

Log

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The Food Issue

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Magnus Nilsson
with Allen S. Weiss

How to Eat A Pine Forest

ALLEN S. WEISS: “The first step is to chop down a pine tree in early spring.”¹ These opening words of Magnus Nilsson’s recipe for Pine-Bark Cake in his cookbook *Fäviken* are mythical, wondrous, outrageous.

The title of Bill Buford’s preface to *Fäviken* is “Nowhere.” This is the literal meaning of utopia. Paradoxically, Fäviken itself – located on a 24,000-acre hunting estate in the Jämtland region of Sweden, about as close to the Arctic Circle as it is to Stockholm – is among the most site-specific restaurants imaginable, in terms of foodstuffs, sourcing, techniques, sensibility, symbolism: a vegetable garden at the foot of the door, surrounding woods filled with game and wild mushrooms, local suppliers of dairy and meat, such that the chef knows the very cow destined for his table. Fäviken sets a standard for defining the limits of the locavore, reminding us of the relativism of the term, and the cookbook immediately brings us to a specific place in a specific season to reveal specific flavors. This “nowhere” is the most “somewhere” imaginable, remote as it may be. One often forgets that the mythology of a restaurant demands a rite of passage.

I think of this exchange as a sort of “paper meal,” not unlike paper architecture, a mode of thinking by analogy, of dining in absentia, of utopian fantasy. In any case, most cookbooks are not read with the goal of reproducing recipes, but rather to serve as souvenirs or prophetic devices. Some years ago I wrote *Comment cuisiner un phénix* (How to Cook a Phoenix) because I wanted to analyze culinary structures by means of examining a foodstuff that nobody could possibly have eaten, thus avoiding the risk of having my thoughts denatured by readers’ preconceived notions and established preferences.² I am therefore well acquainted with writing about what I have not experienced and feel confident about meditating on a restaurant at which I have never eaten. I have always felt that one should prepare for the experience of a great meal as one does for theater or music or painting, and that knowledge increases pleasure and taste. This sounds better in French: *le savoir augmente la saveur*. Thus I consider this dialogue as the prelude to a meal at Fäviken.

1. Magnus Nilsson, *Fäviken* (New York: Phaidon, 2012), 212.

2. Allen S. Weiss, *Comment cuisiner un phénix: Essai sur l’imaginaire gastronomique* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2004). See also my “Is the Phoenix Kosher?,” *Gastronomica* 8, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 66–68.

MAGNUS NILSSON: My firm belief is that anyone who is working in the restaurant trade without wanting to genuinely care for the people coming to his or her place is there for the wrong reasons. This doesn't mean that I give in to the whims and wishes of those coming to visit the restaurant. I imagine that, after 15 years of serving thousands of customers in restaurants, I have developed a better notion of what works on a majority of people, and what doesn't, than most of those who come to eat. My job is to make the experience of my guests greater than it would be if they were left to make all the choices themselves. Every choice I make in my work is guided by one simple question: Will this make the experience stronger and better for the eater? Every diner will experience the meal in a different way based on what he or she has experienced before. I want the eating experience in my restaurant to be structured in so many layers that even the most informed diner will not reach the bottom after only one or two visits. At the same time I want those who are less informed or less interested in being informed to still understand the whats and whys of any part of the experience. I want everything to be so clear that even those who rush past will be left with a strong impression, while the one who stays and digs deeply will discover more things of excitement and interest the longer he or she continues.

ASW: There is a destiny that guides gastronomic events, and the paths that brought us together on these pages are the *drailles* (drovers' paths) that crisscross the rolling mountains of the Aubrac region of France's Massif Central. You cite Michel Bras among your major culinary experiences, and I feel the same way, having spent the last 16 summers in the Aubrac and having eaten at Bras's

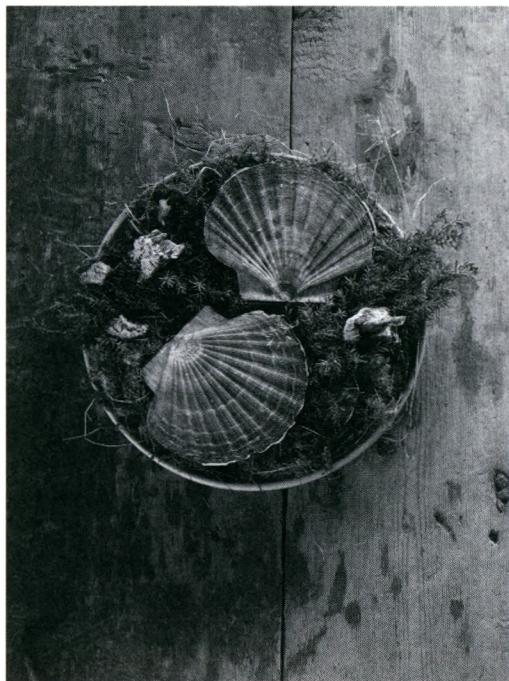
restaurant approximately 15 times since 1995. His style of cuisine has long been my ideal.³

MN: Any restaurant needs to make sense in its environment. I think Fäviken works where it is located because it tries to make the most out of the circumstances surrounding it. In the same way, a restaurant in a big city should make the most out of all the culture, influence, and produce available there.

ASW: One often finds one's roots, as it were, by circuitous means. Though I haven't dined at L'Astrance, where you worked early on in your career, I would say that the culinary genealogy that brings me to Fäviken includes, in its major instances, Michel Bras, Régis Marcon at L'Auberge des Cimes, René Redzepi at Noma, and most recently, Hiseo Nakahigashi at Sojiki Nakahigashi in Kyoto – all restaurants where indigenous, often wild ingredients, impeccable technique, innovative plating, and a fully developed culinary philosophy raise cuisine to the level of art.

MN: I understand why many people make this connection, but to me, cuisine is craft. On the other hand, one can argue that many forms of art are dependent on craft itself; expressing yourself through painting, for example, is in most cases rather difficult to do without being a good painter on a technical level. Closely connected to art is creativity, a word most often used to explain something one particular person does that the persons using the C-word don't have the specialized knowledge to understand. It becomes easier to propose that what someone is doing is some kind of sorcery of the real world rather than to learn enough about the subject to understand it. I think what we often call creativity is actually productivity displayed by people who are very good at their craft; true creativity manifests itself rather rarely and not so often in those fields that people tend to consider creative.

3. See Allen S. Weiss, *Autobiographie dans un chou farci* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2006); see also my "Reflections on the Stuffed Cabbage," *Gastronomica* 7, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 70–75.

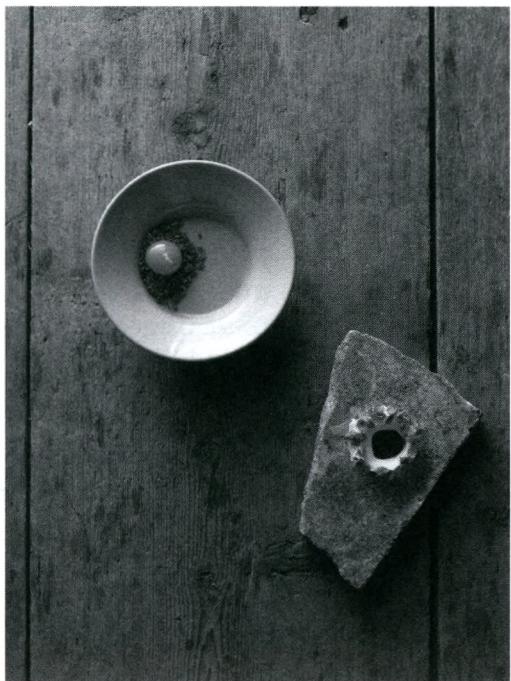


MAGNUS NILSSON, SCALLOPS COOKED OVER BURNING JUNIPER BRANCHES (LEFT) AND EGG YOLK PRESERVED IN SUGAR SYRUP ON A PILE OF CRUMBS MADE FROM PINE BARK AND ICE CREAM SEASONED WITH MEADOWSWEET (RIGHT), SERVED AT FÄVIKEN.

ASW: I have had only one truly locavore meal (in the narrow sense of the term) in my life. It was on a cattle farm in the Aubrac, in a house that was built in 1871. In this austere region, approximately four acres once sufficed to provide a couple with near autonomy. One evening the owners invited us over for a simple but truly excellent dinner: rabbit pâté, liver pâté, *saucisse sèche* (dry sausage); *farçous* (vegetable fritters); *omelette aux cèpes*; green salad; Laguiole cheese; walnut cake – a meal straight out of the everyday life of our hosts, and one congruent with any traditional Rouergat cookbook. Nearly everything came from within a few hundred meters of the farmhouse except the cheese, which was made in the local cooperative (that our hosts helped found) just five kilometers away. It would seem that in the case of Fäviken, given the harshness of the climate, the locavore experience pushes haute cuisine to new limits.

MN: I believe that to be truly locavore mainly means to reflect the culture and the space in which you work, not to consume only crops grown within a certain distance. I have never described Fäviken as about being local, because it isn't. It is about reflecting its place in the world and delivering a strong experience for its customers. The reason we work so closely with many people in the community is simply that you can't reflect it without being part of it, and it is a lot easier to get a carrot perfectly suited to your needs if you can speak directly to the person growing it. Acting locally is a logical consequence of many other factors, rather than the restaurant's *raison d'être*.

ASW: I would contrast the aforementioned farmstead meal to the cuisine of Michel Bras, whose restaurant is located four kilometers from the farm as the crow flies, in order to suggest just such a wider sense of the locavore phenomenon. Whatever be the myth about



Bras – and for many he has come to symbolize the Aubrac – we should remember that the reality of his cuisine is neither locavore nor, strictly speaking, even regional. A cursory examination of his recipes reveals the conceptual complexity and material heterogeneity of his cuisine, which straddles the dichotomies of peasant/haute, regional/cosmopolitan, foraged/domestic, and traditional/nouvelle, as exemplified by his famed Gargouillou.⁴ This cuisine is simultaneously local, regional, international, and most of all idiosyncratic (read: innovative), and Bras's dishes – of technical, visual, and gustatory virtuosity – are not nearly as austere as the ambient landscape nor as straightforward as the Rouergat cuisine from which they spring.⁵ I sense a similar complexity concerning Fäviken, and I often wonder about what specific aspects of Bras's restaurant and cuisine attracted you.

MN: I don't quite know, and I don't think that it is his cuisine as such, which is admittedly very appealing. I think it is much more about how he reflects everything about himself through the food and the restaurant – his roots in the Aubrac, his travels, his imagination, his profound respect for the customer, and many other things.

ASW: Speaking of terroir, one might say that it is the countryside that determines the plate, while plating is an art that evokes the countryside. In *Fäviken*, you explain that “a

few holes in a leaf made by an insect are fine, because that is how natural things look.”⁶ Perhaps this relates to the Japanese sense of the perfection of imperfection, like those insect-eaten leaves seen in Japanese paintings and woodblocks; I am reminded of the enormous influence of *kaiseki* (Japanese haute cuisine) platings on the French nouvelle cuisine.⁷ But one often forgets that questions of terroir imply not just a sense of place but also the strictly seasonal nature of cuisine, and that the seasons can be harsh and nature cruel. Winter is the extreme challenge. I was always struck by my mother's accounts of her family preparing for the severe winters of her Polish childhood just outside of Wilna (Vilnius): root vegetables protected under sand in the cold cellar, mushrooms preserved in brine or salt, pickled onions, fruit preserves and jams, etc. I was thrilled to read about how such preserves are at the core of Fäviken's cuisine, and how all preservation methods are used for this purpose (drying, freezing, salting, smoking, fermenting).

MN: What differentiates any northern cuisine from one closer to the equator is that we have a distinctive winter during which nothing grows. Before the age of industrialized food production and efficient shipping, which today can even out seasonal fluctuations, a whole year's worth of calories had to be procured within a short and finite window of time. We could say that this period of time stretches from May to September, of course differing a bit depending on where in the north you live. In summer, food was harvested for consuming fresh and for storing. Plants turned the abundance of light through photosynthesis into carbohydrates that could be stored during winter and gradually consumed or fed to animals, which in their turn produced proteins and fat in the form of milk and meat to be either stored or consumed fresh during the dark months. This enormous

4. Michel Bras, *Le livre de Michel Bras* (Rodez: Éditions du Rouergue, 1991), 58–76. See also Michel Bras, *Essential Cuisine: Laguiole, Aubrac, France* (Woodbury: Ici La Press, 2002).

5. See Patricia Auger-Holderbach, *La cuisine paysanne en Rouergue: Traditions et vie quotidienne* (Rodez: Éditions du Rouergue, 1992).

6. Nilsson, *Fäviken*, 140.

7. See Kaichi Tsuji, *Kaiseki: Zen Tastes in Japanese Cooking* (Kyoto: Kodansha, 1972). The French version was published as *Kaiseki: Beauté de la table au Japon* in 1973, and had an inestimable influence on the first generation of nouvelle cuisine chefs.

8. Charles Addams, *Half-Baked Cookbook* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 51.

9. Nilsson, *Fäviken*, 217.

10. Chantal Thomas, *Jardinière Arlequin: Conversations avec Alain Passard* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2006), 14–15.

seasonal peak in food production was made possible by long days, which make plants grow faster, and by people working longer hours than in southern countries. Even today, when no one has to live like this, the approach is still very present culturally, and this is something I try to reflect.

ASW: Given the recent infatuation with all things organic, macrobiotic, slow, and local, I would like to play devil's advocate and mention a wonderful Charles Addams drawing of a witch stirring a steaming cauldron full of rather suspicious fixings as she says to two other witches, "It's going to be great. All natural ingredients."⁸ In *Fäviken* you write, "I consider my cooking style to be vegetable and dairy driven, rather than based on meat and fish."⁹ I imagine that this love of leafy vegetables stems in part from the region's extremely short growing season and that a particular passion for root vegetables is due to their extraordinary staying capacity. Your cuisine is, in your words, vegetable driven, something you would have experienced while working at Alain Passard's restaurant L'Arpège. Passard, famous for his Betterave en croûte de sel gris de Guérande and his Jardinière Arlequin, explains that his cuisine is *végétale* rather than *végétarienne*, a distinction that in his case implies more an aesthetic orientation than a moral imperative.¹⁰ Such is not a first cautious step toward an audacious embrace of pure vegetarianism, but rather the definition of a hybrid genre, the figure of a new culinary style. In any case, the results, if not austere, are often quite minimal in appearance. Your cuisine takes this aesthetic several steps further.

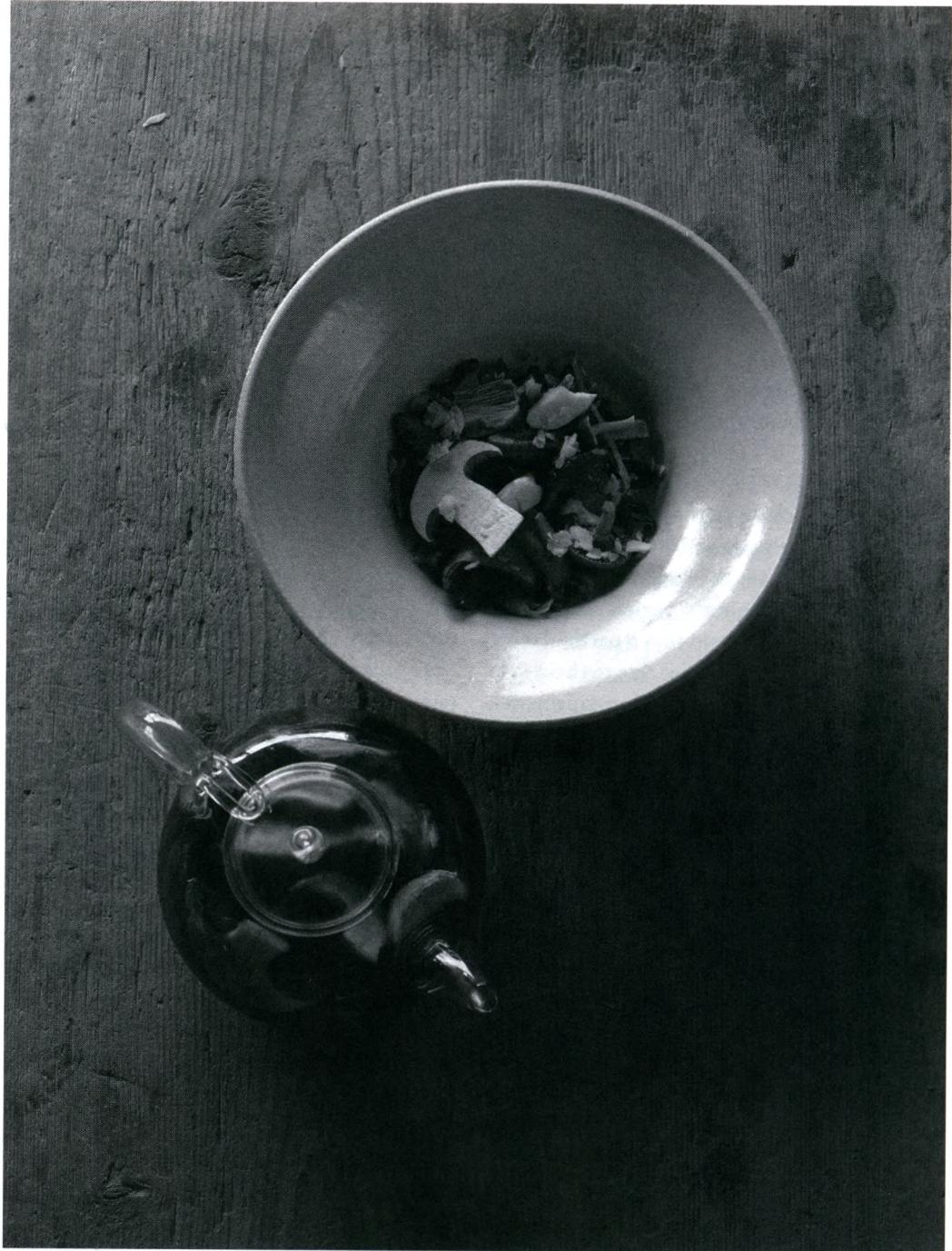
MN: I simply believe that, in most cases, the vegetables of a dish are what makes the difference. You can serve a piece of veal with a carrot and call it a dish. You can pair it with wine, and it tastes great. Then you can

substitute the veal for pork and discover that the effect on the dish is marginal. It kind of tastes the same, it kind of looks the same, it works with the same wine, etc. Then if you keep the veal and you substitute the carrots with some spinach, you have a whole new dish – it doesn't look the same, it doesn't taste the same, and it certainly doesn't work with the same wine. This just fascinates me. My wife was a vegetarian for a long time, which made me a kind of collateral vegetarian for practical reasons, and I didn't mind it.

ASW: One difference between *Fäviken* and L'Arpège is that while all of Passard's vegetables come from an eight-acre vegetable garden – where heirloom vegetables are cultivated through traditional planting, small-plot rotation, horse-drawn plow, and hand-picked crops – that is located at Fillé-sur-Sarthe, about 220 kilometers from Paris, *Fäviken*'s vegetable garden is just outside the restaurant door, minutes, not hours, away. Your treatment of vegetables reminds me of the sushi restaurants in Tokyo where fish are removed from an aquarium and filleted while still alive. One really wonders whether this cuisine should be called "slow" or "fast."

MN: A bit of both. In summer, when you want to emphasize the freshness and vibrancy of the season, nothing will be harvested earlier than necessary. Vegetables are often picked and prepared during service, and every second counts. In winter, when everything has been stored, I want to emphasize that.

ASW: In anticipation of dining at Noma in 2010, I familiarized myself with René Redzepi's philosophy of cooking, which is of obvious interest to you. I found such principles as using fruit reductions rather than cream-based sauces quite coherent for a Danish chef wishing to create a fundamentally



MAGNUS NILSSON, BROTH OF AUTUMN LEAVES WITH MUSHROOMS, SERVED AT FÄVIKEN.

Scandinavian cuisine (even though, or perhaps precisely because, Denmark is the most continental of the Scandinavian countries). This led me to wonder about the excellent wine cellar at Noma, since Scandinavia produces no wines to speak of. Already entranced by the lure of craft beers – which in recent years have exponentially increased in quantity, quality, and variety in the United States – I divulged my thoughts to the sommelier and asked if he could put together a beer menu for the meal. He obliged, and with superb results: each course was served with a different, usually Scandinavian beer, and they worked fabulously well with the food. (I hadn't quite realized the high alcohol content of such beers, some up to 20 percent, and this was the only time I walked – staggered – out of a great restaurant drunk!) This experience leads me to wonder about the lack of any mention of beer in the Fäviken cookbook, and the role of beer and wine in the restaurant.

MN: I like almost any well-made wine that suits the occasion. But in general, I don't tend to like big fat wines with a lot of alcohol, dry matter, and oak in them. I like my wines to be balanced and often light. There were many things that didn't fit in the book, and since it was written we have discovered enough new material to produce 10 more books – if only someone wanted to read them all, of course. About the beer specifically, I think it simply comes down to me not liking beer much and therefore not prioritizing it in the research process at Fäviken. A couple of years ago, however, I became fascinated by the brewing process itself, and we bought a brewery to learn more. I still don't particularly enjoy

drinking it but I do understand beer better, and perhaps it has since been allowed a bit more space at Fäviken.

ASW: I love playing the game of favorites, knowing all well its futility. So, taste un-tasted, I must say that visually I am drawn to Fäviken's Lamb Sweetbreads and Chard because of its elegant minimalism.¹¹ But I would ultimately choose the Broth of Autumn Leaves with Mushrooms.¹² It so beautifully reveals the iconography of my favorite season, much like dishes I have savored in Kyoto, such as Yoshihiro Murata's most autumnal Planked Barracuda at Kikunoi Honten.¹³ I wonder about the influence of Japanese cuisine on Fäviken.

MN: I am very fascinated by Japanese culture in general and I have had many lovely food experiences there. I try not to name favorite places simply because there are so many of them. I used to do this much more when I was dissecting the restaurant experience in greater detail in order to learn from it. Today I go to restaurants because I love doing so. Which one happens to be my favorite at the moment depends on many factors and varies from one day to another.

ASW: In purely gustatory terms, the dish I most desire is the Capercaillie and Coniferous Forest, because I am a devotee of game birds (especially grouse, woodcock, red partridge, and black duck), yet have never tasted capercaillie.¹⁴ Furthermore, since the North is my direction of predilection, the prospect of ingesting the essence of a pine forest well suits my gastronomic proclivities. But in terms of technique, I can't resist A Tiny Slice of Top Blade from a Retired Dairy Cow, Dry Aged for Nine Months, Crispy Reindeer Lichen, Fermented Green Gooseberries, Fennel Salt.¹⁵ If you ask why, the answer is simple: "Dry aged for nine months! And from a cow nine

11. Nilsson, *Fäviken*, 84.

12. Ibid., 190.

13. Yoshihiro Murata, *Kaiseki: The Exquisite Cuisine of Kyoto's Kikunoi Restaurant* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2006), 106–07.

14. Nilsson, *Fäviken*, 96.

15. Ibid., 80.

16. Ibid., 232–35.

years old!" This brings a whole new sense of time into culinary preparations. (I think, by analogy, of those Basque walking sticks, the *makhila*, where the wood is chosen as a still-living branch that is left to grow to the proper length). Among the best steaks I have ever eaten was a *bistecca alla fiorentina* at the cooking school of the Tenuta de Capezzana vineyards in Carmignano, just outside of Florence. For this dish, the steak is usually aged for two to four weeks. But nine months! One also wonders what happens to the rest of the cow after these minute portions of prime cuts are consumed by the guests.

MN: Most of a cow is not included in the prime cuts we see on restaurant menus. At Fäviken most of the animal becomes charcuterie for breakfast, stocks, and of course excellent food for the staff. The funny thing from an economical standpoint is that, if you buy a whole cow, it is about the same price as the prime cuts alone. If you serve those, the rest of the meat is essentially free, other than the couple of hours it takes to butcher it.

ASW: Cooking is all about timing. In my studies of gardens I have become increasingly interested in the aesthetic effects of what I call "polychrony," the fact that every object in a garden – flower, lichen, moss, tree, stone – exists according to a different temporality, all of them radically different from our human sense of time. This is also true of the various foodstuffs that end up on a plate: a plate, like a garden, is both a polychronous and a heterotopic site. Your cuisine reminds me of the extremes that this can take, from fermentation over years to a tiny vegetable sprout that has never seen the light of day to vegetables picked just minutes before they are cooked and served. Even the fact that you let certain fresh fish mature is counterintuitive to any lover of sushi. Many of your dishes incarnate extremes of temporality, like A Little Lump

of Very Fresh Cheese, One Lavender Petal from Last Summer, for which the cheese is made just minutes before being served, while the petal – a symbol of the evanescence of life – has been preserved far longer than what botanical destiny and cultural symbolism would dictate.¹⁶ Time is truly of the essence, whether the clock is measuring seconds, hours, seasons, or years.

MN: I am often asked in interviews whether I prefer any particular season more than another, and I always find it quite difficult to answer. I've realized that the season I am always the most excited about is the coming season, regardless of which one it is. In winter I look forward to spring, in summer to autumn.

The way I cook, everything on the plate is part of an expression and nothing is more or less important. It is very difficult to decide what is important for what aspect of perception, since they are all connected.

ALLEN S. WEISS HAS AUTHORED AND EDITED OVER 40 VOLUMES ON PERFORMANCE, LANDSCAPE, GASTRONOMY, SOUND ART, AND EXPERIMENTAL THEATER. HE TEACHES PERFORMANCE STUDIES AND CINEMA STUDIES AT NYU.