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Noma: the restaurant that changed my life

Working a service at René Redzepi's Copenhagen restaurant, Noma, was the ideal challenge for the winner of MasterChef



It doesn't look like much, but ... Noma restaurant, Copenhagen. Photograph: PR

Before I was sent there for the MasterChef final, I didn't know that Noma, which Sybil Kapoor has written about beautifully in today's G2, existed. I was dreading going to a fussy Michelin-starred restaurant, because what I thought of as Michelin food was not the sort of food I want to cook. It was jaw-dropping for me to find out that at Noma, which has two Michelin stars, René Redzepi does food which is totally different from my preconceptions.

For the final, the other guys were both at five star hotels and had the whole treatment; dinner at chef's tables, all the frills. We stayed at the Scandinavian equivalent of a Travelodge in the red light district and had a few drinks at a Vietnamese, but there's no way I would have swapped. I was delighted to be there. It was very much a life-changing couple of days, offering inspiration as well as the chance to pick up practical tips for my restaurant.

We spent one-and-a-half days at Noma, but even just getting an hour with them, getting to understand what they do, would have been invaluable. René is an incredibly busy man, but took the time to show me how, for example, his foraged produce comes in. I now have my own foragers and I can give them the same containers I saw at Noma - nothing fancy, just lined with tissue paper - and I know from going there that fresh foraged bits and pieces will happily last a good few days.

There's certainly inspiration from Noma that I've used all the way through putting our restaurant together, from the induction hobs in the kitchen to a skate dish which I've done with British ingredients, sea kale and sea kale berries, but which is very much inspired by Noma. Without having gone there it would have been so much more difficult. I don't want to copy him, but when I'm thinking, "how the hell do I do this?" it's my touchstone.

We'd cooked turbot during the day of the final, and when it came to attempting to replicate René's signature dish he said, "you're too good at cooking fish, I'm going to give you something else to do." That was good and bad. He gave me a version of the

musk ox tartar, which is a very difficult one to do for service. I had to do a swipe of tarragon paste across the plate, exactly the right width, on the right angle. It wasn't something I'd done before, but it was the biggest compliment to hear that he was pleased with it.

Going back to my management training, I'd call René an authoritative leader. He leads by example. He knows that he can do pretty much any job in the kitchen, and like any good kitchen there isn't any shouting. He was very clear when he wasn't happy with something and he sent a lot of food back, including some of mine; even his experienced sous chef was getting plates returned, perhaps one in four. But there was no belittling involved in it, and I really felt a sense of achievement when I'd done it to the right standard.

Rene is hard to describe, but I think the whole crew, males included, all fell slightly in love with him. The girls went ga-ga; it was kind of a standing joke. What I want to cook is what Noma does. That's as aspirational as it gets for me.

[Next](#)

[Previous](#)

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