

NOMA: CLOSING & IMPLICATIONS FOR WIDER
FINE DINING INDUSTRY

by

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When co-founders Rene Redzepi and Claus Meyer announced in 2023 that they were planning to close Noma, patrons were shocked. After all, how could the best restaurant in the world be closing after experiencing so much success? Chefs within the fine dining industry, however, were used to such patterns. It is clear from past examples that it is becoming a trend for restaurants to hit peak success and then close shortly after. A thorough review of articles detailing the closing of Noma reveal an overreliance on unpaid labor and extreme pressure from financial burdens and expectation from guests. The factors of Noma's closing were emphasized due to the pandemic and are indicative of unsustainable practices within the wider fine dining industry, providing evidence for the significant decay of the industry as a whole.

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Appetizer: Introduction

“Fine dining, like diamonds, ballet and other elite pursuits, often have abuse built into it”

– Kim Mikkola

In 2022, the blockbuster “The Menu,” and hit tv-show “The Bear,” were released, shining a spotlight on the demands of the dining industry. Both forms of media highlighted the backbreaking realities of working in the dining industry, but “The Menu” was specifically made based on the writers’ experience in the fine dining world.¹ They worked closely with a team headed by a three-Michelin star chef, Dominique Crenn, who not only trained the actors, but also developed a menu to be featured in the movie.²

“The Menu” is a “satirical thriller about a celebrity chef who prepares a masterpiece of culinary art with some disturbing surprises” and highlights the fraught, and at times, ridiculously pretentious, relationship celebrity chefs can have with their guests.³ The movie also clearly displays long hours, tedious manual labor, financial strife, and creative burdens. The response to the movie among the public was varied, but it struck a chord with other chefs within the fine dining world. While they acknowledged the satirical nature of the movie, they also found the movie to hold many sad truths about their lifestyle and what modern fine dining has become – a culture in which being overworked is rewarded and the lives of the chefs only have value as long as they continue to produce satisfying work. To be successful in the modern fine dining industry,

¹ Brianna Wellen, “How *The Menu* Speaks to Chefs,” *The Takeout*, December 2, 2022, <https://thetakeout.com/how-the-menu-2022-film-speaks-to-chefs-1849847513>.

² Valentina Valentini, “The Michelin-Starred Chefs Who Made *The Menu*,” *Vanity Fair*, November 18, 2022, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2022/11/the-michelin-chefs-behind-the-menu>.

³ Chris Catt, “‘The Menu’ Explained: Questions Answered and Themes Explored,” *Creepy Catalog*, May 10, 2023, <https://creepycatalog.com/the-menu-2022-explained/#:~:text=The%20Menu%20is%20a%20satirical,enough%20to%20experience%20such%20cuisine>.

chefs must be prepared to give everything they have, but even then, that might not be enough. In the wake of the pandemic, no industry suffered as many losses as the dining industry. As people went into lockdown, the industry burdened with the largest financial overhead began to crumble without patronage, losing an estimated 70,000 businesses in America alone.⁴ Out of the businesses that survived, it was the casual dining locations that persisted as worldwide eating habits shifting towards affordability and convenience, prioritizing safety through takeouts.⁵ It was the fine dining establishments that struggled to keep their doors open. Aside from the price difference, fine dining establishments differentiate themselves from their casual counterparts through providing a higher quality of ingredients and formality, removing accessibility and convenience. This translates to a higher price point not only for the patrons, but also in the cost of running the restaurant. With the pandemic causing ingredient shortages and many of their patrons prioritizing safety and convenience, chefs found themselves buckling under the pressure to keep their businesses afloat. Many chefs had to walk away from their dream while others, finally given the silence to reflect, found themselves frustrated by how much they had to sacrifice. Among those frustrated was one 3-Michelin star chef, Rene Redzepi. ““We have to completely rethink the industry,” he said. “This is simply too hard, and we have to work in a different way.””⁶

⁴ Danielle Wiener-Bronner, “Covid shrank the restaurant industry. That’s not changing anytime soon,” *CNN*, February 25, 2023,

<https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/25/business/restaurant-closures/index.html>.

⁵ Abby Vesoulis, “‘Profit Doesn’t Exist Anymore.’ Restaurants That Barely Survived COVID-19 Closures Now Face Labor, Inflation and Supply Chain Crises,” *Time*, December 28, 2021, <https://time.com/6129713/restaurants-closing-covid-19/>.

⁶ Julia Moskin, “Noma, Rated the World’s Best Restaurant, Is Closing Its Doors,” *New York Times*, January 9, 2023,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/09/dining/noma-closing-rene-redzepi.html>.

When Rene Redzepi and television food personality Claus Meyer co-founded Noma in 2003, they had no idea that it would not only earn three Michelin stars, but be honored by the magazine, *World's 50 Best Restaurants*, as the world's best restaurant five total times.⁷ So named from an abbreviation of Danish words 'nordisk' meaning Nordic and 'mad' meaning food, the renowned restaurant is located in Copenhagen, Denmark.⁸ Noma served New Nordic cuisine, which are foods that are linked to a culinary movement started by Redzepi, Meyer, and ten other Nordic chefs in 2004 that emphasizes growing and cooking foods native to the Nordic region.⁹ It was this cuisine that allowed Noma to reach the status of three Michelin stars.

The Michelin rating initially began in 1889 as a red guidebook with generalized handy information by brothers Andre and Edouard Michelin to help motorist "develop their trips."¹⁰ They hoped that by creating a guide for the road, this would encourage car sales and by extension tire sales. This guidebook was previously provided at no charge, but one day Andre Michelin arrived at his shop and saw the "beloved guides being used as a prop for a workbench."¹¹ This prompted him to launch a brand new guide in 1920 that sold for seven dollars as "man only truly respects what he pays for."¹² With the rebrand, the brothers now included lists of hotels and most importantly, a list of restaurants according to specific categories. As the influence of the restaurant section grew, the Michelin brothers recruited a team

⁷ "Noma," *The World's 50 Best Restaurants*, accessed May 12, 2023, <https://www.theworlds50best.com/awards/noma>.

⁸ Michelle Welsch, "How Noma Changed Nordic Cuisine Forever," *TastingTable*, January 24, 2023, <https://www.tastingtable.com/891806/how-noma-changed-nordic-cuisine-forever/>.

⁹ Elisabet Skylare, "What is New Nordic Food?" Nordic Co-operation, accessed May 12, 2023, <https://www.norden.org/en/information/what-new-nordic-food>.

¹⁰ "About Us," *Michelin*, accessed May 12, 2023, <https://guide.michelin.com/en/about-us>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

of “mystery diners...to visit and review restaurants anonymously.”¹³ Thanks to their serious and unique approach, the guide grew in authority and prestige and now rates “over 30,000 establishments.”¹⁴ To even be considered for an evaluation, restaurants must perform at the peak of the industry in five universal criteria: quality of products, mastery of flavor and cooking techniques, obvious personality of the chef in the cuisine, value for money, and consistency of the dishes.¹⁵ One Michelin star is presented to restaurants that perform at a “consistently” high standard, two are awarded for foods that are “refined and inspired,” three are given if the food at a restaurant has been “elevated to an art form” and “destined to become classics.”¹⁶ Noma was awarded their third Michelin star in 2021, firmly establishing their restaurant as a classic. It was especially rewarding since Noma had been stuck at two Michelin stars since 2008 and had to go through a complete revamp to produce Noma 2.0, to finally be worthy of three Michelin stars.

Noma also experienced great success after being named the world’s best restaurant in 2010, 2011, 2012 2014, and again in 2021 as Noma 2.0, by the *World’s 50 Best Restaurants* magazine.¹⁷ With their most recent award, Noma had become one of the few restaurants that have reached the esteemed level of not being able to be named the world’s best restaurant again, capping out at five times. Originally started in 2002 by the leading British magazine dedicated to the United Kingdom’s restaurant trade, *Restaurant*, the World’s 50 Best Restaurants organization

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ “Noma,” *The World’s 50 Best Restaurants*, accessed May 12, 2023, <https://www.theworlds50best.com/awards/noma>.

uses a panel of culinary experts and a structured voting program to produce an annual list of the “best destination for unique culinary experiences.”¹⁸

Despite all of the recent success Noma has experienced that allows them to charge a 600-dollar minimum per person for a fifteen to twenty course meal, Redzepi and Meyer announced in 2023 that they plan to close Noma for regular service at the end of 2024. They instead will transition to a full-time food laboratory that will focus on developing new dishes for e-commerce options and periodic pop-ups.¹⁹ They made it clear on their new website that while serving guests would remain part of who they are, they will no longer allow “being a restaurant to...define us.”²⁰ After everything that they have done to finally achieve first place in the world and their third Michelin star, both Redzepi and Meyer decided that they would rather close their business and move away from the unsustainable model of traditional fine dining. While a great shock to patrons, this pattern is not unique by any means and has only appeared in greater frequency in the wake of the pandemic. “For those of us in the restaurant industry, Noma’s announcement felt less like a seismic event and more like the dampened thud of a silver spoon falling on a plush dining-room carpet.”²¹ Many chefs, despite being labeled as successful and finally receiving Michelin stars for their efforts, have closed, or sold their restaurants shortly after, unable to keep up with the ongoing pressures that have only been made more difficult by

¹⁸ “About Us,” *The World’s 50 Best Restaurants*, accessed May 12, 2023, <https://www.theworlds50best.com/about>.

¹⁹ Julia Moskin, “Noma, Rated the World’s Best Restaurant, Is Closing Its Doors,” *New York Times*, January 9, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/09/dining/noma-closing-rene-redzepi.html>.

²⁰ “Noma 3.0,” Noma, accessed May 12, 2023, <https://noma.dk/nomathreepointzero/>.

²¹ Rob Anderson, “How Noma Made Fine Dining Far Worse,” *The Atlantic*, January 16, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/01/noma-copenhagen-fine-dining-unsustainable/672738/>.

the pandemic. Bay Area chef David Kinch, who helped establish Los Gatos, California as an “international culinary destination” with his three-Michelin star restaurant, Manresa, announced that after 20 years, he was going to retire as the head chef.²² ““A three-Michelin-starred restaurant requires nothing less than your best. This is backbreaking work that demands that you show up at your fullest every day, no excuses,”” he said.²³ Kinch’s future plans are to take advantage of the changing food culture and prioritize “more casual concepts.”²⁴ He hopes that this change will allow him to focus on establishing a “new equilibrium” and recover from his burnout.²⁵

The fine dining industry has existed as a model for decades, providing an elevated dining experience complete with timeless classics, such as pâté de foie gras and sturgeon caviar. Guests experience nothing less than perfection, walking away with their bellies and mind full of the unforgettable experience. But there is a price to keeping the façade of effortless perfection. If the fine dining industry is causing this much burn out for the service staff and growing more unsustainable in the wake of the pandemic, should such a model continue to exist? As demonstrated by Noma, factors such as overreliance on unpaid labor and combined pressures from financial burdens and guests, have both allowed fine dining to exist and simultaneously, is marking the crumbling of the industry.

²² Patricia Cobe, “Chef David Kinch to depart Michelin-starred Manresa,” *Restaurant Business*, August 22, 2022, <https://www.restaurantbusinessonline.com/leadership/chef-david-kinch-depart-michelin-starred-manresa>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

Soup & Salad: Overreliance on Unpaid Stages

It was no mistake that Redzepi and Meyer chose Denmark to set up their new brainchild. Redzepi was well known through previous ventures as a chef who wanted to push the boundaries of food. When he heard the New Nordic food movement was starting and there was a chance to redefine the dining scene in Denmark and the surrounding Nordic areas, he decided he wanted in. Redzepi and Meyer not only saw it as an opportunity to capitalize on a growing food movement, but to use it to redefine the fine dining model. As they were writing the New Nordic Manifesto, they made it a priority to include clauses that they believed would finally make fine dining sustainable. However, to do so, they had to incorporate one of the many staples that have allowed the fine dining industry to exist for so long. As modeled by Noma, one of the factors that has been seen in the wider fine dining industry is the over-reliance on unpaid labor.

New Nordic Manifesto

Redzepi and Meyer along with ten other chefs worked together to write the New Nordic Food Manifesto that aimed to counter the growing influence of fast-food culture and instead focused on ten points that promoted “purity, season, ethics, health, sustainability and quality” in their ingredients from within the localized region.²⁶ This was all in an effort to make the fine dining model successful. These ideas themselves are not unique, as many other chefs have previously spoken about a farm-to-table approach, but in 2005, these chefs passed along their manifesto to the Nordic Council of Ministers which “put New Nordic Food on the political

²⁶ Julia Moskin, “Noma, Rated the World’s Best Restaurant, Is Closing Its Doors,” *New York Times*, January 9, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/09/dining/noma-closing-rene-redzepi.html>.

agenda.”²⁷ Government officials were happy to project this manifesto as a priority as the plan not only included the involvement of “farmers, food producers, politicians, home economics teachers, government officials, food scientists, gourmet chefs and consumers,” but it provided an alternative to the heavily entrenched French cuisine that had taken hold in that region.²⁸ The officials wanted to champion their own culture, and this manifesto provided them with the steps necessary to do so. As it was interjected into the political sphere, the success of the manifesto was ensured with support of the government tourism budgets.²⁹ This allowed the idea to reach beyond farms and fine-dining restaurants to “supermarket aisles, canteens, and classrooms.”³⁰ An example of this is beet vinegar. It is often acknowledged that no great cooking is done without some form of acid. While it might be easier to use imported ingredients such as “Spanish sherry vinegar and the tart Japanese citrus yuzu,” Meyer wanted to transform a local staple because: “in Denmark, all we had was industrial beet vinegar, the cheapest there is, without nuance or depth.”³¹ His dream was to create Danish dishes that highlighted the flavor of local ingredients. During an interview he invited some editors to taste his aged vinegars and they found it to be “extraordinary, clear and sharp; its purity and its history are a perfect example of

²⁷ Elisabet Skylare, “What is New Nordic Food?” Nordic Co-operation, accessed May 12, 2023, <https://www.norden.org/en/information/what-new-nordic-food>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Eeva Moore, “The Nomafication of Nordic Food,” *Eater*, May 19, 2019, <https://www.eater.com/2019/3/19/18256048/noma-new-nordic-revolution-rene-redzepi>.

³⁰ Kieran Morris, “What Noma did next: how the ‘New Nordic’ is reshaping the food world,” *The Guardian*, February 28, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/food/2020/feb/28/what-noma-did-next-new-nordic-food-rene-redzepi-claus-meyer-locavore-foraging>.

³¹ Food & Wine Editor, “Manifesto for a New Nordic Cuisine,” *Food & Wine*, June 16, 2017, <https://www.foodandwine.com/travel/restaurants/manifesto-for-a-new-nordic-cuisine>.

the promise of the Nordic cuisine that is Meyer's mission in life."³² This transition to solely focusing on using Nordic ingredients transformed the whole of Denmark into a mecca that followed New Nordic ideals, an idealized way to not only promote healthy eating, but rebranding what the world perceived to be Nordic cooking. The government alongside the twelve chefs were able to build a booming tourism industry and alluring cultural identity around the New Nordic Manifesto. Because there was so much success at home, Meyer wanted to push the boundaries of New Nordic cuisine and see if it would take a similar positive root elsewhere. He began by looking into global "metrics such as economic development, crime rates, and biodiversity" and, using these markers, "Meyer decided to open a social dining restaurant called Gustu in Bolivia's capital, La Paz, in 2011."³³ Meyer also established eleven smaller cooking schools nearby that taught shorter courses to the vulnerable youth about cooking and business management. This enabled graduates transition easily to working at Gustu and today "3,000 young people have received education and found a job connected with or as a result of the project."³⁴ The New Nordic Manifesto spread sustainability throughout the Nordic region and transformed into a humanitarian project to "help people in some the world's poorest areas."³⁵ It was even acknowledged by the Head of the World Health Organization European office for Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases, Joao Breda: "WHO applauds this approach of working with nutrition policy as well as food culture and identity as a means of simultaneously tackling non-communicable diseases and creating a shift towards more sustainable food consumption."³⁶

³² Ibid.

³³ Emil Dammeyer, "How the Nordic food scene became a global movement," *The Nordics*, accessed May 12, 2023, <https://www.thenordics.com/trace/how-nordic-food-scene-became-global-movement>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

Attracting Stages

At the heart of all this success from the New Nordic manifesto was Noma in Copenhagen, Denmark. Redzepi and Meyer had successfully built a culture that supported their fine dining establishment and made it appear sustainable. The news of their influence and success attracted foodies, international food writers, and ambitious foreign young chefs eager to participate in this growing culinary revolution. These chefs saw how Redzepi and Meyer had successfully cultivated this cultural change in Copenhagen alongside other chefs through the manifesto. They came to see Copenhagen as a utopia of endless possibility and opportunities. This extremely successful collaboration between the Noma co-founders and ten other chefs gave them hope that Copenhagen was the start of a departure from the old world of cutthroat “wrathful chef-dictators” that demanded room for their inflated egos.³⁷ Noma’s success provided evidence that it was possible to collaborate successfully in the highly competitive world of fine dining. That coupled with rumors that “hours there were said to be more manageable” than in other haute cuisine destinations such as “London or Paris or New York,” made Copenhagen especially attractive to interns or trainees that were looking to work these prime locations.³⁸

Called stages after the French word for interns, they are unpaid workers that perform a variety of kitchen tasks that include, but are not limited to peeling vegetables, straining stocks, or sweeping the floors.³⁹ Typically, they work at these restaurants for up to three months with the goal to earn their restaurant experience through observation and pick up necessary prep skills

³⁷ Imogen West-Knights, “Fine dining faces its dark truths in Copenhagen,” *Financial Times*, June 1, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/a62a96b8-2db2-44ec-ac80-67fcf83d86ef>.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Matt Tripp, “Why America's Best Restaurants Might Lose a Crucial Labor Source,” *Eater*, May 16, 2015, <https://www.eater.com/2015/3/16/8210363/restaurant-stage-illegal-stagiaire-kitchen-intern>.

that would allow them to be hired at the restaurant that they are interning in or a comparable restaurant elsewhere. Staging occurs at all levels of the restaurant industry worldwide and it is considered a rite of passage that must be undertaken, especially if one hopes to work anywhere in the fine dining industry. “A few months of prep work at, say, Noma can hoist young cooks onto the shoulders of the restaurant’s fame and carry them far into their new career.”⁴⁰ This creates an extremely competitive environment for the privilege of staging at sought-after locations and only a select few are permitted. At the end of their internship, it is typical for a stage to accept a position within the restaurant that they staged at or use that restaurant’s name to open future doors.

But for an intern to even get their foot through the door, they need work experience at a well-known fine dining establishment such as Noma. Vince Nguyen who is now a sous chef at the two-Michelin starred restaurant, Choi, spoke highly of his stage experience at Noma: ““I feel very grateful that the concept of staging exists...While at Noma, I was introduced to so many new ingredients and technique. That’s something one can’t learn from a cookbook.””⁴¹ While Nguyen spoke highly of his experience at Noma, others did not have the same fond memories of their time there.

When the stages arrived to work at Noma, they found that this promised utopia was anything but. Because these are unpaid positions that typically are confirmed through verbal or otherwise informal agreements, there are larger opportunities for their positions to be abused by

⁴⁰ Jonathan Kauffman, “Does Staging Even Matter Anymore?” *Eater*, November 7, 2019, <https://www.eater.com/young-guns-rising-stars/2019/11/7/20931221/pros-and-cons-of-staging-in-fine-dining-restaurants>.

⁴¹ Matt Tripp, “Why America's Best Restaurants Might Lose a Crucial Labor Source,” *Eater*, May 16, 2015, <https://www.eater.com/2015/3/16/8210363/restaurant-stage-illegal-stagiaire-kitchen-intern>.

their bosses. A front-of-house intern recalls the treatment that the interns received: “it was so taxing, mentally and also physically, they used to work for like five and a half days per week, from like eight in the morning until like two.”⁴² She also recalled a specific moment in which Noma was serving a duck dish for the night and the interns were made to pluck duck feathers outside in the freezing rain: “They were covered in feathers, and they’re just like shaking, and their hands were stuck like claws.”⁴³ Other accounts recall them being verbally or physically abused. While some of these stories range on the worse end, even some of the expected experiences for stages have fallen short. Much of the work that the stages do consists of little more than “doing one element of one dish” like picking herbs for three months, therefore it is often that a stage will not get the full restaurant experience that they were promised in exchange for their labor.⁴⁴ They instead must be content with being able to complete their stage at all.

While there is no shortage of bad stage experiences that seem universally represented worldwide, it has been difficult to find anyone who is willing to speak openly about the positives and negatives of their experience. There is a strong culture of blacklisting within the fine dining industry. While the industry might seem large, it is deeply connected. This is due to most of the same chefs completing their stages at the same location. Batches and batches of chefs have been subjected to the same abuse and training during their stage due to the prestige that tradition holds within fine dining. “Everyone from René Redzepi to LA chef Michael Voltaggio has made a trip

⁴² Imogen West-Knights, “Fine dining faces its dark truths in Copenhagen,” *Financial Times*, June 1, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/a62a96b8-2db2-44ec-ac80-67fcf83d86ef>.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

to Napa Valley to stage with the French Laundry's Thomas Keller.”⁴⁵ Anyone who is anyone has done their stage at a well-known fine dining establishment otherwise they would not have been acknowledged by the wider community. Despite stages receiving the same generalized training everywhere, if they do not stage at a well-known restaurant, they will not be respected and passed over for someone else who has. The top-tier restaurants are where every aspiring chef needs to get their experience to be taken seriously and it develops into a symbiotic relationship in which they share cooks and keeps the information in a tight loop. This churns out products within the global kitchen culture lauded for bad behavior and enables fear mongering. One intern questioned the value of what they were learning: ““are we learning to underpay people and make people work insane, rigorous hours, and work in a French hierarchy kitchen and yell at people when we’re angry?””⁴⁶

It should also be noted that those who are selected to stage must be able to provide themselves with housing and other living expenses for the whole three months as they are participating in this unpaid internship. While some stages have pooled their resources to get a townhouse and share their expenses together, this creates a barrier for those who are unable to afford staging and does not provide them with any opportunity to get into the world of fine dining. This further keeps the world close and tight knit with individuals who are privileged enough to be able to afford their internship.

⁴⁵ Matt Tripp, “Why America's Best Restaurants Might Lose a Crucial Labor Source,” *Eater*, May 16, 2015, <https://www.eater.com/2015/3/16/8210363/restaurant-stage-illegal-stagiaire-kitchen-intern>.

⁴⁶ Meghan McCarron, “Chef’s Fable,” *Eater*, July 6, 2022, <https://www.eater.com/22996588/blue-hill-stone-barns-dan-barber-restaurant-work-environment-ingredients>.

Stages are afraid to speak out against their treatment for fear of not only losing their jobs, but also losing future opportunities elsewhere in the world. The stages' loyalty is also reinforced by restaurants and their bosses referring to the staff as family members or their community but then treating them as anything but. Even taking sick leave is "interpreted as betrayal of the company" as bosses will often guilt trip their stages to come back to work.⁴⁷ While Noma is not the only restaurant to have come under fire for their treatment of their stages, the number of stages that they have taken on is noteworthy. Before the pandemic hit in 2020, Noma accepted 30 stages at the beginning of each internship cycle. However, in 2019, Noma had only hired 34 chefs for that year.⁴⁸ This meant that close to 50% of the labor that was being done to prepare and produce the fine cuisine that Noma served was being done through the unpaid labor of the stages.

"“A place like Noma or Mugaritz is what it is because of stages. A restaurant with a surplus of manpower is capable of reaching new heights,”” says chef Justin Woodward who was previously a stage at Noma.⁴⁹

Both Redzepi and Meyers have previously owned restaurants at both the casual and fine dining level, so they know exactly what is needed to keep such a business running. Therefore, they had to have factored in the amount of labor that would be required in order to fulfill the façade of sustainability that they preached in their New Nordic manifesto. This is seen in the

⁴⁷ Imogen West-Knights, "Fine dining faces its dark truths in Copenhagen," *Financial Times*, June 1, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/a62a96b8-2db2-44ec-ac80-67fcf83d86ef>.

⁴⁸ Imogen West-Knights, "Fine dining faces its dark truths in Copenhagen," *Financial Times*, June 1, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/a62a96b8-2db2-44ec-ac80-67fcf83d86ef>.

⁴⁹ Matt Tripp, "Why America's Best Restaurants Might Lose a Crucial Labor Source," *Eater*, May 16, 2015, <https://www.eater.com/2015/3/16/8210363/restaurant-stage-illegal-stagiaire-kitchen-intern>.

unusually high number of stages that they take on as a company every cycle. They knew that they would have to rely on an old staple of the wider fine dining industry in the interest of selling their manifesto as a way to successfully make the fine dining model sustainable.

Overreliance on Unpaid Labor

The unbelievably high human costs within the industry of fine dining was ignored until investigative journalist Imogen West-Knights covered an explosive piece about it in June of 2022. It was notable as the first piece of journalism regarding exploitation of unpaid labor in a well-known restaurant of Noma's caliber. The article was further helped as it was released at the height of the pandemic when people were glued to their phones and even more tuned into social media. The notoriety and timing allowed a heightened awareness of these practices to spread. Due to the continued increasing scrutiny that Noma and other elite restaurants were facing after more and more chefs began to speak out about their experiences as stages anonymously online, Noma decided to begin paying their stages in October of 2022, "adding at least \$50,000 to its monthly labor costs."⁵⁰ While it was a win for these stages who have endured much mistreatment, it came to an end quickly when Redzepi and Meyer announced later on in 2023 that they would be closing Noma at the end of 2024, citing unsustainable financial decisions. It was made clear from their statement that Noma, as a business, was unsustainable when the unpaid labor that they had counted on to keep their business running was removed. Their abrupt closing showed just how much Noma has relied on the work of their stages to produce their meals. In an effort to promote sustainability through their restaurant, Redzepi and Meyer really only further proved how

⁵⁰ Julia Moskin, "Noma, Rated the World's Best Restaurant, Is Closing Its Doors," *New York Times*, January 9, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/09/dining/noma-closing-rene-redzepi.html>.

unsustainable the model of fine dining is. It requires so much additional manpower and suffering to simply keep the façade of sustainability up, never mind any actual sustainability.

A business that builds a reputation without paying anything to nearly half of their workers is not worth celebrating no matter how good the food is. The suffering and sacrifices by these interns cannot be ignored. While the suffering has largely been invisible prior to recent years, with the help of social media, there are now many resources available to the patrons that are easily accessible. They can no longer claim ignorance. It cannot continue to be acceptable to value, as a society, a product above human life. If these patrons continue to support these fine dining establishments, they will prolong the suffering of these stages by continuing to allow these businesses to take advantage of them. This overreliance on unpaid labor combined with their unfair treatment is one of the factors that have led to the closing of Noma and is unfortunately an example of the heavy abuse that is built into the system of fine dining. The industry begins to crumble without being able to take advantage of the passion of those who wish to be a part of it.

Main Course: Combined Pressures

With one of the largest overhead and operating costs, restaurants at every level struggle to balance the pressures of financial burdens and the expectations from guests without buckling. In the wake of the pandemic, Noma found itself succumbing to the pressure as the interconnected model that they developed in their New Nordic manifesto was interrupted. Cut off from their local farmers and therefore their ingredients, Noma was unable to pivot, like some other fine dining establishments, to take advantage of the changing worldwide food habits that prioritized accessibility and affordability. Especially having added 50,000 dollars to their expenses every month, Redzepi and Meyer were desperate to re-open Noma as soon as it was safe to do so. But when they were finally able to, they found that the pandemic caused them to face unique expectations from the patrons due to the changes in their food habits and economic means. Under this weight, the false sustainability model crumbled once again as Redzepi and Meyer were again relying on an old practice of funding from privileged individuals to get them through. With many of their patrons experiencing economic hardship, Noma was lacking in funding and unable to adequately fill the gaps in their supply chain. The pandemic brought upon a different edge to the combined pressure from financial burdens and guests, that not only has caused Noma to crumble but has been seen in the downfall of many other dining establishments within the fine dining industry.

Costs of Running a Restaurant

Running any business is difficult, but maintaining a restaurant in the food industry is uniquely difficult as they are reliant on the fluctuating prices of the food trade and must balance it with their overhead costs. An overhead is defined as “operational costs not related to direct

materials and labor.”⁵¹ This includes everything from licensing to serve liquor on the premises to the security deposit on the physical building.⁵² These prices can fluctuate based on the proximity of the location to the busiest part of the city. The capital required to start a restaurant has only increased with inflation causing chefs to take on more risk to embark on these ventures.

Once the overhead is accounted for, operating costs must then be considered. This includes but is not limited to rent, marketing, food costs, and labor. Labor costs alone account for “30% of revenue including management salaries of 10%.”⁵³ Of course, there is also the personal cost of time and energy that must be applied. The amount of time that it takes to not only test recipes, but to ensure that they will be of the quality that is expected for an establishment that charges several hundred dollars to dine, can be limitless and all-consuming. Especially when that recipe must then be taught to other chefs. To make matters worse, profit margins for restaurants are so razor thin, that at every level of dining, casual or fine, they are 3-5%.⁵⁴ This means that for every dollar spent, restaurants can only expect to make three to five cents in profit. This makes the capital to start and maintain a fine dining establishment, compared to a casual establishment, enormous. Everything is more expensive. For example, the cost of the ingredients is higher due to the finer quality and are often subject to steep market value fluctuations. Breaking even could come down to the additional gram of onion, therefore, to be successful, fine dining

⁵¹ Nick Darlington, “The Ultimate Guide to Restaurant Costs,” 7Shifts, February 22, 2019, <https://www.7shifts.com/blog/restaurant-costs/>.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

establishments must carefully take into account every dollar spent and every dollar gained to maintain the “near-acrobatic balancing act to survive.”⁵⁵

Effect of Pandemic

With the foundation of budgeting within the dining industry already on shaky ground, the pandemic was nothing short of catastrophic. In the beginning when it was unclear how the virus would behave, world leaders had to balance the need to contain the virus while avoiding “economic and food security crises” that could endanger those who were most vulnerable.⁵⁶ Not only did the lockdown prevent everyone from dining out, it also negatively affected every step of the food chain. The production of agriculture and food markets was halted due to labor shortages and closures, which in turn impacted the availability of ingredients and goods.⁵⁷ This pause created long-term complications that the industry is still recovering from. “In the light of recent challenges in the food supply chain, there is now considerable concern about food production, processing, distribution, and demand.”⁵⁸ It was a challenge to find the budget and workers to return the food supply chain back to previous levels of production while also keeping everyone safe as countries eased out of lockdown. Restaurants at every level were affected as they struggled to get back on their feet. Indoor dining was banned and there was a devastatingly slow

⁵⁵ Abby Vesoulis, “‘Profit Doesn't Exist Anymore.’ Restaurants That Barely Survived COVID-19 Closures Now Face Labor, Inflation and Supply Chain Crises,” *Time*, December 28, 2021, <https://time.com/6129713/restaurants-closing-covid-19/>.

⁵⁶ David Laborde et al. “Covid-19 risks to global food security,” *Science* 369, no. 6593 (2020): 500-502. doi: 10.1126/science.abc4765.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Serpil Aday et al. “Impact of COVID-19 on the food supply chain,” *Food Quality and Safety* 4, no. 4 (2020): 167-180. doi: 10.1093/fqsafe/fyaa024.

rebound in patron confidence.⁵⁹ Many attempted outdoor dining and struggled with the appropriate zoning practices. Months dragged on and the challenges in the way of a full return were devastating as inflation continued to rise, the supply chain remained unable to fully recover, and extreme labor shortages made it nearly impossible to keep a business open.⁶⁰

Noma Vs. The Pandemic

The small local farmers who supplied Noma with their ingredients stopped production during the pandemic. This impacted the availability of the ingredients that Noma required to fulfill their New Nordic menu. Even after the farms re-opened, they still struggled with production, lacking in the funds to make up for the gaps in the supply chain caused by the pandemic. Normally, Noma would be able to allocate their funds to help out per the manifesto but with many suffering from financial difficulties as a result of the pandemic, no one was thinking about treating themselves to a meal at a fine dining establishment. Some chefs in the fine dining industry pivoted to offering take out for the first time at a Michelin level, redesigning their menus and providing multiple courses that could be heated up at home.⁶¹ But the majority of other restaurants like Noma, whose menu relied on fresh local ingredients, struggled or were unable to make this pivot.

The New Nordic Manifesto preached sustainability by promoting the use of local ingredients. Through using local ingredients, Noma would not only champion regional foods, but

⁵⁹ Abby Vesoulis, "'Profit Doesn't Exist Anymore.' Restaurants That Barely Survived COVID-19 Closures Now Face Labor, Inflation and Supply Chain Crises," Time, December 28, 2021, <https://time.com/6129713/restaurants-closing-covid-19/>.

⁶⁰ Abby Vesoulis, "'Profit Doesn't Exist Anymore.' Restaurants That Barely Survived COVID-19 Closures Now Face Labor, Inflation and Supply Chain Crises," Time, December 28, 2021, <https://time.com/6129713/restaurants-closing-covid-19/>.

⁶¹ Jolly, "Michelin Star take-out," Youtube, Apr 30, 2021, video, 4:22, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ompsozvLhKI>.

also cut costs by avoiding importing fees for foreign ingredients. But like with the stages, Noma was relying on an old industry staple to make it possible. The pandemic further exposed the cracks in the budgeting foundation of fine dining. Noma's sustainable business model simply could not endure as the local farmers were unable to produce ingredients without patrons willing to spend hundreds of dollars on a single meal.

Of course, Redzepi already had a feeling about that: "as soon as the pandemic hit, I had this feeling in me that it was time for something different."⁶² But he wasn't aware just how different it would be. He required a pandemic, extreme lack of funding, and a forced break to fully admit that the model that he had been working on was unsustainable. As one Polish-born chef put it: "you work five days a week, for 16 hours, and self-reflection is time-consuming."⁶³ Redzepi and Meyer wrote the New Nordic manifesto in an attempt to make fine dining more sustainable; when they opened Noma, they had already had plenty of restaurant experience under their belt, so they wanted to try and build something new. They elevated local ingredients and involved the community around them in meaningful ways, allowing Copenhagen to blossom with culture and tourism. But that was not enough. The space of sustainability that Redzepi and Meyer had tried so hard to carve out for themselves, in what they knew to be the unsustainable fine dining model, failed in the wake of a pandemic. Noma turned out to be just as fallible as it relied on the same audience of rich patrons to fund it, the way that every fine dining establishment does. Patrons of the arts and the elite are the only ones who are able to dine as they

⁶² Pymnts, "Top-Rated Restaurant Noma to Shut Dining Room in Post-Pandemic Pivot," Pymnts, January 10, 2023, <https://www.pymnts.com/restaurant-innovation/2023/top-rated-restaurant-noma-to-shut-dining-room-in-post-pandemic-pivot/>.

⁶³ Imogen West-Knights, "Fine dining faces its dark truths in Copenhagen," *Financial Times*, June 1, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/a62a96b8-2db2-44ec-ac80-67fcf83d86ef>.

have pockets deep enough to pay a minimum of 600 dollars on a single meal. The irony being that Noma and the New Nordic Manifesto did not even make Redzepi or Meyer rich. While it made them culturally significant, Redzepi has stated that his “commitment to high-quality ingredients and flawless execution” has cost him his wealth.⁶⁴

Income & Racial Inequalities

But Redzepi is not the only person not getting rich. Others in the fine dining industry, such as sous chefs and waitstaff, are not faring much better. They are similarly, if not more, overworked and underpaid, but not because of a lack of commitment to ingredients or service. While it is well-known that hospitality is one of the lowest paid industries, these individuals not only also face exploitative and abusive treatment from their bosses, but also must contend with pay gaps that are often not a livable wage. Known as the “great service divide,” there has been an ever-increasing income inequality that demonstrates “the industry is failing to provide equal opportunities to all its workers.”⁶⁵

In New York, it was found that when sent applications by white and people-of-color with identical resumes and body types, fine dining establishments were twice as likely to hire those who were white for livable wages.⁶⁶ This inequality persisted even when the person-of-color had a better resume. With the larger price tag between fine dining restaurants and the rest of the industry, it has unfortunately allowed for additional inequalities, “specifically those related to

⁶⁴ Julia Moskin, “Noma, Rated the World’s Best Restaurant, Is Closing Its Doors,” *New York Times*, January 9, 2023,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/09/dining/noma-closing-rene-redzepi.html>.

⁶⁵ Restaurant Opportunities Center of New York & The New York City Restaurant Industry Coalition, *The Great Service Divide: Occupational Segregation & Inequality in the New York Restaurant Industry* (2009), 3-5.

⁶⁶ Sarumathi Jayaraman, *Forked: a new standard for American dining* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 68.

pay, race, and gender segregation.”⁶⁷ With the fine dining community so close knit and performing many of the same practices, it is not unreasonable to assume that these racial inequalities are experienced by staff worldwide. Patrons have demonstrated a willingness to pay more for what they perceive as higher quality food and atmosphere, but these higher prices do not translate into higher wages or benefits for the workers.⁶⁸ These inequalities come from an outdated sense of aesthetics that is set by taste makers. They are high value food critics who “lay down the rules of what constitutes good or legitimate taste.”⁶⁹ Their posts can strongly influence aesthetic and economic practices among both the chefs and the patrons.

Taste Makers

Taste makers are just one of the many terms given to restaurant critics. These are individuals who sample restaurants and provide commentary on their experience. Their notoriety comes in part from their extensive food knowledge and ability to accurately assess public opinion on food trends, but it is mostly chance. One can become a famous taste maker if all three of these factors culminate in a stroke of luck. One example is Pete Wells. Wells has been a restaurant critic for the New York since 2012 and has written viral reviews regarding the fine dining industry.⁷⁰ One of his most famous reviews was “Nibbled to Death” released at the start of his career. This critical take on tasting menus took issue with lack of control that patrons faced. Wells found the experience of tasting menus to be anything but enjoyable. It made him

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Jayaraman, 65.

⁶⁹ Christel Lane, “Taste makers in the “fine-dining” restaurant industry: The attribution of aesthetic and economic value by gastronomic guides,” *Poetics* 41, no. 4 (2013): 342-365. doi: 10.1016/j.poetic.2013.05.003.

⁷⁰ “Pete Wells,” *New York Times*, accessed May 12, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/by/pete-wells>.

feel “the same trapped, helpless sensation” whenever he sat down to “face a marathon of dishes.”⁷¹ He felt that the comfort of the guests was not prioritized and that chefs were hitting the same bland notes over and over. The tastes became familiar and repetitive rather than inspired and creative as chefs often used the same pricey ingredients. He found this to be immensely disappointing after waiting many months to secure a reservation. Wells was not alone in his sentiments. What was supposed to be a think-piece that got lost within voices of other critics’ opinions struck a chord with the public.

A year later, Corby Kummer broke through with a controversial piece for *Vanity Fair* called “Tyranny It’s What’s for Dinner.” He called chefs out for their continued lack of concern for the comfort of their guests, claiming that they were putting their egos above “any interest in what (or how much) the customer wants to eat.”⁷² While Kummer and Wells astutely took advantage of the general sense of stagnant creativity felt by the patrons, as every dish was laden with the same pile of caviar and pâté de foie gras, their reviews garnered much attention due to the emergence of social media. Wells’ article was the flame that started this conversation, but it was Kummer who turned it into a blaze. Their articles often were quoted in tandem by other reviews, crediting Wells with noticing this stagnation early on and Kummer for amplifying the concerns of the patrons who felt that predictability of these tasting menus seemed an unworthy trade for the months of waiting for a reservation and the money they spent. With the help of social media, their complaints could not be ignored, and fine dining establishments began to lose business. Chefs were forced to reinvent their menus to stay in business. They explored more

⁷¹ Pete Wells, “Nibbled to Death,” *New York Times*, October 9, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/10/dining/tasting-menus-can-be-too-much-of-a-good-thing.html>.

⁷² Corby Kummer, “Tyranny –It’s What’s for Dinner,” *Vanity Fair*, February 2013, <https://archive.vanityfair.com/article/2013/2/tyranny-its-whats-for-dinner>.

sophisticated cooking techniques and began to push the boundaries of food, attempting to dispel any talk of stagnant creativity. This forever changed the trajectory of tasting menus and fine dining as an industry. The end result was a complete change to how we visualize fine dining today as haute cuisine moved away from caviar and pâté de foie gras to dots of sauce and foams. These dots of sauce have taken over the way almost every plate of food. So much so that Delia Smith, a veteran British cookbook writer recently honored by the queen for her services to cookery, declared: ““If I get one more plate put in front of me with six dots of sauce on it, I will go mad.””⁷³

The influence of these taste makers is not to be underestimated as they can sway public opinion with a few well-timed inflammatory words. As social media has become more pervasive in our lives, the influence of tastemakers has only continued to grow. As demonstrated by the change in the fine dining industry at large as a result of two taste makers, chefs, while being paid to provide a service, are very much at the mercy of those who evaluate their service.

Patrons’ Guilty Expectations

The fine dining experience has to be effortless from the patron’s point of view. Restaurants go so far to ensure this, that upon hiring people-of-color, they will spend “a tremendous amount of time and capital” to train them to mirror the mannerisms of their white counterparts to ensure that they were visually uniform for this expected aesthetic.⁷⁴ Fine dining is a façade meant to hide the costs of luxury. West-Knights likens this craft to professional

⁷³ Nina Martyris, “Haute Dots Of Sauce: Culinary Art Or A Horror Show On A Plate?” NPR, December 16, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2017/12/06/567789049/haute-dots-of-sauce-culinary-art-or-a-horror-show-on-a-plate>.

⁷⁴ Sarumathi Jayaraman, *Forked : a new standard for American dining* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 68.

gymnasts.⁷⁵ The audience is rarely able to see the learning process or the failed acts on the mat, they only see the full trick performed in all its splendor. Fine dining is similar in that way. The chefs are the performers, hiding all of the effort that it took to create the dish, only presenting it to the patrons, as the audience, as a completed trick. It is all part of what is known as “invisible service.”⁷⁶ It includes all of the steps that are taken by the restaurant to craft not only the menu but the atmosphere that the patrons dine in. An experience that is all encompassed by a single bill that does not detail everything that had to be done to ensure that the enjoyment of the patrons as they are eating has been maximized. The patrons are blissfully unaware of how many napkins were felt and examined before the one they are currently wiping their mouths with was chosen or how many hours a stage spent cutting carrots to garnish their dish. And how could they be? Many of the top restaurants, including Noma, require payment in advance so they do not handle money when they are there.⁷⁷ This is done so that the patrons may simply enjoy their experience without interruptions.

The very nature of fine dining, especially one such as Noma that was built on pushing creative boundaries, invites aesthetic involvement not only by the chefs but by those who consume it. Therefore, there is an ever-mounting amount of expectation that the patron has for their experience, especially after paying such an exorbitant price. Following the pandemic, Noma

⁷⁵ Imogen West-Knights, “Fine dining faces its dark truths in Copenhagen,” *Financial Times*, June 1, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/a62a96b8-2db2-44ec-ac80-67fcf83d86ef>.

⁷⁶ Rushani Epa, “The true cost of service: a look at the hidden costs in hospitality,” *Gourmet Traveler*, February 12, 2023, <https://www.gourmettraveller.com.au/news/food-and-culture/true-cost-of-hospitality-20745>.

⁷⁷ Imogen West-Knights, “Fine dining faces its dark truths in Copenhagen,” *Financial Times*, June 1, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/a62a96b8-2db2-44ec-ac80-67fcf83d86ef>.

had to adjust to the demands of this new set of patrons that still wanted a sophisticated experience but had grown to prefer convenience overall. Noma has accounted for these with shorter menu lengths and changing their aesthetic with the comfort of guests in mind.⁷⁸ It was critical to nail their first few months open as they desperately needed to make up for lost funds. They could not afford to have a bad review following their scandal with their stages. Especially when their very existence served as a reminder that despite world recession following the pandemic, “some people simply have way more money to spare.”⁷⁹

But these patrons that do have money to spare, money that Noma so desperately needs to stay open, are facing a crisis. As abusive practices have continued to surface more and more in the fine dining industry, patrons have begun to feel ethically compromised by continuing to participate, noting that “fine dining seems to come with an inherent side of guilt these days.”⁸⁰ Many expect that fine dining establishments are “morally good” and have been disappointed to learn otherwise.⁸¹ It has not stopped them from attending as Noma’s reservations continue to be booked months in advance with waitlists that hardly budge, but patrons “just don’t want to brag about it anymore.”⁸²

Patrons of the arts and the elite have always been the main proprietors of the fine dining industry. But following the pandemic, individuals have been undergoing a moral crisis due to

⁷⁸ Charity Robey, “A report from the restaurant trade — Fine dining comes with a human cost,” *Shelter Island Reporter*, March 1, 2023, <https://shelterislandreporter.timesreview.com/2023/03/01/a-report-from-the-restaurant-trade-fine-dining-comes-with-a-human-cost/>.

⁷⁹ Ali Francis, “People Still Love Fine Dining—They Just Feel Guilty About It Now,” *Bon Appetit*, February 10, 2023, <https://www.bonappetit.com/story/fine-dining-has-a-guilt-problem>.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

their expectations of the industry falling short. After all, how can these patrons be expected to confront the realities of their experience when it has been “engineered to make you feel as effortlessly cared for, as special as possible?”⁸³

Noma was just the latest victim of the pressure cooker that is the fine dining industry. Despite attempting to create a sustainable safety net through the New Nordic Manifesto, Redzepi and Meyer’s creation still crumbled when faced with a pandemic. At the level that they are performing at, they cannot afford to keep up their façade without suffering losses. This is because at the end of the day, despite their claims to be sustainable, Noma still draws much of their support from their patrons the way that every other fine dining establishment does. Without the elite willing to pay the bills and unable to rely on unpaid labor, the fine dining industry collapses as it has no other support structure. As demonstrated by Noma, it is the combination of the razor thin financial pressures and ongoing pressure to perform perfectly in front of the guests that is choking the fine dining industry to death.

⁸³ Rushani Epa, “The true cost of service: a look at the hidden costs in hospitality,” *Gourmet Traveler*, February 12, 2023, <https://www.gourmettraveller.com.au/news/food-and-culture/true-cost-of-hospitality-20745>.

Dessert: Conclusion

As demonstrated by Noma, factors such as overreliance on unpaid labor and combined pressures from financial burdens and expectations guests, have both allowed fine dining to exist and simultaneously is marking the crumbling of the industry. The fine dining industry is built on the backs of passionate young interns who are overexploited and overworked. They are relied upon high quality of service without having to pay for it. The tradition of staging perpetuates and allows for this cycle of abuse to continue. The overreliance of the stages was the first initial chip in Noma's stability as it is made clear by their closing that they are incapable of producing the level of quality without having to rely on unpaid labor. This failure to adequately compensate these interns only demonstrates the overexploitation and value of their labor, but also shows how narrow the profit margins are for fine dining establishments. These narrow profit margins are also reflected in the low salaries of those who do get paid. This combined with the guilty pressure from of expectation of guests for the perfect meal creates an unsustainable model that is crumbling.

Redzepi, himself, admitted: ““financially and emotionally, as an employer and as a human being, it just doesn't work.””⁸⁴ It being fine dining. Following the pandemic, the cracks in the foundation of fine dining were further exposed, pushing the industry to the limit. Noma was one of the businesses that buckled under the pressure of the unsustainable fine dining model. Many chefs felt that if a restaurant that was at the top of the food chain and was preaching sustainability was unable to make it, what hope did they have of surviving in this industry? What could they possibly do to work around these pitfalls? What many of them failed to grasp was that

⁸⁴ Adam Coghlan, “‘World's Best Restaurant' Noma Is Closing in 2024,” *Eater London*, January 9, 2023, <https://london.eater.com/23546160/worlds-best-restaurant-noma-closing-rene-redzepi-copenhagen>.

Noma was just an amplified model of the unsustainable practices that run rampant throughout the industry. For all the sustainability that Redzepi and Meyer championed through their New Nordic Manifesto, they could not make it possible without exploitation of old fine dining industry staples. Their sustainable solution to the fine dining industry was only made possible by unsustainable means. They were unable to separate themselves from the practices of their industry, which was why their closure demonstrates why fine dining has been able to exist for so long while simultaneously, is marking the crumbling of the industry.

Solution

In the movie “The Menu,” there is a scene in which a sous chef shoots himself as part of the performance for one of the dishes. He does so in part to profess his undying devotion towards fine dining as a craft, but he also does it because he believes that the dish that he has created is inadequate and therefore must give his life to ensure that it meets the expectations of the guests. While clearly a satirical take, it struck a painful chord for many fine dining stages and chefs. The fine dining industry has a way of taking everything and pushing one to a breaking point.⁸⁵ Stage, Peter-Emil Madsen agrees: ““We have seen what fine dining can do now, and it kills me to say this, but I don’t think you can achieve these results without exploitation.””⁸⁶

The solution is complicated. Noma has had an undeniably positive effect on Copenhagen, Denmark. The New Nordic Manifesto had undoubtedly revitalized the country’s culture and provided opportunities for further economic growth as tourism grows. But an industry that is

⁸⁵ Brianna Wellen. “How The Menu Speaks to Chefs,” The Takeout. December 2, 2022. <https://thetakeout.com/how-the-menu-2022-film-speaks-to-chefs-1849847513>.

⁸⁶ Julia Moskin. “Noma, Rated the World’s Best Restaurant, Is Closing Its Doors.” New York Times. January 9, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/09/dining/noma-closing-rene-redzepi.html>

built on the exploitation of passionate individuals cannot be allowed to stand, no matter how good the product is. A value system that outweighs the real sacrifices chefs make daily for intangible concepts is immoral. Even when Redzepi himself wrote an article detailing the toxic behavior that he participated in, he was applauded for being so vulnerable rather than being held accountable for his actions.⁸⁷

It is clear that help cannot be found inside the fine dining industry, the abuse is simply too embedded. The suffering of those within can no longer be ignored when so many are trying to use tools available, such as social media, to make their invisible labor seen. Their pain and suffering are real, and they deserve to be compensated by, at the very least, a living wage for their work. Noma 3.0 has promised to continue to pay their interns in their new pop-up format and perhaps stepping away from the traditional fine dining format is what is needed to allow these changes to go and manifest. But one thing is clear, the fine dining industry is built on unsustainable practices that are harming those who wish to be a part of it. Changes must be made if the industry is to continue as it is currently crumbling. As demonstrated by Noma, the fine dining model as it is now, is unsustainable.

⁸⁷ Kate Ng, "Top chef René Redzepi says he had 'many, many hours of therapy' to deal with his bullying behaviour," *Independent*, November 28, 2022, https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/food-and-drink/rene-redzepi-noma-bully-therapy-b2234367.html?utm_content=Echobox&utm_medium=Social&utm_campaign=Main&utm_source=Twitter#Echobox=1669643963.

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