

Secret Ingredient

DISCOVERING *HYGGE*, A VITAL ELEMENT OF DANISH CULTURE | By MALAVIKA BHATTACHARYA



The spirit of hygge warms the soul in the coldest of Danish winters.

“What is this *heeg* all about, really?” I ask, sipping a post-lunch coffee aboard a boat at Roskilde, a half hour west of Copenhagen. My companion Anne, a Danish communications student, collapses into giggles. “You mean *hue-gah*,” she says through fits of laughter. *Hygge*, a lovely encapsulation of Danish culture, is hard to pronounce, and harder still to explain. A winter evening spent by the warmth of your fireplace can be hygge, Anne tells me. “When it’s dark and snowy outside,” another voice at the table adds, “and you’re snuggled in a blanket with your family or friends, drinking hot chocolate, talking, laughing, and watching TV together, that’s hygge.”

I try to grasp this vague concept through conversations with various Copenhageners. The definitions vary but the reactions that the word elicits follow a trend: A brief spark in the eyes, followed by slow, faraway smiles, and eventually, an earnest effort to explain

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To break bread with a Danish family (and experience hygge) in Copenhagen, visit meetthedanes.dk, a website that puts travellers in touch with locals that host home-cooked dinners.

hygge through cherished memories. This hygge, I have established, is anything that makes one feel cosy, loved, and like mush on the inside. Having puppies crawl all over you, for instance.

Though it isn’t limited to mealtimes, hygge is a crucial part of Danish food and drink culture. Fittingly, my first experience of it is at dinner with a group of friends. We’re at Simple Raw, a teeny, trendy, vegetarian restaurant in the hipster neighbourhood of Vesterbro. Bathed in warm light with benches piled high with cushions, Simple Raw has large, fogged-up glass windows through which we can see the cold, misty street outside. Our too-small table is crammed with trays and bowls: buckthorn, carrot, and pineapple wrapped in crunchy lettuce leaves; pop-coloured avocado and spinach smoothies; spicy shots of chilli chocolate; and piles of soft, unbaked rye bread. As with meals back home, we waste no time passing our plates of food around,

having bites from each other’s trays. The Europeans in the group are surprised at first but soon join in the camaraderie. It is intimate, the conversation flows, and the food is exceptional—it all seems pretty hygge to me.

My foggy notions are cleared further at celebrity chef Karsten Kroman’s cooking class. The genial, bearded Dane lays down the tenets of hygge for me. The essentials are the 3 Cs: candles, conversation, and cuisine. “You can’t hygge without candles or firelight,” he insists. “Conversation should be meaningful, deep, and nice. And you must always, always have plenty of wine and good food, or coffee and cake.”

Karsten’s gleaming kitchen is filled with music (old-school hits like “We are family”). White wine and elderflower spritzers are being passed around, and there’s fried chicken and open-faced sandwiches for those who get peckish while cooking. We’re learning to make stuffed chicken and Nordic fish and chips with remoulade, a sauce consisting of mayonnaise and pickles.

There’s constant chatter in the kitchen, lots of running around, and squeals of excitement on account of the new culinary experiments: stuffing an entire chicken, or whipping up ice cream. The mood is again cosy and fun. Yet another successful hygge evening.

The following day I am bundled up in my thick winter coat, wandering around Copenhagen’s dark-as-night streets at 3 p.m., an icy rain lashing against my face. Scandinavian winters are marked by biting cold and hours of darkness. Yet, the Danes are ranked among the happiest people in the world, according to the UN’s 2013 World Happiness Report. Maybe it has a little something to do with hygge: this untranslatable, unpronounceable, fully loaded word. ●