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Gustu, Bolivia



By Nicholas Lander

Claus Meyer, co-founder of Noma, is bringing his famed restaurant's principles to the Andes



Gustu, financed by Noma co-founder Claus Meyer (below)

I have never yet devoted this column to a restaurant I have not eaten in. But I believe the story of Gustu in La Paz, Bolivia, is still worth telling, and I hope I will be forgiven this time.

My interest in it began in Cork, Ireland, on the eve of the inaugural Ballymaloe Literary Festival last month. Over a glass of Chianti Claus Meyer, creator and co-founder of Noma in Copenhagen, began to explain his new Bolivian venture, some 36 hours away by plane from Denmark. With Meyer's backing, Gustu restaurant opened in April and is already employing 30 young, marginalised Bolivians. Like Noma, it promotes indigenous ingredients – from waycha potatoes to cheeses and Tarija wines.

Meyer may not have the fame of René Redzepi, his partner and chef at Noma, but he is one of the most influential and successful figures in food. When I asked him when Noma became profitable after it opened in 2003, he smiled and replied, "We made a small profit in our first year and it is now about

10 per cent of turnover.” This is as unusual as it is impressive.

More impressive still is the financial return on his investment. He only had to put in a “very modest amount” and laughed as he added that almost a decade later, Noma, which seats no more than 40, is handling 100,000 requests for reservations a month.



Meyer is a man of extremely strong convictions who believes in the power of restaurants to do good, whether by teaching us to appreciate the ingredients nature provides, as with Noma, or by harnessing the energy of Bolivia’s youth, a role he hopes Gustu will fulfil.

What set Meyer on this path was a combination of the very bad and the delicious. He grew up in Denmark in the ’70s and ’80s when the country was full of cheap bacon, bread and butter. His life changed when, aged 18, he stayed in Agen, France with a couple who owned a patisserie. They opened his eyes to the pleasures of good Gascon food and the *bonhomie* this generates.

The 1990s saw Meyer importing French ingredients and running French restaurants in Copenhagen but beginning to appreciate that what distinguished food in France was what he refers to as “its eternal fundamentals”. “The importance of ‘terroir’, the classifications of food and wine, and the range of France’s suppliers were, I realised, what underpinned everything.”

By 2009 Meyer appreciated that the success of Noma and the speed with which its principles had been accepted left him free to take on an even bigger challenge: could he apply this Nordic approach to another part of the world?

Meyer set up a small research group and used his connections at government and NGO level to produce a shortlist of potential locations. La Paz was chosen because of its low crime rate (“I do love my family,” Meyer quipped); its proximity to Machu Picchu as an established tourist destination; and, above all, for the potential of its natural biodiversity. “I am excited by what the chefs Michelangelo Cestari and Kamila Seidler will be able to make of the produce from the salt lakes, the Andes and the fruits of the Amazon.”

Despite five visits to La Paz and a donation of more than £450,000, Meyer is yet to eat at Gustu. But the success of a street food fair there last autumn that attracted more than 40,000 comforts him. As do the initial figures. “Our opening budget was 135 guests spending \$37 and we’re serving 100 spending \$55 so I’m happy.”

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Gustu

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