Carl Jan Granqvist

An exclusive interview with Sweden’s culinary genius

I was privileged to interview this extraordinary man in his beautiful home on the Saxå Estate between Grythyttan and Filipstad in Sweden.

An entertainer

Swedes are very patriotic and love admiration from foreigners: it gets them talking freely. They seemed pleased to learn that an Englishman was about to interview one of their most famous personalities. Everyone I spoke to wanted to talk about the man who is known to all Swedes simply as Carl Jan.

I would put on my mystified dumb look: so what does he actually do? Answers were thrown out willingly: a chef, a wine connoisseur, a professor, a business man, a restaurateur, a TV personality. There was no end of answers.

So if he is such a multi-faceted man, what is his real strength I would enquire. An entertainer was the consensus. He established Sweden’s most famous restaurant, he is Sweden’s top wine expert and he founded the first restaurant and hospitality university in Sweden, but when pressed for a one word label the response is an entertainer. It seems unkind: to belittle his achievements, but it was an answer that Carl Jan was pleased to hear when I told him later. He loves to entertain.

I moved on to opinions: did they like him. Most were enthusiastic: he entertains effortlessly. His enthusiasm for life is infectious. He laughs a lot and shakes his shoulders as he laughs. There is nearly always a glint of humour in his eyes.

He knows his is a polarizer: yes, many love him, but others have their reservations. To some he was a symbol of Sweden’s upper class, Swedish manners and a bygone overly-formal era. They felt there were snobbish overtones, which they weren’t comfortable with. It was something Carl Jan was happy to talk about and to explain.
**Life is a journey between parties**

Carl Jan was born in Örebro in 1946. His parents were both teachers and were clearly fairly well-off with help in the house.

I asked him about his childhood and where he got his passion for food. To my surprise he doesn’t talk about food initially but about parties. “Parties are very good for the life and my mother loved to have parties. My mother said, ‘Life is a journey between parties’.”

I wanted to know about the food that was important to him as a child but he kept bringing me back to parties. He explains, “My mother wasn’t so very practical, but we had a magnificent lady, Fru Karlsson, who worked in our kitchen. She was older and so we had time to experiment together regularly in the kitchen.”

**Art history**

He studied art history at Stockholm University for a few years from 1967 to 1970. It was, he stresses, his parent’s idea. “My parents said, ‘Remember that after 50 years the body is not so fresh and not so good for working in the kitchen and a dining area, so perhaps it is good a idea to do some intellectual study first’.”

Whether he was pushed or not, Carl Jan is both knowledgeable and passionate about art. He now lives at Saxå Manor, a mansion set above Lake Saxen he purchased in 1984 and set about lovingly restoring. He proudly showed me round: every room is tastefully furnished and decorated with works of fine art.

My wife spots a piece by Salvador Dali. “Ah yes”, confirms Carl Jan. “That was a gift from my friend Marianna Falkman, one of Salvador’s lady friends. We loved to party together”, he explains.

As he pours the coffee on the terrace overlooking Lake Saxen we discuss his early career. After studying art history in Stockholm, Carl Jan moved back to Örebro and went to the Virginska Restaurant School. From there he went on to an internship at Operakällaren, one of Stockholm’s most beautiful classic restaurants with its own champagne, calvados, aquavit and whisky.
It was in the spring of 1972, at the age of just 26, that Carl Jan made the decision that was to make him famous all over Sweden: he bought Grythyttans Gästgivaregård. It was a run-down inn, in the tiny village of Grythyttan, and he turned it into Sweden’s most successful restaurant.

The inn was one vote away from being bulldozed to make room for a new supermarket. Numerous others had been asked to buy the inn, but had turned down the proposal as being preposterous. The idea that a dilapidated restaurant, in the middle of nowhere at a time of petrol rationing, could be turned into a gourmet centre seemed insane to most experienced business men.

When Grythyttanians met Carl Jan for the first time there suspicions were immediately aroused because he arrived wearing plus-fours with burgundy socks and shoes. Nonetheless, Carl Jan’s enthusiasm, love of art, old buildings and fine food gave him a completely different outlook. "I knew I could have three sittings a day with 80 people at each sitting”, he recalls.

When I asked him why he chose to open a restaurant in the middle of nowhere he was emphatic: "Because I loved the place and it was a beautiful platform for my life. There I could have parties for my friends and perhaps somebody would like to eat together with me.”

Success came immediately. Thousands wanted to visit and long queues formed in the village. Carl Jan had to put notices in the paper asking people not to come to the inn without a reservation.

People loved my style
I asked Carl Jan what Grythyttans Gästgivaregård so success he said, "It was at the right time. It was a very special situation after the riots in Europe in 1967 and 1968. People wanted to have something with more flair and a better ambiance. People loved my style.”

But it wasn’t all style. Carl Jan pioneered the sapere method (sapere is a Latin word meaning both “to know” and “to taste or smell”). A meal should not only satisfy the guests’ sense of taste, but should take into account all of the five senses.

The inn went on being improved. The lounge was furnished with great care. Gradually the houses were expanded and renovated. The gardens were recreated. The commitment to detail
and quality was superb. In the reception, clocks were placed that showed the time in Grythyttan, New York and Tokyo.

**Arrested for offering champagne to the King and Queen**

Carl Jan loves the limelight and is a master of publicity. Perhaps the most spectacular example was in 1984 when the King and Queen of Sweden were on their way through Örebro County when he stopped them and offered them champagne. Although he was subsequently arrested by the police, the publicity was no doubt worth it.

When the inn opened he had just three employees but by 1985 it was the biggest employer in Grythyttan and profits had soared to over 20M SEK (about £2M, $3M).

Carl Jan’s emphasis on partying may suggest a frivolous atmosphere, but staff who worked for Carl Jan at the time recall a formal atmosphere. As one waitress recalled, “Carl Jan was quite strict. It was our job to wait at the tables and to serve food, but we were not allowed to chat to customers. Things are more informal and relaxed today, but in those days that wasn’t allowed.”

**Campus Grythyttan/Örebro University Culinary Arts and Meal Science**

Carl Jan’s proudest achievement is the establishment of the Grythyttan Culinary Arts and Meal Science. If that sounds a mouthful (no pun intended), the full title is important to Carl Jan, especially the fact that the university combines science and art.

Carl Jan explained, "It was the first university for culinary art and science in Sweden. Students training as chefs, waiters, sommeliers and hoteliers study together. At the end of their studies students get a Bachelor’s degree in Meal Science or even a doctorate.”

It is indeed an extraordinary achievement to establish such a major university in what, to an Englishman, appears to be the middle of nowhere. Today 400 students are studying and 100 students pass their degree each year, it’s influence has spread throughout Sweden so it is no wonder that Grythyttan is regarded by most Swedes as the country’s culinary capital.

In 1994 the impressive House of Culinary Art (shown above) was opened. As Carl Jan explained, "Without physics it is sometimes
impossible to realise ideas — one must have buildings”.

Laying the foundations for future academic study of culinary art and hospitality is important to Carl Jan. He has worked tirelessly to setup an impressive library for research into meals. As he observed, “I’ve started a Foundation to develop the library so that we can provide the basis for future research.” (Source: www.oru.se)

**Living Life**

To most Swedes Carl Jan is better known for his television work, rather than his academic work.

Carl Jan’s first big success on television was in the autumn of 1983 when he starred in a ground breaking TV programme called *Living Life* where Carl Jan and Knut-Christian Gröntoft tasted and commented on different wines in the cellar beneath the inn.

This was at a time when alcohol was still regarded with suspicion. In Sweden, wine can only be bought from the Systembolaget (the state run off-licences) and back in 1983 wine was not displayed in the Systembolaget — it was kept behind closed doors out of sight. Customers had to know what they wanted and ask for it: browsing was out of the question.

In that climate, to have two Swedes talking about wine on television was almost shocking. They led a quiet revolution in changing attitudes to alcohol so that these days the Systembolaget are brightly lit shops in which alcohol is well displayed. (They are still hard to find and never open when you want them, but that is another story.)

**A snob with a sense of humour**

Carl Jan regularly appears on prime-time TV quiz shows and has even appeared in *Let’s Dance*, the Swedish equivalent of the BBC’s *Strictly Come Dancing*. I wonder if he feels out of place, after all he is a professor, wine connoisseur and highly cultured so I asked him what attracted him to *Let’s Dance*. "I love everything that
belongs to the good life. In the good life you are singing, you are dancing, you are eating and you are drinking champagne.”

His willingness to take part enthusiastically in TV quiz shows seems at odds with the fact that some Swedes see him as rather snobby. I asked him how he felt about being accused of being a snob. "Oh it is true", he replied, "But I am a snob with a sense of humour and people like that." (Source: aftonbladet.se)

**Carl Jan’s Angels**

In 2006 Carl Jan undertook his most demanding TV assignment when he took seven girls aged 16-22 with tragic backgrounds and tried to turn their lives around. Before the series began Carl Jan felt fairly optimistic that he could get on well with the girls, despite his privileged background. "I felt that I would win their respect by just being myself and interested in them", he explained.

The girls initially found Carl Jan "weird" and he found the experience much harder than he expected. "I found the experience absolutely draining emotionally. The girls had led such awful lives. Some had been raped, worked as prostitutes or had been drug addicts. Terrible things."

"It was incredibly difficult getting them into a routine and teaching them to cook. Cooking a meal is a kind of psychotherapy."

Carl Jan looks back on the experience with great pride. "Six of the girls now work as full-time chefs. Cooking really can transform live

**So what’s next?**

So what’s next for Carl Jan? More parties, of course: the Good Life. The parties may be quieter more formal affairs now, but the champagne stills flows and he enjoys entertaining just as much as ever.

All play and no work would bore Carl Jan. He wants a legacy and he hopes that will be something serious and lasting. "Now my interest is focussed at the end of my life on the history of cooking. I have started something that I have called Aptitum. I hope it will become the Centre for History of Cooking in Europe."

Having establised Grythyttan as the culinary capital of Sweden, don’t be surprised if he succeeds. (Source: www.svd.se)

**John Duxbury**

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