



BREAKING BREAD

Land of plenty

At Svanholm, Denmark's largest commune, residents don't just cook and eat together — they grow and rear the ingredients for their meals too. And the produce is so good it has top chefs from Copenhagen and beyond travelling here to buy it

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There can't be many self-sufficient, organic communes with close ties to Michelin-starred restaurants, but at Svanholm, chefs popping by to pick up produce is par for the course.

Noma, four times named the world's best restaurant in the respected World's 50 Best list, sources richly coloured kale, carrots and organic beef here. And until its recent closure, Copenhagen's renowned Relæ would send its kitchen staff to make the 50-minute drive across the flat, patchwork fields of Zealand and over the glimmering waters of the Roskilde Fjord each day. They'd turn off just before the stately tree-lined avenue leading to Svanholm Gods, a 700-year-old mansion-turned-commune, to harvest vegetables from fields untouched by fertiliser or pesticides for more than 40 years, and to collect fresh, unpasteurised milk for making burrata.

When Christian Puglisi, the chef behind Relæ, held a Seed Exchange Festival at the commune in 2019, the grounds were overrun with international gourmands and some of the best chefs on the planet. There was Magnus Nilsson, head chef at Fäviken, then Sweden's top restaurant; Daniela Soto-Innes, who had just been rated the world's best female chef; and Claus Meyer, the entrepreneur who over the past 30 years has helped transform Denmark's food scene.

So what do the anti-materialists, socialists, anarchists and deep green environmentalists who make up Denmark's largest commune think of their recent arrival at the centre of the nation's sophisticated gastronomic scene? Not that much, apparently.

Jeanette Masasila is waiting for me on the steps of the cafe and shop she runs in the building where Svanholm's horses were once shod, enjoying the autumn sunshine. Since she took over the shop and nearby pick-your-own strawberry field, she's become the public face of the community, patiently telling visiting guests from Copenhagen and beyond about her life without responsibility for rent, taxes or food shopping, and explaining how

the 85 adults here pool their financial assets and salaries into a single collective account.

She frowns slightly when she recalls the Seed Exchange Festival. "It was very fancy, a little more fancy than I am. I'm sorry to say, but it was [no better than] our kitchen group on a good day."

Jeanette first came to Svanholm in 1988 to learn from the community's pioneering experiments in organic agriculture, but only joined full-time after divorcing her first husband, 15 years ago.

If she really wanted to splash out on drinks, she could blow her entire £490 in monthly pocket money on a single sitting at Noma. But she prefers to save up for trips to visit her new husband in Senegal, where he lives — and the food at Svanholm is so good, she doesn't feel deprived anyway.

"If you go to a restaurant, you actually have a problem, because when other people say, 'oh this is delicious', you're like..." she says, scrunching up her face up in a sceptical expression. "We eat so well here."

To demonstrate just how well, she takes me past a pen full of goats to meet Hans Kjelstrup, one of the three cooks on duty today. He's come out to gather lacinato, a variety of kale whose decorative nature is better captured by its Danish name, 'palmekål' — palm tree kale.

With his cheery grin and off-centre cap, Hans, a 43-year-old father of two, could easily pass for younger.

"We're in the season right now where it's great to be a farmer." He gestures out over lane after lane of deep green vegetables. "I was planning on doing a salsa with them."

The salsa will be just one dish in the community's daily smørrebrød spread. Translating literally as 'butter and bread', smørrebrød is in reality something much more elaborate: slices of dark, pungent rye bread, topped with an assortment of meat, fish and egg, along with pickled and fresh vegetables.

It's the standard lunch — Danes rarely go a whole day without some rye bread — but it's also the perfect way to showcase Svanholm's produce. On the way to the kitchen, we drop

Clockwise from top left: Hans Kjelstrup picks kale for the day's lunch; making pesto with fresh herbs and plenty of olive oil; Svanholm's main building, a centuries-old manor house

Previous spread, from left: an array of lush plants outside the main house; Svanholm residents sharing lunch in the sunshine



in on the packing rooms, where Mar Van der List, the jolly Dutchwoman who runs the community's vegetable business, tells me why upmarket restaurants make for better clients than supermarkets.

"The restaurants are more focused on taste than looks," she says, explaining this reduces food waste. "It's also nice to get good ideas, because they think differently. They can look at a plant and say, 'Oh, I want to use this', and I'm like, 'I was about to cut that off.' The chefs are more creative than other people."

A salad of many colours

On the way to the kitchen we pass the community's herb garden, which, well into autumn, is still filled with varieties of basil, thyme, fennel and sage, as well as brightly coloured edible flowers. "It's lovely, isn't it? I just think this is so very picturesque," Hans says, as we pause to taste the herbs.

The kitchen is still in the old cowsheds lining the long drive leading up to the house, just as it was when the community started in 1978. But it's come a long way from the simple one-pot arrangement it had back then, with a full industrial kitchen fitted in the mid-1990s. There's an 80-litre kitchen kettle, for making stews, and an industrial hotplate, over which Hans's kitchen colleague Marie Stærmoser is busy frying shallots for a hearty dinner dish of calf's heart in cream sauce.

Sanne Lautrup, Hans's partner and the third member of today's kitchen team, is preparing what's probably the most decorative tomato salad I've ever seen, with black, yellow and red tomatoes set off by brightly coloured nasturtiums and deep-orange marigolds. Sanne has also collected handfuls of fresh sage, which she'll shortly roll up in pork belly and loin, from the community's recently slaughtered pigs, to make porchetta.

Sanne, like Hans, has been living in the community for seven years. Marie, meanwhile, now only works here, having left after three years to live in a nearby village. She had found it all too much, juggling a 37-hour working week outside Svanholm, the need to be part

of one of the community's work groups and doing the dishes twice a month.

"For me, it was a little overwhelming," she explains. "Svanholm is a very big business, so you really have to commit, because it's not only your work time, but also a big chunk of your free time."

While we're talking, Hans deftly removes the hard stems from the kale, before rushing off to start baking the day's rye bread.

The community's rye bread is so renowned that Jeanette gives away the recipe in her shop, together with little jars of its twentysomething-year-old sourdough starter. (To the dismay of the community, the sourdough starter the founders had arrived with in 1978 died in the mid-1990s).

The first thing Hans did when he started this morning was to take the dough, which had been proving and souring for more than a day, into the cold storage room, mix it with sunflower seeds, pumpkin seeds, sesame seeds, linseed and rye flour, and put it in tins to rise.

"We make it on this one," he says, pointing to a battered red machine that looks like a small cement mixer. "It was here when we bought the place. It's the oldest machine we have."

The bread bakes at a surprisingly low 120C for three-and-a-half hours — plenty of time for Hans to focus on making the salsa.

"We have the kale, onions and apples — these ones are Ingrid Marie," he explains as he slices apples into a blender alongside the kale. He then pours in a little organic cider vinegar. After grinding it with a pestle and mortar, he adds some salt, then pours in oil from rapeseed grown in the surrounding fields.

Meanwhile, Sanne has rolled the porchetta, which she starts roasting in the oven, next to the bread.

Hans begins to explain how he understands smørrebrød. "My mum has this story she loves to tell of eating with me and my brother. Suddenly one of us was like, 'What? There's rye bread underneath!'" Despite eating it for years, they'd never noticed the base of the

Clockwise from top left: Marie Stærmoser cooks calf's heart in cream sauce; loaves of homemade rye bread; black tomatoes in one of the commune's greenhouses; kale and lettuce salad garnished with fennel flowers

Following page: The commune's collection of seeds, including pumpkin, lettuce and various spices



dish. “I think that’s the concept of smørrebrød. It needs to be overloaded.”

The food Hans had growing up in rural Jutland was quite different from what he enjoys at Svanholm today. “You got traditional food at my mum’s place. Boiled potatoes, some sauce and a piece of meat. There weren’t that many vegetables in Jutland 30 years ago!”

At Svanholm, the kitchen group only serves meat for two evening meals a week. “I think that’s the future. I think we all need to eat a lot less meat,” Hans says. As if to prove his point, Sanne passes by carrying an elaborate salad with bright purple leaves, garnished with yellow fennel flowers.

Eating under the walnut trees

In the dining area, dishes are starting to pile up on the serving tables: lentil soup and fried potato from the previous day, two types of pickled herring, liver pâté from the community’s own pigs, a smoked sausage, a bright pink slicing sausage, hummus, hard-boiled eggs, pesto, fried vegetable slices and three fresh salads. Alongside Hans’ salsa, there’s also his pickled pumpkin, pickled squash, and sweet pickled red onion.

Adult community members of all ages start to drift in. The 55 children are at school — the youngest ones at a kindergarten on site, and the others at nearby state and private schools (Svanholm pays the fees, which are minimal). Two-thirds of the grown-up members work

outside the community, so there are fewer than 30 people dining today. They line up to fill their plates before taking their places at long tables outside, under the walnut trees. From here, there’s a view down the tree-lined alley to the neoclassical portico of the great house itself, which was finished in 1749. The children’s bicycles strewn haphazardly on the lawns on either side are the only sign this is a commune, rather than the home of a minor royal.

I cut myself some slices of rye bread — using the cast iron guillotine Hans says is necessary because of the unusually hard crust of Svanholm bread — and add a generous spread of Svanholm-made butter before piling on the toppings. I have one with pâté, set off with three pickles, one with cheese and Hans’ salsa, and one with fried herring.

Sitting next to Hans is 82-year-old Tom Michelsen, who manages the orchards that provided the apples for the salsa. “When I first came here in 1980, we had porridge every Tuesday,” Tom says in a slow, gravelly voice. “Our kitchen was much smaller, and there was not so much space for cooking.”

Jeanette explains the founding families had borrowed heavily, at 20% interest, to buy the house and its 1,050 acres, and had to pay back 10,000 kroner (almost £1,200) a day. “They had a lot of nettle soup and no meat; they were very poor.”

“Is it better now?” Hans asks.

“No, I don’t think so,” Tom replies. “I like



Hans Kjelstrup’s porchetta

Herb-stuffed, slow-roasted pork belly gained cult status in Copenhagen a few years ago.

This version is Hans’s favourite smørrebrød topping.

SERVES: 4-6 AS A MAIN,

OR 12 AS A TOPPING

TAKES: 3 HRS 30 MINS

INGREDIENTS

2.5kg piece organic pork belly
3 garlic cloves, finely chopped
plenty of herbs (like sage, rosemary, thyme, lemon verbena and parsley), finely chopped
1 lemon, zested
rye bread and pickled pumpkin, to serve (optional)

YOU’LL NEED

butcher’s string
meat thermometer

METHOD

- 1 Heat oven to 270C, 250C fan, gas 10 (or as high as it’ll go).
- 2 Score the pork belly (if it’s not already scored), taking care not to cut into the fat. Set the meat skin-side down and season generously. Scatter over the garlic, herbs and lemon zest.
- 3 Tightly roll the pork belly and tie in place with the butcher’s string. Rub the skin with salt.
- 4 Place the meat on a rack set in a roasting tray and cook for 15 mins, then reduce the heat to 160C, 140C fan, gas 3 and roast for 3 hrs until the meat’s internal temperature reaches 72C. Turn the heat back up to 270C, 250C fan, gas 10 for a few minutes at the end of the cooking time to achieve a crisp skin (keep a close eye on the meat as it can go crispy quickly). Remove from the oven, cover with a tea towel and leave to rest for 15-20 mins.
- 5 Serve warm as a main, or cold and sliced on rye bread with, say, pickled pumpkin, if you like.

FLAVOURS OF DENMARK

Smørrebrød

The traditional Danish open-face sandwich is less a dish than a way of eating. Toppings are usually laid on dense rye bread, but fluffy white bread is used for white fish, prawns and smoked salmon. Popular toppings are leverpostej (liver pâté), with fried mushrooms and bacon; herring with lettuce, boiled egg and pickled onion; roast pork with sweet and sour cabbage; and smoked salmon topped with shrimps, dill and lemon.

Stegt flæsk

Roast pork with parsley sauce beat smørrebrød to the title of Denmark's national dish back in 2014. It's a classic 'meat and spuds' dish: pork belly roasted until the crackling becomes crispy, then served with boiled potatoes and a béchamel sauce containing chopped parsley. It's on the menu in most Danish restaurants, and is a popular choice for Sunday lunch.

Frikadeller

While German in origin, these flat, pan-fried meatballs are now as Danish as it comes. They're usually made with a blend of minced pork and veal, combined with flour, milk, eggs, chopped onion, salt and pepper, although other meats can be used. They're most often served with mashed potato, gravy and pickled cucumbers as a hearty lunch or an evening meal, but can also be served on bread as smørrebrød, as a light lunch with salad, or as a picnic food.

Rødkål

This classic Danish accompaniment turns ordinary red cabbage into something intensely aromatic by mixing it with apple and stewing it in sugar, vinegar, red wine and butter or duck fat, flavoured with spices such as cloves, bay leaves, cinnamon and allspice. It's an essential part of the Christmas table, but can be served with any meat dish.



Tomato salad with herbs and onions, all grown in the garden

porridge. I think it's healthy, too. The food now is more expensive, of course, but not better."

As I tuck into the zesty, sour kale salsa, the gingery, slightly spicy pumpkin pickle and the wonderfully textured rye bread, I have my doubts about Tom's assessment. Smørrebrød is supposed to be a light lunch, but I can't stop myself from having seconds.

Camilla Svane, one of the younger community members at the table, tells me I'm lucky to have come at a time when there's a variety of fresh vegetables on the menu. "It's not long now until the kale season really kicks in," she laughs. "In winter, we mostly eat potatoes and kale, and when the first real vegetables come in summer, we're really happy about it. It's a real party when the first asparagus comes."

Tom has retired, which at Svanholm entitles you to enjoy all the benefits of the community without sharing in the work. "I can do whatever I please. I can sit down and do nothing if I please — but I don't please." Instead, he's up most mornings at 4.30am to help milk the Jersey cows.

As we wait for Sanne's porchetta to cool, we visit the community's 130 hens (including an 'anarchist chicken', which lays its eggs in the wrong place). When we return, Sanna dishes up. The crackling has just the right mix of crunch and fatty chewiness, while the sage and lemon stuffing is flavoursome and the meat perfectly juicy. Porchetta is usually eaten on rye bread, but we eat it on its own, dipping

it in a pungent herb oil Hans has whipped up using fresh thyme from the garden.

Hans then shows us the fridges where the porchetta will be left, free for residents to take and eat in their private quarters (everyone has a kitchen in their small apartments, which are spread between the main house, the gatehouses and in other converted outbuildings). If there's any left, it's brought out for lunch the next day. In the common pantry, there's everything a family might need, from breakfast cereals to condoms, all of it free.

"Everything is there," Hans grins. "You pay a lot of money, 81% of your salary before tax, but then you don't have to go to the supermarket. You don't have to think of electricity or internet. Everything is paid."

Before my journey back, Jeanette shows me a copy of the newspaper advertisement from 1977, in which the community's two founding families sought out like-minded pioneers for a 'large collective for farming, production and much else besides'. Even then, cooking was at the centre, with the group proposing 'a common kitchen' and 'healthy food'. And for Jeanette, good, healthy food — enjoyed together — is what it's still all about. ●

HOW TO DO IT British Airways offers a weekend in Copenhagen from £256 per person in July, including flights from Heathrow and three nights' B&B at Scandic Sydhavnen. Svanholm, around an hour's drive from the city, offers tours by appointment, plus a cafe and shop. ba.com svanholm.dk visitdenmark.com