

A changing global gastroscape – looking into what’s cooking worldwide.

It is hardly a big surprise that top-end restaurants present as the most trend sensitive. This is one of the conclusions of the first-ever global trend survey, mapping the currents in gastronomy. And what top-end restaurants do today, mainstream will do – or try to do – tomorrow. By then top-end will have moved on to the next big thing. Such is the logic of the changing gastroscape.

By Lars Peder Hedberg

••••

Are there really global trends in food and beverage?

Yes! This can finally be concluded after analysing the first global trend survey, performed in March/April 2011. Glazed pork belly is being served in Singapore, New York, Milan and Sao Paulo. Unoaked chardonnay is flooding the tables in Cape Town, Copenhagen and Sydney. In fact, many cities—all foodie capitals in their respective region—surprise with their similar eating and drinking patterns that geographical distances would logically defy.

Experts from all over the world contributed to this unique survey, aiming to map the currents of today’s gastronomy in terms of what is offered in the world’s better restaurants today, and what is likely to be offered tomorrow. The survey was carried out in close cooperation with the Electrolux Academy of World’s 50 Best Restaurants, whose votes result in the yearly S. Pellegrino World’s 50 Best Restaurants list. No other group could supply a better map for the global gastroscape and its changing topography than this panel of experts.

Local is big – globally

Some themes and trends come through as more or less general all across the key categories—mainstream; top-end; trendsetters. The keynote in today’s gastronomy is definitely LOCAL, almost to the point of being a cult. This is both paradoxical and fortunate, as this major global trend secures a rich global, local variety. Indeed, if the worn-out term “glocal” still applies anywhere it would be in the field of gastronomy. What is typical for a region in terms of produce and cooking styles – regardless of where – attracts locals as well as visitors and it covers the whole spectrum from simple eating establishments to the more exclusive.

In the more advanced gastro-regions local translates into “terroir”; the unique, often unexploited and sometimes even unexplored flora and fauna that most regions source locally. “Foraging” is the buzzword here, at least among the trendier top-end establishments.

Authenticity and origin is another dominant trend closely associated with the cult of local. Basically it’s about quality. Freshness is a fundamental quality factor in most food and, when sourced locally, freshness takes on a cache of credibility. If you can identify the origin, the farm, or even the farmer and weave a little story around it all you can achieve even greater “cred”. Indeed, storytelling is a growing phenomenon in the topend.

In addition, sourcing locally is appealing from an environmental standpoint. What affects the health of the planet seems to be much easier to understand and agree upon than what affects ones own

health. Surprisingly enough, and despite the mushrooming of “eating awareness”, health is not a predominant theme. Furthermore, offering vegetarian options is much less common in all categories than could be expected.

“Informal” gaining ground on “formal”

Traditional “fine dining” – the classic, ritualistic model – is generally on the retreat, while “fun dining” – emphasising a feel-good experience, with accompanying vibrant social atmosphere and exciting eating and drinking – is generally on the advance.

Certainly there are important regional and local differences. Traditional luxury and bling is still on the rise in developing and nouveau riche markets, not only on plates but in the fixtures and fittings too, while more mature and sophisticated markets move towards a new “simplicity”. Don’t be fooled though, this simplicity is often only skin-deep because some extraordinary and quite exclusive ingredients, as well as sophisticated cooking techniques go into achieving it.

The ascendancy of “fun dining” also extends to restaurant concepts. Bistronomy, gastro-pubs, foodie lounges, ateliers, star establishment mini-siblings attest to this burgeoning accessible gastronomy scene, where good food can be enjoyed by more people, more often. This trend was obviously boosted by the financial crises in 2008/09, when many leading restaurateurs were forced to switch to more inclusive and informal formats, or at least spin-offs to support their main establishment. But the expansion of this more relaxed gastro scene does not seem to have slowed down as the economy has bounced back; quite the reverse in fact. Casual, fun dining, with a genuine focus on good and exciting food, is simply too successful.

Standing-up eating is a trend to watch, not only according to the contributing Spanish experts in the survey. Undeniably the tapas concept is spreading and it’s perfect for mingling, socializing and having fun when eating. It is a clear sign of the times that Ferran Adrià is pulling down the shutters on his monumentally successful three-starred El Bulli (not that it was in any respect dull), while opening the doors of his new and innovative ‘Tickets’ tapas and cocktail bar in Barcelona.

Innovation taking a detour

Traditional versus innovative cooking is another complex area – especially when it comes to the local cult and the booming terroir trend, with its strong historical undercurrent. Foraging allows for rediscovering “forgotten” primary products, used by past generations that could not rely on long-distance imports to counter short seasons of bounty. Many experimental chefs return to traditional recipes and techniques only to reinvent them in contemporary and personal versions. It looks like “Grandma twisted” is one of the strongest upcoming phenomena we can expect.

Especially in Europe, North America and Australia “molecular” cooking is rapidly on the decline, if not already extinct. Many of its technical achievements will most certainly survive, but its techniques will fade into the background and no longer serve as conceptual gimmicks or show-stoppers. Today the focus is rather on natural flavours and textures, and the skillful chef knows how bring them out, in splendid isolation, or in combinations that enhance flavours. Top-end “subtle” tends to win over “powerful”, and seasoning is kept to a minimum, so as not to distort delicate flavours.

This trend correlates with the local paradigm of focusing on seasonality, and enjoying everything in its very prime. “Extreme seasonality”, as in advanced Japanese cooking, where some specialties can be enjoyed a few precious weeks only, or even days, is something to watch in several regions.

To a great extent local, natural and rustic is a reaction to global, molecular and artificial. *Local innovative* is the “cult style 2011” in the top-end category. Next we will probably see more of the same: “terroir” being a rich and as yet mostly unexplored resource.

True creativity and a personal approach to cooking is still what elevates a restaurant to the top tier. To be top-rated anywhere it has become increasingly important not only to be generally skillful with high typically expressed quality ingredients, but also to distinguish ones cooking through a more or less unique personal style, in a couple of signature dishes. “Chef’s signature style” is increasingly a top-end denominator.

The main course of mainstream

Apart from local traditional, “generic international” is the main thrust of the mainstream, driven as it is by demand. What is being served up mainstream must be able to support profitable business volumes. If people all over the world want sushi: sushi they will have, even if a Japanese sushi lover would be surprised and sometimes appalled at some of the creations being served under this label.

Informal eating dominates the category, whether in a bistro, brasserie, bar-lounge, pub or steakhouse setting. Meat dominates over fish and seafood, and prime cuts over lesser cuts, even if pork belly has migrated to being a cult cut all across the western hemisphere. Flavours are powerful rather than subtle.

Champagne or “bubbly” are the standard aperitifs. Wines are predominantly red, traditionally made and local if possible and the table water is bottled, local or imported and usually sparkling. Espresso is offered universally, and increasingly through Nespresso technology.

On top – and over the top

Today’s mainstream agenda reflects yesterday’s successful themes in the top-end category. And what top-end does today, mainstream will do – or try to do – tomorrow. By then top-end will have ventured on to what might become the next big thing. Such is the logic of the changing gastroscape.

Top-end is where “fine dining” resides, even if the direction today clearly is towards more fun. Fine, fun dining caters to the growing population of foodies that eat out more frequently as a vital part of their lifestyle. Traditional fine dining which is far too stuffy and ceremonial – not to mention pricey – for this category.

Local, organic and seasonal produce with clearly identified origins distinguish today’s top-end kitchens. Vegetables and fish/seafood dominate over meat. Sardine and mackerel are the top cult fish right now. And when it comes to meat, the focus is on lesser cuts and odd cuts “from nose to tail” (offal in Europe and partly Asia), game or exclusive breeds, such as Wagyu.

The kitchen may well be super high-tech, but the approach and presentation highlights the natural and artisanal. If molecular techniques are being used, they must not show. Simplistic artistry is preferred over the complex and the elaborate, even if the simplicity may well be fake. “Less cheffy” seems to be the new ideal. Slow cooking and low heat alternate with raw and high heat. Mastering sous-vide is essential. Flavours are delicate and subtle rather than loud and powerful and textures and surfaces are critical.

Plate presentation is still cardinal, but increasingly supplemented by cutting-boards and pots and pans, from where dishes are being finalized at the table. The chef himself often makes a personal appearance to add his magic final touch at the table.

Champagne or prosecco is still the archetypical aperitif, even when allowing for sommeliers proffering an artisanal beer or a signature concoction with or without alcohol. Wines are predominantly white, local and imported (France still enjoys a hegemony here that it has lost in gastronomy at large), with a growing share of “natural” (no additives) wines from small “garagista” producers. Espresso versions are offered at most top-end establishments, but along with estate coffees and increasingly, exclusive teas.

Into the next big thing

What comes next is always the big question. Some of the trends in the top-end category can be expected to evolve into the next phase, while at the same time siphoning down into mainstream. Local is far too big and rich not to grow in all directions, and we can look forward to new terroir specialties and oddities from all over the world. Foraging will turn into the historical route and “old veggies” and heirloom varieties will see a new dawn. Vegetarians will have a much easier life when vegetables continue to claim top billing. “Old species” livestock is also likely to be relaunched. And when it comes to fish, freshwater will be in focus, and local river fish in particular.

The demand for declaration of origin will continue to grow, resulting in AOC single estate oils and “single cow” butter and cheese. To really make a statement, table oils will tend to be non-olive (perhaps from apple seed or argan tree kernels) if not traceable to multi-centenarian olive groves or even individual trees. When it comes to vegetables, we will see more of the wild-grown, indigenous varieties. The demand for “sustainable wild” as well as “fair farmed” will increase across the board with growing awareness around sourcing. Artisanal beers will compete with natural white and red wines from small producers. Cocktails, and especially “twisted classics”, will challenge champagne and other bubbly as the preferred aperitifs. The signature barman and “mixologist” clearly are rising stars. Tap water, most likely filtered and possibly mineralized, will be a serious alternative to bottled water even in the best restaurants. Traditionally brewed coffee is also expected to make a comeback.

We’re not done with sourdough yet, and the craze will expand to odd grains and wild or ancient yeast cultures. “Bake and wait” will contribute to table entertainment as it already does in top-end restaurants as far apart as Tokyo and Stockholm. There will be more pots and pans on the table, and more action at and around the table, with a floating border between kitchen and dining room. Increasingly, cooking will take place in the eating area and eating in the cooking area. Involving guests in kitchen activity – or at least finalization at the table – seems to be inevitable. Bar seating, stand-up eating and communal tables will take a larger share of total guest space. At least part of the restaurant will be reserved for drop-in guests. No reservation is pinpointed almost universally as a next big phenomenon. The bar/lounge will gain ground as a common restaurant concept, offering relaxed comfort that facilitates socializing.

Supper clubs or pop-up restaurants are the natural extension of informal eating, focusing on interesting food, a temporary stage for talented cooks – usually sous-chefs – to make their own statements. Pop-ups have been around for some years, and are primed for making the move from obscure underground to the next big thing. World leading innovator in kitchen technology, Electrolux, recently launched *The Cube by Electrolux*, an ambulatory restaurant that literally pops up at spectacular locations all over Europe. It made its debut on a corner-top of the magnificent *Arc de*

Triomphe in Parc du Cinquantaire in Brussels in April. A second Cube is on the launch pad and the two will tour Europe with three month stop-overs.

But, we better watch out

In a couple of years, we might well be in for some real surprises, according to the reconnaissance in the “to watch” category. How about “neo-global” cooking – a new take on fusion? It would be the logical thing when we have all grown tired of local and the escalating terror of terroir.

The cult around natural and artisanal might also recoil into hard-core high-tech. Will even genetically modified food become more accepted? Many speculate in that direction. If you can improve hardiness and prolong seasons you will reduce stress on the planet caused by unnecessary transportation, and have a better capability to feed a growing population.

There is also a growing scientific tilt when it comes to beverages. “Designer mineral waters”, where you compose the mineral profile to fit the menu, or the individual guest, may well be on the cards, as well as “medical water”. Watch out for pirate champagne, smoked ice in your cocktail, local “wines” that are not grape-based, crazy yeast, nut nutter, wild birds or farmed ortolan sparrows, dried seafood, “dude food”, pre-ordered dishes, stand-up or even “walk-around” eating – and brace yourself for insects on the menu.

And finally – who are the stars?

	MAIN	TOP	NEXT	WATCH
1. <i>The chef</i>	++	+++	+++	+++
2. <i>The chef/sommelier</i>	+	+++	+++	++
3. <i>The owner/host</i>	-	0	0	+++
4. <i>The maitre d'</i>	+	+	+	++
5. <i>The waiter</i>	0	+	+	++
6. <i>The supplier</i>	+	++	+++	+++
7. <i>The critic</i>	++	++	++	+
8. <i>The food blogger</i>	+++	++	++	++
9. <i>The celebrity guest</i>	+	0	--	--
10. <i>The regular guest</i>	+++	+++	+++	++
11. <i>All guests</i>	++	+++	+++	+++

The chef is clearly the leading star of the show in the gastrosphere, and he will keep this position, even if challenged by the head sommelier, the “star supplier” and the guests. The food blogger is a bright star in the mainstream category only, and the food critic has questionable star quality all across, and watch out: stardom may wither away altogether. Maybe this scenario reflects a tinge of humbleness from the people who contributed to the survey, many of whom are to be found in this category. Guests can look forward to rising glory however, not only regular guests – but all guests. There is one exception though. The celebrity guest will have a tough time from here on in. Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie better eat at home from now on.

If you want to dive deeper into the Global Trend Survey: get in touch with lars.peder.hedberg@whiteguide.se