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# guy's

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# taste maker

CULINARY INVESTIGATOR  
**LARS WILLIAMS IS**  
 DESIGNING THE FUTURE OF  
 FOOD. BY DIANE VADINO.  
 PHOTOGRAPHED  
 BY ELENY RAMIREZ

**LARS WILLIAMS**, head of the Nordic Food Lab, sort of looks like a Scandinavian superhero, and talking to him, you get the feeling that he's lived the life of one. Despite the name, Williams grew up in central New Jersey; the "Lars" was a shout-out to his Norwegian grandfather. "He was always smoking things—in his basement, he had all the crazy tools he used to smoke fish," Williams says, by phone from Copenhagen, where he now lives. "He'd smoke half, and he'd pickle the other half. I was always eating very strange things for an American child in the '70s." Williams went to high

school in Brooklyn, college at Wesleyan (where he studied mid-century American literature), and then worked briefly in music videos before pursuing his true calling: food.

After studying at the French Culinary Institute, he put in time at Marcus Samuelsson's Aquavit and Wylie Dufresne's WD-50 in Manhattan, and then The Fat Duck, Heston Blumenthal's temple to tail-to-nose cooking in the English countryside. There, he met his wife, and the two set off for a year in the South Pacific, working as chefs on a private yacht. "Actually, it was fantastic, and the perfect

## IT'S CHEMICAL

Culinary whiz Dave Arnold is the man behind Booker and Dax, a New York City cocktail lounge that does for drinks what Momofuku does for food. (It's no coincidence—Arnold's partners include Momofuku's David Chang, and the lounge shares space with Chang's Ssäm Bar.) We spoke to Arnold about Booker and Dax's signature "hot-poker drinks," the cultural significance of warmed-up rocks, and his favorite thing on the menu—liquid nitrogen is involved. DV



What do you say to people who consider sticking a hot poker into a drink a gimmick? It's not a gimmick! We focus very specifically on non-gimmicks. None of our drinks are overly garnished. None of our drinks have weird little flourishes—it's not like we're putting a foam on top or dropping little balls into a drink. No one's running around with a mister to mist you in the face. If I find a drink that desperately needs a foam, I'll add a foam—though I doubt that's going to happen. I don't know



## spirit of the night



their career choices. "With the slowdown and some reflection, we had a chance for that ah-ha moment," Will says. "We spent a lot of time trying to figure out why we shouldn't do it." "It" is Bully Boy Distillers, the brothers' line of whiskeys, vodka, and rums. Local ingredients are preferred, like winter red wheat (from northern Maine) in the vodka. "We have apple trees, and we're looking to do something like an applejack, which is just a distilled, fermented hard cider," Will says. "It's really exciting. And ironically, if it weren't for the economic downturn, we probably wouldn't be doing this." DV BULLYBOYDISTILLERS.COM



Will and Dave Willis's farm in Sherborn, Massachusetts, has been in the family for four generations. "My great-grandfather bought it in the early 1920s," says Will. Though the brothers left the farm to take professional jobs in Boston, they grew up with a love for artisanal foods—and when the recession hit, they had an opportunity to rethink

preparation for Noma—we had to go foraging for everything," Williams says. "You go to an island and all they have in the grocery is a half kilo of sugar and some dubious-looking flour. We'd run around asking people for chickens, and we'd go fishing every day. There was actually plenty of stuff to use, even if all the Tahitians, these days, are eating corned beef."

All roads, it seems—even South Pacific shipping lines—led to the restaurant Noma in Copenhagen, Rene Redzepi's internationally acclaimed homage to the wonders of foraging, local foods, and indigenous, Scandinavian ingredients. Williams's wife is from Denmark, and when the pair decided to move there, he found a spot in the kitchen. "At Noma, the [dishes] are beautiful and quite simplistic, but they're still incredibly complicated to plate," Williams says. "Everyone works extremely hard."

After three years there, Williams now runs Redzepi's Nordic Food Lab, which is

the restaurant's investigative wing, as fueled by academic and theoretical questions as by the practicalities of bringing a dish to a diner. "The point of having the Nordic Food Lab is to really delve into a subject—we try to bridge the culinary art with a purely scientific investigation into things," says Williams. Current experiments include injecting venison with bacteria ("It gives it a slight acidity") and working with kombucha juices: "Some of them were amazing, but the beet juice kombucha was one of the weirdest things I've ever put in my mouth," he says. "It was almost like a mucus. There was a...dangerous unpalatability." Of course, in Williams's context, a failure is almost as notable as a success, and one to be shared with as many like-minded colleagues as possible; he regularly corresponds with chefs around the world, looking



for common ground. "We're very committed to open-source research. Ultimately, we just want to get people to eat better through good food."

if people realize that this is a very, very old tradition of drink-making. We had hot rocks long before we had vessels we could put over a fire. Before we had vessels, we'd take a rock out of the fire and put it in a drink. Anyway, they're coming off the menu soon because the weather's going to warm up.

**But people will want the red-hot poker drinks?** I'll never tell anyone no—if they can wait the seven minutes for it to heat up, OK.

**Do you think all this innovation is a trend or here to stay for the long term?** We are in a period of tremendous experimentation and exploration. Certain things are being done now that will stand the test of time, and certain things won't. But certain pieces of equipment that were considered outlandish 10 years ago, like an immersion circulator [for sous-vide cooking]—they sell them in Williams-Sonoma now, for God's sake.

**What's your favorite thing on the menu?** The Bangkok daiquiri. Basically, we freeze the Thai basil with liquid nitrogen and muddle it in its frozen state to make a powder. It's delicious, but it's so simple. That's the point—it's so simple. This is something anyone can make—anyone who has liquid nitrogen can make. You don't need a boatload of training. Have liquid nitrogen, will make.

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## JOHANNESBURG

THE CLASSIC SOUTH AFRICAN MEAL IS A BRAAI, A MEAT-CENTRIC BACKYARD BARBECUE; NO LESS AN AUTHORITY THAN *FOOD & WINE* HAS DECLARED THAT "ALL SOUTH AFRICANS LOVE IT"—NOT AN EASY FEAT IN A COUNTRY WITH 11 OFFICIAL LANGUAGES AND A SCHISMATIC CULTURAL LIFE AS RICH AND COMPLICATED AS OUR OWN. IF YOU'RE LACKING A LOCAL FRIEND WITH A GRILL, RESTAURANTS LIKE THESE SHOULD SHOW OFF THE COUNTRY'S CULINARY GIFTS TO ADMIRABLE ADVANTAGE. DV

### MOEMA'S

This Parktown North café, in the Parktown Quarter shopping center, appears regularly in South African style magazines. Stop here for tea and red velvet cupcakes. *Parktown Quarter, Corner of 3rd Avenue and 7th Avenue, Parktown North*

### MOYO

Moyo feels a bit like an offsite Disney World dining option—it's definitely the place to take visitors expecting the country to look like a *Lion King* set. It's a one-stop shop for box-tickers looking to sample local game like ostrich, springbok, and snoek. *1 Prince of Wales Drive, Parkview*

### TASHA'S

The bright and buzzy Tasha's at Melrose Arch is our favorite choice for weekend brunch, with plenty of options that reflect the local love for sweets. Speaking of, the Dr. Paw Paw breakfast plate has slices of paw paw (sort of like mango, but even better) with honey, almonds, and yogurt. *Melrose Arch complex, Melrose*

### ATTIC

Since the amazing Randalords rooftop bar is only open to the public intermittently, Attic is, by default, the best first-date place in town. Start with drinks at the bar, then make your way to the wallpapered dining room for regional specialties like Namibian mussels. *24 4th Avenue, Parkhurst*