



THE SERIOUS GAME

Michelin-starred chef Sayan Isaksson strikes the right balance between imaginative playfulness and Swedish culinary philosophy for Scandinavian week at Mandarin Oriental, Kuala Lumpur.

The Food Photographer: LAW SOO PHYE



By RENYILIM

“We have had Scandinavian chefs participate before,” remarked Han Wetterberg, the organiser of Simply Scandinavian week,

“But never in this class – chef Sayan Isaksson is outstanding.” How right he was – for between 14 and 21 April, Isaksson put on a breathtaking display of Swedish creativity at Mandarin Oriental, Kuala Lumpur’s Mandarin Grill, in a gastronomic celebration of Simply Scandinavian’s 30th anniversary.

Not for nothing has Isaksson’s much-lauded restaurant Esperanto, in Stockholm, held a Michelin star

Mandarin Grill. Facing page: chef Sayan Isaksson was born in Thailand and adopted by Swedish parents when he was eight months old.

since 2007. It also bears mentioning that he was chosen to prepare the menu for the prestigious Nobel Prize banquets in 2015 and 2016. For his Malaysian gig, he produced a menu that – in the spirit of Esperanto –

crossed frontiers with a culinary language rooted in inventiveness, authenticity and passion tempered with balance. (Isaksson’s lunch menu for Simply Scandinavian week ranged between three and five courses at up to RM238 per person, while his dinner menu ran from five to seven courses at up to RM468 per person.)

The spirit and traditions of Swedish cooking, particularly the techniques used to survive the famously merciless Nordic winters,

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ran through each of his dishes like a vein. An unctuous, jewel-like quail egg was smoked with straw as an amuse bouche, alongside roe-filled potato doughnuts dipped in cultured cream, and a light organic waste broth (Swedes are experts at recycling) made

Likewise, an entree of Japanese amberjack the colour of a blush pink rose – one of Isaksson’s favourite fish – arrived air-cured and cold-smoked, topped with horseradish, delicate slices of pickled daikon and a seed



and oyster shell dashi. “Food is exciting to me because it is always evolving,” the executive chef and owner of Esperanto explained as he presented his ingenious Oyster Pearl entree: his most playful course yet and arguably his most memorable. Within an edible shell

crafted from rice flour sat an oyster topped with preserved elderberries and Oscietra caviar – a dish that elicited multiple double takes before it was devoured with glee.

This, too, was the fate of an earthy, comforting

porridge of buckwheat, millet, mushrooms and preserved butter, and an unconventional (but delectable) main of aged sirloin served with a chlorophyll puree, shredded lettuce, dried kale and grilled cabbage.

The sheer genius of Isaksson's ability to throw a new light on familiar ingredients emerged once again through his Pommes de Terres dessert - a subversion of the link between apples, potatoes and the earth that connects them. In his hands, the humble potato took centre stage as a sweet attraction, transfigured into a generous sphere of roast

potato ice cream, resting on a soil base of crumbs and apple peel, and surrounded with juice extracted from grilled apples. With a menu filled with food that brought joy and wonder, this collaboration was one of Mandarin Oriental, Kuala Lumpur's best yet, and a clear demonstration that Isaksson is indisputably at the top of his game.

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Porridge of mushrooms and preserved butter; Pommes de Terres. Facing page, from above: Oyster Pearl; aged sirloin in chlorophyll.

