

LEURRE BLANC  
 GE MENU:  
 S SCUFFLE  
 VIAR  
 ERET M/SC PROLEUGH  
 BRULÉ TRADITIONELLE



# MIXTURE IMPOSSIBLE

SCANORAMA

"WELCOME TO HELL," says the waiter, kicking open the kitchen door with a well-polished heel and sedate bow. He's gone in a flash, an instant before the sauna-sizzling air from the kitchen gushes forth and I step from the spacious ivory-white restaurant into a dripping, black-painted concrete kitchen. Before my eyes have time to adjust I'm hustled into the narrow kitchen's furthest corner by harassed chefs laden with laundry, and leftovers to be dumped in the back yard. My presence serves as grit in a well-oiled machine; usually the staff glide, like Fred and Ginger they say, smoothly and purposefully between the naked lamp bulbs and the heaps of wet towels on the floor. Seven till eleven at night is rush hour when the kitchen staff totals six, not counting the washers-up, and all squeezed into a tight ten square metres. Eighty guests are waited on every evening, epicures who call for the brasserie's bestselling items - bouillabaisse with lobster, and white chocolate mousse with tomato pickles - but whose real interest is to pass judgment on the renowned chef, Niels Melgaard, 31.



Decent cold starters are rare, claims Niels Melgaard. Here, he shows a salad of lobster with peas, creamed celeriac and lobster vinaigrette.

Melgaard - there's no denying - is something of a rogue male; how else can you describe someone who started his career frying hamburgers for the Copenhagen fast-food chain "Spärvägen" (The Tram). An 18-year-old Melgaard sent hamburgers rattling down the track - bread, meat, tomato, lettuce - for three months, then flung aside the clownish bow tie and cap which had sat atop his long hair like some crazy pillbox, marched up to the boss and paraphrased his hero Bruce Springsteen: "I was born to run." From clown to cookery student he went, working himself up from apprentice to master chef Erwin Lauterbach's deputy at Le Saison in Copenhagen. "The first three months were the toughest of my life," he says. "I was just an inexperienced college boy when I got there, intrigued and impressed by the discipline. At first my goal was just not to break down under pressure. And then finally Erwin took me aside and told me that maybe, just maybe, he could make a cook out of me after all."

Melgaard's response to the compliment was to move on again, this time all the way to Chicago and the Royal Danish Consulate. The consul was in need of a private chef and, having spent four years combining school and Lauterbach, Melgaard took this chance to visit Springsteen's promised land and drive down Thunder Road towards his very own glory days. His stay didn't turn out as expected, though. Perhaps

*From Copenhagen to Chicago and back, Danish chef Niels Melgaard has sweated his way through top kitchens, building the confidence to combine the most disparate elements of gastronomy. Mark Isitt sniffed him out at one of his restaurants. Pictures by Anne Söderberg*



Pressure cooking: Melgaard in action at Victor, his brasserie in the centre of Copenhagen. Below: Veal liver served with foie gras de canard, rhubarb coulis, summer cabbage and caramelized ginger.

*I'll try my new recipes on Maja, my girlfriend, and hopefully she'll survive long enough to give me her opinion*

the consul asked for nothing more advanced than *pølse* and *smørrebrød* (hot dogs and open sandwiches) but, for whatever reason, Melgaard found that he could complete his duties with one arm tied behind his back, and would spend the rest of his 16-hour working day with his head in his hands, drumming his fingers and gazing across Michigan Avenue to the skyscrapers beyond. It wasn't long before he started sneaking out, mainly to try the various eating places in town but also with a vague idea of applying for a job if a restaurant's level of ambition seemed right. Trained as he was in French cuisine he didn't hold very high hopes. Not, that is, until he visited Charlie Trotter's now



well-known establishment and ate wild salmon served with tomatoes, foie gras, mango and papaya (anything's possible in America). "That dish was a stunner," Melgaard remembers. "It was intelligent, and I knew you had to be top of your class to combine flavours like that. I was released from the consulate contract, worked my way up in Charlie's kitchen and

after six months I was his right-hand man. I worked there for a year and a half, 90 hours a week. I wanted to learn, learn, learn."

He slams his wine glass down as if to stress the importance of experience. He's seated beneath a tangle of gurgling piping in the tiny cellar office at Restaurang Victor, near the cold room where meat is sliced and seasoned. With a shaven head, baggy sports clothes and a decent physique, he looks more like a hip-hopper than anything else. According to the staff he also possesses a rap artist's volubility and natural authority when working. And, to cap it all, his female colleagues claim he's a male chauvinist.

If a Danish rapper strikes you as an unlikely prospect, it's nothing compared to the mix of ingredients in Melgaard's dishes: grilled rabbit, papaya and artichoke; braised chicken liver, scallops and curry. "At Charlie's I learned the essence of American cooking - don't be bound by tradition. Charlie mixed the impossible and I learned from that. I try to come up with new combinations every day. Some dishes are a real struggle to produce, others - boom! - they're there. Yesterday I composed ten different rabbit recipes and maybe only one of them will be a hit. I'll cook them for Maja, my girlfriend, and hopefully she'll survive long enough to give me her opinion."

Recipe ideas come to him as he does his daily one-hour run from his flat close to Strøget (Copenhagen's pedestrianized main street) to Victor on Ny

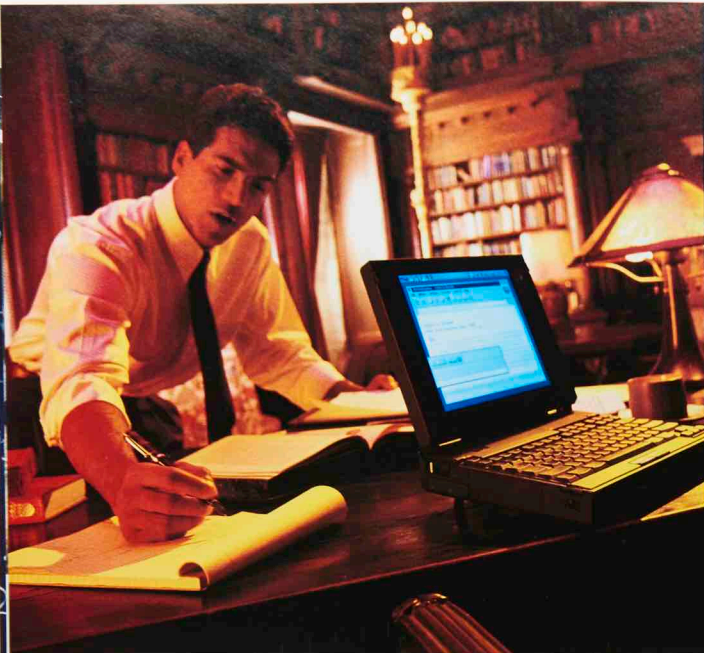
"It was a six-car pile-up. Can you find me an English-speaking doctor who understands that my neck hurts?"



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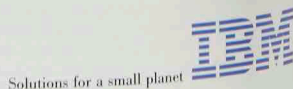
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Østergade 8. That's if he hasn't chosen to work at Nokken today, the harbour restaurant in northern Zealand. Or at Sommersko (Summer Shoe), an unpretentious café in the centre of Copenhagen where 1,200 people are served daily. "An absolute factory," laughs Melgaard, who puts together the menus for all three places himself, hires and fires the staff, and even decides how the dishes are to be arranged on the plate. In all three establishments his philosophy of mixing high and low-food cultures is consistent - a wedding of entrecôte and hot dog, you might call it. He's faithful to the traditions of French cuisine but believes that American cooking at its best is unbeatable and is keen to combine the best of both worlds.

Being a chef has never been a life's ambition of his. "As a kid I was always interested in cookery books. I liked the look of them but didn't understand a thing about the recipes. If somebody had asked me what celery was I wouldn't have known because there was nobody around to teach me. Cooking didn't run in my family. Still, two of my younger



Mille-feuille of blackberries and Creme Chantilly with blackberry coulis. Below: dark and light chocolate mousse, Grand Marnier-flavoured Creme Anglaise and a comfit of orange zest.

start a restaurant of your own. That's not the best way because if you go straight to the top you stop learning and instead become the teacher yourself. My ambition was simply to become a good cook, a good craftsman, and that takes years."

Once you've established yourself as one of the most experimental chefs in Scandinavia, where do you turn if you want to learn about cookery developments? "To England, maybe," Melgaard muses. "They do things there that you don't see anywhere else. They combine Italian, Asian and French, and they don't mess around with the classic dishes that are already perfect. And, unlike the French, they're not snobbish about what they do because they're striving to improve the reputation of English food. If I leave Copenhagen it will probably be for England."

His own cookery book is on the way (but no scheduled release date as yet). He claims to have no interest in cookery competitions. The only medals he has are from track events, he asserts, and his implication is that cookery doesn't lend itself to competition. It

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brothers are cooks today, one of them an apprentice here at Victor."

His interest in food may, nevertheless, derive indirectly from home. His father abandoned the five Melgaard children and their mother at an early stage and Niels, the eldest boy, was called on to take responsibility, having to cook more than just black-pudding and potatoes, learning how to make use of poor raw materials and demanding full support from those around him. "I hate working with people who don't care, who aren't interested in what they're doing. My main weakness is probably that I can't bring myself to be tolerant towards them. I demand the same level of ambition from them as I put into my own work."

"My greatest asset, on the other hand, is that I'm good at handling stress. I actually like working under pressure. A good chef needs to have stamina, an easy temperament and an ability to concentrate on what's relevant. And that's not always the food; sometimes it's the mood of the place, the atmosphere. You have to be able to stop tempers from boiling over."

He keeps one step ahead of his staff, gastronomically speaking, with his ongoing experimentation with rabbit and other dishes. But when he's out eating on his one free day a week he tends to be "like everyone else, easily satisfied". He admits that his culinary arts were improved by his choosing to wait before becoming chef in his own kitchen. "When you've been training for four years, all you want is to

sounds a little like a Eurovision Song Contest where the loser denies having any regrets by claiming that for him music is a way of life and not a competition. "It's true," Melgaard insists as he tramps up the rickety staircase to the kitchen. "Being in restaurants and working in kitchens is my life." He leans, all smiles, over a bubbling pot for a trial taste, sips confidently and - zap! - is turned to stone. Slowly he turns to confront the apprentice, seizes the ladle from him and begins furiously spicing, skimming and stirring, all the while spitting out an account of the only cookery competition he ever took part in, two years ago. He won. "It only took me seven minutes and twelve seconds to carve up a whole leg of veal," he says and fixes his eyes on the shivering apprentice.



MARK ISITT is Scanorama's senior editor. He makes pan pizzas which are, apparently, much appreciated by his friends.

TRANSLATED BY DAVID ISITT