

# HIDDEN FLAVOURS *of* JAPAN

THOMAS FREBEL's adventures in foraging have taken him from Copenhagen to the most remote corners of Japan. As the chef prepares to open his new Tokyo restaurant, he explains why going native in the East is a truly unique culinary experience

Story by DANIELLE DEMETRIOU



"I WAS TREKKING IN THE JUNGLE IN COLOMBIA WHEN I found this tiny guava that had ripened in the sun for hours, maybe days, dried almost like a raisin. I took a bite into it and... I mean you just can't get any better. It was like a mix of roses, peaches and mangoes."

Little more than 60 seconds after first meeting Thomas Frebel, the conversation has segued smoothly into what is clearly his all-time favourite subject: foraging. The German chef's memorable encounter with a Colombian guava is shared as he steps nimbly over bollards, past builders on ladders and across tarpaulin in his flip flops, jeans and navy apron while leading me into a new tower block in the Iidabashi neighbourhood of Tokyo.

It is here, on the ninth floor, that just weeks later Frebel will open his first restaurant, Inua – and key to the concept of this new venture is, of course, foraging. This comes, perhaps, as little surprise in light of his background, having spent the best part of a decade working as right-hand man to cult chef René Redzepi at Noma in Copenhagen. Arguably the world's most famous forager – he has even created a mobile app for kindred souls – Redzepi is renowned for creating imaginative dishes featuring wild and unusual flavours, ranging from a seasoning of live ants to edible soil.

Frebel, 34, will showcase a similarly creative, nature-inspired philosophy at the 60-seat Inua, fusing a Nordic sensibility with Japanese ingredients sourced from two years of foraging across the archipelago, from southernmost prefecture Okinawa to the northerly





Thomas Frebel's new Tokyo restaurant  
Inua puts foraging front and centre  
in the Japanese culinary scene





Above: a variety of chillis and peppers foraged from across Japan, where Thomas Frebel has spent years cultivating relationships with specialist growers. Below: Frebel, formerly of Copenhagen's Noma, and his team in Inua's test kitchen

Hokkaido. Expect to see the likes of wild kiwi, octopus and bee larvae on the menu.

“Foraging is a way to reconnect with nature,” says Frebel, who remains extremely close to Redzepi – his mentor recently tasted the new Inua menu in Tokyo. “It helps you see and appreciate ingredients in a very different way. And when you forage in Japan, you taste extremely unique ingredients and flavours that you cannot find anywhere else in the world.”

Entering the building, we wander along a corridor lit by abstract white lanterns and a wall of windows, which Frebel enthuses he’d like to transform into a “green cave”, before taking a lift – still wrapped in plastic – to the ninth floor. Even with builders at work, the restaurant’s fusion of Scandinavian aesthetics with Japanese craftsmanship is evident, thanks to the clean-lined vision of design bureau OEO Studio, which has offices in Copenhagen and Tokyo. Think organically curved oval tables in shades of grey, fabric ceiling panels by the Kyoto-based kimono textile company Hosoo, a moon-like Isamu Noguchi paper lantern, and a cypress wood bar.

After following Frebel through the spacious kitchens, stopping to nibble on a crunchy piece of dried mirin

rice wine, we head upstairs to a serene roof terrace with hammocks and views across Tokyo’s skyline. “This is our place to hide,” smiles Frebel, inhaling deeply. “Sometimes we have to relax. When it’s been a tough day in the test kitchen or you just need to disconnect yourself, we come up and lay down for a few minutes.”

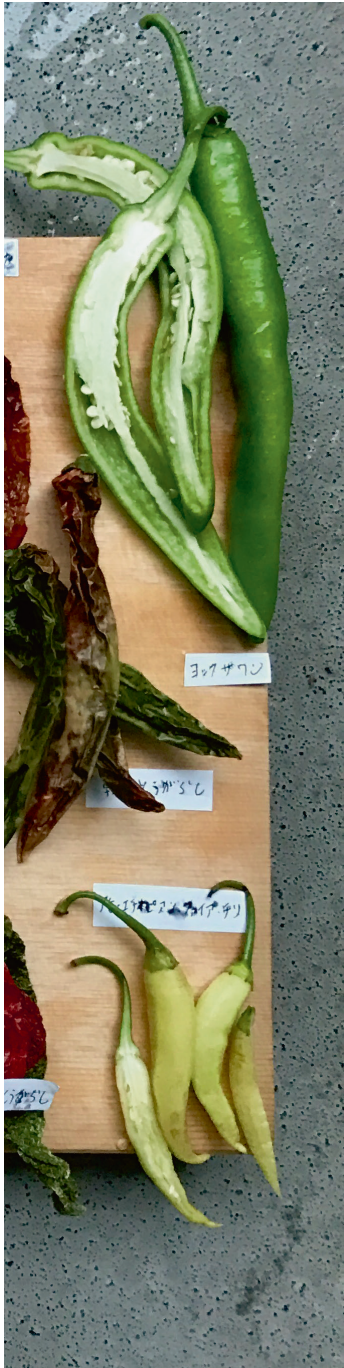
The idea of disconnection is a recurrent theme for the chef. Soaking up the morning sun like a lizard, he describes how he initially dreamt of becoming a football star in his hometown of Magdeburg, where his father ran two “simple bistros”. But then, at 17, he read a book about Austrian chef Eckart Witzigmann that changed his life. “What fascinated me most was how he managed to travel the world through his cooking – to meet new people, find new ingredients, different cultures, food, and so on.”

Frebel went on to work as a chef across Germany before his culinary path led him to a serendipitous – and life-changing – opening at Noma in Copenhagen in 2009. He smiles when asked if he was foraging at that point: “No, I was very disconnected from nature. At that time, most chefs picked up the phone and asked for a carrot and then it showed up the next day.”





## “You taste extremely unique flavours that you cannot find anywhere else in the world”



It didn't take long for nature-loving Frebel to be seduced by Redzepi's foraging, and the adventures soon came thick and fast, first in Denmark and later Mexico, Australia and Colombia. But it was a wildly popular five-week Noma pop-up event at the Mandarin Oriental, Tokyo in 2015 that triggered another major life swerve. (Inua's general manager, Romy Matsumoto, was the hotel's PR at the time, and when asked whether media reports of a 60,000-strong waiting list were true, she quickly quips, "Actually, it was 65,000.")

"It was absolutely life-changing," enthuses Frebel. "It was also, professionally, the toughest experience of my life. When it was over, Japan was the perfect example of leaving a place and thinking, 'I'm not done at all.' I had to come back and experience more."

And so, after leaving Noma to start out on his own – with full support from his culinary soul brother Redzepi – two years of foraging adventures across Japan began. "In Japan, I don't have that problem of 50 per cent of the animals you come across killing you on the spot, which is nice," says Frebel with dry humour. "I don't have to be afraid while walking by a lake that a 4m-long crocodile might see me as its next meal, as was the case in Australia where I had a guide with a shotgun."

He describes one foraging highlight in near-spiritual tones: discovering *yamanashi* wild pear, which ripens once every four years in the forests of Nagano, with a 70-something guide he calls "The Nice Guy". He recalls how The Nice Guy stopped abruptly by a tree, prompting Frebel – a keen rock-climber – to scramble halfway up it to no avail. Meanwhile, The Nice Guy gently searched around the base and hit the jackpot: two small fruit.

So profound was the taste that Frebel struggles to describe it adequately: "If someone wondered what a pear tasted like 400 years ago, I would say you have to go to Nagano and look for this tiny fruit that drops off the tree once every four years. Then you would have your answer. It's not sweet or juicy – the skin is a bit thick and the flesh is grainy. But you can taste the forest, you can taste the wild. It's difficult to eat, but in terms of a pure, perfect, unique flavour, it's a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

His explorations of the subtropical islands that form a necklace-like trail across the southern Okinawa region evoke further memories of foraging nirvana – in particular, Iriomote Island. "It's a place where the rainforest kisses the ocean. It's humid, sticky and green, with small houses where people grow tomatoes and lemongrass. It doesn't feel Japanese at all."

It was here that Frebel stumbled across someone growing a fruit called the *pitanga*. "They are small and red, sweet and fruity, but savoury – it's like biting into a fully ripe chilli, but without the spiciness. The *pitanga* is also so soft and fragile that we can only receive it frozen, as it ferments within 12 hours of harvesting."

But perhaps Frebel's greatest foraging adventures took place in the cooler mountain climes of the northern Akita prefecture, where he discovered Japan's unique mountain vegetables, known as *sansai*. "It was early summer and there was sunshine but also snow on the mountains," he explains. "Our guide Kawata San was excited like a little kid, more running than walking, always ahead of us. Whenever he found something, he would start shouting and almost dance around it, like a shaman."

He had good reason, it transpired. "At one point, he stopped and started jumping and shouting, and

then he gently uncovered the snow on the ground and dug up the stem of a green-whitish vegetable," recalls Frebel. "It was a *yama udo*. He peeled off the tough skin and I had a bite. It was a big moment for me. It was like wild asparagus: sweet, juicy and gently warmed from the sun."

As is often the case, however, the discovery of such a profound taste was quickly tempered by challenges – not only the logistics of creating a sustainable supply from forest to plate for 500 daily guests, but how to recreate the experience in a Tokyo tower. "The moment you cut the ingredient, the quality starts going down," explains Frebel. "In Akita, you have the humidity, the smell of the forest, that sound when he cracks off the root and gives it to you. It's an experience you can never replicate. All you can do as a chef is take the essence of it and figure out how to bring this experience as closely as possible to your guests."

Such logistical challenges meant Frebel and his team have spent much of the past two years forging relationships with around 150 farmers to create sustainable supplies. "It takes a long time to establish relationships with farmers in Japan compared with other places. People want to know what they are going to do with their product, and they can find it a bit confusing when we explain."

Frebel recalls the bafflement of one blackcurrant farmer when he listed his unconventional requirement

for the whole plant throughout different seasons. More precisely, early spring branches to make a green olive oil; flavoursome tiny buds; small shoots to preserve and pickle for winter; unripe green blackcurrants to salt for capers; and green leaves to infuse into an oil. "And this is just one ingredient," he smiles. "It takes about a year to convince people here about what we want to do."

Keen to taste some of Frebel's unusual ingredients, I venture into the sun-filled tasting kitchen on the eighth floor, where music plays on the radio and

foraging finds are neatly stored on shelves in labelled Tupperware. Here, using an eclectic array of apparatus – from tweezers to pipettes – he shares some of his favourite Japanese flavours. And so I lick a forest-green drop of oil made from blackcurrant shoots off the back of my hand; taste a mouth-burstingly fresh *sarunashi* wild kiwi; bite into a delicious bright-red *pitanga*; try a moreish scoop of a Nutella-like paste made from kaya nuts; experience a pleasantly tingly mouth after licking a few, tiny gratings of the *kihada* berry; and sample a drop of clear oil that magically tastes exactly like bacon but actually dropped off *maitake* mushrooms that were being smoked for two days. "It's the closest a vegan can get to eating bacon," he smiles.

Before I leave, Frebel shares his next plan: "We've never done this before, but we want to forage 200kg of rose petals from north Japan." The reason? To create a whole list of culinary treats, from rose oil and rose-infused soy sauce to the ultimate table condiment: "Rose soy kombucha oil salt paste that you can put on sea urchin or brush your roast carrots with."

Judging by Frebel's track record, it's a foraging mission on which he will most likely succeed. As Inua's 65,000 waiting-list guests already know, a rose by any other name could never taste as sweet.

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