

FRONTIER



FOOD

Reindeer tacos, polar bear attacks and cultivation in sub-zero temperatures... We investigate the highs and lows of Svalbard's burgeoning fine-dining scene

Words ✓ Jamie Lafferty → Photography ✓ Dan Mariner



Opening pages ✓
 The shale slopes above Longyearbyen; pungent blue cheese profiteroles served on locally mined coal at Huset
 Above & right ✓
 While snowmobiles are used in winter, in summer scarce roads mean locals are left with limited transport options; a disused mine above Longyearbyen



To look at Svalbard on a map (or in person), there's no reason to expect it to even have restaurants, never mind those serving up anything exciting. At 78 degrees north, just a little over 1,000km from the North Pole, the archipelago is a harsh landscape where almost nothing edible grows.

Its capital Longyearbyen, which sits in a great, snow-topped valley, is a utilitarian – many would say bleak – place. Infrastructure is negligible, and agriculture is non-existent, thanks to its thick layer of permafrost. Its topsoil can barely sustain enough moss and shrubs to keep the indigenous reindeer alive, never mind humans.

This being the case, you'd probably expect the 2,000-odd inhabitants of this former mining town to be surviving on canned goods and frozen pizzas, but you'd be wrong. Instead it's home to two of the best restaurants in Norway – Huset and Funktionærmessen – and numerous others where elaborate menus are filled with exciting dishes that combine fresh produce and elaborate French techniques. It begs the questions: why and *how*?

"It's really crazy work," says Steve Torgersen, who runs Gruvelageret, a mine-outbuilding turned fine-dining restaurant, where a typical set menu might include a potent smoked Svalbard reindeer heart and white bean soup followed by delicious Arctic tacos served with a cloudberry preserve then a delicate fillet of butter-seared halibut. »

He's talking about getting fresh water but he could be referring to the challenges of supplying good food this far north generally. Most produce has to be imported by boat or plane. In addition, restaurateurs have to develop relationships with trappers who get wild meat out in the tundra, and make the most of a brief and frantic hunting and fishing season in August and September.

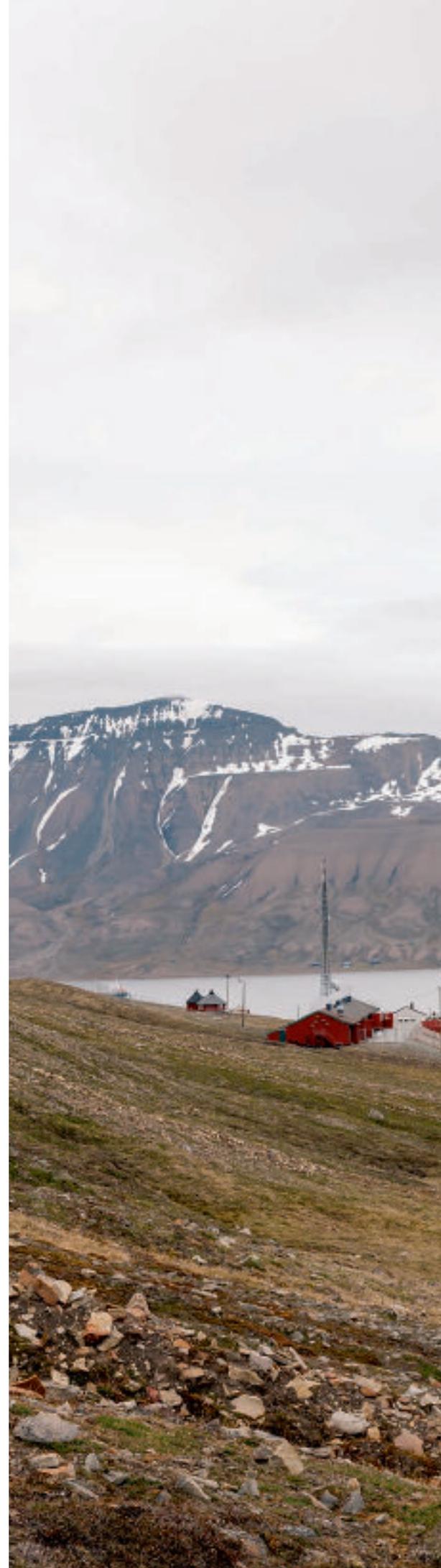
"You want local fish? You have to catch it," he says. "Same for the grouse. There's no commercial operation here."

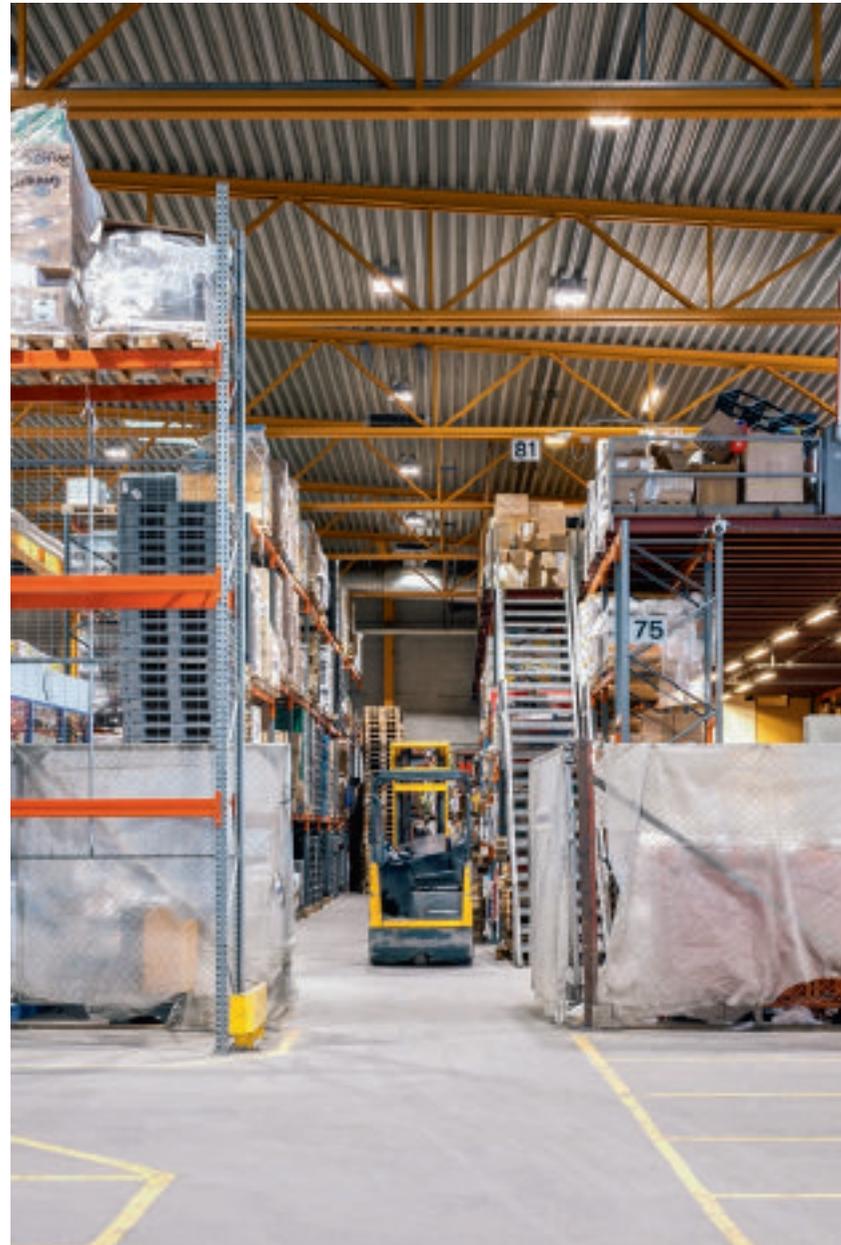
Chefs arriving here with visions of a New Nordic style of cooking with all locally sourced ingredients would have another think coming – and quickly. The foraging is strictly limited to a small brown mushroom (not even cloudberries grow this far north) and each licensed hunter may only take one reindeer each.

"It's not possible to have a kitchen that's based only on food from Svalbard – we don't have enough," says Torgersen. Instead he tries to reduce the distance his ingredients travel. "We keep it Scandinavian, including the north of Norway, Sweden and Finland. From here we have reindeer, cod, char, grouse, goose..."

Along with partner Kristin, Torgersen is at the forefront of the movement driving culinary standards on Svalbard. As well as Gruvelageret, they own the recently opened Stationen in the heart of town and Svalbard's most popular bar, the Karlsberger Pub. Over the past 25 years – since moving here at 15 from Berlevåg on mainland Norway – he's witnessed the population's changing demographics, economy and tastes. But although there have been advances, the logistical challenges they face would have made most chefs and restaurateurs hop on a plane back to civilisation.

It's not every restaurant, for example, that has to deal with a polar bear attack, but that's just what happened this summer at the Isfjord Radio Adventure Hotel. An hour away by speedboat, »





“The challenges would make most chefs and restaurateurs hop on a plane back to civilisation”

From left ✓
Butter-seared halibut at Gruvelageret; Svalbard Church in Longyearbyen; a warehouse facility with nine months' supplies



“As well as more people coming here for food and drink, we want to see more local producers and businesses”



Isfjord Radio is the outpost's outpost, a former telecommunications hub, now a remote hotel and restaurant visited by tourists seeking adventure and locals who have grown claustrophobic in Longyearbyen.

It welcomes guests from February to September every year, but one arriving in early June this year was a lot hungrier than most. "He ate mostly from the food waste, and some chocolate, plus some figs," says head chef Simon Liestøl Idsø. "But the drinks storage was completely destroyed – you can imagine how it looked after a big polar bear has been in there for two-and-a-half hours."

Although it was a funny headline in the wider world, the incident represented real damage to a hotel so cut off that its power comes from a diesel generator, its water from snowmelt. Yet, despite the remoteness and ursine invaders, Liestøl Idsø is doing outstanding work here, presenting impressive spreads of smoked seal, halibut with roe butter and reindeer sausage.

"I wasn't quite aware of what I'd gotten into at the beginning," says the Stavanger native with a chuckle. "We're just two chefs and when we're not in the kitchen we're driving tractors or helping to fill the water. Cooking is only half the job."



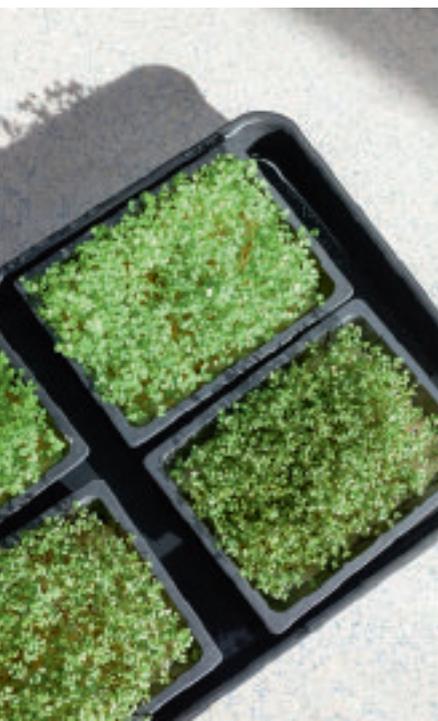
Menus have to be planned months in advance – but also adjusted almost every day, depending on availability of chance ingredients like seal or ptarmigan. Although the stores receive a large delivery from the mainland twice a year, and fresh fruit and veg arrive in small quantities by boat or snowmobile every fortnight, many of their cooking techniques rely on preservation.

Liestøl Idsø uses methods he learned from his grandparents to preserve the wild reindeer he gets from the trappers. "We smoke the hearts, poach the tongue in its own bouillon, marinate and grill the fillets, ferment the front legs. From the neck we do dry-aged cured ham. In fact, we use the entire animal from head to tail."

Thanks to a grant, Isfjord Radio will also be able to grow its own herbs soon. The idea is to be as self-sufficient as possible while accepting the considerable limitations imposed by mother nature.

Those surprised by the ingenuity and quality of the food here would do well to consider the changing face of Svalbard. Originally founded by Dutch whalers and then dominated by mining for the whole of the 20th century, it's only really since industry has waned that tourism and relative comfort have come to the islands. Since 2000 the number of annual visitors has doubled to 130,000. »

From left
Smoked and cured
reindeer leg; hotel Isfjord
Radio's head chef Simon
Liestøl Idsø; reindeer
sausages with beetroot



[CHALLENGING THE WISDOM THAT NOTHING GROWS THIS FAR NORTH.](#) Ben Vidmar (left) runs the Polar Permaculture facility, growing micro greens for gourmet restaurants and offering tours of Longyearbyen that culminate in a short cooking course. The tour includes a trip to the only supermarket supplying the town's 2,100 residents, and then to the greenhouse dome and polar garden to pick produce for your evening meal.
polarpermaculture.com



From Left
Polar Permaculture's
greenhouse; mushroom
soup served at Huset,
made from fungus
harvested during
last year's foraging
expeditions; Huset's
elaborate bread course
served with reindeer
prepared three ways

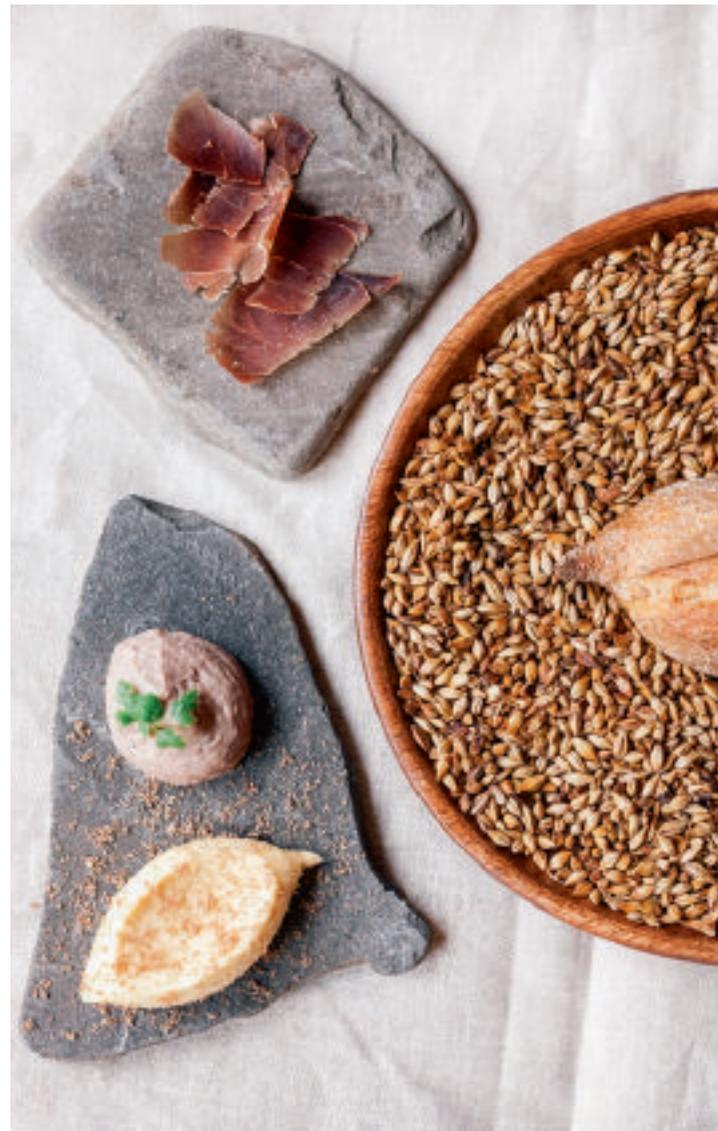


Yet, the seeds for today's food scene were actually planted during the bleak mining days, according to Stein-Ove Johannessen, manager of the Svalbard and Vault hotels. "It used to be mostly single people living here – they were in small accommodation and not cooking at home," he explains. "Plus, the food prices in our stores are really high, so it can actually be cheaper to go out. Also, the taxes are low here so the restaurants can get high-quality ingredients, and now there is a demand for very good food."

Along with other food figures around Longyearbyen, Johannessen has now set up a food network that will shine a light on the growing industry by hosting food festivals, while aspiring to push the government to allow locals to make more of Svalbard's limited natural resources. "We'd really like to have more people coming here primarily for food and drink," he says, "but also we want to see more local producers and businesses starting."

One such business – and a somewhat unlikely one – is Ben Vidmar's Polar Permaculture Solutions. A former cruise-ship and pub chef, Vidmar, who hails from Cleveland, Ohio, got the idea to subvert some of the problems of local agriculture by growing fresh herbs, salads and vegetables in his greenhouse dome. Nearby in his laboratory he's trying to work out a way not just to provide local restaurants with microgreens and other produce, but for a more holistic approach to resources on Svalbard. "We want to grow fresh food and deliver it, but we also want to process organic waste that's just being thrown away," he says. "We need to figure it out – it's very new, revolutionary."

For now, most, if not all, of the high-end restaurants in town are buying his greens to serve with their dishes. This includes Huset, the oldest continually running restaurant on Svalbard. Almost everyone involved in haute cuisine up here has worked there at one time, including Steve Torgersen and Simon Liestøl Idsø. Today, this huge, solid-looking building continues to set the industry standard for the archipelago, leading the way with a divine eight-course Nordic Tasting Menu with wines paired from its mighty 20,000-bottle cellar. »





The menu here also adjusts constantly, maximising the freshness of ingredients arriving into Longyearbyen from other parts of the archipelago and the wider world. During a two-hour theatrical set banquet, there are delicate cuts of reindeer served on an antler, locally caught cod served with burnt onions and smoked almonds, and a pungent blue cheese profiterole arriving on a piece of coal from an old mine. It's as inventive as it is tasty.

When presented with impressive dishes like eider duck, shallot and leeks served in a feathered "nest", it's hard not to draw comparisons with the innovative food scene in another far-flung part of the old Norse empire. Koks Restaurant in the Faroe Islands hit international headlines last year when it earned the nation's first Michelin star. The surprise wasn't so much in response to the food, but rather that the hallowed guide's gaze was roving quite so widely.

It didn't go unnoticed by Stein-Ove Johannessen, who used to work in a two-starred restaurant in London. If a Faroese restaurant can win a star, could Svalbard, one day, follow suit?

"Ja, I think it could be possible," he says. "I really think that should be our goal."

gruvelageret.no, svalbardbooking.com, basecampexplorer.com, huset.com

Norwegian flies to Svalbard from Oslo. Book flights, a hotel and a rental car at Norwegian.com



From left ✓
Bartosz Tarczyk, manager of Huset; preserved local eider duck egg at Huset

While you're in... Svalbard



Stay The Vault

The Svalbard Global Seed Vault is inaccessible to the public, but its proximity to Longyearbyen was the inspiration behind this hotel, which opened in February 2018.

svalbardbooking.com



Eat Stationen

Opened in July, Svalbard's newest restaurant has décor that evokes the archipelago's whale-hunting past, combined with a more relaxed service and presentation - think gastropub crossed with a canteen (order at the till).

stationen.no



Do Polar sailing

New for this Arctic season, Basecamp Explorer has secured use of the *Linden*, a three-mast ship with ice-strengthened hull for travelling around Isfjorden and beyond.

basecampexplorer.com