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The inside story of the world's most exclusive ingredient

At £23 a bottle, is Noma's first-ever product a wonder sauce or just Michelin-starred Marmite? Our taster finds out

By Michael Booth

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Most celebrity chefs attempt a commercial cash-in at some point. Titans of French

cuisine, Joel Robuchon and Paul Bocuse, already had their own ranges of ready meals back in the 1980s, and since then we've witnessed Marco Pierre White's evangelical zeal for stock cubes, Heston Blumenthal's Christmas Pudding, Gordon Ramsay's cheap Korean beer, and is there anything Jamie Oliver *hasn't* endorsed?

Now it is the turn of René Redzepi, founder of Copenhagen's fabled Noma, named the best restaurant in the world a record five times, including last year when it was also awarded its third Michelin star. But, as you would expect from the restaurant that brought us live ants as a garnish and where I was once served a deeply perplexing dessert made out of plankton, Noma's first commercial product is rather more unusual.

"Ferments are at the soul of every flavour we make," Redzepi announced to the world via the Zoom launch of Noma's Smoked Mushroom Garum last week. "We've used ferments for years – made from seafood, meats, vegetables, smoked, not smoked."

He might also have mentioned their experiments with fermented insects and reindeer penis, but what is a 'smoked mushroom garum'? I visited the restaurant, located in a bucolic urban garden beside the city moat, to find out.

The Romans made garum 2,000 years ago by leaving anchovies to liquify in salt; the same process is used to make Asian fish sauces to this day. But no fish are harmed in the manufacture of Noma's vegan-friendly version. To kick-start the fermentation of the organic mushrooms they use a cultivated mould, koji, which originates in Japan where it is used to make soy sauce, miso paste, sake and other fermented products.

"We chose mushroom garum as our first product because it was something we have used for many years, and we knew we could make it here in the kitchen," explains Thomas Frebel, Noma's creative director, pouring a little of the sauce into a sherry glass for me to taste. In one month they processed five tonnes of mushrooms and made 600kg of their own koji rice 'cake' inoculated with the koji spores (having to explain to the Danish food authorities what koji actually was along the way), before leaving it for a five week fermentation, cold smoking the resulting strained liquid over birch wood.

I take a deep sniff. I'm getting... "Marmite?" I venture. Luckily Frebel laughs.

"Australians here have said 'Vegemite'." I take a sip: it's much smoother than Marmite,

rounded, balanced, remarkably savoury, with a light smokey-umami finish which lingers like a good *pho*, the Vietnamese broth. One could almost drink it neat, not something you'd want to do with Maggi sauce.

Frebel explains that from the many hundreds of foods and flavours Noma has innovated over the past nearly 20 years, they initially whittled down 90 for a tasting session. Of those, the garum was chosen because, as Frebel says, "Whatever I cook with it, it just tastes of *more*", it is especially good at lending vegetables a savoury heft apparently.



The expensive bottle of Garum

They also felt it would be easy for home cooks to use, except that, first of all they have to explain what it is, and how to use it. “Yes, it would have been so much easier if we had just done a Noma ketchup or mustard,” laughs Noma's COO, Annika de Las Heras. “But this is the best way we have of sharing the taste of Noma with a broader public.” Several recipes have been developed too, now posted on their website.

De Las Heras explained there will be more food products to come (so far secret, but I reckon a seasoning and perhaps a vinegar are next), but Noma Projects will also encompass media- and educational projects. As I leave Noma, Redzepi pops his head out of one of the greenhouses and beckons me in to meet the team from Apple TV, with whom he is currently planning a new series, Omnivore, to be directed by Cary Fukunaga (director of the last Bond film, 'No Time To Die').

At home, members of my family sniff the bottle of Noma sauce with varying degrees of suspicion, pronouncing the aroma variously as 'Like soy sauce' and 'Yeasty', but also 'Sweaty feet' but all enjoy the celeriac soup I make with a couple of tablespoons of Noma's garum added towards the end, when I might otherwise dash in some Worcestershire sauce or a good pinch of MSG. The colour is not ideal for a light soup, but the Noma garum definitely brings more depth and roundness.

As with everything Danish, the garum is expensive (around £23 for 250ml), but given that a meal at Noma costs £330 a head – if you can secure a reservation – I suspect demand for the 10,000 bottles will far outstrip supply.

The smoked mushroom garum will be available from March 1 at nomaprojects.com

One pot chicken and rice



One pot chicken and rice | CREDIT: Cory Smith

At Noma Projects we want to help you figure out how to use garum! Recipe developed by Nadine Levy Redzepi and chef Kevin Jeung.

Serves

Four

Cook time

1 hour

Ingredients

60g vegetable oil

4 chicken thighs, boneless, skin on

Sea salt

140g onion, finely chopped

3 cloves garlic, minced

15g tomato paste

60g white miso

15g smoked paprika

600g vegetable broth (or other broth; water is also ok)

80g smoked mushroom garum

10g salt

200g short grain rice

10g parsley, finely chopped

200g mayonnaise

1 clove garlic, micro-planed

Method

- 1 In a wide, shallow pan, add the vegetable oil and place over medium-high heat. Season the chicken thighs generously with the sea salt. When the oil begins to shimmer, carefully add the chicken thighs to the pan, skin-side down. Sear the chicken for a few minutes, or until the skins have turned deep brown and crispy. Remove the chicken from the pan and set aside on a plate. Reduce the heat to low.
- 2 Add the onion and garlic to the pan and cook until the onions are soft and translucent. Stir in the tomato paste and cook for 5 minutes, or until the mixture takes on a rusty brown color. Add the vegetable broth, salt, smoked mushroom garum, and miso and increase the heat to high, stirring to evenly combine the ingredients.
- 3 When the liquid begins to boil, add the short grain rice, and stir briefly just to make sure the rice is in an even layer. From this point, do not stir the rice for the duration of the cooking.
- 4 Turn the liquid down to a simmer, add the chicken thighs to the pan with the raw,

flesh side down. Continue to cook the rice at a steady simmer until the liquid has cooked out and the rice is tender. Continue cooking the contents just until the smell of burnt rice becomes detectable. Turn off the stove and let the pan sit, off the heat, for 5 minutes. Garnish with chopped parsley.

5 Combine the mayonnaise with garlic and mix well.

6 Using a spatula, scoop portions of rice onto your plate, making sure to scrape up the crispy layer of rice from the bottom of the pan. Top each portion with chicken. Serve the rice and chicken with a spoonful of garlic mayonnaise and enjoy!

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