



MASTER BUILDER
Meyer, who recently sold most of his majority stake in Noma, in front of his new food complex in Copenhagen, The Standard, which opened in October.

EPICUREAN TRAVEL

BOARDWALK EMPIRE

Claus Meyer, cofounder of the internationally acclaimed Noma and self-proclaimed champion of new Nordic cuisine, expands his culinary domain along Copenhagen's waterfront.

BY JAY CHESHES PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIK OLSSON

CLAUS MEYER—chef, TV personality, philanthropist, serial entrepreneur—is wandering through his new food-and-drink complex along the Copenhagen waterfront, still a construction site barely a month before its opening in October. The dusty shell will soon contain an upscale Indian restaurant, a jazz club, a casual bistro and a high-end showcase for new Nordic cooking. “This thing is a monster,” he says, skirting past a tattooed worker applying a final coat of paint to the ceiling.

The Standard, as the whole project is called, is a change of pace for Denmark's most prominent food celebrity, a straightforward pleasure palace with no grand agenda. For years, Meyer has exuded the world-changing ambitions and natural charisma of Jamie Oliver, combined with the manic business drive of Richard Branson. In 1991, he became the host of a prime-time cooking show on Denmark's national TV network that ran for six years. In 2003 he, along with chef René Redzepi, opened Noma, the Copenhagen restaurant that would redefine Nordic cuisine. His empire in Denmark includes four bakeries, four delis, the restaurants Radio and Namnam, a small country hotel, an apple orchard, a vinegar brewery and a vast chain of corporate canteens. His name is ubiquitous in the country, with Meyer labels on flour, coffee, jams, juices, beer and wine. Next year he hopes to make his mark on the U.S. too, with plans to launch a new Nordic food emporium in New York City.

In the last 20 years, through a mix of showmanship, commerce and grassroots campaigning, he's had a tremendous impact on the way Danes eat—and has become a divisive figure in the process, as a wealthy outspoken celebrity in a country where humility remains a national trait. “I'm much less interested in money than I am in doing great things,” Meyer insisted when we met for the first time last summer at the beautiful old house he shares with his three daughters, two dogs and his wife, Christina Meyer Bengtsson, an interior designer who has collaborated on several of his ventures. “That's why I run from one thing to the next. I'm not interested in opening my sixth or seventh bakery—to me that's just business.” His main motivation, he says, has always been moving his country's food culture forward. But is he a man on a social mission, or simply a shrewd marketer who builds demand for his products without appearing to be a salesman? >

REPAST IS PRESENT

Clockwise from far right: The Standard occupies a former customs house with views of the Copenhagen harbor; the dining room at Studio, the flagship restaurant at The Standard, run by former Noma chef Torsten Vildgaard; Studio's petit four tray, with caramels, French nougat pate de fruit and caramelized chicken skin with chocolate.



BORN INTO a fractured home in southern Denmark in 1963 (his parents divorced when he was 14, and he does not see his father much), Meyer grew up in one of the “darkest periods of Danish food history,” he says, an era of frozen vegetables and tinned meats. He discovered fine cuisine for the first time while taking a teenage sabbatical from school in France. A baker in Gascony, who became the father figure he’d been missing, taught him to cook classic regional dishes like duck confit and beef bourguignon. He was seduced by the joie de vivre he encountered there and the slow pace of life. “I realized my country was sick,” he says. “People didn’t laugh, they didn’t eat together.” He was determined to change that.

Back in Denmark, Meyer convinced the dean of the Copenhagen Business School, where he’d enrolled, to let him take over the college canteen, serving 700

meals a day. His new quiches, tarts and crisp salads became an instant sensation. A popular brasserie soon followed—with Meyer at the stove preparing elaborate French food. He was an athletic, charismatic young man—he’d been a badminton champion in high school—and quickly became a standout on the Copenhagen food scene.

So the invitation to audition for Danish TV didn’t come out of nowhere. The network had been looking for a fresh face to build a food show around. “I think I made boiled potatoes with parsley,” he says of the tryout, “but apparently I did it with a smile.” *Meyers Kitchen* ran every week for 300 episodes until 1997, after which he landed a gig as an occasional cohost of an export program, *New Scandinavian Cooking*, which still airs on PBS.

In the early ’90s, Meyer launched a formal club for chocolate lovers, defending consumers against what

he refers to as “big corporations, colluding, to rape the very notion of chocolate.” He also began importing Valrhona chocolate from France. A similar effort promoting serious coffee debuted with the launch of his Estate Coffee brand, using beans from Brazil. Both businesses thrived.

With Noma, Meyer was able to draw attention to the new style of locavore cooking developed by Redzepi, with its emphasis on foraged ingredients. A year after the restaurant opened, in 2004, Meyer organized a grand symposium on “new Nordic cuisine”—a term he came up with—unveiling a set of defining principles, a manifesto inspired by a similar document written by Basque chefs in the ’70s. “The aims of the new Nordic cuisine,” it begins, are “to express the purity, freshness, simplicity and ethics we wish to associate with our region.” Government ministers from Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Norway all signed on to support it. And Noma had a movement it could lead.

Noma remains Meyer’s proudest achievement—the one project that’s brought him international acclaim. “Noma was about giving something back to the world,” he says. Which is why a recent split from the restaurant has hit him hard. Things had become so strained between the two cofounders that, a few months ago, Redzepi threatened to walk out of >