

# NORTHERN LIGHTS SUPPER

With his roots in the Westman Islands and a career that has taken him from Lyon to the Bahamas, Chef Sigurdur Gíslason has come back to Iceland to work with local produce in his gourmet restaurant. We are on a trip with him to Iceland's edible nature.



BY LOUISE WINDFELDT  
PHOTOS BY PÁLL STEFÁNSSON AND HÖRDUR ELLERT ÓLAFSSON

“So you’ll come with me to the Westman Islands?”  
It wasn’t really a question and the decision was made without having to think about it.

A couple of days later I found myself with my family and Chef Sigurdur Gíslason in a little propeller plane bound for Heimaey. We were on our way out to look at and taste the sea, fish and seabirds from the amazing bird cliffs—the natural habitat of Gíslason’s native area that inspires him in his work as chef at one of Reykjavík’s top restaurants.

“I come from Heimaey and it has definitely exerted great influence on me and my career as a chef,” says Gíslason. He is referring to the northern lights in the winter, the long, light summer evenings, the wind and the taste of fresh fish, langoustine and angelica. “For a food lover like me these small volcanic islands are a sea of inspiration.”

Gíslason is one of the young Icelandic cooks who take pride in serving local produce and indigenous Icelandic food in a modern interpretation. He is helping to put Iceland on the gastronomic world atlas as a representative of New Nordic Cuisine. Nordic food, based on local ingredients in a pure and simple style that is still complex in its expression of taste, is seriously beginning to catch on. The flagship is Noma, in Copenhagen, which was chosen as the world’s third best restaurant by Restaurant Magazine earlier this year.



Iceland has experienced a gastronomic boom in recent years and, despite its small size, Reykjavik now boasts over 100 restaurants. Several of them are top class international restaurants and some serve New Nordic Food made from the special Icelandic local produce.

The Westman Islands lie on the south coast of Iceland like little rocky crags flung into the vast Atlantic.

“People here have always lived primarily from nature: collected birds’ eggs, caught fish and various sea birds, gathered herbs and fished for seaweed”, says Gíslason. “Some of this knowledge has been lost by the younger generation, but there are now many people who would like to use local Icelandic produce again. The older people have incredible knowledge. We have to sit down with them and ask how they used the things we have forgotten. Angelica root and Iceland moss for example.”

At the end of May the puffins land on the bird cliffs of the Westman Islands. They dig their nests deep into the grass-covered earth at the top of the crags and dive deep into the ocean to fish. When we visit the bird cliffs on Heimaey the wind is blowing so hard on the edge of the steep rocks that even the heavy puffins lie almost still against the wind just in front of us. They seem tame and friendly—as if we were in a joint battle against the elements.

The young are ready to fly the nest in August and the puffins take off towards their winter hibernation. But before that happens, it is the season to hunt these unusual birds which are considered a great delicacy.

We meet a flock of sheep on the rocks too. “Out on the small islands they live on angelica, seaweed and grass, and spend the entire season in the open air. That makes the lamb taste almost like game,” says Gíslason.

At the bottom of the small fjord on the main island of Heimaey is one of Iceland’s largest fishing harbors. Large container ships are docked here waiting to depart with the day’s catch.

We drink coffee at the fish factory Godthaab and look at the freshly caught

fish which will be sailed away to Britain and France. Others will be smoked, salted and dried.

“My first job was here in the fishing industry. We produced salted cod,” Gíslason recalls.

“However, it was in my three years as a seaman on an Icelandic fishing boat that I really learnt how to work. I was 14 years old. It was the most valuable experience of my life. I hope I can send one of my own children out to sea sometime.”

Since then Sigurdur Gíslason has worked as a cook in many exotic places around the world.

“In Lyon in France at the Michelin listed ‘Domaine de Clairefontaine’ we worked, amongst other things, with fruit and vegetables from the restaurant’s own garden. This is where I learned respect for the ingredients—no matter how much we had of them.”

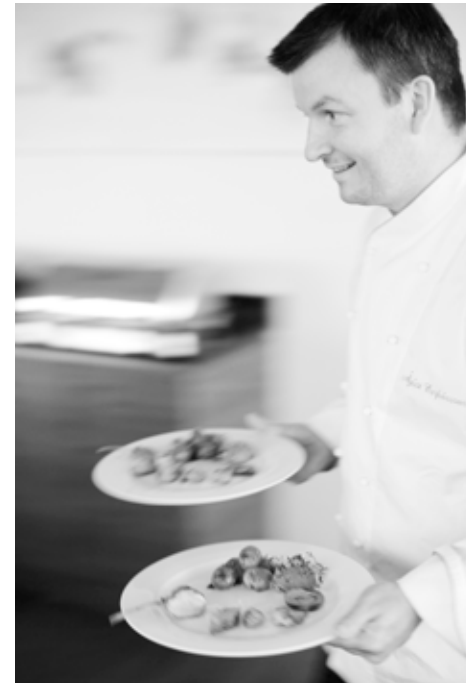
After that Gíslason worked at the 5-star Hotel Colombia Gorge in Oregon, and then he went to Charlie Trotters in Chicago. “Charlie Trotters taught me that you can never be better than the last meal you made and that you must strive to be better every time.”

Seven years ago Gíslason moved to the Bahamas with his family. “I managed a gourmet restaurant there for two years. There we could only get local ingredients, so I learnt to use them,” he says and smiles.

“When I came home from the Bahamas I was given the unique opportunity to be involved in the opening of the first Nordic restaurant in Iceland, VOX, together with Hákon Már Örvarson. Working with Chef Hákon was fantastic and it was a great privilege to learn about New Nordic Cuisine together and to develop our own at VOX in the Icelandic way. We were the first to combine modern cuisine with traditional Icelandic produce and I am very proud of having been a part of that.”

The two chefs still meet regularly to study Nordic cuisine, and they also arrange tasting evenings with other chefs to try out and spread knowledge about Icelandic





products, so that more restaurants will get to know them. “I remember the time René Redzepi from Noma came here to check out Icelandic products just before he opened Noma in Copenhagen. The ingredients he chose were the ones that we used to throw out—he found them of great value”.

Now Gíslason has his own restaurant ‘Veisluturninn’ at the top of the Tower in Kópavogur, 10 minutes from the center of Reykjavík.

Everybody on Heimaey seems to know Sigurdur Gíslason and everywhere we go we are met with smiles and a chat.

Then suddenly I am holding a live langoustine in my hand. We are visiting a ‘langoustine hotel’ where the langoustines that are caught in deep waters are kept alive in salt water until they are sold to exclusive restaurants. Before we leave, Veisluturninn has secured its supply of fresh langoustine for the next six months.

Afterwards we drive round the island and Gíslason points across the waves. “A special type of seaweed grows over by that cliff, we call it *söl*. I often use it instead of salt.”

Then his brother phones. He has a

handful of fulmar eggs which we must come and taste. The whites of the freshly boiled eggs are slightly transparent like an opal and they have the strong, fresh taste of the sea.

May is the season for birds’ eggs. The guillemot’s large blue, the seagull’s grey-speckled, the fulmar’s white. Gíslason shows us how to push off with our feet and swing from a rope from the cliff when collecting wild birds’ eggs.

A couple of days later we are sitting in Restaurant Veisluturninn waiting in anticipation to taste the Icelandic cuisine.

We start with roasted puffin and puffin heart served in a blueberry and malt sauce sprinkled with wild thyme. The taste of the puffin is dark, intense and exotic and we agree that it is like nothing we have ever tasted before.

Next come the langoustine spiced with *söl* seaweed and a purée of angelica and langoustine reduction that sends you back to Heimaey’s rocky cliffs and the sea.

The climax of the evening is one of the season’s new delicacies: milk lamb.

“It comes directly from a sheep farmer I know in the Westman Islands. I often go out and visit the breeders—it is an important part

of my work as a chef to maintain a contact network. That is the way that I make sure I have the best produce in my restaurant.”

The roasted suckling lamb tastes delicate and is served with sous-vide boiled lamb tongue and kidneys fried in butter.

Gíslason comments that we have been served the heart, kidneys and tongue from the animal.

“In the olden days the offal was used too. It is very tasty and nutritious.”

For dessert he serves newly-picked, sugar-coated Icelandic strawberries with skyr, baked hazelnut crumble and a rhubarb ice cream with clear rhubarb soup.

We sit back—satiated with flavors, but not to excess, because modern Icelandic cuisine is not at all heavy.

“I’m working on a new project called Northern Lights Supper,” says Gíslason. “I will focus primarily on produce that comes straight from my native surroundings and will transform it into something new. This will be a total experience, in which the guests are transported to an atmosphere of northern lights, and listen to Icelandic storytelling while they eat langoustine, puffin, Icelandic beef and lamb.”

