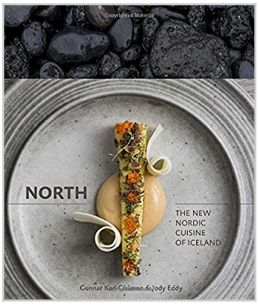

North: The New Nordic Cuisine of Iceland

By Gunnar Karl Gíslason, Jody Eddy

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An unprecedented look into the food and culture of Iceland, from Iceland's premier chef and the owner of Reykjavík's Restaurant Dill.

Iceland is known for being one of the most beautiful and untouched places on earth, and a burgeoning destination for travelers lured by its striking landscapes and vibrant culture. Iceland is also home to an utterly unique and captivating food scene, characterized by its distinctive indigenous ingredients, traditional farmers and artisanal producers, and wildly creative chefs and restaurants.

Perhaps no Icelandic restaurant is as well-loved and critically lauded as chef Gunnar Gíslason’s Restaurant Dill, which opened in Reykjavík’s historic Nordic House in 2009. *North* is Gíslason’s wonderfully personal debut: equal parts recipe book and culinary odyssey, it offers an unparalleled look into a star chef’s creative process. But more than just a collection of recipes, *North* is also a celebration of Iceland itself—the inspiring traditions, stories, and people who make the island nation unlike any other place in the world.

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Editorial Review

About the Author
Chef GUNNAR GISLASON opened Restaurant Dill in Reykjavik's historic Nordic House in 2009. His contemporary cooking celebrating Iceland's pristine ingredients and artisanal producers has garnered international acclaim and media. Dill has been nominated for the Nordic Prize and has earned numerous accolades including Iceland's restaurant of the year. In his spare time, Gislason can be found foraging with his children for ingredients to stock his restaurant's pantry, or salmon fishing in one of Iceland's glacial rivers.

JODY EDDY is the author of *Come In, We're Closed*, which profiled the staff meals of 25 of the world's best restaurants. A graduate of The Institute of Culinary Education in Manhattan, she is the former editor of *Art Culinaire*. She first visited Dill in 2009 and has been a devoted disciple of Gislason's cooking philosophy ever since.

Introduction

In 2009, Iceland was in the middle of what would prove to be, relative to its size, the largest universal banking collapse experienced by any country in economic history. The ongoing financial implosion sent the nation’s restaurants into a tailspin, as the cost of food skyrocketed and people could no longer afford the luxury of eating out. It is hard to imagine a more dismal time to open a restaurant, but Gunnar Karl Gíslason had no alternative.

Just prior to the crisis, Gunnar, who had introduced contemporary Nordic cuisine to his country, had left his position as executive chef of Vox, Iceland’s most esteemed restaurant, determined to realize his lifelong dream of opening his own place. Despite the financial maelstrom engulfing his nation, he decided to move forward on this idea. He chose the name Dill for the restaurant, to honor one of the nation’s most abundant herbs and to highlight the foraging principle integral to his cooking philosophy.

As the economy blazed a downward trajectory fierce enough to disrupt financial markets around the world, every one of Gunnar’s investors pulled out of the plan to open Dill in Reykjavík’s landmark Nordic House, designed by the famed Finnish architect Alvar Aalto. The building, the city’s primary meeting place for cultural exchanges among the Nordic countries, seemed an ideal location for a restaurant celebrating the foods and cooking techniques of the region.

When the funding disappeared, Gunnar was forced to forge ahead with his plan with nothing but a resolute commitment to realize his dream and credit cards that “burned red” by the time he was finished. Since those dark days, Dill has become Iceland’s most celebrated restaurant. But there is more to the story of its success than indefatigable work and enormous credit card debt. There is a promise made. And a promise kept.

The purveyors promised to supply the Dill kitchen with either free or heavily discounted products until Gunnar found his footing and could afford to pay them back. In most parts of the world, this arrangement would be unprecedented. In Iceland, it is a way of life. Icelanders know a thing or two about transcending struggle. This innate knowledge, born of an ancient and perpetual negotiation with the environment for survival, inspires an invincible kinship among the citizenry. That affinity expresses itself in a fidelity resolute

enough not only to withstand the near collapse of an economy but also to open a restaurant with little more than a dream and a promise.

After months of working twenty hours a day, seven days a week, Gunnar's vision was realized, and his restaurant honoring Iceland's culinary heritage by showcasing its pristine products on a contemporary canvas quickly earned unparalleled success. It garnered acclaim around the world, becoming the must-visit restaurant for Icelandic tourists, a destination restaurant for culinary adventure seekers, and, most important for Icelanders, an establishment that finally put their nation on the international gastronomic map.

As successful as Dill became, Gunnar never forgot the debt he owed to his purveyors. He expressed his gratitude first through the repayment of his monetary obligations and then through a renewed commitment to protect the venerable culinary traditions of Iceland by showcasing local products on his restaurant menu in fresh, innovative ways. His approach is never to mask the integrity of the ingredients but rather to allow them to tell their own story. In doing so, they link diners to the past while simultaneously propelling them into the future—the essence of contemporary Nordic cooking.

This cooking model has been embraced not only in kitchens in Iceland and its neighboring countries but also by chefs around the world who want to fortify their cooking with something more elusive than flavor. They are striving to stake a claim to important roles in society as architects, ambassadors, and educators of a revolutionized food system, one that values sustainability over industrialization, products with an historical pedigree over factory-produced foods without lineage. For Gunnar, a chef who has always been ardently committed to his producers, the *terroir* of his nation, and the traditions of the past, this role is nothing new. It is as instinctive to him as plucking sea urchins from a cold, frothy sea; harvesting seaweed the color of iron from a black stone beach in the shadow of a glacier; or gathering sorrel and angelica from craggy volcanic crevasses to supplement a restaurant menu that celebrates the local resources of a place that has been dubbed the world's only sustainable nation.

Striking a covenant with the environment that you will never take more than you need and that you will fight to protect it as long as it provides you with the seafood, game, livestock, and produce necessary to survive is a way of life in Iceland. It was practiced long before the words *foraging*, *terroir*, and *sustainability* became commonplace. This simple cooking philosophy was employed by Gunnar years before new Nordic cuisine and The Manifesto for the New Nordic Kitchen (see page 259) came to be among the culinary world's hottest buzzwords.

This book celebrates the cuisine and nation of a forward-thinking chef and the producers who supply his restaurant. The alchemy of the relationship between chef and producers, and between that pairing and the environment, is revealed in Gunnar's contemporary recipes, which are approachable enough for the home cook, yet sufficiently challenging to entice the professional chef. Each recipe tells a story, contextualizing and integrating the tenets of the contemporary Nordic kitchen into the ongoing larger conversation in the culinary community, and by extension the world.

The principles of this modern Nordic culinary philosophy can be put to work anywhere on the planet. That fact prompts some questions: If any professional or home cook can celebrate regionality in his or her cooking repertoire, why is there such an intense focus on the Nordic countries leading the way? Why have the nations that hover so close to the Arctic Circle garnered such prodigious praise in recent years? Why are expectations running so high for the Nordic pioneers of the culinary world? It is because they are at the forefront of a revolution in our food system constructed on an ideology that embraces a respect for place as the foundation of their cooking style. It is a revolution that is not defined by innovation as much as it is by centuries-old principles.

This cookbook adds a unique voice to this conversation by examining the culinary narrative of Iceland, a fascinating nation with a compelling gastronomic heritage that until now has gone virtually unexplored. It opens the doors to an extraordinary country whose identity is shaped in equal measure by a rich, harrowing past and a bright future. Iceland's citizens have endured a perpetual struggle to survive ever since their Viking ancestors settled the country in the ninth century, yet have now arrived at a moment when they are always ranked near or at the top of a United Nations–compiled Gini index measuring such factors as life expectancy, educational attainment, literacy, and general standard of living. Iceland is one of the most egalitarian countries on the planet, and modern Icelanders are content despite the sometimes difficult circumstances they endure. This cookbook illuminates the continuity of past, present, and future, through Gunnar's contemporary recipes and through conversations with some of Iceland's traditional food purveyors. Together, they are preserving their nation's culture through the enduring language of food.

When I first visited Iceland in 2009—before most cooks in the United States had heard of the new Nordic cuisine—I returned extolling its virtues to my friends in the culinary industry. I declared that this new philosophy, with its focus on sustainable cooking practices, foraging, and *terroir*, would soon be embraced by chefs around the world. My enthusiasm was met with skepticism.

I returned to Iceland several times over the next few years to examine further what I knew was an extraordinary region on the verge of claiming the spotlight in the culinary world. I was fortunate to meet Gunnar Karl Gíslason during my first visit, and he became my culinary mentor on subsequent visits to the country. Walking with Gunnar through the country's breathtaking terrain proved to be part history lesson and part culinary tourism, and always a feast. To join him as he forages—not because it is trendy, but because it is inextricably woven into who he is as a chef and as an Icelander—is to become privy to wisdom acquired throughout a lifetime of living close to the land.

Several years ago, only one airline flew nonstop from the United States to Iceland. Then, in 2011 alone, four new airlines established routes between cities in the United States and Reykjavík. As travelers discover that Iceland is not only an incredible place to visit for the adventure seeker but also a top-notch culinary destination (not to mention that it is only a five-hour plane ride from New York City), it will grow into a travel and culinary hot spot.
Today, no one chastises me for my obsession with Iceland and its exceptional cuisine. Now I frequently hear from people asking for help planning a trip there. I always send them to Dill, where they are treated to the extraordinary cuisine and uncompromising hospitality of Gunnar and his staff. The reports on their return are unequivocally positive. They are usually followed by a request for a recipe or two from Gunnar and an outline of additional places to visit on their return trip, for it seems once you've visited Iceland, you can never get enough.

From his earliest days working with farmers in the distant corners of Iceland until now, in his role as the country's best-known contemporary chef, Gunnar has listened closely to the landscape of his country and the stories of its producers. These voices have found their way into his refined cuisine, celebrated in a restaurant that is more than a dining establishment. Dill is a reflection of Gunnar's philosophy of an allegiance to the artisans, food purveyors, and citizens of Iceland.

The restaurant's service ware is designed by local artisans, its furniture is by Alvar Aalto, and the artwork on the walls is a regularly rotating display of local talent. The refined space of muted colors, clean lines, and an absence of clutter reflects the Nordic aesthetic of less is more. Spanning one entire wall is a floor-to-ceiling window overlooking a bird sanctuary, abundant with the herb bushes and raised gardens from which Gunnar forages daily. A greenhouse glistens for the part of the year in which the sun never sets and sparkles in starlight during the months of long, cold nights. Iceland is situated on the Gulf Stream, making its climate

more temperate than most would imagine. Even on an afternoon in the middle of winter, Dill's guests wander along the edge of the lake outside the restaurant, past the vast garden beds awaiting spring planting.

As idyllic as Gunnar's visits to his producers are, an underlying urgency accompanies these encounters—an urgency born of the need to preserve the traditional foodways of the country. The ingredients Gunnar serves at Dill reflect his devotion to ancient Icelandic traditions disappearing at a speed so alarming that he fears many of them will be gone within a generation. Because this urgency grows more acute with each passing day, this cookbook is both a recipe collection and a documentation of a way of life that is fast losing ground to the contemporary world.

If the next generation continues to eschew these traditional food craft jobs in favor of urban living, there may be nothing left to document in a decade or two. To combat that trend, this book is intended not only to remind Icelanders of their fascinating past but also to provide them with a road map for how to integrate tradition into their modern lives. And it is a powerful source of inspiration for others seeking to preserve the legacies established by generations of cooks, producers, and farmers in their corner of the world.

Bacalao Potatoes
with fennel Ribbons and Sorrel Ash
Serves 4 | Preparation time: about 1 hour (plus 24 hours to rehydrate the cod)

On a visit to northern Iceland, Gunnar and I stayed in an inviting apartment on the outskirts of Akureyri, the second largest town in the country (at a whopping eighteen thousand inhabitants) and Gunnar's birthplace. The only thing our cozy abode lacked was blackout curtains. Not surprisingly, the blinding July sun that drenches the country in light twenty-four hours a day results in severe sleep deprivation for anyone not accustomed to it. Gunnar, of course, is accustomed to his nation's days of perpetual light and slept soundly each night. Perhaps because he was not bleary-eyed by dinnertime (and because he is a naturally hospitable fellow), he took charge of the evening meal.

One of the first things he made was this creamy potato recipe incorporating Elvar's bacalao. It was not his intention to prepare it every night, but we couldn't seem to get enough of its comforting virtue. The bacalao infused it with just the right amount of brininess, and the pungent horseradish perked up any sleepy brains. It's hearty enough to work as a main dish and also makes a fantastic side. One night, Gunnar served it on toast; on another, he substituted smoked haddock, an ideal replacement for the cod. The profusion of herbs he added was dictated by whatever we foraged that day. This dish, which is inspired by a popular lunch item at Dill, is festively attired with fennel ribbons, a soft-boiled egg, and sorrel ash—the latter a mainstay of the Nordic kitchen.

Potatoes
1 pound (450 g) salted cod
1 pound (450 g) waxy potatoes
1/4 cup (60 ml) heavy cream, warmed

Sorrel Ash
Leaves from 1 bunch sorrel

To Serve
4 carrots, peeled, cut into bite-size pieces, and roasted

2 fennel stalks, cut into long ribbons using a vegetable peeler (see note)
4 eggs, soft boiled
Freshly grated horseradish, for finishing

To make the potatoes, immerse the salted cod in cold water to cover and refrigerate for 24 hours, changing the water several times to remove as much salt as possible. Remove from the water and, if skin and bones are present, remove them. Preheat the oven to 400°F (200°C) and roast the cod until warmed through, about 8 minutes. Once it is cool enough to handle, break into flakes, and keep warm.

To make the sorrel ash, preheat the oven to 400°F (200°C). Line a baking sheet with parchment paper. Arrange the sorrel leaves in a single layer on the prepared pan and toast in the oven for about 8 minutes, until blackened. Let cool to room temperature, then pulverize the leaves in a spice grinder, transfer to an airtight container, and store at room temperature until serving. The ash will keep at room temperature for up to 2 weeks.

Boil the potatoes in salted water to cover for 18 to 20 minutes, until tender. Drain the potatoes, let cool just until they can be handled, then peel them, keeping the peel intact if possible.

In a saucepan, mash the warm potatoes and cream together until smooth. Add the warm cod and stir gently to incorporate. Keep warm.

To serve, spoon the potatoes into a bowl. Top with the carrots, a generous handful of fennel ribbons, a soft-boiled egg, and a spoonful of horseradish. Dust with sorrel ash.

Note:
To prevent browning, immerse the fennel ribbons in acidulated water until ready to use.

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