



'Nduja

From the Mountains of Calabria to the Tables of Copenhagen

When talking about 'nduja, I have noticed that in recent years I do not have to explain quite so often what it is. This once hyper-local secret from the mountain village of Spilinga is on a rapid migration north, charming and conquering international high-end kitchens.

Let me take you back to its humble beginnings

To understand 'nduja, you have to look at the anatomy of a slaughtered pig. In historic Calabria, the prime cuts such as prosciutto, coppa, and pancetta belonged to the landowners or were sold for precious cash. The local farmers were left with what remained: the offal.

Faced with a collection of trimmings, fat, and organs, the peasants of Spilinga needed a way to transform highly perishable, iron-rich scrap meat into something that could be preserved through the brutal Calabrian summer without refrigeration. Their solution was both brilliant and simple.

They finely minced the pork fat (primarily lard and underbelly) with the remaining trimmings. Then mixed it with a staggering amount of Calabrian chili peppers, often up to 30% of the total weight. They stuffed the mixture into a blind intestine called orba, lightly smoked it over olive and orange wood, and left it to cure.

The chilies were not just there for heat; they were the ultimate natural preservative. Packed with capsaicin, vitamins, and antioxidants, the bright red peppers inhibited bacterial growth while the smoke added a protective layer.

Over months, the mixture fermented slightly, developing a distinct, funky acidity that cut right through the intense richness of the fat.



A Surprising Evolution

When Northern European chefs began moving away from the heavy, cream-based reductions of classic French cuisine in the 2010s, they went searching for ingredients that offered maximum flavour with minimum baggage.

They found it in Calabria

'Nduja is a dream ingredient for a high-end kitchen. Because of its extremely high fat-to-meat ratio, it does not dry out or harden like typical salumi. Instead, it remains soft, pliable, and spreadable at room temperature.

Its true power however is unleashed when it meets heat. Because it is essentially an emulsion of fat and chili, 'nduja melts instantly when tossed into a warm pan. It dissolves and releases a vibrant, rust-red oil that acts as a powerful flavour carrier, coating the palate in a way that dry spices never could.

Chefs in London, Copenhagen, and Amsterdam began looking past the traditional uses, treating it as a versatile texture and seasoning agent, using the rendered oil to brush over sweet roasted langoustines, dehydrating it into fine dust, or even fat-washing spirits for savoury cocktails.



Keeping it Real

I am all for experimentation, but when it comes to 'nduja, my heart belongs to tradition. There is nothing quite like spreading it on a warm piece of freshly grilled bread or melting it into a sauce of slowly caramelized onions and tomatoes to coat homemade Fileja pasta. It celebrates the humble 'nduja as the majestic, resourceful ingredient it truly is.

And yes, I do have a favourite artisanal producer from Spilinga, the beating heart of 'nduja production. If you want to experience the real deal, [drop me a line](#), I will happily share my source with you.

stories from an Italian Kitchen

