

Opinion



Know your place FARAWAY FEASTS, ERIK THE RED, A SCOTCH LIST

THE NEW NEW NORDIC

On the Lofoten Islands' shores, **BEN OLSEN** meets the British chefs who cook food as bold as Scandi scenery

At the summit of Tinddalstinden – a 1,640-foot-high peak to the west of Norway's Lofoten Islands – it's hard to be unmoved by a vista as stark as it is stunning. The contours that define this glacier-hewn landscape are bathed in bright sunshine in the east and coal-black clouds in the west, with a faint rainbow falling in between. Clinging to the coastline below is the village of Sørvågen, whose scattering of *rorbu* fishermen's huts is now a slippery descent away.

British chef Valentine Warner takes in the view and winces slightly. He's twisted his ankle hunting





hares (soon to be served as consommé and rillettes) but his enthusiasm is undimmed: “It’s a breathtaking and brutal environment – there are some incredibly violent gods in Norse history and up here they’re always shouting wind and rain at each other.” Warner is the driving force behind Kitchen on the Edge of the World – a series of events at Sørvågen’s cosy Holmen Lofoten eco-lodge – assembling an A-list cast of chefs, including Mark Hix, Nathan Outlaw and Norwegian mixologist Monica Berg, to work wonders with the island’s seasonal produce.

As we near our base, Berg spots the last of the juniper berries on the bushes before extolling the virtues of the bounty provided by the Arctic Circle’s midnight sun. “Cloudberries are the gold of the highlands – they’re sweet, savoury and bitter with lots of umami,” she says. “We whip them up with cream as a dessert on national holidays but don’t share where we find them.” Over the next few days Berg will serve a series of charismatic aperitifs, including sea buckthorn Negroni and a Martini using vodka distilled with fermented bladderwrack.

From the open kitchen in the eco-lodge, Warner orchestrates his team as they skin the hares for dinner and deshell scallops, to be served alongside crab, mashed potato and a bisque at lunch, while explaining Lofoten’s culinary legacy. “‘New Nordic’ cuisine is not a fad but a way of life,” he says. “This is where the ethos behind the restaurants Noma or Fäviken originates. People use what’s around them and bring the outdoors in.”

The next day, our proposed fishing trip is cancelled. With even the seabirds staying sheltered in the bay, Warner believes that braving the world’s strongest ocean current – the nearby Saltstraumen – with a crew of landlubbers may be unwise. It’s this strait that brings the gigantic skrei cod, which grow up to 56kg, within range of the local fishing boats each April, making Lofoten the cod capital of the world. The prized tongues and cheeks removed, they’re strung up to dry on the wooden stockfish racks across Lofoten, providing food throughout the year.

Yet, having brainstormed an alternative menu with his chefs, Warner says there’s more to Lofoten than seafood. “There’s a tremendous logic to the food here,” he says. “You might catch a freshwater char and then find some chanterelles. Or you walk down a mountain with a ptarmigan grouse while picking the last of the season’s berries. That dictates what you put on the table.” The resulting dinner – tender mountain lamb cooked over wood and juniper – certainly proves his point.

🐦 @benaca

Kitchen on the Edge of the World runs in March, June and September, and costs £3,000 per weekend. holmenlofoten.no



JOHN SIMPSON IN GREENLAND

INSPECTOR NORSE

What the world’s most famous correspondent gets up to off duty

I often boast about the travelling I’ve done in my 52 years with the BBC, but there are still some areas I’ve never managed to get to: lots of Southeast Asia, for instance, or New Zealand, though I’m certain I’d love it. And until now I’ve never come to Greenland. That, perhaps, is less surprising, because there’s not an awful lot here: two million square kilometres of rock and ice and only 56,000 people, the majority of them Inuits. The rest are mostly descended from the Danes and Norwegians who colonised the place 1,000 years ago.

Well, to be precise, 1,032 years ago. A rough character called Erik Thorvaldsson came here from Iceland in 986, together with a fleet of 14 longships. He’s better known as Erik the Red: you visualise a thick-set character with unruly ginger hair, like someone you might come across in Sauchiehall Street in Glasgow on a winter’s night. Erik was trouble. He left Iceland for Greenland after being banished for killing – wait for it – Eyiolf the Foul in 982. You didn’t get a nickname like ‘the Foul’ among the Norsemen for being a quiet ratepayer who stayed at home of nights. Or maybe Eyiolf didn’t change his underwear too often. Either way, Erik was hustled off into exile.

But, after he’d colonised the enormous new island to the west and sailed back in triumph to Iceland, Erik showed his true talent: he was one of history’s most effective PR men. Keen to attract more emigrants, and realising that the name ‘Iceland’ had put off would-be settlers, Erik announced that his new-found territory would be called ‘Greenland’ – even though it is even snowier, colder and more ☹

Illustration: Martin O’Neill



NOVEL DESTINATIONS BY DAMIAN BARR
GLASGOW

desolate than Iceland. Nowadays we'd call this 'brand management', and at the admen's annual awards dinner Erik would come forward in an ill-fitting dinner jacket to be presented with a gong for 'Most Effectively Misleading Name for A Newly Discovered Country'.

Erik went back to Greenland and settled down with his wife, but not all that happily. She was a Christian, and he was an enthusiastic pagan, so she staged a sex strike to punish him. Even so they produced four children, one of whom was called Leif. Leif Erikson. You know, the one who found North America. Old Erik was invited to go on Leif's voyage of discovery, but fell off his horse on the way and decided it was a bad omen. It was, but not for the discovery of America. Erik died in his bed shortly after Leif's longships left.

Enough history, though. I'm here for a very up-to-date news story: China is turning itself into what it calls a 'near-Arctic' power, and is interested in playing a role in Greenland. Every Inuit I've spoken to thinks it's an excellent idea. The ethnic Danes seem less convinced.

I've learnt a lot of interesting things about the Inuits here. They actually turned up three or four hundred years after the Norsemen, spreading across from Canada and Russia. They speak roughly the same language, and are all more or less related. Or so the ex-prime minister, himself an Inuit, told me. I first came across them when I was in the far north of Canada for an Arctic documentary with Sir

Robin Knox-Johnston and Sir Ranulph Fiennes. While recovering from frostbite I wandered round the nearby Inuit village and bought an exquisite stone carving of a kayak, complete with a tiny reindeer-bone man. Now, here in Greenland, I've seen the real thing. We were filming the harbour at Nuuk, the capital – very pretty with its coloured houses – when a couple of chaps came along carrying kayaks over their heads.

These things are immensely light and delicate, made of the thinnest wood and covered in whale skin. The two Inuits, who were father and son, polished and scraped away at the sides of their kayaks for a while, then sharpened a couple of slim, lethal-looking spears. They were going to

hunt king eider ducks. A third Inuit called Lars helped them down to the water. The son went first, and climbed gingerly into his kayak, which bobbed around on the waves, while he slid into the tiny hip-sized hole. His father, with decades' more experience, simply jumped into his kayak in a single movement and paddled off after him. It was a freezing cold morning. I was wearing everything a London ski shop could provide me with. The father and son weren't even wearing gloves as they paddled across the wind-whipped sound.

Lars agreed to talk to us about the impending arrival of the Chinese, and was predictably keen on it. At the end, I saw his Manchester United sweatshirt and told him I supported Chelsea. Without missing a beat, he answered, "Well, take José Mourinho back, then." We'd crossed several millennia in a few seconds.

The Inuit are an interesting lot, but I haven't been hugely impressed with their cuisine. There's an awful lot of whale meat about: the Inuits seem to be allowed to do pretty much what they want to the local wildlife. In a shop in Nuuk, I came across a vast, pure white polar bear skin for sale. If I take it home, which I wouldn't dream of, Mrs Simpson will probably do something even worse to me than Mrs Erik the Red did to him. I mean divorce me, naturally.

@JohnSimpsonNews

John Simpson is the BBC's world affairs editor. His novel, *Moscow, Midnight*, is out now in the UK (£20, John Murray)

MRS ERIK THE RED WAS A CHRISTIAN, AND HER HUSBAND AN ENTHUSIASTIC PAGAN, SO SHE STAGED A SEX STRIKE TO PUNISH HIM. EVEN SO, THEY PRODUCED FOUR CHILDREN

Glasgow's been good to me. Edinburgh's posher, cleaner and more obviously handsome but, as my Granny loved to say, "You'll have more fun at a funeral in Glasgow than a wedding in Edinburgh." To me, Glasgow offers freedom. I came out as a writer among the shelves of the Mitchell* and to my first boyfriend on the dancefloor in Bennets. All is revealed in my memoir *Maggie & Me*. Glasgow's ill-deserved dodgy rep was invented by *No Mean City*, a 1935 novel by H Kingsley Long, a journalist, and Alexander McArthur, an unemployed worker. Set in the Gorbals, it's all hard men and cut-throat razors. In the 1970s/80s William McIlvanney fathered the Tartan Noir crime genre now reinterpreted by Christopher Brookmyre, Louise Welsh and Denise Mina. But it's no mean city, not really. theliterarysalon.co.uk

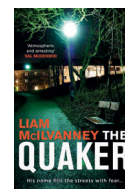
@damian_barr



THE CLASSIC

The Trick is to Keep Breathing by Janice Galloway (1989)

Galloway's debut novel established her as a major talent. Joy Stone, 27, watches herself from the corner of a darkened room. An anorexic, she devours women's magazines as a way to suppress memories. Is the trick to keep breathing?



THE CONTEMPORARY

The Quaker by Liam McIlvanney (2018)

Set in Glasgow, 1969, during the worst winter for years, this follows two men with something to hide: the killer known as the Quaker and the man in charge of catching him, DI McCormack. McIlvanney (son of William McIlvanney) revitalises the genre and rediscovers the city.



THE CURIOUS

Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine by Gail Honeyman (2017)

Read this before the film comes out. Eleanor is better at crosswords than most. A secret alcoholic, one day, something happens in the street that opens her life up. "Glasgow's a very kind city, though I don't think it's always portrayed like that," says Honeyman.



Damian Barr's *Literary Salon* is on board in Audio (selected flights), with guests including Graham Norton

*Check out the AyeWrite! Book Festival based in the Mitchell Library each March and April