NUESTRA FORMA DE COMER

Chef Uses Geyser's Heat to Prepare an Icelandic Feast

By PETER KAMINSKY

REYKHOLT, Iceland — Standing in the mud of the Myvatn geyser field in northern Iceland, Kolla Ivarsdottir lifted the lid of her makeshift bread oven. It had been fashioned from the drum of an old washing machine and buried in the geothermally heated earth.

Ms. Ivarsdottir, a mother of three who sells her bread in a local crafts market, reached into the oven and retrieved a milk container full of just-baked lava bread, a sweet, dense rye bread that has been made in the hot earth here for centuries. She cut the still-hot loaf into thick slices. It is best eaten, she said, "completely covered by a slab of cold butter as thick as your hand, and a slice of smoked salmon, just as thick."

In this era of slow cookers and sous-vide, one wonders, wouldn't it be possible to make a whole meal using Iceland's natural geothermal ovens?

The answer is yes, thanks to a man in Reykholt, a village in the southwest with the some of grandest scenery on earth. Jon Sigfusson is the chef at Fridheimar, a restaurant under the same roof as a futuristic indoor farm of the same name. About a fifth of Iceland's tomatoes are grown there on soaring vines — as tall as a two-story house — under golden lamps in geothermally heated greenhouses. The restaurant's whole menu, including cocktails, is based on tomatoes.

Before embarking on this venture, Mr. Sigfusson was a traditional fine-dining chef. He cooked in elegant restaurants and for visiting dignitaries like United States Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.

Mr. Sigfusson and his wife, Asborg, returned to Reykholt, his native village, after raising their children in Reykjavik. They were looking for a slower pace of life. He did not foresee the success the restaurant would have, but he still maintains a small-town existence, more in tune with nature.

In that low-tech spirit, Mr. Sigfusson set out to cook a whole meal at the local geyser oven, a feature of many towns.

BARA KRISTINSDOTTIR FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Jon Sigfusson, far left, a chef in Reykholt, Iceland, prepared a meal in a geothermal oven, which is normally only used to bake a sweet, dense bread.

He showed off the oven, propping it up with a fence post. The escaping steam was as hot as a sauna and, at the bottom of the oven, a good deal hotter (about 95 degrees Celsius). It smelled a bit sulfurous, too, but that comes from tapping the heat of the Earth's core.

Mr. Sigfusson prepared a menu of local fare, including trout from the nearby Tungufljot River and grass-fed Icelandic lamb, a hardy local breed that has the same salty succulence of the famous French agneau de pré-salé, lamb raised in salt-marsh meadows.

For dessert, there was abrystir, a pudding made from the first milk (nutrient-dense colostrum) produced by a nursing cow. "Whenever one of our cows gave birth, my grandma would take some of the milk and put it in a teakettle set into a pan of hot water," he said. "It was so rich that pretty soon it had set into a crème brûlée all on its own — no eggs."

On a sunny day with light breeze, Mr. Sigfusson said: "First we forage. Wild herbs are everywhere." The ground was carpeted by wild thyme. There also was angelica, a plant with a floral note and just a touch of bitterness — well suited to contain the broad flavors of the unctuous lamb. He lopped off two stalks of wild hops to season the broth.

But appetizers were first: smoked ptarmigan and cured salmon on rye crackers, with tomato jams and chutneys from the restaurant and, as with just about everything one eats in Iceland, cold fresh butter. The ptarmigan had been smoked over dried, smoldering sheep dung, used for smoking in the nearly treeless landscape.

He separated some greenhouse romanesco into florets and tossed them into a Dutch oven. He cubed baby kohlrabi, did the same with the smoky brined lamb shoulder, then added the herbs, the hops and a half-dozen glugs of cream.

Next, he poured the colostrum into ramekins set into a roasting pan half-filled with water. Then Mr. Sigfusson brought out an impressive brown trout he had caught himself and stuffed it with sorrel, angelica and green onions, folded it in parchment paper, and placed it in with all the rest.

The oven was left to work its magic and, a few hours later, the meal was ready. The trout was flaky and herbaceous. The milk pudding, topped with a jam of green tomatoes, ginger, and honey, was super-creamy.

But the star was the lamb braise. The meat was salty and smoky, the creamy gravy enriched with the captured juices of lamb, romanesco and kohlrabi, and everything suffused with wild thyme, angelica and hops — which brought the sweetness-enhancing quality of fresh tarragon.

The breeze was gentle, and the ground was soft and dry enough to lie or sit on without getting damp. Late afternoon sun lit up the landscape formed by long ago by lava flows. It looked like pale-green velvet rippled by the breeze.

It Isn't 'Authentic?' He Doesn't Care.

By KIM SEVERSON

ATLANTA — Eddie Hernandez, who runs a string of counter-service Mexican restaurants in Tennessee and Georgia, likes his chili con carne over vermicelli.

He puts cream and sugar in his shrimp and grits to counter the heat of jalapeños, a move that will get you kicked out of a lot of Southern kitchens, and makes his chilaquiles with Fritos because they don't get as soggy as tortilla chips.

And his popular jalapeño cheese dip? It's based on whole milk and a specific brand of processed American cheese: Land O' Lakes Extra Melt.

"I am not food correct," he says in his new cookbook, "Turnip Greens & Tortillas: A Mexican Chef Spices Up the Southern Kitchen," which he wrote with the former Atlanta Journal-Constitution food editor Susan Puckett. "If the food police don't like it, they can sue me!"

Mr. Hernandez, 63, is part of a generation of immigrants from many countries who

JOHNATHON KELSO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Eddie Hernandez, a former rock musician turned chef, is the author of a cookbook.

moved to the American South and found success exploiting the similarities between their culinary roots and the bounty of the ingredients they found in their new home.

For Mr. Hernandez, it wasn't much of a leap. Mexicans have corn tortillas; Southerners eat cornbread. Mexicans render pork fat and save the lard; Southerners cook bacon and save the grease. Mexicans make barbacoa; Southerners call it barbecue.

"The country is irrelevant to me," he said over a bowl of shrimp soup with pasta and peppers at an Atlanta branch of his restaurant, Taqueria del Sol. "It's what's available and what you can do with it."

Too much emphasis is placed these days on culinary authenticity, he continued. "In Mexico, we eat what we like and don't worry about what is authentic to this cuisine or that," he said. "You make do, and you make it taste good."

Mr. Hernandez, who learned to cook from his grandmother, first came to America when he was a teenager with his rock band Fascinación. They tried to land a recording contract in Houston. It didn't go so well.

After a decade of working in factories and Tex-Mex restaurants while trying to break into the music business, he moved to Atlanta. He said that despite his chunky gold jewelry, pierced ear and long rocker hair, he got a job at a restaurant owned by Mike Klank, a low-key son of the South.

He and Mr. Klank, to whom the book is dedicated, are now partners in the seven-restaurant Taqueria del Sol chain.

Mr. Hernandez sells plenty of carnitas folded into flour tortillas, and bowls of green pork chili.

But the menu also has his own Southern-Mexican mashups like tacos stuffed with fried chicken and lime jalapeño mayonnaise, or Memphis-style smoked pork with spicy cabbage slaw.

Mr. Klank has helped Mr. Hernandez understand the Southern palate. They toured Atlanta's meat-and-vegetables restaurants, and sampled the dry-rub barbecue from Memphis, Mr. Klank's hometown.

Some of Mr. Hernandez's education was simple experimentation.

Early on, a customer gave him a bag of turnip greens. He didn't know what to do with them. Mr. Klank explained that Southerners simmer them for a long time with a ham hock to make a smoky, almost murky broth called potlikker.

Instead, Mr. Hernandez approached them the way his family used to cook lamb's quarters, the greens called quelites in Spanish. He put them in a pot with chicken stock, tomatoes and garlic, and added a hit of chile de arbol. The dish is a mainstay at the restaurants, and the recipe is in his book.

Most of his recipes are thrifty, practical and delicious.

"My food doesn't require an arm and a leg, and you don't have to spend six hours in the kitchen," he said.

"This is the way I cook," he added. "Either you like it or not. I don't care."

The point is to not fuss too much.

"If you have something good and you want to make it better," he advised, "be careful. You can ruin the good you've got already."

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DINA LITOVSKY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The wide breadth of Filipino food reflects the country's history and diversity. A recent dinner in New York.

Filipino Food's Salty and Sour Flavors Ascend

By LIGAYA MISHAN

In 1883, José Rizal, the future hero and martyr of the Philippine Revolution, was a homesick student in Madrid. His longing for bagoong, a paste of seafood salted and left to ferment until it exudes a fathomless funk, grew so great that his worried family in Manila sent a jar. But it broke on the ship, releasing its pungent scent and, reportedly, terrifying the passengers.

Today, Americans of Filipino heritage make up one in five of all Asian-Americans, and Filipino food is finally entering the American mainstream. But the flavors of Filipino cooking still have the power to startle.

Filipino food draws on early encounters with Malay, Chinese and Arab traders as well as centuries of Spanish occupation, its profile is distinct: salty and sour above all, with less of the mitigating sweetness and chile-stoked fire found in the cooking of its Southeast Asian neighbors.

Bagoong, commonly made of tiny krill, anchovies or bonnetmouths, brings a depth of flavor that evokes cheese interred in caves and aged steak, with an extra dimension of ocean floor.

Along with its byproduct, patis (fish sauce), it's an essential seasoning that claims a place on the table next to suka (vinegar) and banana ketchup (bananas cooked down in vinegar and tomato paste), as much a condiment as an ingredient.

As such, it's part of what the Manila-born food historian Doreen Fernandez termed a "galaxy of flavor-adjusters" that define how Filipinos eat: seasonings added to dishes after they're served according to each diner's taste.

Vinegar is the undertow in adobo, perhaps the best known of Filipino dishes, whose ingredients and method predate its Spanish name. At its base, adobo is a long braise of meat in vinegar and garlic, but other ingredients are up for debate: Some swear by soy sauce while others dismiss it as an import; some stir in achuete oil (made from annatto seeds), coconut milk, sugar or squid ink.

But the novelist Gina Apostol argues that sinigang speaks most directly to the Filipino soul.

The soup is "the dish most representative of Filipino taste," she said, in part because it's adaptable "to all classes and budgets." Recipes differ, but the goal is the same: a sourness so profound that the first sip should make you shudder.

Still, no one dish can sum up the Filipino palate. "A feast of different flavors is optimal," said Nicole Ponseca, who runs Maharlika and Jeepney in New York. "Sauces meld, complement, make whole." Sinigang and adobo are likely to appear on most Filipino menus, alongside dinuguan, a pork-blood stew that can pose a challenge even for Filipinos.

"When I was growing up, dinuguan was a kind of culinary boogeyman, a dish that adults would tell gory stories about to scare children," said Genevieve Villamora, one of the owners of Bad Saint in Washington.

Dried fish soaked in vinegar, top inset, and ginisang ampalaya, sautéed bitter melon, with eggs.

But the mineral-rich blood is what gives the stew its ballast and faintly metallic hint of a licked knife.

For many Filipinos the dishes of their heritage are inseparable from days of celebration. "Food marks the occasion," said Angela Dimayuga, who was most recently the chef of Mission Chinese Food in New York.

For the highest occasion — like Ms. Dimayuga's grandmother's 99th birthday last year — there can be only one centerpiece: lechon, whole roasted pig, its shining, lacquer-thin skin primed to shatter.

After a party, King Phojanakong, the chef of Kuma Inn in New York, explained, the lechon is broken down: "You use the head for sisig" — a sizzle of jowl and ears — "trotters for adobo, make dinuguan with blood and innards and turn leftovers into paksiw," a vinegary stew contoured with a pâté-like liver spread.

"It's trendy here to go head to tail," he said, "but there it's just a way of life."

Excuse Me If I Don't Want to Share

ALEX WILLIAMS

ESSAY

I was at a dinner with five friends the other week when the waiter uttered those dreaded words: "We recommend sharing."

Sharing is in. Small plates, large plates, starter or main — they're all meant to be sampled tablewide. It is supposed to be more communal, lets diners taste more dishes and is more in tune with the way large swaths of the world eat. So who could possibly be against it?

Well, me, for starters.

Continental-style dining, in which dishes are brought to the table sequentially and served individually, is known as service à la Russe, and spread from Russia to Europe, and eventually to the United States, in the late 18th century, according to Ken Albala, the founder of the food studies department at the University of Pacific in Stockton, California.

As recently as the 1990s, many Americans thought to share courses only on visits to Chinese, Indian, and Middle Eastern restaurants, said Krishnendu Ray, the chairman of the department of nutrition and food studies at New York University.

Those norms broke down as food literacy exploded with the rise of cable food networks and foodie blogs. Diners came to understand that the appetizer section was where chefs often took the most risks, so they began to order starters en masse. This led to the rise of small plates meant to be shared.

The restaurant meal was no longer a hushed, isolated experience; it was a party, one fueled by social media photo opportunities.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY TRACY MA/THE NEW YORK TIMES; GETTY IMAGES (ARMS AND MEAL)

I get it. But I am not sure you have to be a cultural reactionary to say, "Hold on a minute."

Let's start with the most basic issue: pacing. A classic Western meal has a discernible beginning, middle and end. What happens to that when everyone is scrambling to sample everything on the table? The meal becomes a jumble.

Then, people at the table must make grand theater of their generosity of spirit, being careful not to overconsume the best dishes, and finishing off the duds because, you know, someone has to. We have all seen that last shrimp, sitting forlorn on the plate, because everyone is too polite to snag it.

Meanwhile, the flow of conversation is inhibited. When I'm sharing with a group, I feel like I am left with two choices: chat or eat. You can't do both, especially when you're racked with anxiety at seeing the fried baby artichokes disappear out of the corner of your eye while your story starts to run on a little too long.

Not to mention the fact that before the meal even commences, you need to agree on ground rules. Is anyone vegan? Shellfish? A shared meal is a committee meeting.

I would prefer to retain sovereignty over my order, talking and eating as luxuriously lazily as I like.