

Political

Rasmus Munk is the brains behind Alchemist, Copenhagen's experimental new foodie experience. We found out how he's changing the world, one morally charged morsel at a time

to order





Words / Clare Vooght → Photography / Peter Westrup



Previous pages ✓
The dish Danish Summer Kiss aims to raise awareness of tongue cancer; chef Rasmus Munk
 Clockwise from left ✓
Alchemist's wraparound ceiling is all part of the sensory experience; its front door is made of hand-sculpted bronze; Munk's tattoo of Nordic herbs and flowers



You don't need a fork

to eat Danish Summer Kiss, one of 50 dishes served as part of Alchemist's tasting menu. A slick

of gazpacho topped with fermented strawberries, tomatoes, herbs and petals, it comes on a rubber tongue – you simply kiss it off.

Diners' reactions when faced with the prospect of this outlandish soup range from awkwardness to disgust and hilarity. But the dish comes with a serious message. Chef Rasmus Munk wants to draw attention to the fact Denmark has some of the highest oral cancer rates in Europe.

"I had a friend who nearly died of tongue cancer, and we don't speak out about it," says the 28-year-old chef as we meet in his kitchen, where his team of 30 diligently chop, ferment and assemble as part of the nine-hour preparation for evening service. "You lose your appetite, so we presented it as a tongue kiss with a taste of the Danish summer. We made it more romantic, in some way, that it's a summer kiss." »





Some might struggle to see the romance, but it's just the kind of experimental moment that's got people paying attention. Since Alchemist opened in July, Munk's not just been pushing boundaries with presentation. His food is conjured with flourishes of molecular gastronomy (the gazpacho has been separated in an ultrasound machine for optimum texture, for example) – and comes with a social and moral message. Ethical questions are baked right into the experience, forcing his diners to think about global problems.

"There's a lot in this world to talk about," Munk says, simply. "I think it's important, when we use so many hours, day in, day out, in this space, it should be more than just a restaurant, more than just great food."

Alchemist is certainly that: a six-hour journey of 50 courses over five theatrical acts, set in an ex-warehouse in the former industrial Copenhagen peninsula of Refshaleøen. It's the bigger, "dream

Clockwise from top left: Munk prepped to go; jars of fermentations and other ingredients line one of the open kitchens; the plates for cod dish Plastic Fantastic are made by a plastic artist from litter picked from Danish beaches; *The Last God* sculpture by Christian Lemmerz



restaurant" version of Munk's original 15-seater, which he built himself in 2015 – and where he managed to convince 1,500 people to sign up for organ donation with a particularly confrontational dish of lamb's heart in a red sauce.

This time around, Munk's ambitions to change the world were enabled by US\$15 million backing from an investor who also owns Copenhagen's three-Michelin-starred Geranium. More money means more freedom to really go for it, judging from the number of dishes on the menu that take the moral message to the very edge of appetising.

Another being prepared in the pristine kitchen – where utensil-filled Tupperware are lined up impeccably – is Plastic Fantastic: cod jaw with edible "plastic" made from cod skin. It sticks to the lips as it's eaten, to highlight the issue of plastic in our oceans and food supply, following a report from the Technical University of Denmark that plastic is found in 29% of Danish cod and herring. »



“There’s a lot in this world to talk about – it’s important to do more than just great food”



“I’ve always been a guy that wanted to do something for other people”

Other dishes include Food for Thought, made with an ethical organic foie gras from Spain to throw light on animal welfare; Læsø “chocolate” created from the shell of discarded langoustines and cocoa butter as a nod to reducing food waste; and Blood Diamond – essentially a Bloody Mary made with diamond-shaped ice.

Not every dish has an agenda. There’s a perfectly white snowball made from fermented tomato and eaten with ski gloves, a fluffy bao and an Andy Warhol-inspired, ice-cream-filled banana dessert, simply because Munk likes the artist.

Still, for today’s diners, eating in the vast, dark, domed main dining space at Alchemist, it all feels about a million miles from the light and airy restaurants of New Nordic fame – but that’s where Munk first made his name, as a wunderkind of New Nordic cuisine.

Clockwise from top left: This ice-cream-filled banana was inspired by Munk’s love of Andy Warhol; nine hours is spent preparing for evening service; the rotation evaporator is used to extract aromas from liquids



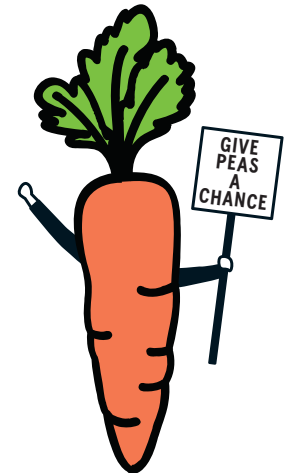
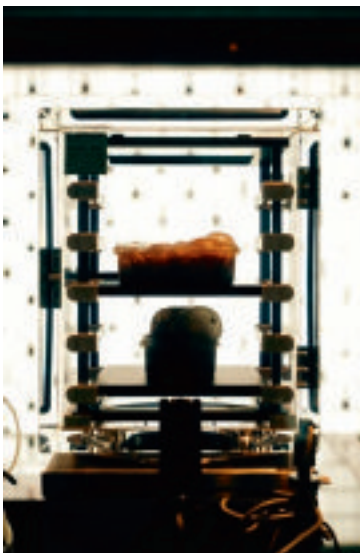
At just 22 he became head chef of a typically minimalist natural-wood-clad restaurant called Treetop, in the Jutland countryside, to great critical acclaim. But he soon felt dissatisfied with the “same-old” style of his cooking. “It felt like it was a bad copy of Noma or Relæ,” Munk says, “like I was just cooking things that were on Instagram.”

His vision for Alchemist was all about food with a message. “I’ve always been a guy that wanted to help or do something for other people,” he states, his low voice gentle but passionate – even, somewhat unusually for a busy chef, when addressing his staff. “I have both my arms, both my legs and I think I have a good life, and I’m very privileged to be born here in Denmark.”

So while the local-first principles of New Nordic are still part of his approach – “They’re in my DNA”, he says, rolling back his grey apron to reveal a giant forearm tattoo depicting wild herbs and flowers found in Denmark – his remit isn’t just about the slavish adherence to some kind of aesthetic ideal, but of trying to solve world problems in a holistic way. To this end, a large part of his budget for the restaurant has gone on hiring around 50 experts – food philosophers, sound designers, dramaturges and scientists – to consult on the finer details, with some surprising answers.

“A lot of people think that a tomato from Denmark is better than a tomato from Spain,” he explains, “but when the tomatoes in Spain are in season, it’s a lot better for the environment to get it from Spain than to try to harvest one in Denmark.” »

“We need to think global, we need to talk about global problems”



More food with a message

Hot Bread Kitchen, NYC

In East Harlem, Jessamyn Rodriguez trains up and creates economic opportunities for women, many of whom are immigrants, in the fine art of baking.

hotbreadkitchen.org

Atelier Crenn, San Francisco

Dominique Crenn calls on others in the restaurant industry to make major efforts to work more sustainably and do their bit to help the environment.

ateliercrenn.com

Silo, London

Douglas McMaster's pioneering eatery – the UK's first zero waste restaurant – relocates permanently to London from Brighton this month. It champions all-reusable packaging and serves elevated carrot tops and sauces made from vegetable scraps.

silolondon.com

His kind of issue-based cooking is on the up. Three-Michelin-starred chef Dominique Crenn regularly speaks out against climate change, and Spanish-American chef José Andrés and his team served millions of meals to Puerto Ricans affected by Hurricane Maria. New Yorker Dan Barber is involved in everything from sustainable fish farming and waste banquets to anti-GMO crop development.

Chefs have become activists because they have a unique view of the industry, says Munk. “We see the farmers, we have connections with industry and can see what’s right and what’s wrong. We can see the product and what it could be like.”

In some ways, all cooking might be a political act. Every action or decision chefs make during the process has an effect: where they buy their ingredients, how they treat their suppliers and their staff. But what sets Munk apart is that he literally and unapologetically brings politics to the plate.

Not everyone is a fan of his approach. There’s been criticism of the \$15 million build cost and price tag of \$650 for the experience – could this money not have gone towards direct action? However, his discourse is backed up by his charitable initiatives, including JunkFood, which serves meals made with leftovers to homeless people and drug addicts, and clean water initiatives in Kenya. Every year, he hosts a Christmas Eve party for 80-90 families in need.

By feeding diners a message each night, he hopes to encourage us all to be more outward-looking and think about the bigger picture. “There are so many problems out there. So many islands with plastic swimming around. We need to think global, we need to talk about global problems. It’s not enough to talk about just ourselves anymore, our little Nordic region here.” alchemist.dk

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