

The kitchen, right, where chef Rene Redzepi, below, develops dishes for his restaurant Noma in Copenhagen.



PHOTOS: BLOOMBERG

## The world's best place to eat? It's not El Bulli

The annual list of the world's 50 best restaurants was unveiled in London on Monday night, containing a new No. 1. The publication of the list is one of the biggest events in the food world's calendar.

The talk of the night was that the title of world's best restaurant has finally been wrenched from the grip of El Bulli in Spain, with Denmark's Noma, a relative newcomer, being acclaimed as the globe's greatest dining experience. Rene Redzepi's groundbreaking restaurant in Copenhagen, which serves only food from the Nordic region, was propelled into the top spot thanks to a dedication to regional products fashioned into startling creations such as "vintage potato and whey," and "lovage and prastost."

Some big-name chefs in London, however, again failed to make the top flight, with Gordon Ramsay — arguably Britain's most successful culinary export — absent from the list, having dropped out of the top 100 last year. Despite all of the publicity from his TV shows in the UK and US, and more than 20 restaurants in four continents, Ramsay failed to regain his place among the top chefs, where he last appeared in 2008, in 13th place.

Traditional rivals for the top two spots, El Bulli on the Costa Brava and the Fat Duck, of Bray, Berkshire, moved down to second and third respectively to make way for Noma, after what has been a turbulent year for both restaurants.

Ferran Adria of El Bulli, celebrated as the world's leading molecular gastronome, announced in January that his experimental restaurant is to close for two years, while Blumenthal was forced to temporarily close the Fat Duck in February last year when around 400 diners got food poisoning.

Speaking ahead of the awards, on the prospect of dropping further down the list, Blumenthal admitted that the restaurant's closure could influence its ranking. "Us chefs are incredibly competitive so no one would be a human being if they weren't disappointed by slipping down a place or two or three," he said.

Praising Noma, he added: "No one thinks of Denmark as being one of Europe's gastronomic leaders and what Rene has done in that country makes it even more remarkable."

Noma's breakthrough — decided by an 806-strong panel of chefs, restaurateurs, food writers and restaurant critics from around the world — caps a remarkable rise. The restaurant leapt from obscurity to third place in 2008 while Redzepi won the chefs' chef award in the same year, hitting back at critics who he said had called the restaurant "the stinking whale."

Richard Vines, restaurant critic at Bloomberg, said the Danish chef's victory was deserved. "[Redzepi] is doing something really different, heading a movement that is trying to rediscover Nordic cuisine. It is genuinely creative and unique."

He added: "Many people are trying to use seasonal and local food but Noma has taken it to

*Copenhagen restaurant knocks Ferran Adria's temple of molecular gastronomy off the top spot*

BY ALEXANDRA TOPPING  
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON



the next level. They are rediscovering traditional ingredients while using modern techniques to create the dishes."

Noma uses only food from Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Denmark (including Greenland and the Faroe Isles) and Finland, and employs a network of foragers to find wild herbs and source unusual seafood. In an interview with Jay Rayner, the *Observer* food critic, he argued that the strict framework had unleashed his creativity. "A tight frame sets you free. It forces you to be imaginative," he said.



Rene Redzepi, right, and other employees of the Danish restaurant Noma, winner of the 2010 San Pellegrino World's 50 Best Restaurants Award, address the awards ceremony audience at the Guildhall in London on Monday.

PHOTO: EPA

**How Noma ended El Bulli's reign**

BY JAY RAYNER  
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

And so the logjam is finally broken: El Bulli has lost the top spot it held in the San Pellegrino world's 50 best restaurants list for four years, to Noma, Rene Redzepi's avowedly Nordic restaurant in Copenhagen.

Is that the right result? Allowing for the fact that I think the rankings are far less interesting than the list itself, I would say yes. Redzepi, the 32-year-old chef at Noma, pursues a regional, seasonal agenda that is right on the cutting edge: If it isn't available in the Nordic region, he won't cook with it. The result is an idiosyncratic style of food that speaks to concerns about the way a global food culture turns our eating experiences a uniform beige.

But it goes much further than the agenda: Redzepi is a gifted cook with an extraordinary palate who does amazing things with wild herbs and flowers, bitter green leaves and the freshest local seafood.

In some quarters, of course, the decision will be read as a slap in the face for the modernists, especially for El Bulli and the Fat Duck.

Heston Blumenthal, chef and owner of the Fat Duck, responds — quite reasonably, I think — that if his or Ferran Adria's restaurants had plummeted down the list, then that might well be a viable argument; as it is, what we are really seeing is just a little bit of jostling in the rankings.

## Robot takes on battle of the bulge

Imagine something between a computer game and a pet that helps makes you slim. One inventor did just that and came up with Autom — a robot that will look dieters in the eye and tell them what they need to hear.

Users can have daily conversations with the 38cm-tall robot, which will crunch calories and provide feedback and encouragement on their weight-loss progress.

For those who hate manuals — there isn't one. Switch Autom on and it's ready to go.

Its blue eyes open and its head swivels as a computer inside its head allows it to search for a human face in front of it and maintain eye contact.

"Hello, I'm Autom! Press one of the buttons below to talk to me," it says in a robotic female voice with an American accent. "I'm ready to get started. Let's keep working together."

Users tap their details onto the robot's screen in response to its spoken questions about weight, diet, exercise regime and goals and over time it builds up a knowledge of the dieter's strengths and weaknesses to tailor its questions and advice accordingly.

The information is also processed to provide graphs on their progress and habits over time.

The brainchild of Cory Kidd, a graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a doctorate in human-robot interaction, Autom hits the US market later this year, retailing for about US\$500.

The US\$80 billion weight-loss market in the US has already been targeted by Nintendo

with its *Wii Fit* and *My Weight Loss Coach* games, but Kidd is banking on Autom offering dieters a more personalized way of using technology to slim down.

It is a so-called sociable robot, a new generation of robots that adapt their behavior in order to interact with humans.

Autom looks fairly simplistic, with a head and neck attached to a rectangular box-shaped body on two stumpy legs. Its face has no nose and only the hint of a mouth.

But the cutting-edge field of human-robot interaction combines insights from the social sciences as well as technology and medicine

"It draws heavily on human psychology — so understanding how we as people interact with one another," Kidd said. "It relies on cues that people use in everyday communication."

For example, Autom looks down at the screen on its torso briefly when asking for the user to put in information, in the way people naturally glance at something they are mentioning.

Next year a more developed model will be released that uses voice recognition technology so the dieter can speak to the robot as well as communicate via the touch screen.

Lona Sandon, assistant professor of clinical nutrition at the University of Texas, had not seen Autom in action and said she was reserving judgment about how successful the product would be.

"For some people it could be a good tool. You need constant feedback so I can see how it would be beneficial but there is a novelty

*Autom offers dieters a more personalized way of using technology to slim down*

BY ELEANOR WASON  
AFP, HONG KONG



factor and some will just get bored of it when that wears off like they do with everything else," said Sandon, who is also a spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association.

But according to Kidd, Autom's human qualities, if primitive, were an important factor in keeping 15 dieters motivated during a trial in the Boston area.

Another 15 slimmers were given a computer with a touch screen running identical software to Autom's and 15 had a paper log. Each had to stick to a certain eating and exercise regime.

The average time someone used the robot — almost 51 days — was nearly twice as long as with paper — almost 27 days — and 40 percent longer than with the computer.

"Even if you have an animated character that looks exactly like Autom on the computer screen, you cannot have the same interaction as you can with an actual robot," Kidd says.

"The robot was a rougher version of this one but was extremely effective at engaging someone over a period of time and helping them to stick with whatever diet program they were on."

Kidd says the fact that people were able to humanize Autom made the information it gave them seem more credible. Maya, Casper

Cory Kidd, CEO of Intuitive Automata, poses at his office in Hong Kong next to Autom, a robot he designed that helps you diet. Users can have daily conversations with the 38cm-tall robot, which will crunch calories and provide feedback and encouragement on their weight-loss progress.

PHOTO: AFP

and Robbie were among the names users gave their robots. Some even dressed them in hats and scarves.

"When people develop a kind of bond with something, it's almost like a pet," says Kidd.

As the costs come down for certain technologies, Kidd says users will have more opportunity to personalize the robot — the color, the clothes, the personality. Even the voice could be customized to sound like that of your favorite celebrity.

"You'll see a lot of changes in the next few years. In 30 years this is going to look very primitive," he said.

"Technology has really advanced in the last decade to allow us to finally create something like this. A lot of what goes into this would 10 years ago have not been possible. Five years ago it would not have been feasible and two years ago it would not have been affordable."

Kidd's company Intuitive Automata is based in Hong Kong and Autom also speaks Chinese — both Cantonese and Mandarin.

Initially, though, the company will use an English-language version to target the US, where the government estimates two-thirds of the population is overweight or obese, followed by Europe.

Kidd is confident the model can be adapted to different languages and cultures as well as other health issues — chronic disease management, diabetes, even drug and alcohol abuse.

The UN Economic Commission and the International Federation of Robotics forecast a market for personal and service robots worth about US\$52 billion by 2025.