

Kitchen

Avant-garde Natural Cuisine

Nicolaj van der Meulen, Jörg Wiesel and Stefan Wiesner
in Conversation on Cooking as Aesthetic Practice

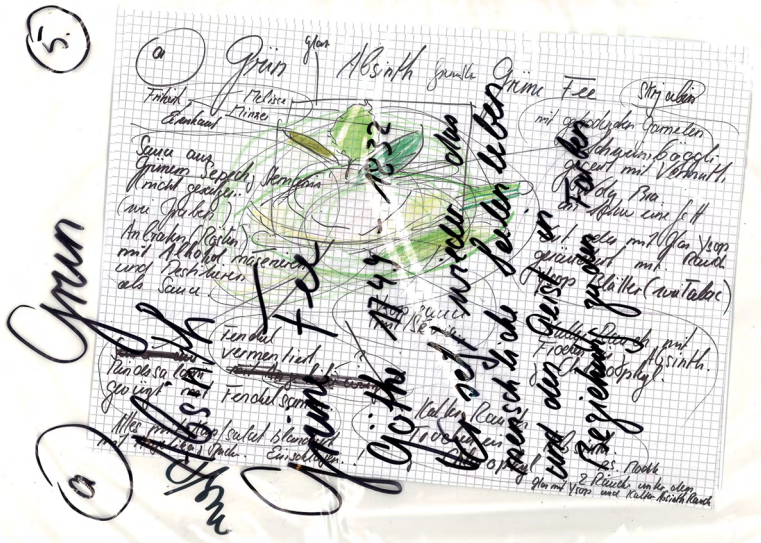


Fig. 2

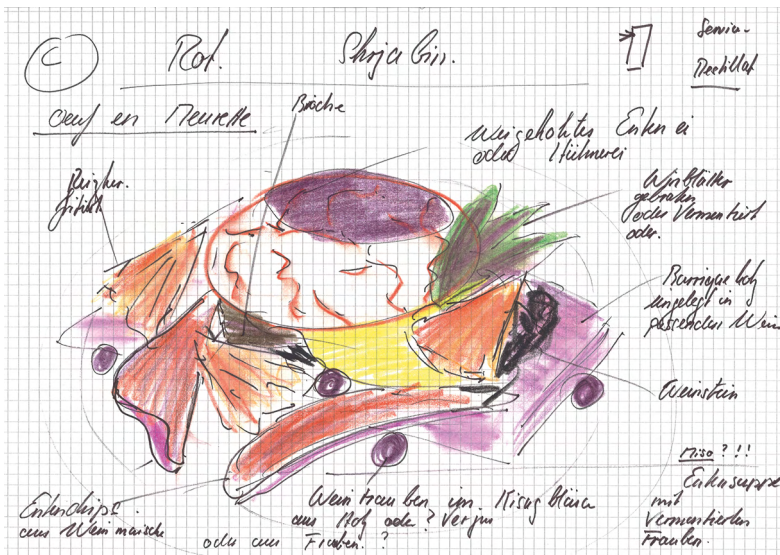


Fig. 3

Nicolaj van der Meulen and Jörg Wiesel: *To start with, let's talk about your approach to cooking. How do you create a recipe, and a gourmet menu in particular? The way you work seems related to certain methods employed in design and the arts. Can your way of cooking be termed concept cuisine?*

Stefan Wiesner: A traditional understanding of cooking often views chefs as creating their dishes arbitrarily or by following their intuition. One example of this is color cuisine. It involves cooking by color, ingredients are chosen according to their visual qualities. Another problem is that while chefs might learn a lot about their craft at culinary school, they often don't question what they have learnt. Chefs often lack the courage to do their own thing. They want to stand out from the crowd, but they don't dare to. I would prefer to tell stories, express something and question the status quo. My thinking and my action may be childish or naive at times. It often requires explanations. Through my way of cooking I gain knowledge of nature, art and the sciences, because for each menu I look at a particular topic. And this always brings a learning effect with it.

To me, the message of a menu is key. While in the past I created menus and then gave them a name afterwards, I do things the other way around now. I need the idea and the concept to be thought-out first. So in this way, "concept cuisine" does fit. I begin by asking myself what I want to express with a menu, which subject matter I'm interested in: a clock, a building site, Dada. Then I create the menu on the subject – with my one condition always being that everything I use should be as regional and seasonal as possible. In the past I focused on perfumery and scent – my second book was also written in this context [Avantgardistische Naturküche, 2011] – I travelled the world, and brought tree bark, resin and essences back from wherever I went. Recently I have become a little more calm and concentrated, I am returning to my own roots. The mind needs to be sated in order to return home.

On the other hand, logical and aesthetic deliberation also brings you closer to the arts. You move away from the craft you learned a little. But having perfect command of your craft is a prerequisite, on which it is then necessary to build through expressing inner, personal aspects. This holds as true for architecture as it does for graphic design. And this is what I try to convey when teaching the arts and design students I work with at your University. They shouldn't imitate but develop. It works exactly the other way around in the catering trade: a chef goes to work with Andreas Caminada, and a few years later he will cook perfectly – but exactly like Caminada. It takes years to free yourself and develop something of your own. Some never achieve this and continue to create Caminada cuisine, while others manage to incorporate their own personality. In my eyes it is only when this happens, when the chef's own personality shines through, that you encounter a true dining experience and real culinary art.

NvdM/JW: *You said that you want to express something through food. That isn't a given for many people, seeing as just seventy years ago people in Germany*

and Switzerland had to worry about where their next meal would come from and how to make rations last. When going to a restaurant in the sixties and seventies, people actually just wanted to have a good meal, which also meant: satisfying their hunger. When you say you want to express something through your cooking then there's something else at stake, this isn't about feeling full or eating tasty food. What do you mean when you talk about "expression"?

StW: Of course food is primarily "life" in the sense of "survival". This is still a part of our culinary daily life. Well-cooked, fresh, organic everyday meals are of course very much desirable. In restaurants more so than at home things like hospitality, the presence of other diners or a special atmosphere conjure up a sense of pleasure and contentment – this holds true even for fast food restaurants. I want to raise the bar in my restaurant in this respect. It should be as though my guests were going to the theatre or to see an opera. I want to take them on a journey to another world. The food might be thought-provoking, causing them to think about what they've just eaten, or conjuring up a memory, maybe even one from their childhood. Discoveries in the field of neuro-gastronomy are interesting to me in this context. It investigates how food can trigger certain memories or feelings. Scents can even have this kind of effect by themselves. I am looking into this at the moment. I create four menus per year, which means that I can't delve into the topics involved as deeply as I would like to. What is the case instead is that I investigate a topic, then I process it and convey it in the way I understand it. I assimilate existing knowledge and turn it into my own, which is why I like to call myself a charlatan. You could also say I turn it into art, because what exists can be modified. The ancient Greeks for example considered there to be four elements and the Chinese had five. Why not combine all of them and turn them into six elements? I have included ash once more, because it stands for the mineral element and we all return to ashes. That is how I interpret myself, with truth or untruth or simply with naivety. I also look at spagyrics, at holistic thinking about the body, mind and soul for the purpose of healing. And I practice spagyrics – however, my motive doesn't lie in healing but in bringing these principles to the realms of cooking and eating.

JW: *Where does the urge to incorporate knowledge from the most diverse of disciplines come from? That's rather unusual for someone like you, who has learnt their trade as professionally as you have.*

StW: I probably have a predisposition of some kind towards it. Not every chef is interested in, or inclined to, put knowledge into practice and listen to their inner voice. My species will probably die out sooner or later or become involved in other disciplines, for example in art, which I also feel very close to of course. If I was a carpenter rather than a chef I might be creating the same kind of art, just using wood.

NvdM: *Was there a turning point for you, at which you noticed that there was a transformation in the way in which you cook, away from how you approached cooking before and towards the discovery that you can do something else with cooking than fill people's stomachs and create good menus – namely, express something with these menus and tap into a range of topic areas and investigate them?*

StW: This realization really crystallized over time. It began to happen unconsciously and became more and more deliberate as time went by. I now work towards things I would have done intuitively in the past in a much more purposeful way. Previously I would let myself be led by my gut feeling when creating menus. With time this became more professional and ambitious. When I cooked Scriabin in mystical harmony in the color key I realized I was going too far. No-one except for classical musicians was able to comprehend what I was doing. So I aimed to make my food accessible to all once more, amongst other things through employing smaller harmonies. The harmonies in a menu are created using taste and texture. In the past they were much bigger, but nowadays they are smaller, which makes them easier to understand. If you create a harmony with fifteen or twenty components it always works out, because you can blur everything a little. This is where things are currently headed: dishes contain so many components that you've actually enunciated an entire menu on a single plate. Reducing things to a few harmonies makes it simpler and easier to understand, but more difficult at the same time. That's the "monotypic" culinary art I strive for, creating harmonies out of five or six elements. They might be easier to comprehend but they also require more skill because they force you to be precise.

NvdM: *Which role does what is generally called "holism" play for you? You say that actually it isn't just the apple that's interesting in terms of fruit but the entire tree. Why do we need to take a more holistic look at the apple?*

StW: This is always about the interplay between body, mind and soul. As a child I arranged tins of food in the cellar in pretty ways and burnt cardboard boxes and packages in the heater. I thought that people who had fresh vegetables in their basket were poor and those who had cans were rich or well-off. And so I stopped off at a whole range of different stations as a chef too, from truck stops on the Route Suisse to pajama parties to country nights, I cooked Spaghetti à discretion for the entire family for eight francs. It was only when I wrote my first book [Gold Holz Stein, 2003] that I actually realized what I was doing. The chemist Markus Zehnder first made me aware of the fact that I am engaging in spagyrics, for example through employing incineration. The press called me a Paracelsus, and I didn't know who that was. In the end, the dose makes the poison, and I began to look into these topics and employ particular techniques more deliberately. I only realized as I was doing it that this was my own interpretation of spagyrics – just not in the homeopathic sense, of course. Even-

tually I touched upon a wide range of subject fields. For example I cooked Paracelsus in the planet. And the planets themselves are in the metals and in the plants. The moon for example is silver and has whitish growths. The sun is yellowish and has red plants and is associated with gold.

So I broached many topics, the most recent of which was monotypic culinary art, which, in the sense of a narrow mode of thinking, asks where and with which neighbors something grows, which animal occupies itself with what. This includes, amongst other things, the singing trees, which communicate with one another, as well as what is happening inside of them and what they yield for us: their leaves, fruits, woods, juices, tars, bitumen. Birch tar or coal for example that is distilled into vinegar. Those are building blocks, which I have collected and finally unified to form a key.

JW: *So you proceed from the technical knowledge you gained in your training as a chef and take this as the basis, and this is joined by a great interest in approaching other fields, communicating with these and using the structures you have learnt in connection with them, such as for example with music and a composer like Alexander Scriabin.*

StW: Exactly. But it can be Leonardo Fibonacci's arithmetic, too. This in turn could provide the formula for a spice mix. Or if we were to look at the golden section: It exists both in the human body and in our architecture. Everything is connected in this way; it ensures proportions are balanced and harmonic. The same principle can be employed in the kitchen, too. Architecture can be found on our plates, in our chairs and tables. An architect works in a similar way I do, we are very much alike. And this finally holds true for all those working in the creative industries; the way we think is the same.

JW: *In the context of our research at the Institute for Aesthetic Practice and Theory we are also interested in the fact that you don't merely let the other art forms you're interested in stand for themselves, but instead allow a third entity to arise out of the encounter between your culinary art with music, architecture or even the agricultural sciences – a third quantity, which you communicate to your public, your guests or students. Would you agree?*

StW: That third element you refer to is the heart, it's love. When you're eating, you can listen to yourself, to your own awareness, I think that's what it is. Food and art give rise to a sense of contentment that we all strive for. Art shouldn't stir up aggressions either, despite there being those who might provoke them. In my opinion what the combination of culinary art and other disciplines ultimately create are a sense of pleasure and love.

NvdM: *Earlier, we spoke of the notion of a concept. Concept implies that a lot of ideas are generated, developed and categorized beforehand, before the actual implementation takes place. There were various different trends in painting,*

such as for example Impressionism and Expressionism, which generally tried to circumvent the conceptual and communicate directly with the empty canvas. For other movements the things happening in the artist's head beforehand were decisive, and their implementation was nothing but an organic continuation of the preceding thoughts. I would ascribe your practice to the latter. The end product, which can be experienced and received, is important – but so are the thoughts going into it before, as they ensure the harmonic balance in the end product.

StW: I agree. The thoughts always come first; putting them into practice is actually the easiest part. When I clear my mind for what I want to express, a perspective opens up that allows me to see it. I can draw from every magazine, every TV program in this way. I write it down, order it and then I turn it into the story, the menu. When I have all of the elements I need I can write it in one day.

NvdM: *You are essentially a gustatory architect. In relation to his work, Le Corbusier spoke of the “promenade architecturale”, which refers to the architectural design choreographing the experience which occurs when walking through the building. You pass through Le Corbusier’s structures and in doing so you experience architecture as a unity.*

StW: Something similar applies to the succession of dishes in the menus I create. It's possible to puff up a single course and enhance it to the extreme, but this tends to just confuse the guests. In my opinion a menu needs peaks and depths, has to be made up of new things, tried and tested aspects and even primitive ones. It has to address all senses in order to tell a holistic story. You could say a menu leads you through different rooms, and you take them in one by one. My strength seems to lie in being able to envisage such a succession of rooms and, if needed, tear down some walls, fill the space with new furniture and change the lighting – I can even change from an interior perspective to an exterior one. I have a good imagination: I dream up a lot of things when I'm cooking or writing. And if there's something I don't quite like about what I'm doing, I'll take the thought and my writing material to bed with me and work it out overnight. I tend to have the solution the next day. This meditative procedure does have a bit to do with white magic. Magic necessitates a great imagination, if you meditate enough it lets you pass into a second body, the astral body, which allows you to fly, walk on water or through the fire. If I have been to New York once I can travel there in my mind whenever I want, look at houses and shops and sit on a bench and look at the people walking the streets there.

NvdM: *Do you also see this as a gustatory journey?*

StW: Of course I do know how shrimp tastes and I can imagine saffron. But obviously it doesn't work in the way that I can actually smell all of these

scents with my nose or really taste them. You can certainly also use books as an aid. But with a good imagination you can let your mind wander into a petrol motor and all the way to the cylinder. You can watch the cylinder go up and down. And the drive shaft. You can see that in your imagination.

If you have a large enough imagination the possibilities are endless. If I go into the forest with students, I ask them to look at nature very closely, for example at how a tree is composed, with its bark and lichens, or at the interplay of colors. These observations and realizations can be useful in many contexts; you just have to translate them. What's important is being more open, more conscious, and turning what you've perceived into something that is your own. This doesn't mean you're not allowed to copy, but you should create interpretations rather than straight copies. But why not take ten architectural structures you like and blend them into one?

JW: *It seems very interesting to me that you have always attributed a life force to the materials and textures you work with as a chef. You meet a piece of wood, a seed, a flower or a piece of meat almost as though on an equal footing, you read them as subjects.*

StW: With the plants and animals I use in my cooking, I try to incorporate the place in which they grow or live. This might mean combining the snail's eggs with the plant and the fish with the algae that surround it in nature. But there's nothing wrong with thinking about this in a contrary way, for example bringing the Alpine goat together with the wolf of the sea. The thing that is the most important to me in all of this is doing it purposely. If the chain of thought that forms the basis is not coherent and elements are combined willy-nilly, I can't stand for it. I did, for example, look into the Chinese and Greek theories on temperaments at the suggestion of a student of mine. This led me to create a menu with six courses, each of which is attributed to an element: air, fire, water, earth, wood and metal. I noticed that you can find the elements wood, metal, glass and water in many wellness restaurants, which are of course places where guests can lean back and relax. This led me to the realization that it makes sense to cook with these elements too and thereby create a connection between eating and the way we live. The most important thing for a human being is his cave, whether this is a hole in the mountain or a modern home, as well as the presence of fire and water. Those are very important elements, which most people like to have around them.

NvdM: *Let's speak about some of your drawings, in which you design your menus, in this context of elements.*

StW: Interestingly those have totally slipped my mind. In the course of my examination of monotopic cooking I very strongly projected my thoughts into the menu and mulled it over many times. This was followed by a phase of sickness during which I was somewhat removed from the work I had done previously. This meant that when I later did put my ideas into practice

I made many mistakes. If I had mentally revisited the menu before implementing it that wouldn't have happened. It is essential for me to take some quiet time to myself at some points during this process, where no one will ask anything of me – and sometimes this can take two or three days. Of course this isn't always easy for the people around me.

JW: *How do you communicate with your coworkers? Do you show them your sketches?*

StW: Yes, I make sketches and give them to my crew, sometimes these also feature menus or recipes. My team is strong enough for its members to grasp my ideas through spoken dialogue only, without me needing to actually formulate a recipe. I only write down recipes for the more complex foods, such as bread or sausages.

JW: *Your sketches suggest that you conceive dishes visually from the very start, in terms of using different colors and already considering the way you want to present these to your guests.*

StW: Yes, in part, but I remain flexible in this respect because ultimately it boils down to the materials I end up using in the dishes. Sometimes you have to compromise, for example if the original idea would create too much work for the chefs. In the end it has to be possible to serve the menu – it has to be doable. You can't stretch to the point where things need to be fried, cooked or served with such extreme precision that even the last second matters. It's about finding a consensus that works for 25 serving guests, too. The experience the chefs bring with them plays an important role in this sense. And you essentially don't need to reinvent the wheel: a crème brûlée is a brûlée, a parfait is a parfait, a glacé is a glacé, and bread is bread. Of course you can change the ingredients, add something or leave something else out, freshen up an old recipe or include new elements, but essentially everything already exists in nature, and nature provides you with rich pickings. In the German-speaking part of Switzerland you are disadvantaged to a certain extent because people are less "animalistic" in terms of food. In the Ticino and the southern European countries people don't mind being able to taste the animal in the dish. Here it's more difficult to serve certain foods; you always need an alternative to dishes with innards or blood.

NvdM: *Does including meat and the animalistic aspect play a role for you in terms of a holistic view?*

StW: Monotypic cuisine assumes a ratio of 1:10 when it comes to animal and plant-based ingredients. It would actually have been one of my objectives to serve less meat and more food based on organisms belonging to the vegetable kingdom here at the restaurant Rössli, too. However, the monotypic menu I created reflects that this did not correspond with what

the guests want. At least we offer more vegetarian courses than we used to, which is certainly justified and should be a maxim to follow in everyday life too. I find the flexitarian approach – of eating little meat, but good meat when you do – very sensible. But I do see meat as being part of the human diet. To me, it is definitely a part of it.

JW: *This also relates to a very important point in our publication on the ‘Culinary Turn’. Do you get the impression that the culinary knowledge guests bring to the table when they eat in your restaurant, but also in other places, is strongly influenced by ethical, political, cultural or religious issues? Until a few decades ago it was of primary importance to know how one should behave at the table, as this was a marker for a person’s social standing in society. Nowadays, it seems much more important to know what it is you’re eating. Have you observed this shift, too?*

StW: Much has fundamentally changed in terms of the food we eat, and in Germany, Austria and Switzerland this has tended to be for the worse. The southern Mediterranean countries are still very interested in taste, but here, a lot of people will simply eat roasted chicken and nothing much else. Yet despite this it is of course still the case that guests come to my restaurant very much anticipating a new taste experience. In the end of course the experience and the sensations they take away from menus I create are subjective. I prefer not to ask my guests about it too much, because then I would receive answers that confuse me. The same holds true for the development phase of a menu. Even the question concerning the meaning of a single detail will have a manipulative effect on me. But after I finish writing the menu I’m open for questions and ready to listen to input. When you serve something you have developed you have to begin by watching and listening. Do the guests eat it? Do they eat everything? What is the undertone?

NvdM: *We are under the impression that two aspects are currently of importance: on the one hand, many people seem to want to taste something new and explore the world through their sense of taste. But our capacity to perceive flavor seems untrained, and somehow also dulled. The sense of taste plays a special role because what you taste you usually then ingest, making it a part of yourself. It tests: is this good for me? That also explains why food is such an important topic for so many people. But then there is another facet to this: Through your way of cooking, you take us on a path – and we are really very much only at the beginning of that path. I imagine that we face your dishes in a similar way people approached paintings by Kandinsky or musical pieces by Schönberg in the early 20th century. Until recently, our tastes were very much shaped by standardized flavors – for example through the use of Aromat¹. Your way of*

1 | Swiss produced seasoning mix consisting mostly of monosodium glutamate, a flavour enhancer.

cooking opens up new taste experiences, which simultaneously carry in them the memory of something we previously knew.

StW: This corresponds with the idea for the new menu I am developing based on concepts found in neuro-gastronomy. The ability to smell is regarded as the oldest of our senses; humans can perceive thousands of tastes and smells and in contrast to animals we can also understand these. This concerns a vast field which can be studied in depth. I did try out many things subconsciously in the past, but at the time I couldn't find an explanation for them. This is what I am aiming to do now. It is possible, for example, to conjure up memories from early childhood – and smell is very important in that phase: after all, mother and child are able to recognize each other by smell. Society, economy and school cause us to un-learn this earlier ability; as small children we are much more responsive to tastes and smells. I plead in favor of a return to child-like thinking, towards a thinking that is led much more strongly by the instincts.

On the topic of “standardized tastes”: Aromat, monosodium glutamate and umami are dead. They take away all of the rough edges a dish may have, so it may be consumed without thinking. However, the realization that it is boring to eat like this, and that feeling full alone is not truly satisfying, is gradually taking hold. To speak in harmonies: Schnitzel, French fries and lemon are a boring triple harmony. The pleasure lasts for about three bites then you merely gulp the food down until you feel full. Skill in cooking lies in creating harmonies that make eating the entire dish a pleasure. In order for it to be perceived as light by the tongue, the chef has to work magic with acidity, piquancy, sweetness and bitter flavors. The latter is especially important, because the bitter flavors make the food better and the harmonies more coherent – yet for a long time, they were frowned upon. Bitter flavors help you make out the individual components more clearly. Umami on the other hand flattens everything out. The Swiss love Aromat and Maggi, it's difficult to wean them off these. I see eating as having a lot to do with education and style. The higher classes used to have more style when it came to food, and this made them healthier and live longer, while the lower classes had to content themselves with simple, unhealthy food; and they died earlier.

JW: *You really do provide aesthetic experiences. And I don't mean this only in the sense of experiencing something “beautiful”, but in the sense of a holistic atmospheric encounter. We are looking into this new interest in food. After all, it's possible to perceive a painting by Kandinsky with your entire body. This means not just looking at it, but entering the painting with your body – not in a metaphorical but a literal sense. It's also possible to physically absorb a text by Max Frisch. Your menus are ingested in an entirely new way. – What would you say, why does the young generation post selfies of their visits to restaurants on Facebook, why do they take pictures of their food, of their Schnitzel and fries or their salads? People show images of what they eat to the entire world. What are they communicating in doing so?*

StW: I believe this to be a backwards step. The mobile phone is turned into a second brain, one that people almost rely on more strongly than on their instinct. This results in the instinct atrophying. Funnily enough, there's often talk of over-aging with respect to gourmet cuisine. You tend to find older, often affluent guests in restaurants with 18 *Gault-Millau*-points, but very few 30- or 40-year-olds. In our restaurant on the other hand the audience is very mixed, we have many young guests. The oldest generation however doesn't come at all, because it still feels more at home with traditional, opulent gourmet cooking. Opulent means expensive and expensive signifies good or special. But this is slowly changing. A contemporary chef is likely to assume that it is possible to create a wonderful dish by using nothing but garden lettuce. You can fry, distill or ferment the core and the inner and outer leaves; you can dry them or turn them into granules.

NvdM: *You already mentioned that regional ingredients play an important role in your kitchen, alongside seasonality. Do the processing methods you just listed also stem from the region, or do you draw from the diversity of all human culture?*

StW: Molecular cuisine has opened up many avenues for us and also given us freedoms. Old techniques such as sterilizing foods were suddenly up to date again, as were materials such as nitrogen and dry ice. I already used distillation beforehand. Working with xanthan gum was a great revelation for me, as this makes thickening cold liquids possible. But at the same time we have also produced new directions ourselves, for example working with a wrought iron oven that can heat up to 1200 degrees Celsius, or working with fire, charcoal and wood. That's our turf; it's an area where we're ahead of everyone else. Much of it has a regional basis: distilling, using fire and wood coal. And deep-frying has also emerged as being a reliable method – but we now deep-fry entirely different foods to the ones treated in the past – herbs for example.

NvdM: *The same holds true for fermenting. While in our latitudes people used to ferment silage and white cabbage in the past, we have now tapped into many different possibilities.*

StW: Of course on an international level the different cooking cultures are blending into each other. For my first book I already fermented carrots after the oriental method, and at the time I was the only one doing so. It's a shame we didn't follow this up more closely. Today, the Nordic Cuisine is a forerunner when it comes to fermenting, the Dutch celebrity chef Ron Blaauw also works with it. At the moment we work with the bubbler [vapor-acid cooker] a lot, for example in order to poach fish using formic acid. We worked with ants even before René Redzepi started cooking; by placing gauze on anthills and working with it or placing eggs in there and so on. The *Gault-Millau* guide then reported I was divorced from reality and it was impossible to understand my methods, so I forgot about most of it. But now

I'd like to pick up on these techniques once more. When I read negative reviews – amongst other things I was criticized for cooking stones – I put the method in question aside for some time. I feel hurt by criticism.

NvdM: *In the same way artists are hurt if they venture on new paths and are met with ridicule. But at the same time it is also a compliment.*

StW: In order for me to pick something up again I first need self-affirmation, I have to know I am strong enough. We invented the bubbler and I'm certain others have already picked up this technique too, they might even overtake us in using it. This happens to us time and again. We might be the first to do something, but won't necessarily remain the best at it. I would need a few employees like Rebecca Clopath, who want to work in the laboratory every day. In our current involvement with neuro-gastronomy I also need three or four chefs who are ready to carry out intensive studies. At the moment I work by myself and that's also why I sometimes find myself on thin ice. Which is why I call myself a charlatan: I enter a particular area and talk about it in my menu, even if everything isn't always entirely well-founded.