

SAVEUR

Sharing the Best of the Web

Dec 16, 2010

A Scandinavian Julbord Christmas

By Helen Rosner

The Scandinavian *Smörgåsbord* is a thing of beauty: a long table overloaded with robustly flavored meats, fish, cheeses, and breads, epitomizing the Nordic palate. The spirit of the the *smörgåsbord* crashes headfirst into the holiday season with its cousin the *julbord*, a Christmas spread that's so complex, some home cooks will start work on dinner literally a month ahead of time. "If you're hard-core with your Christmas table, there are books that guide you through all of December," explains Marcus Jernmark, the Swedish-born chef at New York City's *Aquavit* restaurant. "There's really something you can do every day up until Christmas eve: you start infusing your *aquavit* on December 1, you start curing your fish on December 2."

While there's room on the *julbord* for family or regional variations on the classics, the actual selection of dishes tends not to stray too far

from the traditional menu. At the center is the *julskinka*, a ham that's been boiled with aromatics and then baked with glaze and breadcrumbs. Surrounding that are seasonal dishes like [herring and beet salad](#); [Jansson's temptation](#), an anchovy-studded potato gratin; and, of course, the infamous *lutefisk* — a dish of lye-cured cod so widely reviled that the state of Wisconsin famously [made explicit in law](#) that it does *not* qualify as a "toxic substance." In Sweden, "*lutefisk* is more of a concept than an actual food," says Jernmark. The harsh fish preparation is almost obsolete in its home country — though it still has a thriving fan base in Minnesota, the world leader in *lutefisk* production. On the *julbord*, you're just as likely to see something that picks up components of the traditional preparation in a slightly easier-to-palate version. "The flavor profile is actually quite good," Jernmark says. Riffing on the traditional accompaniments of green peas and an allspice-flavored bechamel, he uses brined, poached fresh cod instead of the "jellyfish-like" lye-cured classic.

At *Aquavit*, Jernmark serves a traditional *julbord* during the month of December, bringing in both holiday-happy diners and expat Scandinavians who miss the taste of home. He serves versions of *julbord* cuisine that he considers to be epitomes of their form: "For me, it doesn't make any sense to try to tell my story of the Swedish traditions," he says. "People are coming to *Aquavit* for the true story of what Scandinavian food is all about."



[VIEW GALLERY](#)

Photo: Maxime Iattoni