

Milk Skin with Grass: Food Is Everything, but Everything Isn't Always Food

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A plateful of milk skin with grass, flowers, and herbs. That was one of the dishes on the day's menu. The garnish came from the field where the cow that had supplied the milk had walked, grazed, and defecated. The plate itself was a small closed ecosystem, which I ate my way through with a fork in some surprise (after all, it was a rather slimy-looking milk pancake with some greenery on top). There was no doubt about it: the space of the field was being thoroughly explored in our mouths.

Together with a group of friends and acquaintances, I consumed this dish one day in June 2007 during *Life in Space* (LIS) – an annual experimental workshop at my studio in Berlin. Here artists, architects, designers, social and natural scientists, and others meet to explore our experience of colour and movement, time and space. We make no distinction between experiments, discussions, drinking coffee, and eating, and this informal framework usually results in a long succession of ideas, exercises, and an exploration of our senses. To avoid the meal appearing as a break from the themes of the day, I asked René Redzepi if he would think about doing a number of experiments with food, which would have bearing on our perception of time and space and which the LIS participants were to consume as we went along.

The milk skin recipe in particular aroused comment. Most people saw it as an extension of the day's topics; the milk skin was, as it were, stretched out into the other experiments. *Life in Space* is very much about how we experience space as a process – and not least about how we represent space in motion. To be able to do this, we need to integrate the idea, the work, the space, ourselves, and the world around us into a single system. Aesthetic, social, and political values come to influence one another – and the organic milk skin with 'all the good things of the field' was undoubtedly an extension of this line of thought. We do not stop the world when we eat; we go into it a little more deeply.

Since then I have had the opportunity to work closely with René again. We have discussed what cooking means when the building blocks are not defined in advance but emerge through experimentation with raw ingredients, consistency, colour, temperature, and texture. The alphabet of food is not supplied in advance – it is crafted as part of the actual work – and the relationships between the individual letters are created during the experimental journey.

Our conversations concerned memories of tastes and how taste is closely connected to images of places, moods, times, and people. When you work with a language of very delicate shades of meaning – in cooking as well as in art – it gives access to a subtle and unfamiliar register of experience. You come close to the limits of your sensory values. The senses combine, making your brain begin to creak, and a new synaesthetic map appears.

We are constantly confronted with a trivialised sensory world that is generally the product of banal commercialisation. In that world, people aim for *safe sensations*. They sell experiences with which the target group can immediately identify. Our imaginative ability is levelled off, so that it is the same for everyone. The senses are blunted. By contrast, the language that is continually being developed by NOMA helps to keep our senses keen. Its ability

to surprise and sow the seeds of uncertainty is of the essence. You might say that NOMA offers its guests a new language, but this language only acquires meaning by virtue of our personal way of using it – that is, through our individual experiences of taste. (This also applies to good art: it both creates meaning and investigates the meaning it creates, at one and the same time.)

Take René's milk and field experiment during *Life in Space*. Without any great fuss, everyone was served the same dish. Many of them stood around desultorily gesticulating as they struggled to eat the unusual field. We were in the same room, but we had vastly different experiences of what we were consuming. And that is where something unique happens. You have one set of taste buds – maybe you react to sweet rather than savoury flavours – and you associate certain particular images or moods with the dish. Your expectations and scale of perception are specific to you. Your body ingests and converts the food in one way, whereas I have a different set of taste buds, a different body, a different previous history, a different experience. The difference we experience helps to emphasise that it is all about experimentation at a high level. It concerns an event that prioritises individual perception within a space that is very much collective – the meal, the act of eating together.

We have grown up within a tradition that sees food as an isolated phenomenon, as an interval or a pause during the day. The food may be beautifully served, a miniature work of art that is detached from its surroundings by its pedestal – the plate. But this offers an impoverished taste experience.

Think of a tree. Some people will see it as an object in the landscape; its leaves have a particular shape, its bark a particular thickness. This kind of description of a tree may make it easier for a nursery to sell it. But of course the tree is not a detached object – it is part of a gigantic ecosystem: it is bound up with the soil in which it is growing, the rain, and the sun. Its photosynthesis makes it an essential component of our biosystem. The tree is part of the earth's lungs and is therefore inseparable from its surroundings. It has temporality built into it. A before and after. A summer, autumn, winter, and spring.

In the same way, the potato cannot be separated from the soil in which it has grown. René knows that. That is why, later on in the day, the LIS participants also sank their teeth into 'newly ploughed potato field' – a round of brownish-black, knobbly, crunchy food. And, just like the tree and the potato, the meal on the plate is part of a bigger system: the ingredients often belong in a particular season, they have a specific ripening process – their own temporal dimension – and they take a certain time to make their way through our bodies. They come from a field, a tree, a bush, an animal, the sea. . . . In other words, they are inseparable from the environment. (The same applies to us too.) And NOMA's environment is largely Scandinavian.

Food is so commonplace. Everyone eats; everyone has an opinion about food. But taste is not exclusively a matter of individual perception, and food is never 'just food'. Whether we like it or not, what we eat affects how the world looks. And that affects the way we understand it. When we look at the plate, we should really also see the greater ecosystem. Finding out where the food comes from and where it goes to – maybe this knowledge can be made into a

kind of flavour enhancer. It matters whether the potatoes come from New Zealand or the Lammefjord area of Denmark, and I can see great potential in not dividing knowledge and flavour (just as in art, you should not separate form and content). They can be part of one and the same food experience. In the same way, cooking and eating and taste are associated with many other things. Food can be political. Food can be about responsibility, sustainability, geography, and culture.

It is in the implementation of René's ideas that we find the integration of the experience of dining and the social dimension of memories, cultural spaces, the raw ingredients of the Nordic countries, individual and collective experiences. I hope you will experience some of the same things when you make use of this book.