

# Food & Travel

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CHEF  
RENE  
REDZEPI

RETHINKING THE FOOD INDUSTRY

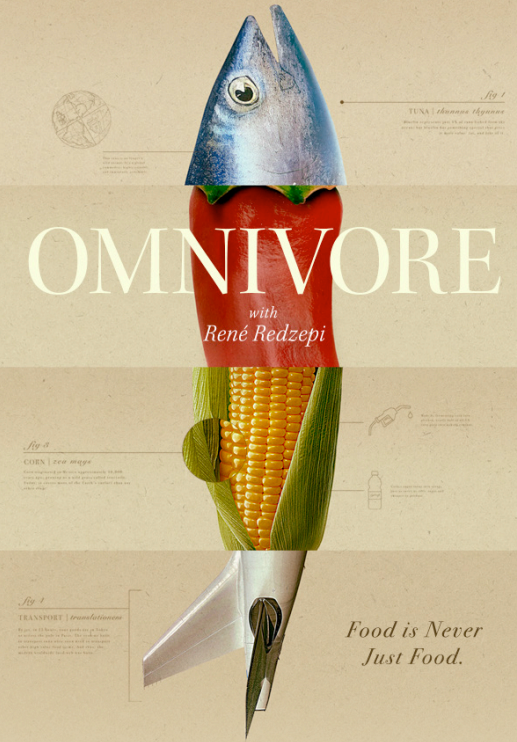
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# CHEF RENÉ REDZEPÍ

RETHINKING THE FOOD INDUSTRY



By Margie Goldsmith

**R**ENÉ REDZEPÍ IS THE CHEF AND CO-OWNER OF NOMA, THE THREE-MICHELIN-STARRED RESTAURANT, CONSIDERED ONE OF THE MOST COVETED RESTAURANTS IN THE WORLD. SHAPING CULINARY CULTURE SINCE FOUNDING NOMA IN 2004, REDZEPÍ RECENTLY CREATED A NOMA KYOTO POP-UP, OPEN THROUGH DECEMBER 18TH, 2024, BUT HIS MAJOR PROJECT HAS BEEN CREATING AND NARRATING A NEW DOCUMENTARY SERIES, OMNIVORE (STREAMING ON APPLE TV+), WHICH TAKES VIEWERS ON AN IMMERSIVE JOURNEY OF FOOD. SHOT IN DESTINATIONS AROUND THE WORLD, OMNIVORE FEATURES EIGHT OF THE WORLD'S MOST ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS: BANANA, CHILE, COFFEE, CORN, PORK, RICE, SALT, AND TUNA. THE SERIES CELEBRATES THE WAY WE GROW, TRANSFORM, AND CONSUME THE WORLD'S BEST CULINARY RESOURCES. I CAUGHT UP WITH CHEF RENÉ IN NOMA'S TEST KITCHEN GREENHOUSE IN COPENHAGEN:

**How did you come up with the idea to create the series Omnivore?**

I've always loved watching David Attenborough's nature documentaries, which made me feel as though I were traveling, and I wondered, could we do that for food? How we eat determines how healthy we are, and how we grow the food determines the health of the planet.

**What is the biggest takeaway of the series?**

I'm hoping people will understand that food is everything, and that they will be inspired to think more about all we eat. I'm very hopeful.

**Was there a reason for the order of the foods? For instance, you start with "Chile."**

If I could tell you all the hours we spent figuring this out – how do you actually start? We decided to start with love. I grew up in an Albanian community and, seeking a better life, we eventually moved to Denmark. As a child, when food came to the table, my uncle would literally take bites of chiles with a spoonful of rice. I remembered a certain level of fear and excitement, almost like an exploration. That also became one of the themes, because while we just need basic nutrition, chile makes food delicious and fun. We grow it not for any sustenance but just for pleasure. I liked that about chile, and it ended up being the genesis of the story.

**What are your most important takeaways from the "Chile" episode?**

Chile started as a fruit in a jungle, then was transported in ships, and perhaps it will be one of the strongest species on earth by making us addicted. Even Europeans, who are notoriously afraid of spice, are slowly waking up to love chile.

**Is there a particular dish at Noma that you make with chile?**

A stew of artichokes and padrone peppers. After having worked with chile, I understood it better. I'd thought chile was just about heat, but you can actually enhance a dish by working with it in the right way to enhance the food.



**What are the most important takeaways for you from the "Tuna" episode?**

Once we get the appetite for something, we will eat or use that thing almost to the brink of extinction. A decade or two ago, bluefin was disappearing. Now, there's a much healthier population of bluefin tuna. The difference between extinction or a healthy population is minor tweaks in governmental policy, and that can be a very positive change. Bluefin went from trash fish to the luxury fish of the world. Everyone loves tuna, including my three children, who have vastly different palates. In the last five years we've started to see bluefin return to Nordic waters, but they come in high summer, and that's when we serve vegetables-only in Denmark.

**What are your biggest takeaways from the "Salt" episode?**

Salt has been a game changer for humans, because it has saved millions of people from starvation. It's one of those essential and important ingredients we take for granted because it's always around. We don't consider

that we need salt as a basic mineral to stay alive. We started our fermented kitchen fifteen years ago, and salt is a key component. It's the soul and DNA of Noma, the bloodline of our restaurant.

**What is food to you?**

Food is not only basic survival, but it's also how we stay healthy or unhealthy. It's the center of culture, and culture defines us. To me, food is the most important thing on earth.

**Tell me about the "Banana" episode. Why are bananas so important?**

Bananas are omnipresent, so nutrient-dense that it's almost the perfect superfood: protein, carbohydrates, and fiber. At Noma, the staff eat bananas, and once in a while we'll offer banana cake or even a banana split.

**Speaking of staff meals, you were in The Bear.**

**Was it authentic?**

There are definitely authentic things. Of course, they have to compress days and weeks of work to fill an hour. A lot of it is fiction so it engages people. But definitely, it's part of restaurant reality. It has that energy.

Photo by Per Arnesen



**What’s your biggest takeaway from the “Coffee” episode?**

Filming “Coffee” was quite hard. We were supposed to be in Ethiopia, but there was a civil war and our visas were cancelled. We ended up in Rwanda and learned that people used to produce coffee so cheaply that it become the driving force behind an economic revolution. As much as it can be annoying when a barista weighs out every single grain before brewing it, in Rwanda, if you buy specially roasted coffee, you are actually making a difference.

**What’s your biggest takeaway from the “Corn” episode?**

Corn is essential to us as modern humans. It’s also ready for a reinvention; we need to find a more practical method to grow it, not so demanding from Mother Nature. I was surprised to learn that to find a better model of growing corn in the future, with modern technology and modern agriculture, it can be inspired from 1000-year-old traditions.

**What’s your most important takeaway from the episode, “Pig”?**

“Pig” is about the fact that we should get to know our produce more, because when you do, you make better choices. Are you still eating meat? If so, are you eating everything or is it only the pork chop? Are you also being a steward of the feet? I live as a chef, but I have a hard time killing animals. I eat animals, but definitely less than ever.

**In the episode “Rice,” you say your earliest memory of food is your Albanian aunt cooking chicken and rice. Is that why you became a chef?**

I was 15, leaving ninth grade in the Danish school, and my best friend wanted to be a cook, so I followed him to cooking school, not knowing what I wanted to do with my life. We entered a competition to cook one dish of our choice. I wanted to win but didn’t know how. I went to the library and there was a roast chicken recipe and that made me remember watching my aunt kill and pluck the chicken, wrap it in oil and salt, and cook it with rice underneath in a wood-fired oven. We came in second, but it ignited something in me. I still cook that chicken and rice dish today; it’s my 16-year-old daughter’s favorite dish.

**You say that if corn disappears, so will we.**

In much of Latin America, they believe that without corn, there is no future for them. And perhaps it’s true.

**Tell me about your culinary journey.**

When we lived in Macedonia, we had three cooked meals a day. Our house had no refrigerator and no real electrical appliances. If you wanted milk, somebody milked a cow, someone made butter. I helped in the fields foraging for blackberries, fruits, and wild plants for the meal. It matters how you eat, and being brought up that way dictated many of my beliefs today as a cook.

**When you created Noma, what was your plan for the restaurant?**

The simple plan was to focus more on local produce, which wasn’t really in existence in this part of the world. We tried to explore the landscape of local seafood, plants, animals, and dairy. That was the beginning of our journey. The first spring of the early days of Noma, we were out looking for food. We’d gone through a terrible winter and didn’t have much with which to cook. We read a book on foraging, and once we started tasting what was out there, it fueled so much inspiration, so much creativity, that we decided to look at what we had here and see what we could get out of it.



Photo by Per Arnesen

**Noma has been called the best restaurant in the world. Why?**

That’s a good question. I don’t really know. I think we are great at what we do, and I think we have one of the best teams around, but food is just so subjective. What’s the thing that made people vote for us and think we are deserving of this? Was it creativity or because it was fresh and new? I’ve never believed we were the best.

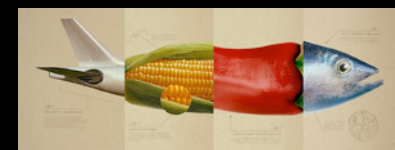
**Noma is closing. Is this temporary?**

We’re going to see if we can set up a new type of organization in which we don’t have to rely on restaurant work to pay our bills. We’re approaching our twenty-first year of being open with three of us here since day one and handfuls of people who’ve been here more than ten years. We have to do something different if we want to be an organization where people can thrive. I want

us to always work on the cutting edge, and if we are constantly in production mode – chopping onions, producing things, and serving food – we have no time to explore the world and be creative. We need to figure out how to find the revenue to support all of this. Our challenge in the coming years is to initiate new projects, new collaborations to have some of our own products in our fermentation labs, to sell them to a broader audience, and thus fuel this innovative work that we love.

**What do you want your legacy to be?**

I believe you shouldn’t be working for legacy. You should be working for having as much fun and doing what you feel is the right thing for you and your team. The only ones who will truly remember you is your family. If anything, I want to make sure that I’m a good husband and an incredible father. •



WATCH OMNIVORE ON 