



**MASTER BUILDER**  
Claus Meyer in front of his new food complex, The Standard, which opened in October.

EPICUREAN TRAVEL

## BOARDWALK EMPIRE

Claus Meyer, former co-owner of the internationally acclaimed Noma and self-proclaimed founder of the New Nordic Cuisine, expands his culinary domain along Copenhagen's waterfront

BY JAY CHESHES PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIK OLSSON

**C**LAUS MEYER—CHEF, TV personality, philanthropist, serial entrepreneur—is wandering through his new food-and-drink complex along the Copenhagen waterfront, still a construction site barely a month before its opening in October. The dusty shell will soon contain an upscale Indian restaurant, a jazz club, a casual bistro, and a high-end showcase for New Nordic cooking. “This thing is a monster,” he says, skirting past a tattooed worker applying a final coat of paint to the ceiling.

The Standard, as the whole project is called, is a change of pace for Denmark's most prominent food celebrity, a straightforward pleasure palace with no grand agenda. For years, Meyer has exuded the world-changing ambitions and natural charisma of Jamie Oliver, combined with the manic business drive of Richard Branson. In 1989, he became the host of a prime-time cooking show on Denmark's national TV network that ran for six years. In 2003 he opened Noma with chef Rene Redzepi, the Copenhagen restaurant that would redefine Nordic cuisine. His empire in Denmark includes four bakeries, four delis, the restaurants Radio and Namnam, a small country hotel, an apple orchard, a vinegar brewery, and a vast chain of corporate canteens. His name is ubiquitous in the country, with Meyer labels on chocolate, flour, coffee, jams, juices, beer and wine. Next year he hopes to make his mark on the U.S. too, with plans to launch a New Nordic food emporium in New York City.

In the last twenty years, through a mix of showmanship, commerce, and grassroots campaigning, he's had a tremendous impact on the way Danes eat—and become a divisive figure in the process, as a wealthy outspoken celebrity in a country where humility remains a national trait. “I'm much less interested in money than I am in doing great things,” Meyer insisted when we met for the first time last summer at the beautiful old house he shares with his three daughters, two dogs, and his wife, Christina Bengtsson, an interior designer who has collaborated on several of his ventures. “That's why I run from one thing to the next. I'm not interested in opening my sixth or seventh bakery, to me that's just business.” His main motivation,





**WORLDLY PALATE**  
Clockwise from above: Meyer's Namnam restaurant serves Singapore street food; Meyer and Redzepi in 2011, planning an outdoor food festival; a dish at Radio, with salmon, seaweed and cucumbers.



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—CLAUS MEYER



between the two co-founders that, a few months ago, Redzepi threatened to walk out of the restaurant. As the chef himself told me, “I said, ‘It’s you or me, Claus.’” The two had been at odds for years, bickering about small things. Redzepi says his old partner had been trying to hijack the Noma brand. “I said to Claus, ‘You cannot associate Noma with your places,’” he says, “‘Noma is totally different, totally independent, you cannot go out and use it in your world.’” He now rejects Meyer’s manifesto as a PR stunt that never had any influence on his cuisine. With the help of a new American investor, Redzepi is now the principal owner of Noma, after Meyer agreed to sell most of his once-majority stake. “For Rene’s growth and Noma’s growth I had to kind of write myself out of the story,” concedes Meyer.

While Meyer is an ace at getting new ventures started, by his own admission, he’s not always as good at following through to the end. Most of his holdings, including Noma, have run themselves after launch largely without his involvement. And, for a while, many had started to run themselves into the ground. “In 2008 we were close to going bankrupt” he says. “I had done too much spontaneously, and I didn’t care about operations.” A new CEO at his company has since helped turn things around, and with more cash to play with, he’s been able to push more of his social agenda.

Recently Meyer, who turned 50 this year, started the Melting Pot Foundation—an organization that teaches inmates how to cook. “I realized I have maybe 10 or 15 years left in the work market,” he says. “I wanted to find a better way, separate from my business, to give away my knowledge, my time, and some of my money.” In addition to working with prisoners, the organization holds fun runs for kids with unorthodox foods (insects, organ meats) set out to sample along the way.

Recently, in a cooking class at the maximum-security Vridsløselille prison, an enormous guy with a shaved head and tattoos up and down his arms studied a recipe, from British chef Heston Blumenthal, for thrice cooked chips. “I’ve been struggling to get them right,” he said. Another inmate, in for his role in Denmark’s biggest heist, showed off photos from a five-course dinner Meyer’s chefs had helped the class

prepare when the prison opened its doors to the public for a pop-up restaurant.

Meyer spent eight weeks on camera here—for a reality TV show that aired last year—teaching another group of inmates to cook a Michelin-star level meal. The program unleashed a firestorm of criticism before the first episode even aired, when a young woman who’d been thrown out a window by her boyfriend (an ex-inmate Meyer had employed at his apple orchard) told her tale to the press. “She accused me, indirectly, of giving a hand to her assaulter,” he says. The outrage went viral, leading to boycotts of Meyer establishments. “I was attacked by 60 percent of the parliament in national debates,” he says. The show, when it debuted last year, became his best defense, showcasing the transformation of hardened crooks through cooking. Eager to prove it hadn’t been all about putting Claus Meyer on TV, his chefs continue to teach classes, untelevised, in three Danish prisons. “Some of the inmates thought I was there to celebrate myself,” says Meyer. “It was an uphill battle—they just didn’t want to be part of it—but in the end I won their hearts. I didn’t let anyone down. I never once made a promise I couldn’t keep.”

Though no stranger to controversy, Meyer takes every attack pretty hard. Rumbings about the New Nordic cuisine he’d championed being too xenophobic have inspired him to adopt a more global outlook. Last year he opened Namnam, serving Singapore style street food. And this past summer he threw open the doors on his first overseas venture, Gustu—his foundation’s latest project—in Bolivia’s high-altitude capital, La Paz. The two Danish chefs at the helm have been trying to create a sort of Andean Noma, using only ingredients indigenous to the region, while employing and training marginalized youth. The Bolivian food movement even has its own manifesto.

“I believe in Karma,” says Meyer. “I like the idea of giving something away without demanding anything back. Though Rene and I will not do other projects together with the Noma brand, nobody can prevent me from giving my knowledge away, what I learned from creating Noma and the Nordic cuisine movement—nobody can take that away from me.” ●



**CAMERA READY**  
Clockwise from above: Meyer on *New Scandinavian Cooking*; Meyer’s marmalade brand; Noma’s entrance



TOP TO BOTTOM: DITTE VALENTE.