



**“The drink has been produced in Scandinavia since the 16th century”**



## The Old Nordic Spirit

Drinks scribe Matthew Day knows a fair bit about the strong stuff, yet he still learned plenty at a St James's Masterclass

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UK, which used to be consumed daily, aquavit was considered old-fashioned and would only be for the older generation or at set times during the year like Christmas.

“New Nordic Cuisine has played its part” said Fjeldsrud, “But also mixologists have embraced aquavit as an exciting ‘new’ base allowing them to craft cocktails with new and distinctive flavours.”

In the halo of Copenhagen’s Noma (almost always voted World’s Best Restaurant) New Nordic Cuisine has exploded onto the global scene. At the same time, another much quieter movement is slowly gathering speed, shedding the moss gathered over the past 50 years.

Aquavit London (the St James’s Market-based sister of two Michelin star Aquavit in New York) takes its name from the quintessentially Scandinavian drink derived from Latin aqua vitae (water of life). They are part of a growing global community working to revive this old Nordic spirit. As well as offering the largest collection of aquavits in the UK, the restaurant also runs a monthly event in the St James’s Masterclass series, hosted here by Norwegian expert Jon Anders Fjeldsrud.

This drink has been produced in Scandinavia since the 16th century, but Fjeldsrud explained on my recent visit that in the 1970s its popularity started to wane as drinks like wine, vodka and gin started to take over. A bit like Port and Sherry in the

bit ahead of ourselves here. What exactly is aquavit? As someone who is meant to be a drinks expert, I have to admit that my preconception was completely wrong. Aquavits are not based on fruits like the French eaux de vie. In fact it is a clear spirit (minimum 37.5%) distilled from either grain or potato, and flavoured with herbs and spices. By law the predominant flavour must be either dill or caraway and cardamom, cumin, anise, fennel, lemon, orange peel and grains of paradise are also used. The recipe varies from distiller to distiller with each having their own secret formula. The spirit is then aged in oak casks which gives aquavit its yellowish hue. One of the most famous Norwegian brands, ‘Linje’ (equator), is transported in oak casks on container ships to Australia and back (twice crossing the equator). The fluctuating temperature, humidity and constant movement accelerates the aging process adding to the flavor of the spirit. The spirit is bottled once back in Norway and stamped with the name of the ship it sailed on.

Aquavit is commonly served as ‘snaps’ (shots) at Christmas, Easter and Midsummer festivities, which are downed between gulps of beer and refrains of bawdy drinking songs. The elixir of herbs, spices and high alcohol is said to help digest rich and fatty meals that typically include lamb, pork, pickled herring, gravlax and crayfish depending on the occasion and time of year. A good time – and a hangover – are almost guaranteed.

For a more sedate experience Aquavit London has a dedicated trolley in the dining room to encourage guests to try a shot or two with their meal, and many of the smörgåsbord small plates are paired with a specific type of aquavit served at room temperature. Scandinavians often serve ‘snaps’ from frozen bottles, but Fjeldsrud explained that drunk too cold, much of the flavour and aroma are lost. The top shelf of the Aquavit London bar groans with over 100 different rare and unique varieties (many otherwise unavailable in the UK) and their mixologist offers to incorporate them into a wide range of Nordic-inspired cocktails.

The aquavit movement is advancing apace, and the only moss gathered will be served with your pine-infused smoked elk. Skål!

Monthly masterclasses cost £20 and include five shots, a cocktail, plus Nordic nibbles. More info and to book tickets: [aquavitrestaurants.com](http://aquavitrestaurants.com)