



## OUR PERSONAL STORY

### NICOLAI

My campfire journey began in 2002 in Copenhagen, where I began training to become a chef. It was at a time when molecular gastronomy was at its peak. For the budding chef's apprentice I was, it felt like taking a sneak peek into the wizard's crystal ball as new techniques and dishes emerged from the likes of Ferran Adrià and Heston Blumenthal. Liquid nitrogen and hot gels seemed to dominate the gastronomic image of the future. It was magical, it was alluring, and I was swallowing it up whole. I had to know which magical powders and high-tech machines were used to produce these miracles, and this captivated me so much that I read and researched everything I could on the subject. To this day, I still know all kinds of molecular gastronomic techniques off the top of my head. For a long time, I felt as though I had found the culinary equivalent of the philosopher's stone. But what I didn't realize was that my eagerness to discover new culinary impossibilities was overshadowing what good cooking really is. Because, as you may already know, the best food is not made with whimsical techniques and mystery powder. The best food is made with love, thoughtfulness, quality ingredients, and a great sense of taste.

If I could rewind time and give the young chef's-apprentice-me some advice, I would advise him to be less preoccupied with the future and instead look backward and inward. I was training at Le Sommelier in Copenhagen under the head chef Francis Cardenau, who,

with his classic French background, was among the pioneers who created a breeding ground for the high-level Nordic gastronomy we see today. At Le Sommelier, I learned to master the French style of cooking. But still, I could not muster the same fascination for the classic French cuisine as I had for the Spanish techno-emotional kitchen. So, as soon as I got my diploma, I went to Spain, where I worked at La Terraza del Casino: a Michelin 2-star restaurant in the El Bulli family. There, I learned to excel at the new Spanish cuisine's sacred tricks.

But despite my newfound expertise, I was still unaware of just how important the prerequisites of taste and love are if you want to cook something truly delicious. So when I lived out my dream of opening my own restaurant, it was short-lived. The concept—a Nordic bistro—was spot-on; the guests and the food critics loved it. But for me, every day was a struggle. I simply felt no joy behind the stove, only the mounting pressure of work. One morning, when I arrived at the restaurant and put my key in the door, I had a breakdown. Right then and there, I lost the desire to cook. I could not find any joy doing it, and perhaps it had never truly been there to begin with.

A few weeks later I met Eva, who later became my wonderful wife. Every morning I felt the sadness of leaving her to go to a job I simply did not enjoy. The combination of my blossoming relationship and my breakdown forced me to contemplate where I was in my life and what I really wanted. I wanted a family, and I did not want a job that dragged me down. I knew then that I didn't belong in the restaurant business, and that I would have to leave it behind me. I quit my job as head chef, handed the keys over to my partner, and left. Soon after, I was hired by Copenhagen Hospitality College to teach new chef's apprentices the craft. All those cooking theories I had absorbed over the years were being put to good use, and I had an amazing time.