, it was hard to imagine how it could justify its price tag. But this algae, which relies on other species to grow and is found only in localised ecosystems, packs a punch chefs around the world will pay to put on their plates. And having sampled it, I can't say I blame them.

### how to do it

Book onto Hurtigruten's 15-day Svalbard Line Cruise, which sails from Bergen to Svalbard and back to Bergen. Stopping at 14 ports along Norway's coastline, this all-inclusive itinerary features daily onboard menus with various truffle and other seaweed dishes, as well as a visit to Lofoten. Prices start from £3,760 per person including flights, with departures on various dates between May and September. hurtigruten.com



**From left: Seaweed consomme with fermented celeriac; cruising Norway offers ever-changing views, from towering fjords to quiet coastal villages**