

#HEDONE:

COOKING IN THE AGE OF TWITTER

STORY by LYDIA ITOY
PHOTOGRAPHS by RICHARD HAUGHTON

"Great sourcing, yes. Great chef, no."

Anonymous online comment

HEDONE

"A REVELATION"

Bruce Palling, *Wall Street Journal*

"We began with onion and pear shaving.
Don't laugh, don't sneer. It was inspired."

AA Gill, *Sunday Times*

The Viking Culinaire

At an age when too many men chuck it all in for a new girlfriend and a Ferrari, opinionated Swedish blogger Mikael Jönsson left his deck chair in the Mediterranean sun and moved to London to open his dream restaurant. What next? First, bloggers started encroaching on mainstream restaurant critics. Now they are taking over the kitchen.

Hedone Restaurant might be just another suburban midlife crisis except that Mikael Jönsson is not your ordinary guy. He's a prickly visionary with a food-fixated personality disorder. His idea of excellence is ferociously purist: there can be no great food without great ingredients. In Mikael's world, if it isn't extraordinary, it's execrable. His bread is made with wild yeast starter, his pigeons must be hand-strangled to retain the blood, his fish must never touch ice and would ideally be speared through the head. The poulet noir or frozen gambas de Denia that some chefs proudly showcase on their menus is good for nothing but stock.

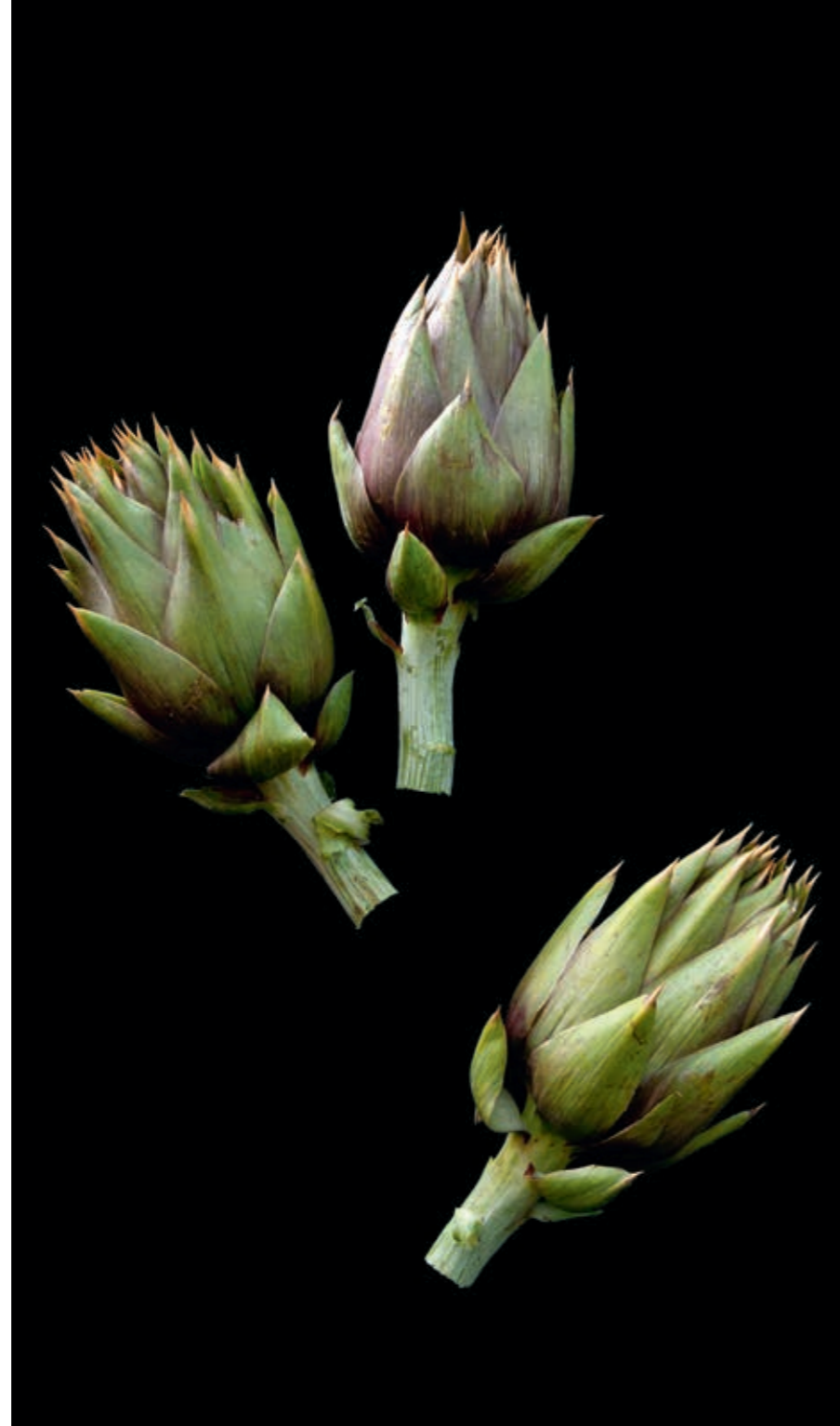
Notorious in online food forums for his outspoken opinions and uncompromising standards, Mikael would crucify some of the world's best-regarded restaurants for serving mediocre produce with more attention to flashy technique than ingredient quality. Many a harassed chef has come away from an argument with him muttering, "Let's see you do better, punk." Now Mikael is giving other keyboard cowboys some-

thing to blog about and London chefs a run for their money.

Mikael has a thing about defying conventional wisdom. He had never been a professional chef and had never lived in the UK, yet he decided to open a cerebral temple dedicated to rarefied ingredients in a boring West London suburb. Makes perfect sense - if you are insane. A gifted amateur cook, Mikael has dedicated his life to the relentless pursuit of culinary knowledge about the world's best ingredients. He left his native Sweden and his successful law career to live and eat and blog in his

beloved France. I suspect one reason he moved from Monaco to Malta was to be nearer the tuna migration.

His investigations often lead him to the counterintuitive, even the controversial. Think all fish is better as fresh as possible? Think again. With the kind of single-minded precision usually reserved for particle physics or cancer research, Mikael will conduct experiments on adenosine triphosphate levels, storage temperatures, and rigor mortis to determine the best moment to cook a fish after it has been caught. He will age a turbot for at least a week to 10 days,



"I DON'T KNOW WHAT HEDONE MEANS OR HOW TO PRONOUNCE IT, BUT I DO KNOW THAT MIKAEL HAS A VERY SPECIAL WAY OF SOURCING, PREPARING AND PRESENTING FOOD."

Anonymous online comment



and he won't touch a Dover sole until it has rested 4 days between -2 and -1°C. The huge scallops, on the other hand, are so alive that they may wriggle off the plate when touched and are sweet enough to be dessert. Other restaurants in town offer day-boat hand-dived scallops but not like his, still angrily snapping at his fingers as he prises them from their shells.

Remarkably, this shy, foreign upstart manages to source better ingredients than most native-born British chefs. He spent the year before opening He-

done searching out the best the UK has to offer and then uses all his culinary ingenuity to make them even better. I had given up on world-class fish as extinct in London until Mikael proved it had been here all along - pearlescent, juicy turbot, pristine mackerel, fantastic cod. Already, the local fishermen have Hedone on speed dial. If they make a particularly good catch, they will text him the photo straight from the boat. Today, a 13kg monster turbot will be bled and handled to his OCD specifications. One thing for sure: the man French food writer Sophie Brissaud



calls the Viking Culinaire would not be doing New Nordic. It's also a mistake to pigeonhole him as a "Swedish" chef. Mikael might technically hail from a small Swedish town known for Volvos, smoked eel, and Absolut vodka, but he has no interest in riding the media trend for identity politics on the plate. The novelty of Gotland summer truffle might impress foreigners on the Grand Tour to Noma, but Mikael knows them well enough to prefer Périgord.

Good ingredients usually don't travel well, but he has not jumped onto the locavore bandwagon either - if only because Mikael does not do bandwagons on principle. While trendy chefs are limiting themselves to food foraged from their own postcode, Mikael limits himself to the best ingredients he can find. If he is not happy with the produce on these cold, foggy islands, he'll have choice ingredients shipped directly from Paris' Rungis market, within easy reach over the English Channel.

Mikael can no more be boxed into arbitrary regional boundaries than could his pillaging Viking ancestors. Perhaps both launched their longboats for the same reason: to find the best food they could get their hands on.

Another cardinal rule Mikael ignored was "location, location, location." Hedone is too far from the center for all but the most motivated diners, and even those act like they need a passport to get there. Hedone looks like

a neighborhood joint, only it's in the wrong neighborhood. The few passersby look mystified by the menu. (Duck egg "Meurette"? Albenga purple asparagus?) Others hesitate at the prices: 4 courses for £50, 5 for £60, or a 7-course tasting menu for £75. Pretty steep compared to the £10 Lebanese menu on offer next door. Local hoodies stare in fascinated horror at a pile of dead woodcocks through the window. When Mikael tried to stop another gang from peeing on the side door,

they stabbed him in the face and arm.

But Mikael never intended to run a modest local bistro. As someone who has lived and eaten all over the globe, the borderless Internet is perhaps his logical home. Gastronomically speaking, he has a nouvelle French soul with a Zen intensity of focus, Nordic cool, and blood hot enough to be Spanish. Hedone should fit right into multicultural London.



"Hedone is from the Greek word for pleasure and for your food nerd, this is close to Nirvana. Regular punters? I'm not so sure."

Marina O'Loughlin, *Metro*

For Mikael, the main advantage of the Chiswick site was that every table is a chef's table. It isn't just an open kitchen - the kitchen practically invades the dining room. The short distance from kitchen to table means not only better food but also more immediate communication between chef and diner. He can see every customer, and the customers can feast their eyes on the magnificent produce he is playing with, whether it is a trophy turbot, a pristine Spikey artichoke, or an impromptu puppet show with a crested Bresse capon. At Hedone, show-stopping ingredients take center stage.

Ironically, Mikael's penchant for bucking trends puts Hedone in the trend-setting vanguard. By breaking all the rules for a successful London restaurant, he has anticipated the new direction of fine dining: less formal, deceptively simple, with a focus on product rather than process. The only mantra is simply excellence. After the gimmicky excesses of molecular gastronomy and the smug political correctness of locovormism, it's the restaurant many of us want to eat in right now.

As a rule, London dining is more about quantity than quality and theatrics over subtlety. It takes guts and unusual maturity in a novice chef to let great ingredients simply speak for themselves, but is anyone listening? Apparently, yes. Equally mad for an ambitious London opening, there was no initial PR besides his blog, *Gastroville.com*, and a few well-placed rumors on the Internet. Nobody knows better than a blogger how short the runway has become to launch a new restaurant in the Internet age. In fact, when PRs approached Mikael with campaign proposals, he said he'd pay them to keep the critics at bay until he was ready.

This strategy backfired - or worked, depending on how you look at it. Within days, even hours, of opening Hedone, the blogosphere was buzzing that something special was happening among the pizza and fish'n'chip takeaways on Chiswick High Street.

The word on the street quickly percolated to exalted professional circles. Superchefs like Alain Ducasse and Fulvio Pierangelini were among the first to check out the new kid on the block. Mauro Colagreco, who still remembers how hard it was to please Mikael when



he had just opened Mirazur in Menton, relished the thought of having the tables turned. Rather than being intimidated, Mikael was confident in the surprisingly wonderful products he has managed to find or import in the UK. Rank-and-file London chefs were stunned that his fish do not come prepped and his birds still have their heads, entrails, and often feathers.

The professional critics rushed to "discover" Hedone. The paint had barely dried when London's tastemakers started spilling ink in generally breathless admiration for Hedone's minimalist, ingredient-driven cooking. When *Sun-*

day Times reviewer AA Gill gave Hedone a rare 5/5 perfect rating after a mere 3 months, the floodgates opened. Hedone began winning best new restaurant awards and unusually precocious international media attention. (The Italian print edition of *Cook_inc.* first covered Hedone within months of its opening.) And just after Hedone celebrated its first anniversary, it was awarded a Michelin star.

Such an idiosyncratic restaurant needs a very particular kind of customer, and Mikael is keen to find them. Mikael sometimes grouses that the reviews and Michelin awards have brought in

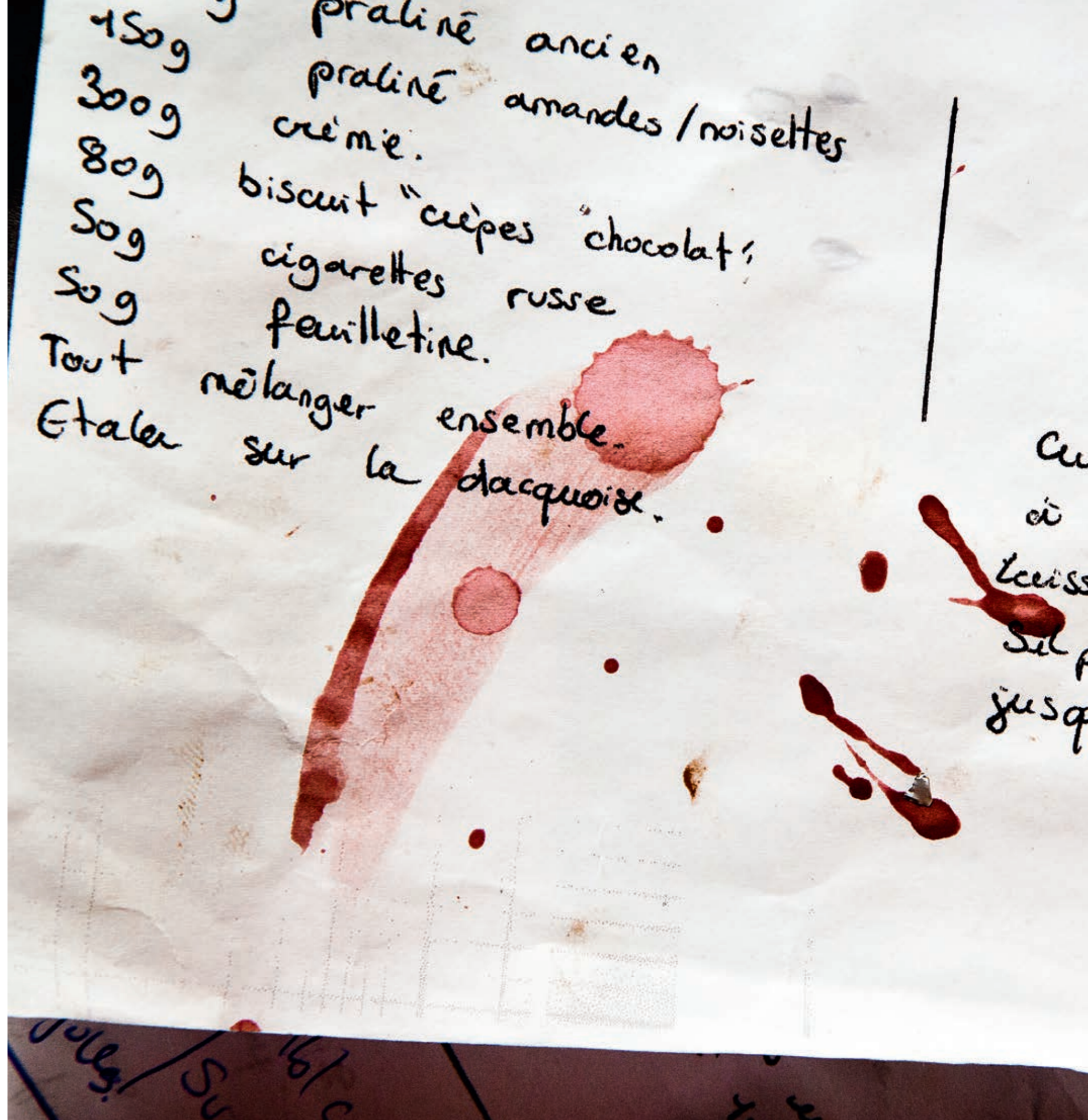
masses of customers who do not "get it." Some people, it seems, question the idea of paying hefty prices for a roasted onion. Hedone is redefining the way chefs connect with their target audience in the age of social media. Post it, retweet it, and they will come - from Europe and the US, Japan, maybe even East London. Mikael has created the ideal bricks-and-mortar hangout for an international online community.

In his online rhetoric Mikael has always been an uncompromising idealist, but in practice he turns out to be a savvy entrepreneur with a gift for controversy. Much to the chagrin of some who would have liked to see him eat his words, he adapts to restaurant realities without sacrificing his principles, even on days when the vegetables or the new pastry chef don't turn up.

He is also one hell of a cook.

Question is, is he a great chef? Time will tell, as Mikael develops his own style and struggles to build a strong team. Ironically, Mikael finds it difficult to give Hedone an objective Gastroville rating right now. As a blogger, he excoriated Michelin's rating system, but as a new chef-proprietor, he has come to recognize the power of traditional media - and, perhaps, the inadvisability of hasty blogger pronouncements online. One would think that the Michelin award would hush the arguments, but not so.

Making the leap from Internet chat room to professional kitchen was a daring move. Taking the London food establishment by storm was the easy part - those of us who know him took the breathless rave reviews of the mainstream media for granted. The unruly blogosphere is less unanimous in its accolades, but Mikael is a hardened veteran of heated debates and flame wars. The toughest standard he has to live up to is his own.





Cévennes onion with onion beurre blanc and pear shavings

Of all the dishes at Hedone, the Cévennes onion with onion beurre blanc and sliced pear has become a litmus test of opinion among the twitterati. Those who love The Onion will likely rave about the restaurant in general. It is also the dish most often cited by those who disliked Hedone as the dish least exciting or most confusing or overpriced. Like all of Mikael's dishes, the utter simplicity of the preparation leaves nowhere to hide any flaws in ingredient quality or cooking. No two onions are created equal, so there are days when this dish is merely intriguing, others where it is sublime. Naturally, success depends on the sweetness and tenderness of the onion. There is an English grower who produces the same variety, but Mikael prefers AOP ones from France.

For the onion

2 kg Cévennes onions
lemon juice
sliced underripe pears,
preferably Red Williams

Cook whole, unpeeled Cévennes onions in a steam oven for 30 minutes at 100°C and 100% steam. The onion should be tender but still have an al dente bite. Reserve 1 kg of the cooked onions for the sauce, and carefully slice the rest into sixths or quarters, leaving a bit of the stem end to keep the slices together. Baste the cut onions with lemon juice.

For the onion beurre blanc

1 kg Cévennes onions,
cooked as above
250 g butter
1 dl lemon juice
salt

Juice the cooked onions and heat, reducing by half its volume. Beat in lemon juice to taste and butter, adjusting seasoning with salt. Blitz with Bamix to emulsify the sauce thoroughly before serving.

To serve

Serve the sliced onion with drizzled onion butter sauce, and garnish with thin shavings of raw, barely ripe pear.



Broken Seagull Egg with Morels, Wild Garlic, and Slow-cooked Egg White Mayonnaise

Seagull eggs are an expensive and rare Nordic delicacy. Duck eggs are an alternative.

For the seagull or duck eggs

2 seagull or duck eggs

Place 2 whole eggs in a water bath at 62.0°C for two hours. Remove the eggs from the shell and carefully separate the whites from the yolks. Reserve the egg whites to make the mayonnaise and keep the yolks whole for presentation.

For the pea veloute

Shell enough fresh peas to make 1 cup, reserving the pods separately. Place pods in water to cover, bring to a boil, and blitz with the cooking liquid to make pea pod bouillon. It should be very thin.

Blanch 1 cup shelled fresh peas in water to cover and sea salt. Strain and puree with a little pea pod bouillon. Pass through a sieve and season to taste.

For the wild garlic froth

*wild garlic leaves
vegetable stock
butter*

Blanch wild garlic leaves in salted water to cover. Strain and puree with vegetable stock to reach a very liquid consistency. Finish by stirring in a small amount of butter to the warm stock. Just before serving, gently reheat without letting it come to a boil, then froth the surface with a Bamix. Spoon up the froth to garnish the dish and serve immediately.

For the red pepper puree

*10 Romano red peppers
50ml each of sherry vinegar,
Banyuls vinegar, and Barolo vinegar
salt and 1 TB sugar*

Roast peppers for 30 minutes at 160-170°C, or until skin comes off easily. Peel the peppers and puree with a Bamix, leaving the texture still somewhat grainy. Add 50ml each of sherry vinegar, Banyuls vinegar, and Barolo vinegar, and adjust the seasoning with salt and 1 TB sugar.

For the mayonnaise

*2 slow-cooked seagull egg whites,
reserved from the first step
1.5 dl grapeseed oil
1 TB muscat vinegar
1 TB warm water
Salt to taste*

Have all ingredients at room temperature. Blitz all ingredients together with a Bamix stick blender until a thick emulsion forms.

To serve

pea sprouts

To plate the dish, place the whole slow-cooked seagull egg yolk in the center of the plate and top with a spoonful of red pepper puree. Garnish the dish with several spoonfuls of egg white mayonnaise, pea veloute, pea sprouts, and finally with the wild garlic froth.



Hedone dry-aged steak with baby carrots and caramelized shallots

Once again, on paper the recipe is almost nothing, certainly nothing revolutionary. On the plate, two modest slices of beef, cooked “crousti-bleu” as Mikael calls it, look decidedly underwhelming between a scrap of shallot and slivers of carrot.

The first mouthful tells the story. This is the essence of beef.

The secret to Hedone’s steak is the selection and aging of the beef before it even reaches the kitchen. A loin of Black Angus beef hand-picked by Mikael for its superior grain and marbling hangs in the cold storage caverns below O’Shea’s butcher shop in Knightsbridge, set aside by a sign which reads: “Hedone Restaurant—P.S. DO NOT FUCKING TOUCH.” Every week, Mikael drops in to cherry-pick his meat from the newest shipment and check how his other purchases are coming along. Expert butcher Darragh O’Shea is happy to humor Mikael’s whims, shifting his meat around to different places during the 60-70 day aging process, depending on the air circulation. He tells me that while he supplies many of London’s top restaurants, none are so hands-on about their orders.

On impulse, I decide to do a test to see if all this extra bother is worth the trouble. I buy a piece of O’Shea’s standard beef rump from the retail meat counter, dry-aged a respectable 45 days. I ask Mikael for a piece of his 69-day rump steak and cook both pieces at home to compare. The 45-day steak is excellent, but the Hedone beef is so far superior in marbling, tenderness, flavor, and juiciness that it seems impossible that they originated from the same supplier. Mikael’s meat has the rich complexity of long aging without a whiff of moldiness.

The hands-down winner, however, was the onglet, a little used cut that butchers often took home for themselves.





Woodcock

no recipe available





For the rhubarb sorbet

Cut up fresh rhubarb and macerate overnight with enough sugar to equal 5% of the weight of the rhubarb. Strain, measure the juices and add enough rhubarb pulp to equal half of the extracted juices. Freeze mixture in a Pacojet.

For the steamed rosewater meringue

The meringue is made with minimal sugar, powdered egg white, and fresh egg whites whipped in a mixer. Spread the meringue on a silpat, place over a pan of rosewater, and cook in a steam oven at 76°C for 7 minutes at full steam until the meringue is just softly set.

To serve

Standard crème anglaise mixed with fresh beetroot juice

Cut rounds of meringue and place on a pool of beet crème anglaise. Top with a quenelle of rhubarb sorbet, garnish with crystallized rhubarb and a rose petal.

Rose, rhubarb and beetroot ile flottante



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From Virtual to Reality

In 2005, Mikael began publishing thought-provoking reviews of the world's top restaurants on Gastroville.com, the blog he co-founded with Turkish critic Vedat Milor. On Internet foodie forums, he already cut an outspoken and polemical figure who was difficult to please. At a Stravaganza event showcasing many of the best chefs in Sicily, I feared for his life when he publicly excoriated every dish presented. Had he never heard of Cosa Nostra? To be fair, he's the kind of guy who would render horse fat in his apartment kitchen for his French fries, so he expects nothing less from professionals. As many chefs will tell you, Mikael Jönsson is one tough customer.

By 2009, Mikael was more interested in his own cooking than in blogging about the cooking of others. His partner Vedat Milor left Gastroville to launch his own blog and a career as a professional critic. Gastroville became a solo platform for Mikael to publish his findings about the best ingredients and the best way to prepare them. Truth be told, the revamped Gastroville would stagnate for months. But every now and then, he would post ideas and photos of produce so tantalizing they should be illegal.

Suddenly, in May 2011, he astonished us all by announcing on Gastroville that he was opening Hedone in London. "He's been talking about it for years," Vedat says. "To be honest, I stopped listening. I told him I wasn't his shrink." But this time Mikael was putting his money where his mouth is and signing a lease. Things moved fast. Throughout June, Mikael kept us posted on the breathless progress of turning a seedy suburban nightclub into the restaurant of his dreams.

Hedone opened July 1, and I barely recognized Mikael when I walked in. Thanks to a radical Swedish diet, he had lost 30 kg, his crippling allergies, and his chronic discontent. He was transfigured with pure joy. After 44 years, he was finally in his element.

Naturally, Hedone's soft opening showed rough edges, but the potential was obvious even then. Downstairs was still under construction, there was



no toilet paper in the bathroom, and Mikael had still not completely figured out how to use his shiny new kitchen toys. He still produced the best lobster I have ever tasted in my entire life. He had asked for newly molted females from his supplier, who was probably bemused by his long wish list of other requirements: netted lobsters of specific species and origin that had not done too much time in a trap or tank. Mikael served it, almost still alive, with vanilla-smoked new potatoes and an insanely wicked coral sauce. It was not simply reinvention of a classic: it was revelation.

I have since had many other meals, including other excellent lobster, at Hedone. Almost everything else has improved by leaps and bounds, but that

first lobster remains my reference for all lobsters for the rest of my life. There is no sauce like the taste of a lifelong dream come true. And after posting about that momentous first night, the Gastroville blog screen went blank. Mikael had gone live.

De gustibus non disputandum est.

Hedone

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"THE ONION DISH IS ABOUT TAKING SOMETHING REALLY SIMPLE AND MAKING IT LUXURIOUS."

Mikael Jönsson