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DESIGN REPORT 2007

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The Art of the Danish Lunch

The Christmas season marks the time for the Julefrokost or Christmas lunch. But this is no ordinary lunch. It's art -- where the rye bread is the canvas and the toppings are morsels of mouth watering delicacies designed to delight the eyes as well as the pallet.

By Laura Stadler-Jensen

Christmas is by far the very best time to experience one of the most traditional types of Danish cuisine in all its shapes and forms. The open-faced sandwich, or smørrebrød (meaning "butter and bread"), is a long standing Danish tradition that can be sampled any time of year. However, starting mid November through Christmas, the ordinary Danish lunch is turned into the Christmas lunch. A plethora of dishes are prepared in an ensemble meant to be enjoyed from start to finish.

But, before you jump in, it's good to know some of the rules. It's not just a sandwich after all. Don't worry, I've lived in Copenhagen for just over five years and still don't know all the rules! I can recall having my first typical Danish lunch with my Danish family. They began by putting out small plates of fish, meatballs, sliced meats, salads, pâté and cheeses along with a basket full of several kinds of fresh sliced breads. I thought, wow, now this is a lunch! I am an American and like to have a lot of options, but this was a bit over the top.

One thing that all open-faced sandwiches have in common is their foundation. Most are made with thin slices of Danish rugbrød, hearty dark rye bread made mostly of whole grains. Some are made with slices of white or sour dough bread but all are usually decked with layers of ingredients and then topped with dainty garnishes that playfully add to the texture and taste. When sampling Danish open-sandwiches, it is customary to choose between two to three for a lunch meal. You can also just start with one and add them on as you go because they can be quite heavy and filling.

One of the most traditional types to start with is herring, which can be pickled, marinated, boiled or even fried. The texture may be difficult to get used to at first bite, but if you decide to taste herring for the first time, the curry herring is one of the most favored. I will admit that I was reluctant to try herring myself. It took several tries before I started to acquire a taste for it. I never thought I'd actually come to like it, but I do and prefer the curried herring the most.



Be sure to complement herring with ice cold snaps. It helps the fish make its way down the hatch and clear the taste buds for the next course. Unlike other digestives, Danish aquavit accompanies the entire meal, but at 40-45 percent alcohol levels it's wise to use caution. In between the snaps, beer is the most compatible, preferably one of the many seasonal Christmas brews usually available on tap. Danish aquavit goes hand in hand with open-faced sandwiches, and especially the Christmas lunch.

Julefrokost, as it's called, is not only a meal but a celebration in Denmark. Many associate Julefrokost with company Christmas parties, as well as Christmas celebrations with family and friends. It's an all evening affair that usually lasts until the early morning hours. As a result, you can be hard pressed to find a taxi most Friday nights in December in central Copenhagen.

I can remember my first Julefrokost vividly, or should I say I sort of remember. All I know is that the meal started at 6 p.m. and by 6:30 p.m. it went from 0 to 100 miles per hour with food being passed around and people shouting across the table and saying skål or "cheers" just about every five

minutes. And there was no declining participation either. I can recall looking at my watch and thinking, this must be a record for the shortest time it took me to get completely intoxicated in my life.

So, what makes the traditional Christmas lunch different from the Danish lunch? The main difference is that smørrebrød is individual sandwiches from an á la carte menu and Julefrokost (Christmas lunch), which can also be called "Julebordet" (the Christmas table), is a variety dishes served family-style like a smorgasbord at the table. Each dish has plentiful portions for arranging on your own plate. Many classic open-faced sandwich fixings are included with the addition of Christmas dishes such as æbleflæsk (boiled apples with bacon), flæskesteg (pork roast) served with pickled red cabbage and Jule sylte, a type of pork terrine served with pickled red beats and mustard. For an á la carte Christmas lunch, these added seasonal dishes are available for single portion sandwich options at most smørrebrød restaurants.



When ordering the full Christmas lunch, you are usually presented with multiple plates and cutlery, which can be daunting at first. As a general rule, here are some helpful hints. The first courses are always fish, starting with herring and moving on to salmon then fried plaice and shrimp. Next are warm dishes requiring a clean plate and cutlery, then cold cuts or pålæg, and salads such as chicken or egg salad. Finally, a third plate is used for cheese and fruit, finished by coffee and chocolates, kransekage (marzipan cake), or risalamande with kirsebærsauce (rice pudding with cherry sauce). When in doubt, you can always ask your waiter for guidance.

Sampling Smørrebrød

Perhaps the most famous place to try smørrebrød is Ida Davidsen located just off Kongens Nytorv (King's New Square). Five generations of Davidsen's have served up

Danish open-faces sandwiches and the restaurant has more than 250 different kinds on the menu. With so many to choose from, you can easily find yourself lost in the long list of variations from crayfish tails to ox tongue to gorgonzola with egg yolk.

One of the most traditional is Restaurant Sankt Annæ, dating back to 1897 located near the Royal Palace. You may even be lucky enough to spot a member of the Royal family among the clientele. Voted the year's best lunch restaurant for 2007, Restaurant Sankt Annæ prides itself on preparing home-made ingredients including its own pickled condiments such as pickled cucumber salad, pumpkin, and red beets. The quaint and charming restaurant offers a wide variety of classic open-faced sandwiches that are served on Royal Copenhagen porcelain.



Restaurants Serving Smørrebrød & Julefrokost

The Royal Cafe

Amagertorv 6
38 14 95 27

Restaurant Sankt Annæ

Sankt Annæ Plads 12
33 12 54 97

Ida Davidsen

Store Kongensgade 70
33 91 36 55

Slotshøjskølen hos Gitte Kik

Fortunstræde 4
33 11 15 37

Restaurant Amalie

Amaliegade 11
33 12 88 10

Parkhuskælderen Restaurant

Nyhavn 7133 43 62 00

Restaurant Told og Snaps

Toldbodgade 2
33 93 83 85

While Danish smørrebrød is traditional, there is some innovation taking place with something new called “smushi,” an invention taking smørrebrød and creating sushi-ish size portions that are sculpted into true pieces of art. The new twist on the tradition is offered at The Royal Cafe located between the Royal Copenhagen and Georg Jensen shops on the main shopping street. “The idea with smushi is to create smaller portions so one can sample more varieties and really get a taste of Denmark,” said owner Rud Christiansen.

Christiansen and his partner and interior stylist Lo Østergaard have custom designed the café from floor to ceiling with designs from Holmegaard, Royal Copenhagen, Bang & Olufsen and Arne Jacobsen, just to name a few. Part Danish design museum, part shop and café, “the funny, funky, baroque, rock and roll-style café is a showcase for promoting Danish society and food,” Christiansen said.

The new smushi and Danish café concept is so popular that franchises in Singapore, Seoul, Taipei and Tokyo are set to open next year. Christiansen also talked of looking for space in the U.S. In addition, smushi-making has been added to the official smørrebrød curriculum at Copenhagen’s culinary school. It will be taught as somewhat of an art form, like making sushi is, where there is an architectural approach to the design and assembly.

After trying smushi myself, I can honestly say that it was some of the most beautiful food I have ever seen or eaten. It was so meticulously perfect and precisely decorated that I didn’t want to destroy it with my knife and fork. It also tasted as good as it looked. The best part is that it did actually preserve the tastes and texture of the original smørrebrød that it was modeled after.

There is nothing quite as traditional as smørrebrød or the Christmas lunch when it comes to cultural cuisine in Denmark. If you have the opportunity, it is worth sampling. No matter if it’s a few smushi in the eclectic Royal Cafe, or the entire Julebordet, everyone is sure to find something they like. If not for the taste then for the artistry and craftsmanship that goes into making them, and for the pure fun of it!

A Traditional Danish Christmas Lunch Menu

Pickled, pan seared, curry, and marinated herring with red onions, capers and fresh dill
Greenlandic shrimp with hard boiled egg, mayonnaise and lemon
Graved laks with sweet dill and mustard sauce, fresh dill and asparagus
Smoked eel with scrambled eggs and leeks
Fried plaice with remoulade and fresh dill
Christmas pork terrine with mustard and red beets
Warm roasted apple pork
Liver pâté with bacon and mushrooms
Roast duck with prunes, apples and sweet and sour red cabbage
Roasted pork with sweet and sour red cabbage
Danish brie and gammel ost (aged cheese) with grapes and rye crackers from Bornholm
Almond rice pudding with warm cherry sauce

