

OX's dining room fixtures were fashioned by hand more than half a century ago. Restaurant owner Þráinn Freyr Vigfússon's grandfather carved the cabinetry for his provincial home in Snæfellsnes in 1961, where it remained until Vigfússon unearthed it to build his restaurant around it. Vigfússon's ode to life in a rural household birthed an unparalleled addition to fine dining in Reykjavik.

He crafted a new home around a memory of family, and he has consistently filled it with complete strangers who coalesce at the communal table. ÓX seats 11 guests around a partition styled as a blonde kitchen counter with a woodgrain finish. It reminds me of the countryside breakfast bar at my parent's house in rural Pennsylvania, but here, I'm a solo diner surrounded by unfamiliar faces.

Photo: ÓX via Facebook

"We have three Danes with us tonight," the chef smirks, so he's prepared a special canape: a light, almost raw dough with a savoury soft Danish cheese filling and manure-smoked lamb. It's resting on a pedestal set into a bed of hay. I've specified a vegetarian menu for my 13-course meal, so the chef replaces the lamb in my dumpling with a singular, perfectly centred mint leaf. He sings the bed of hay—a light smoke—and covers the dish with a lid. When I open it, I'm immediately thrown into a tailspin of nostalgia for bonfires, farmland, upturned earth. It adds a light smoke to the dough, making the memory all the more tangible.

Each sequential course impresses: the chef captures the textures of chicken liver mousse in an exquisitely whipped vegetable pâté, filling a light tart. The first bite is tangy—perhaps it's the pickled sea-buckthorn—in a prelude to an easy sweetness.

*Balance and timing seem to conduct the meal as if the components of each bite run on a metronome.*

All of the dishes are single bites—which means that their flavour palette has to be executed with great precision. They're paired with a generous range of wines and liquors—starting with a tart rose and moving toward a light Chateau Fuisse chardonnay.

OX is the best of fine dining in Reykjavik.

Photo: ÓX via Facebook

I feel levitous as he introduces the next course: a petite Icelandic pancake (skansa) with skyr-cultured creme for a lick of sourness, paired with an astonishingly flavour-accurate mock lumpfish roe (tapioca pearls soaked in seaweed and soy). It's at once creamy and grassy and salty and builds upon a canon of uncomplicated flavours in uncommon combination.

The next several courses are equally ingenious variations on their meat and fish counterparts, although I am impartial to both wasabi and celery root, which featured prominently in courses four and five. I've become unaccustomed to flavourful vegetarian food over the last several years in Iceland, eating in rather than bothering to venture out for a repetitive and unappetizing hodgepodge of root vegetables and pickled this-and-that.

But the contrivances at OX transcended quotidian vegetable offerings: the chef has navigated by taste and smell, and the foods feel instinctual. Even the thin wafer of burnt chocolate that tops an organic strawberry sorbet—with a delicate drizzle of licorice oil—seems an oddly serendipitous discovery.



Photo: ÓX via Facebook

Vigfússon has inlaid the cabinets with a jigsaw of refrigeration and heating units, transforming family heirlooms into essential components of his kitchen. For some recipes, he uses more earthy techniques.

During the seventh course, the chef sliced rye bread, which he'd steamed over a geothermal pocket, out of a milk carton casing. He served it with a generous pad of hand-whipped butter, which tasted of light cream sans all hint of salt, sprinkled with Angelica. That course, for me, was the crux of the meal: when the host offered me a simple plate of bread and butter.



Photo: ÓX via Facebook

The meal took around four hours from start to finish. It was around the seventh course that I began to feel content with those dining next to me—and I, a moderate introvert, decided to engage them. That surprising feeling of fullness gave me a sense of internal warmth and confidence.

I discovered that the man to my left had the strange occupation of designing and managing east coast luxury clubs, the natural descendants of country clubs. But no food, no activity, was off limits for him in his eternal quest to improve concierge services: he loved street food as much as cuisine and lauded a few familiar spots in the Bonkastræti area for their cheap, tasty bites. He was a veritable pilgrim of the best sites for fine dining in Reykjavik.

fine dining in Reykjavik at its simplest.

Photo: ÓX via Facebook

The couple to my left—one Dane, one American—were both culinary aficionados. He was the chef at another high-end restaurant in town; she was the founder of an Icelandic company that uses only wild ingredients that are foraged, hunted, or caught. She was a treasure trove of intel on Iceland's landscape of small-scale farms and greenhouses, fishmongers, dairy farmers, and butchers.

Even the Icelanders at the far end of the counter who kept to themselves for much of the meal, likely because they preferred to enjoy their dinner in Icelandic, opened up around the time that our host brought out the AeroPress coffee, quickly followed by Madiera sherry. They seemed to experience a moment of delighted uncertainty when I engaged them in their native idiom, and soon integrated into our larger group. We played a small round of musical chairs before, once again, breaking off.

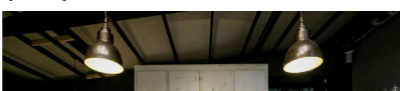


Photo: ÓX via Facebook



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But this time, we divided into two groups, not 11 individuals, and headed out into the city in a state of satiation akin to euphoria.