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Noma Chef Rene Redzepi, a.k.a. The Vegetable Butcher, Meets the Obsessivore

What happens when Rene Redzepi, the world's most celebrated chef, gives a course in plant-based cooking to our meat-worshipping columnist?

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Welcome to the Obsessivore, in which BA contributing editor Adam Sachs tackles ambitious, sometimes nutty projects you might not have the time (or nuttiness) to try in your own kitchen.

The king of Denmark: Chef Reen Redzepi can make any vegetable impossibly delicious. (Credit: Javier Sirvent)

"I never, ever eat anything for health reasons. I eat for taste," says Rene Redzepi, celebrated Nordic forager, exalter of pine needles, sea buckthorn, and edible moss. On break from his day job in Copenhagen running Noma, otherwise known as the best restaurant in the world, Redzepi is, improbably, standing in my tiny New York kitchen, drinking a bottle of Tsingtao and attempting to persuade me that it's possible to make a meal of these stinky, stemmy, dirt-caked rooty things called "vegetables." I don't hate our friends in the plant kingdom. Really, I don't. (Tell 'em, Cauliflower, old buddy!) I've just never known how to make them shine. At the farmers' market, I regard the abundant plenty and think: *Salad or side dish*. Never main event.

At Noma, Redzepi can dazzle you with nothing more than a plate of onions and gooseberry juice. He once served me a roasted hen of the woods mushroom with the dignity and dimensions of a rib eye. Aged like a steak and presented tableside before carving, it was one righteous mushroom. The man is, in other words, an ideal mentor to lead me away from my meat-centric existence and into the leafy promised land of enlightened vegetable-cooking competence.

Culinary gods of this caliber do not, as a general rule, drop in on the Obsessivore laboratory to make sure we're getting enough greens in our diet. But I've had the good fortune to get to know Redzepi over several visits to Copenhagen, and when we discussed my anxiety, he offered to help with my remedial education. Beginning with this: The reason we should eat our vegetables isn't because they're better for us. We should be plucking and pan roasting our friends in the plant kingdom, first and foremost, because they are damned delicious.

(Credit: Video by Matt Duckor)

First step: a visit to Union Square Greenmarket. He promptly zeroes in on some crates of yellow and red peppers. Dropping half a dozen of those into my bag along with a few onions and some wrinkly chiles, he announces: "You're making *ajvar*, chef." It doesn't matter that I've never heard of *ajvar* and definitely shouldn't be called "chef."

Wandering on, I carefully observe Redzepi carefully observing the produce. Cool weather has reduced the market's bounty, but there is still lots to choose from if you know how to look.

So how, I ask him, do I take all *this*--the multitude of apples, crates of unpeeled chestnuts, the pimply squashes of all sizes, the last pickings of sweet Concord grapes jealously guarded by a battalion of bees--and plan a meal?

The key, Redzepi says, is to consider how we eat differently when we eat mostly vegetables. "You don't replace a hunk of pork shoulder with one big central vegetable dish. Think in terms of smaller plates with a variety of flavors."

He ticks off a few ideas we can cook: shaved raw zucchini with pesto; steamed spinach flavored with fresh coriander, parsley, mint, basil, sage, and lemon thyme. Some things he tosses into the bag without a plan, just because they appeal to him that afternoon.

Back in my kitchen, we open some beers and Redzepi makes his case for why he'd rather cook with vegetables. "The dimension of flavors you find in roots and fruits and berries and mushrooms," he says, "it's just so much more diverse and exciting than the three or four animals we eat all the time."

Take that *ajvar*, for instance, which, it turns out, is a spicy pepper spread Redzepi ate as a child in the former Yugoslavia. Whole bell peppers, chiles, and eggplant are set on a lit range, blackened in the open flame. Garlic and onion are cooked in a pan with a little olive oil until they're dark and sweet. All of this is chopped together until you've got the texture you like. It's less a recipe than an adaptable assemblage, a taste memory.

"Squeeze lemon on it," he suggests.

How much?

"Taste it, add some more if it needs more. Let the flavors settle, and try it again. It's about developing confidence."

Redzepi isn't the tradition-bound type who pushes rules about what goes best with what or how finely you should be dicing your mirepoix. What he wants to confer on me is a kind of functional familiarity with my produce. Mistakes will be made on the way to figuring out what you like, but the key is to take a vegetable and just start cooking with it: "Think about what you can do with it. I can boil it, saute it, roast it. Then you add an oil, a broth, or a condiment."

I've seen him cook this way at home, casually throwing together for his wife and daughters a Sunday dinner of root vegetables roasted with some very non-Nordic ingredients (olive oil, lemongrass). It's this kind of openness to flavors, to learning how to coax great things out of humble products, that informs his restaurant cooking, too.

Redzepi plans to eat the chestnuts raw, peeled, and dipped in the *ajvar*. But they are smaller and more grainy than he had hoped, so he drops that and pivots to a soup instead. The chestnuts are roasted in the oven, then peeled and cooked again on the stove in bubbling butter with miso and a piece of umami-impacting kombu (seaweed). They are rich and crunchy and sweet and I have to remind myself that he just made them in my kitchen. No lengthy prep, no team of tweezer-wielding *stagiaires* working behind the scenes. Just a pan full of chestnuts and an informed hunch about how to get them to really sing. A spoonful of caviar on top of the soup adds a bit of celebratory sparkle, but it is the chestnuts themselves that make you stop and wonder at the simple alchemy that has taken place.

What's cool about all this isn't just that Redzepi made it up on the spot. It's the lesson you can apply to any vegetables in your sights: Cook them to the point where they've developed maximum flavor intensity (but no more), deepen the complexity with a complementary flavoring agent (here the miso and kombu), and dress in the binding, unifying fat of your choice.

The Concord grapes have been marked for undetermined dessert usage, but Redzepi's enthusiasm for them means they're upgraded to beet duty. He roasts the beets in the manner of a mob enforcer dispatching an inconvenient witness: unceremoniously dumping them, unpeeled and uncovered, into the bottom of an incinerating oven, where they are later retrieved shrunken-head style, seemingly charred beyond recognition. He peels and slices them. They're now maximally sweet and somehow smoky. Redzepi strains uncooked Concord grape juice, adds vinegar, a drop of beer, and a little salt: This is the sauce for beet slices.

We've been cooking and tasting all day, and while nobody is exactly sober or hungry, there's a distinct absence of that engorged dizziness that typically follows carnivorous feasting. "If you have an appetite for flavors," Redzepi says, "not just for gluttony but for delicious flavors, you're naturally going to seek the best of seasonal offerings, and so there's a kind of healthy sense to it." Feeling good as a happy by-product of eating well.

My sole contribution--winter squash bucatini with toasted pumpkin seeds and pea shoots--ends up a little gummy, a well-intentioned failure. But all things considered, my indoctrination into the world of meatless main courses has gone reasonably well. I tell him about my plan to repurpose the leftover *ajvar* as a sauce for pasta. He seems satisfied. I've got a lot of experimenting to do, but his work here is done.

Redzepi's Rules

1. "Think of the meat as a condiment: A vegetable broth with a few drops of chicken stock or some bacon added to a dish can do wonders."
2. "Like when you're beginning an exercise routine, you can't just say one day, 'Okay, I'm going to cook predominantly vegetables.' It takes effort and it hurts. But soon it becomes something that you need."
3. "This is like eating meze or tapas. Make a variety of boiled, steamed, and roasted things with a few cool condiments. The meal gets prolonged, and the conversations get longer as well."
4. "Have a well-stocked pantry with items that work with whatever you find at the market: a homemade pesto, good anchovies, miso, soy, preserved lemons."
5. "This is how I started to make vegetables at home. Put a pot of boiling water on, plopp some vegetable in it, and lift it out when it's perfectly cooked. Then add a fistful of any herb you're in love with, some oil or butter, and taste it. Let this be your guide: How does it taste? What else can I do with it?"

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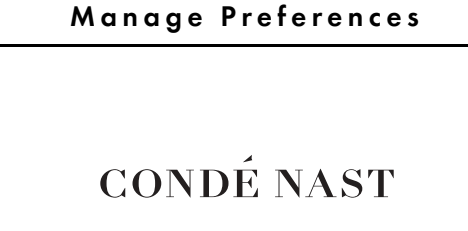


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