



**AA GILL**

▶ 'A school of fish is like Glastonbury – It's wet, there's not much to eat, and you're swimming in poo'



# Table Talk with AA Gill: Sankt Annæ

Our resident critic takes a trip to Copenhagen this week, where he samples the best (and worst) that Scandinavian cuisine has to offer

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These are the rules: we don't take responsibility, we don't take credit. When some short-order whinger asks how can I be so cruel, when I know it's somebody's life, their dreams, I'm trashing, I tell them, "It's not my responsibility."

To get a bad review, you've first got to get a bad restaurant.

When they send flowers and say they're going to name their next child A because I can make their fortune, I tell them first get a good restaurant, and then you get good notices.

So really, I shouldn't complain that I couldn't get a table at Noma.

True, I was the first person to point out that this was the best restaurant in the world. I happened to be in Copenhagen, went for dinner on my own, had the best food anyone was eating that evening on the entire globe, and I wrote it up. And then everyone went. And they voted it the best restaurant in the world. And now I can't get a table, even when I drop my own name. Actually, I don't drop it so much as produce it, with a roll of drums, like a magician conjuring a bunch of paper carnations out of thin air. Noma replied, in the calm monotone of people who don't appreciate magicians, that they were booked solid months in advance, and if they gave me a table, it would be at the expense of someone else and that wouldn't be fair. And also, that wouldn't be very Scandinavian. It wouldn't be very straightforward.

So I didn't get to eat at Noma last week, and you know what? I respect them even more: égalité is the handshake of restaurants, democracy the bowl all the other hospitable

<b>The essentials</b>	
<b>Sankt Annæ</b>	
<b>Cuisine</b> Scandanavian	
<b>Address</b> Sankt Annæ Plads 12, 1250 Copenhagen	
<b>Price for two</b> Around 350DKR per person	
<b>BOOK</b>	
<b>CRITIC'S RATING</b>	☆☆☆☆
<b>Like this? Try this</b>	
<b>Name</b> Madsen	
<b>Cuisine</b> Scandanavian	
<b>Location</b> 20 Old Brompton Road , London, SW7 3DL	

ingredients come in. So Noma is possibly still the best restaurant in the world. It's certainly the most admirable.

But their repletteness offered me the chance to sample a few of the other restaurants in the city. There is a small foodie resurgence here. Danes are conservative about their dinner, tending to shrug off rumours of a Nordic food revival as the invention of hysterical southern Europeans. I was taken to two promising Michelin-starred restaurants serving modern Scandinavian food.

**Why?** Beautifully presented dishes, faultless service and good value too - a little piece of Scandinavia in the heart of southwest London

Geranium is a bleakly inhospitable, overlit suite of dining rooms above the national sports stadium. Its chef has just won the Paul Bocuse cook-off competition, which is an absurd international games that is a cross between a bush-tucker trial and Crufts for cooks. It's not something you boast about among real chefs. Dinner here was a relentless litany of everything that has gone wrong with public eating since the 1980s, an uncounted number of secret courses, like the verses of a miserable dirge, that started with beetroot and apple vinegar and, four hours later, finished with Milk in Mysterious Ways. Every plate was a new and novel shape and size. Each contained minute comestibles that competed with their predecessors for the sludge of innovation. Things were cooked in nitrogen, mounted with petals and almost always covered in a cuddish foam. It took no more than a moment to consume, another moment to dislike and a third to regret, before, 10 minutes later, another tiny trial arrived, preceded by a lecture from a serious and emphatic man in a suit. As a rule, Scandinavians don't make good servants, which may be admirable. They carry with them a stolid sense of duty, born as penance, delivered with humourless obligation. This dinner panicked me. I thought it may never end, and I left feeling only deep sorrow for whichever charitably taken-in refugee had to wash up the hideous plates.



The most

Gill and The Blonde decided that Sct. Annæ was an almost faultless restaurant (Panos)

famous Danes are all ficitonal: Hamlet, followed by Beowulf and the Little Mermaid. That's the camping holiday from hell. There followed another relentless tasting menu in the new, glibly

trendy hotel known as Nimb. The grub was better, some of it bordering on brilliant, but the dinner stretched like winter, the descriptions were intoned like a pitch by Lars von Trier. We stumbled out of the restaurant at 1am, after 16 courses. It's food as endurance, and kitchen vanity.

All was redeemed by Sankt Annæ, a neatly packed, pale green dining room that is elegant and cosy, and opens only for lunch and tea in the beautiful heart of Copenhagen. As we arrived, the royal guards in their bearskins marched past. The sun shone and the city felt like the most carefully civil place. The first six dishes on the menu were all herring. Mustard, pickled, curried, boiled, fried, plus another pickled one that's from Christian's Island, home of particularly fine herring.

The herring is arguably the most important fish to be pulled from the sea. It has supported an awful lot of northern Europe for 1,000 years: a great source of protein and vitamins, and fish oil, which lends itself to all sorts of preservation. Kippers and bloaters, buckling and rollmops, bathed in smoke and salt and vinegar.

There is something witchy about herring. The name comes from the Viking for army. Catching them is wrapped in myth and incantation, prayers and shanties, and superstition. Sometimes they would vanish from the sea, other times their weight would swamp ships. They are a schooling fish, which, I've recently discovered, is not the same thing as a shoal of fish. Shoals are loose herds of fish travelling in the same direction.

Schools are co-ordinated and disciplined; they move in unison, keep a set distance, travel at the same speed, and nobody really knows why they do it, except a herring separated from the school shows signs of distress. You can only imagine what a distressed herring looks like. Schooling may help with predation, but it also attracts predators. It increases the competition for food and, I'd never thought of this, but there are problems with waste management. Essentially, a school is like Glastonbury — it's wet, there's not much to eat, and you're swimming through poo.

I've never met a variety of herring I didn't relish: I particularly like them with the razoring raw onion (and here with the first white asparagus). I had thick fillets of smoked eel with scrambled egg, gently boiled tongue, Danish new potatoes, like small, ivory balls of waxy, mineral earthiness; meatballs with pickle, fried plaice with dill, and a dish of mixed chopped meat and vegetables, fried in bacon fat, with an egg on top: a superior bubble and squeak. The Blonde had something they called the vet's nightcap: warm pâté with boiled salt beef. It was all served with light and dark beers and schnapps, and the sharp and sweet cloudy Danish apple juice. Dark rye bread came with freshly churned butter and salty dripping.

The Blonde said this was an almost faultless restaurant, as she ate a pudding of little summer-bird chocolates, made from marzipan and marshmallow. It was all served by pink-cheeked, bosomy girls with happy smiles and assured, udder-Braille fingers. This place, and this food, was history and earth, sea and home, with an atmosphere of quiet hurdy-gurdy burbling and furry drunkenness. The heritage of smorgasbord — help-yourself sideboard sandwiches — can evolve into the torture of relentless plates of foam and fungi. Or it can remain this generous saga of Viking brunch. It is like eating Hamlet and Beowulf and the Little Mermaid.