

SMÖRGÅSCHEF, NEW YORK

The beer is Danish, the meatballs Swedish, the salmon Norwegian and the shrimp from Iceland. Finnish licorice is also available. It doesn't get much more Scandinavian than this – Smörgåschef, with three locations in Manhattan has become one of the pan-Scandinavian meeting points in the Big Apple.

Its owner and executive chef, Norwegian Morten Sohlberg, opened the doors to the first restaurant with his wife Min Ye about three years ago. The concept has been quite successful and whether visiting Wall Street, bustling midtown or trendy Greenwich Village, an open-faced shrimp sandwich is never far away.

Part of the reason for their success is Sohlberg's attention to detail. A designer by education, he takes great care in planning, designing, or even creating the interiors of his restaurants. Wooden floors, exposed brick walls, Scandinavian art photographs on the walls and creative details such as utensils, or Ramlösa bottle lamps and a whole wall of

– earlier served – Ramösa bottles, Sohlberg has created a unique and cozy feel.

And food, just as design, is a visual art form, says Sohlberg.

"After having been a designer for many years, I knew I wanted to get into a more tactile and people-friendly business," he says. "My wife and I wanted to open a restaurant, looked at different locations and found the original Stone Street restaurant and since then, things simply took off."

Scandinavian food in general might not have been the hottest ticket in town, but Sohlberg saw that as great potential.

"It's unexplored, and even though it's perceived as healthy, hearty and exotic not too many people really know what Scandinavian food entails," Sohlberg says. "It's also not as easily definable as, say, Italian food with its pizza and pasta. Then again, of course, IKEA has done much to educate Americans about Swedish meatballs."

Sohlberg says he wants to commercialize Scandinavian cuisine by being a positive ambassador and bring out pure, fresh food.

"The object is not to scare people with true Scandinavian food that might not appeal to a broader audience – that doesn't work – but we constantly try new dishes," he says. "We have introduced a milder version of Janssons Frestelse which is enjoyed alongside certain meat dishes."

Sohlberg says he makes sure his staff is involved in coming up with new dishes. Everyone pitches in by going to the library and leafing through cookbooks. They then bring back recipes and discuss and try the findings, he says.

"I think if the waiter is happy, it will show when he serves the customer," Sohlberg says. "Back home, the gap between the waiter and the customer is not that big, and I want to keep it like that. When my staff is happy, the customer will be happy."

For more info on Smörgåschef, see: www.smorgaschef.com



BAKED COD

with lemongrass and lingonberries, served with fingerling potatoes (Serves 4)

FISH STOCK

All of the bones and/or the head of the codfish (as little skin as possible)

1 celery stalk
1/2 white onion
1 cup of white wine
1 quart of bottled or filtered water

Let simmer on low heat for about 20-30 minutes while you prepare the sauce and the pan. You will get more than you will need for the sauce, which can be used for soup or other sauces. The stock freezes well like all high liquid foods. Now is a good time to boil the potatoes, 2-3 per person.

LEMONGRASS SAUCE

2 medium-to-large shallots (coarsely chopped)
2 oz fresh chopped lemongrass
2 stems fresh thyme (remove stems)
1 stem rosemary (remove stem)
1 tbs olive oil

Sautee the ingredients until the shallots are soft but before they start turning brown.

1 cup white wine
1 cup of the fish stock

Add the wine and the stock to the shallot mix and let boil for another 10-12 minutes

2 Cups Heavy Cream
4oz of raw cod meat (use the tail piece if possible)

Add the cream and let boil for about 20 minutes on low heat before you add the cod meat. Add the cod and let cook another 2 minutes. Add salt and freshly ground pepper to taste and please be generous with the pepper – nothing is more boring than bland fish. Use sea salt or kosher salt. Then cool slightly, and blend (almost puree) the sauce in a blender or mixer. Finally press everything through a strainer, so you are left with a smooth liquid sauce.

PREPARATION

Use an oven-safe pan, about 10x10 inches square, 1 1/2 - 2 inches deep.
5-6 oz spinach
2 medium tomatoes (as ripe a possible), sliced
Grated Parmesan cheese
The Cod filets, 24oz
1/2 cup Felix Lingonberry Preserve

Sautee the spinach in butter with a little salt, chopped lightly (1 inch lengths). Butter the pan and distribute the tomato slices, then as a second layer distribute the spinach. Layer the cod filets evenly and pour the sauce over everything (you want the fish to stay emerged like islands, not submerged). Sprinkle the cod with Parmesan cheese, and put in the oven for 10-15 minutes. Make sure the sauce is boiling well and that the fish comes apart easily when you put a fork through it. You can broil it for a few of the last minutes to get a slightly brown color on top.

Pour the Felix Lingonberry preserve over the fish and a little parsley or mint for garnish, let cool a little and serve!

Chef Sohlberg's comments:

You need about two pounds of fresh cod with head

and bones. Makes sure the raw cod smells good and that the gills are bright red. You can ask your fish vendor to skin and filet the fish for you, but make sure you take the bones and head for the stock. Clean the parts of the fish you are using for the stock thoroughly in cold water.

Serve with boiled fingerling potatoes. Start making the Fish Stock so you prepare everything else while it boils and reduces.

Preheat oven to 400 F Degrees. Read over the recipe twice before you start.

A note when using wine in sauce:

Always use good wine; "if you would not drink the wine with your food, do not use it in the food. I always use nice French Chablis for white sauces or stocks in my restaurants.