

FOOD

FOOD; Water Babies

By Jonathan Reynolds

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If you want to know how to capture the rapt attention of five redheads ranging in age from 2 to 16, take them 45 minutes by boat from the high-end Solstrand Fjord Hotel just outside Bergen, Norway, across the Bjornafjord to the island of Tysnesoy. This is where Eystein Michalsen and Nina Havn have set up a deliriously rustic retreat called Kubbervik. Eystein will take all the redheads out on a boat, yank in the nets he has laid the night before and, with luck, bring in a couple of cod (one weighing more than 12 pounds and worthy of gasps from several would-be Cousteaus) together with dozens of red and clear jellyfish, about which he will claim, "These are not good." He will then gut the cod to the wonder of all, describing each of the organs as he goes along, and toss the inedibles back into the fiord, where they'll be immediately divebombed by a trio of friendly seagulls and one graceful tern. Game Boys and Walkmen will be silenced and earphones pocketed as the kids (and, I might as well admit it, another 10 or so adults) will be transfixed by his surgical skill in filleting the cod, which he does in under two minutes. Who would have thought marine biology so much fun?

Red and I traveled to Norway with her family -- three children, her mother, two sisters, their spouses and children and so many cousins, aunts and assorted friends that I began to feel like Sir Joseph Porter aboard the H.M.S. Pinafore. The number, I think, got as high as 26, and in 10 days never fell below 11.

Red is mother to two redheads and the aunt to three. The occasion was the 60th birthday of her brother-in-law, Sven, and it was a logistical undertaking worthy of Joel Silver going on location. Sven is a native Norwegian, though he grew up on the Kenai Peninsula of Alaska and lived in Seattle from the age of 6, and he and Barbara, Red's sister, had arranged an exhaustive -- though mercifully voluntary -- schedule of excursions to acquaint us with several high points of his homeland. Many of these included indigenous food, and there is little that five redheads greet with more apprehension than victuals that stray from the domestic familiars of burgers and 'zza. So Eystein and Nina had their work cut out for them.

If you're lucky, you'll be able to visit Kubbervik, which is open from April through November, when it's overcast or rainy; if you're blessed by an even higher power, you'll get to see it when the sun is out. Approaching its wood boathouse in a drizzle, we could

see a long pine table laid for lunch, the candles of the silver candelabra blazing like a scene from "Babette's Feast."

Eystein, who is handsome enough, and Nina, who is the paradigm of the Norwegian knockout, are married, and for four years, the former economist and the advertising executive have been reconstructing four cottages that sleep a total of 20 -- none with electricity, and, oh, there is no road -- for vacation hideaways that authentically replicate the primeval Norwegian countryside.

At the moment, the complex of six buildings -- two of them dismantled at another location, transported here, then rebuilt -- are rented out for corporate bonding and "team spirit" retreats. But we were the only ones retreating that day, and even in the light rain, the food, walks and miniature fishing adventures were comfy.

Even those who seriously don't like fish -- four out of five redheads, one of whom had proclaimed "I'm not eating fish!" the day before we left New York, and another who tossed off, "I don't do fish" -- were swayed by the chowder that Eystein and Nina made for lunch: just stock, white wine, cream, butter and the previous day's catch of flounder, pollock and cod. We looked out over Bjornafjord (bjorne means bear) as the rain softly plinked the surface, and it couldn't have been more familial, safe as we all were under our sloping tile roof, with candles, strengthening soup and fortifying white Burgundy.

The kids, of course, eschewed soup superlatives and eventually grew restless, leaving the table to explore the grounds as the rest of us curled up like slugs for naps in front of the fireplace in the main house or delved into some of the hundreds of books (many in English) from a birch bookcase nearby. Eystein took me on a brief tour of the house. "I just made those beds," he said, pointing proudly to two brightly painted blue wood pedestals lying foot to head, with protective gingerbread cutouts that prevent sleepers from rolling off and busting their pates.

Concerned about dinner, Eystein shipped out once more, scraped a few mussels from rocks nearby and began preparations for our seafood feast. As the afternoon progressed, the ever-inventive redheads started a game of charades, cheating wildly by adult standards. ("No, no, it's a movie." "No, no, it's 'Malcolm in the Middle.'")

In the kitchen, Nina sautéed fresh, fat scallops in a little butter, removed them and made a simple but exquisite saffron sauce by adding a little stock, cream and a few pink peppercorns for color. Eystein dipped monkfish chunks into an elemental flour batter for quick sautéing. I've never subscribed to the marketers' description of monkfish as the "poor man's lobster" -- it's like the Chicken Liver Council claiming its product is Gonzo's rib-eye for those who can't afford it. I usually find it combative in texture and only mildly toothsome. If you see a whole monkfish at the market, you'll find its massive mouth scarier than a shark's. Apparently it sits on the bottom of the ocean, opens its Godzilla

jaws and waits for poor unsuspecting fishies to swim right into it, not unlike the latest recipients of W's capital-gains cuts. So it has in common with lobster only reprehensibility of character.

But Eystein had the novel idea of freezing it first -- even though it had been netted the day before -- to improve its texture, which indeed it did. Perhaps this technique should be used on all passive-aggressives, human or piscine: freeze them first, then cut them into pieces.

As everyone assembled at another long dinner table, activity in the kitchen increased, and the spirit grew jolly. Nina's team of attractive high-school girls bearded the mussels, and Eystein steamed them simultaneously with fistfuls of toothpick asparagus. He poached two-inch cubes of the newly gutted cod in lightly lemoned and salted water, simmering them for a brief two to three minutes as Nina decorated each plate with superb wild salmon that had been juniper-smoked locally. It is more intense than Scottish smoked salmon but less blunt than Nova.

At the dinner table, redheads young and old gathered round. The 12-year-old, a daring eater, zapped around the table begging other people's mussels and racking up 12 or 14 shells on his plate; the 16-year-old fiske-a-phobe moved his scallop around and ultimately slipped it to an uncle, who gulped it down. The younger ones looked suspiciously at their plates and were finally granted hamburgers. But the rest of us feasted and feasted -- mussels, cod, salmon, monkfish, asparagus, the ubiquitous boiled potatoes -- till the last sliver was done.

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It was 9 at night by the time we finished, so naturally, the sun came out and stayed till midnight.

Kubbervik Scallops

3 tablespoons butter

12 fat sea scallops, with coral attached, if possible

Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

1 1/4 cups dry white wine

2 tablespoons fish stock (see recipe)

1 1/4 cups heavy cream

1 tablespoon lemon juice

1/2 teaspoon saffron threads

1/4 cup minced chives

Cracked pink peppercorns for garnish.

1. Melt the butter in a large skillet over high heat. Season the scallops with salt and pepper and sauté until lightly browned, about 1 minute per side. Remove the scallops and set aside. Pour the butter and liquid that remains into a saucepan.

2. Add the wine, stock, cream, lemon juice and saffron to the reserved liquid in the saucepan and reduce over medium heat by about half, until you have a rich sauce. Season to taste with salt.

3. Gently reheat the scallops in the sauce and stir in the chives. Serve immediately, sprinkled with the pink peppercorns.

Yield: 4 servings.

Fish Soup for a Rainy Day

4 tablespoons butter

4 tablespoons flour

5 cups fish stock (see recipe)

1 cup dry white wine

1 cup clam juice

1 1/4 cups crème fraîche

1 1/4 cups heavy cream

1 large carrot, peeled and cut into julienne strips

1 small celery root, peeled and cut into julienne strips

5 scallions, green part only, cut into half-inch slices

5 cups spinach leaves, coarsely chopped

1 teaspoon sugar

Salt and freshly ground white pepper to taste

2 pounds skinless, boneless whitefish like cod, flounder, turbot or catfish, cut into 3/4-inch chunks

30 mussels (optional)

3 tablespoons chopped chives.

1. Melt the butter in a large soup pot over medium heat. Stir in the flour and cook, stirring constantly, for 3 minutes. Stir in the fish stock, bring to a boil and boil for 5 minutes, stirring occasionally. Stir in the wine, clam juice, crème fraîche and cream. Reduce the heat to a simmer.

2. Add the carrot and celery root and cook 2 minutes. Add the scallions, spinach and sugar. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Add the fish (and mussels, if using). Cook for 3 minutes, or until the mussels open. Ladle the soup into bowls, sprinkle with chives and serve immediately.

Yield: 6 servings.

Fish Stock

Bones and trimmings from 1 large white-fleshed fish

1/4 head celery root, rinsed and peeled

1 carrot

1/4 leek, rinsed and chopped Juice of half a lemon

Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste.

1. Rinse the bones and place them and the vegetables into a stockpot. Add 3 quarts of water and bring to a boil. Lower the heat and simmer for 20 minutes, skimming off and discarding any foam that forms on top of the liquid.

2. Strain the liquid, discard the solids, and return the liquid to the pot. Continue to simmer until the liquid is reduced to 6 cups. Add the lemon juice and season to taste with salt and pepper.

Yield: 6 cups.