

KRISTIAN BAUMANN

THE PIONEER



A flower made of kohlrabi kimchi, flavoured with seasonal herbs and blooms

IMAGES: NEVE GARADAY



AT HIS COPENHAGEN RESTAURANT, KOAN, CHEF KRISTIAN BAUMANN CHANNELS HIS DANISH UPBRINGING AND KOREAN ROOTS TO CREATE INNOVATIVE DISHES. WORDS: LAUREN JADE HILL

It was in 2020, with the launch of a Copenhagen pop-up, that Kristian Baumann fully leaned into the gastronomic style he's become known for. Koan, which has since moved to a permanent location in the city, is where Denmark meets South Korea. Ingredients from the former are incorporated into artfully executed tasting menus influenced by the latter's street kitchens, temples, royal court cuisine and barbecue culture.

"We create flavours that both our Danish and Korean guests will say they don't know," says Baumann. "For me, that means we're creating something that really is unique." Dishes like white kimchi with aromatic herbs and rose hip oil combine the flavours and culinary principles of these two contrasting cultures, reflecting the chef's own background and life experience.

In the 1970s and '80s, after the Korean War, a large number of South Korean children were adopted by Danish families. Baumann was one of these early adoptees and experienced a happy upbringing in the town of Ganløse, just outside the capital. This is where his curiosity about his birth country was kindled and where his culinary journey began.

"At that time there were a lot of Danish-Korean gatherings, giving these adopted children the chance to experience aspects of Korean culture, like the food," he says.

"I'm glad I was exposed to these experiences throughout my childhood. I think it was this early curiosity that became the spark that ignited my openness towards having a beginner's mind when I first went back to visit Korea and really accepted being between two cultures."

Baumann attended culinary school in Copenhagen, where one of his first jobs was an internship at Noma. At that time the restaurant was in its infancy, but it wasn't long before it became synonymous with world-class cooking and New Nordic cuisine. "To this day, Noma has contributed to gastronomy in a way not many have, opening doors to a new generation — me included," Baumann says. "Noma encouraged people to try something different and brought more visitors to Copenhagen. Now the culinary culture here is more diverse and there's a deeper sense of knowledge being spread through food. It's the impact Noma had that's allowed me to do what I'm doing today."

Baumann also cooked alongside chef Christian Puglisi at his two (now-closed, but at the time much-lauded) Copenhagen restaurants, Manfreds and Relae, but the Noma internship was arguably one of the defining moments of his career. It kick-started a long professional relationship with chef Rene Redzepi and his team, with whom Baumann worked, on and off, for a number of years.



Koan's Scandi-Korean dining room sits within a heritage building on the waterfront

He helped to launch the first Noma project in Japan, and when the restaurant transferred to Australia as a pop-up, Baumann was able to launch his own temporary venture, Restaurant 108, in Noma's original Copenhagen location. Focusing on Danish cuisine and hyperlocal ingredients, the restaurant received a Michelin star after six months, and it was here that Baumann began to think about incorporating Korean flavours and techniques into his cooking. In 2017, he took his first research trip to the country of his birth, and has returned regularly since — visits that have helped him better understand his place between two cultures.

"Many adoptive people I meet struggle with identity and to this day it's one of the things I also think about," Baumann says. "The way for me to move forward and find more peace has, of course, been accepting the fact I'm in the middle and realising that it's actually my strength. [Another way has been] through the trips I've taken to Korea over the years."

Each encounter Baumann's had in South Korea has inspired his cooking. In South Jeolla Province, for example, he spent time with a nun at Baekyangsa temple, accompanying her as she foraged and cooked for guests staying at the holy site. In Seoul, he met local artists and picked up Korean specialities at street food markets.

Upon launching Koan, Baumann decided to commit fully to this gastronomic path he'd found himself on. "Before this, I'd experimented with flavours, like finding the flavour of sesame in rose hip berries — in August their seeds can be toasted and blended with oil — but for a while I kept these thoughts inside," he says. "Koan was the start of really learning to articulate myself through food."

In 2022, the chef and his team opened a casual Korean restaurant, Juju, in central Copenhagen, all the while continuing to search for a permanent location for Koan. They finally found the right space in 2023, and it welcomed its first guests that spring. "Just before that, I travelled to Korea with my head chef to find the last porcelain for the opening; it was an eye-opening experience on many levels," Baumann says. "It felt like it was one of the last pieces of this puzzle we were building to start this restaurant with full intent."

Tableware and other ceramics made by Korean artists are integral to the experience at Koan, whose dining room is a Scandi-Korean, wood-and-white space in a high-ceilinged heritage building on the waterfront. Tables overlook the open kitchen, where Baumann and his fellow chefs turn out dishes that, just 10 weeks after opening, earned the restaurant two Michelin stars.

To replicate the feeling of eating warm bread with your hands, Baumann makes his own savoury version of kkwabaegi, a type of Korean doughnut. It's cooked to order, seasoned with pine salt and served with a whipped apple cream. He also came up with a reinterpretation of sundae, a Korean blood sausage, combining its flavours with Danish ingredients such as preserved blackcurrants. Spins on gamasot rice made with fjord shrimps, and chilled lobster noodles also feature on the tasting menu.

"My dream has always been to contribute to gastronomy in a way that can excite others and bring something better to them," Baumann says. "I'm just happy that Koan resonates with people. Sometimes when I fail to find the words for what I want to do, people still understand what I'm trying to articulate at the restaurant through the experience and food." □



Signature dishes

TOFU & CAVIAR

Baumann has long been fascinated by the texture of tofu, so for this dish he wanted to pair it with one of his favourite ingredients, osetra blonde caviar from a sustainable Scandinavian producer. The velvety tofu is flavoured with pine nuts and coated in the caviar (pictured above). Baumann serves it with sorrel, a cream and oil made from langoustine, plus mustard seeds, goji berries and strawberries (the latter grown on the farm where Baumann worked in his youth).

WHITE KIMCHI

Koan's white kimchi features delicately cut kohlrabi fermented with seasonally changing aromatic flavours such as ginger and jujube (red dates). It's shaped into a flower and seasoned with aromatic herbs, flowers and rose hip oil. The flower is then presented in a cup made by a Seoul-based artist using fragments of pottery from China's Qing dynasty.

THE FLAVOURS OF SUNDAE

Inspired by a traditional pork blood sausage found all over South Korea, Baumann has recreated the speciality's textures and flavours using Danish ingredients. For the dish, he combines pork, pork blood and vegetables such as carrots, leeks and shallots with aromatic spices and lemon thyme before serving with dried blackcurrants for acidity.