

Fantasy Island

Tiny Lummi Island makes a play for the culinary big time. **BY JOE RAY**

CHANGE COMES SLOWLY to the San Juan Islands, and Lummi is the slowest-paced of them all. So when farmer, fisherman and innkeeper Riley Starks hired a chef from Copenhagen he'd never met to run the kitchen at his Willows Inn, it was unexpected.

The chef, Blaine Wetzel, officially began making his mark in February with a relaunch of the inn's restaurant. He's a long way from Noma, René Redzepi's Danish gastronomic temple where the 24-year-old whiz kid spent 18 months as the chef de partie. It was a fruitful sojourn—during Wetzel's tenure Noma was named the top restaurant in the world, stealing the crown from Catalan superchef Ferran Adrià's El Bulli.

Noma is known as the birthplace of the New Nordic movement—refining and redefining Nordic cuisine with regional products and making extensive use of foraging, a process Wetzel is bringing to his new home. He's on a hunt to define a flavour particular to Lummi, pulling sorrel, woodruff, mushrooms, yarrow and wild pea tips from the ground for that evening's meal.

"Foraging doesn't define the cuisine, but it's one element," he says. "It adds to the feel of the island.

"The chefs I like are the ones that are so damn honest," he adds, channelling his inner Dale Cooper. "It's a skilled hand and high quality. There's no chemistry in the bag."

Much of the quality comes from Willows owner Starks, who banked the future of his inn on Wetzel's ability. Starks is a lifelong fisherman, now specializing in reef-netting salmon, and founder of the five-acre Nettles Farm—where there's a mangalitsa pig that will join the offer-



Chef Blaine Wetzel has traded in the international clientele of Copenhagen's Noma to take over Lummi's Willows Inn.

ings once Starks works up the will to kill it. All of his best fish and produce comes straight to the kitchen. He's been on the water long enough that his fishing buddies give him first pick from their catch. On the island, he sources grass-fed beef from Lummi farmer Phil Tucker and pork and fowl from Koraley Orritt on nearby Whidbey Island. The inn buys Orritt's entire production.

Wetzel has wasted no time in becoming a chef to watch on the West Coast. A dish of wild mushrooms, fresh cheese and woodruff sets the painters at one table talking about the best meals of their lives. Some local fungi—black



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the goods eats



Local Lummi bounty.

truffle, chanterelle, hedgehog and black trumpet—are arranged on a base of watercress sauce with a pudding-like thickness and a colour that looks like it's been squeezed from a paint tube. The dish becomes a miniature landscape.

Wetzel's is a subtle cuisine: Dungeness crab meat wrapped in milk skin and studded with radish slivers. There's a brave simplicity and a mature style that belie his age. "We get crabs brought in that day and radishes from the farm. The two things go together naturally," says Wetzel. "You don't need anything else." *wl*

MEET THE WORLD'S BEST RESTAURANT

Jaws dropped when the little Copenhagen restaurant that could, Noma, stole top honours from five-time winner El Bulli at the S. Pellegrino World's 50 Best Restaurants this past year. Noma's winning approach to Nordic food is based on chef Renee Redzepi's stoic reliance on regional ingredients: musk ox from Greenland, langoustines from the Faroe Islands, rare wild plants and berries scoured from the Danish countryside. The 20-course dinner menu that wowed judges held surprises like turbot with unripened pickled elderberries, barley and birch syrup, and a flowerpot of earth and seedlings—actually radishes in roasted hazelnuts. The title clincher? Homemade spirits, and the view of the Copenhagen harbour from the restaurant's quay-side perch on Christianshavn Island. —*Taraneh Ghajar Jerven*

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