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COUNTRY

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Food**

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Proud to be Belgian?

While growing up in Ireland in the 1980s, the country wasn't able to get anything right. The economy was on the floor, bombs and shootings were a weekly, sometimes daily event in Northern Ireland. And the only solution open to many was to leave, which they did, by the thousands.

Then in the 1990s something changed; the country grew more prosperous, violence in Northern Ireland subsided, and the Irish developed a type of confidence that didn't really exist before. Explaining this is the job of economists and social historians, but ask an Irishman to pick a defining moment, and he'll say it was the second round of the 1990 World Cup Finals when Ireland beat Romania on penalties to progress to the quarterfinals.

You can see it on YouTube: Euphoria broke out across the country, much of it boiling down to a collective Irish realisation that we could achieve something in front of an international audience. And even though we lost in the quarterfinals, and the team was mostly English anyway, things just started to get better from there.

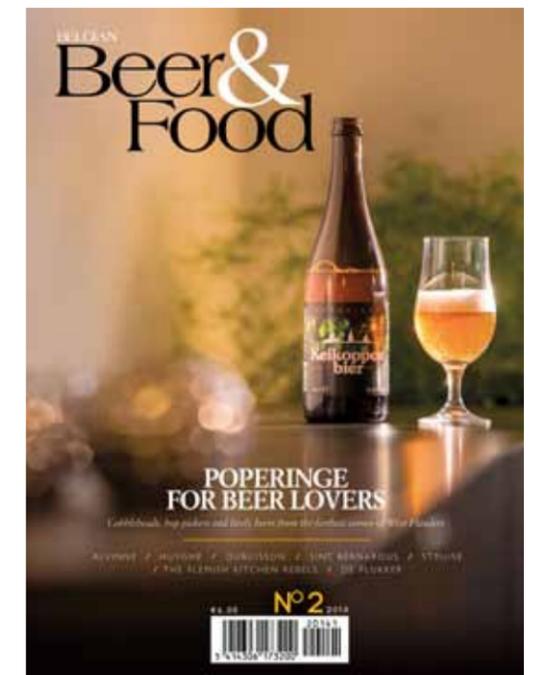
In my experience Belgians don't lack confidence — at least not to the extent that the Irish did in the 1980s — but they do lack national pride. While there's plenty of Flemish pride, and even Bel- legem pride and Mons pride, Belgium itself doesn't always mean that much to the Belgians.

Now I don't want to jinx anything, but with the World Cup just around the corner, the Belgian national team looks like it might make an impact. Let's say it does. Is it reasonable to predict the emergence of Belgian chauvinism in the aftermath?

And, more importantly, will this produce a different attitude to beer? Will we see Belgians going abroad and confidently boasting they produce the world's best beer? Or will they start ordering Belgian beer in gourmet restaurants, because it is, after all, just as complex and sophisticated as French wine?

Never say never. Football can do strange things to people.

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When Is a Brewery Not a Brewery? *(And Does it Matter?)*

By Joe Stange

Who really makes that gorgeous liquid pouring out of that bottle? And if the contents are tasty, who cares?

There are 160 working breweries in Belgium, give or take — but if you believe what you read on beer labels, there are hundreds more. That's because many of the companies that are conceiving, marketing and selling their beer brands are not, in fact, breweries. They are commissioners, or "beer firms", hiring other breweries to make the stuff for them.

These beer firms run the gamut of sizes, shapes and intentions. Some are simple enthusiasts — tasting clubs or homebrewers who have their recipes professionally made. Many more are marketers or salespeople with ideas for names and labels — and maybe even recipes — but no real brewing experience.

A few are trained brewers who rent someone else's brewhouse, making beer to test the market and raise money for their own brewery. A few of Belgium's more esteemed craft brewers followed that path, including De Ranke, Senne and Struise.

Others who appear to be on it include the Brouwers Verzet, three friends who studied brewing together in Ghent. They brew themselves, currently at De Ranke. Bit by bit, they invest in their own equipment — most recently a label machine, forklift, and two massive oak barrels. "The equipment to brew is too expensive to buy right away for young guys like us," said Koen Van Lancker, one of the trio. "We don't see Brouwers Verzet as another beer firm, we prefer the term 'brewery renters'. We would never want to 'order' our beer somewhere. It's one of our principles to always brew our beers ourselves."

But for every Verzet there are uncounted commissioned beers whose origins are less clear. Many of these mystery brews are quite good. However their labels, websites and other materials don't always say where they are made. Instead they promote the name of a firm, which may even have the word "brewery" in it. The addresses often lead to homes or



nondescript offices.

At the Bruges Beer Festival in February, with 76 entities presenting their beers, 23 were beer firms rather than brick-and-mortar breweries. We checked labels and websites for all 23 of those firms. We counted 10 whose labels noted the true place of manufacture. We also counted a slightly different group of 10 firms whose websites mentioned the manufacturing brewery somewhere on their websites.

The others did not include that piece of information, leaving casual drinkers to think whatever they will, or not at all, about where the product is made.

For example: Broeder Jacob's ales are well distributed and promoted, and

its Double Espresso stout won silver medal in blind judging at the recent Brussels Beer Challenge.

So where is the brewery?

The labels and website say "Brouwerij Broeder Jacob", with an address in Wezemaal. The website features an amusing video of men in monk's habits inspecting a large bottling line in action. Notably, the site also features the logo for Streekproducten Vlaams-Brabant, an initiative that promotes products from Flemish Brabant.

Here's the awkward part: The beers are made in Namur. The video doesn't say so, but that bottling line is at the Du Bocq brewery.

Johan Claes, owner of Broeder Jacob, acknowledged that casual drinkers might think that he has a brewery. "But my beers are made at Du Bocq," he said. As for the Streekproducten logo, he said that his firm is located in Flemish Brabant. He compared it to companies that get their ingredients from all over the world, but they are based in Flemish Brabant so they are still local.

Claes noted that having your own brewery does not mean that you make good beer. "The most important thing is the quality of the beer," he said, adding that he studied brewing for a while in Ghent and completed a two-year beer sommelier course in Hasselt. "The

people want to drink this, one time, two times, three times, four times. They like the beer, that's the most important."

And isn't that what matters? If casual drinkers believe a firm is a brewery, why should we care?

"I care."

Those were the first words we got from Gunter Mertens, president of OBER, the enthusiasts' club that runs the annually superb Christmas Beer Festival in Essen.

"I even hate it when a beer firm pretends to be a real brewery," Mertens said. "I think it is lying and not taking your clients serious. These days people are more and more interested in genuine

artisanal products, whether it be beer or food in general. ... Usually those people pay more money for a better, honest product ... so I think it's fair that those people know where it actually has been made, and by whom."

Mertens said that honesty doesn't seem to hurt sales for companies that are open about their brewing arrangement — such as the Danish Mikkeller, who hires Proefbrouwerij. Some of the more creative firms bring new ideas and trends to the market, and that's good for drinkers.

However, Mertens said, "from a brewer's view I would hate it. I know the cost of real brewing equipment, and all the money and time spent brewing you can't put in advertising and promoting your beers at festivals, stores and bars."

The beer firm phenomenon is not new in Belgium, even if it has become more obvious on shelves and at festivals. At the 2006 Zythos festival, Achouffe founder Chris Bauweraerts brought an unsanctioned contribution to the discussion. He printed signs that said, "We are an Authentic Brewery", giving them to colleagues who liked to separate themselves from beer firms. Eight years later, a few of those signs can still be seen on certain brewery walls.

Joris Pattyn, a longtime aficionado and beer judge who co-wrote the book *100 Belgian Beers to Try Before You Die*, said he has mixed feelings about the trend. On the one hand, he is happy about the diversity of choice. "What ought to be important is the product," he said. "If it procures satisfaction, if it challenges you, if you want more, then the goal ought to be achieved."

On the other hand, he said, he can't help feeling a little disdain for those who promote their drink as a symbol of their village when it is in fact the "umpteenth commission" from Proefbrouwerij. Pattyn, a founding member of the European Beer Consumers Union, said that the ideal might be a law requiring beer labels to include the place of manufacture.

And then?

"No more mysteries," he said. ■

Balancing Extremes

The Struise Brouwers and Brouwerij Alvinne have arisen over the past decade to reinterpret and challenge Belgium's beer traditions for a global audience. All somewhat by chance. *John Rega asks how and why.*

Travelling the world and installing his own custom-made brewhouse have been high notes in Glenn Castelein's relatively brief brewing career. Yet he still maintains that the best times were spent hanging out with his buddies in the garden shed.

Castelein and brother-in-law Davy Spiessens played darts and watched football while dipping into their home-made beer. But as the batches got bigger and earned some local notoriety, the excise-man came round to spoil the fun. They were forced to turn their hobby into a legitimate operation, and in 2004 Brouwerij Alvinne was born.

Today, Castelein, a young-looking 40 with longish hair, still works full-time as a teacher and administrator at a special-education school. But it's Saturday, so he's knocking around the brewery in jeans and a sweater.

He pushes up the sleeves, showing scars from the brewhouse hazard of working with scalding, sticky liquids. Before setting out on a tour of the facility, he pours bottles of Gaspar Ale. A winter seasonal product, it was one of Belgium's earlier brews to reinterpret the American-invented style of Belgian IPA, mating this country's expressive yeast strains with bitter, aromatic hops. Adopting this re-imported mashup shows how Alvinne is embracing ideas from abroad about "extreme beer."

Sturdy People

While Spiessens and Castelein were in the backyard, another pair of brothers-in-law in West Flanders were on their way to breaking new ground.

Urbain Coutteau and Philippe

Driessens got into brewing in 2001 while seeking inventive ways to serve guests on their ostrich-farm gîte. Coutteau roped in longtime friend Carlo Grootaert, a wine salesman and amateur winemaker. They became De Struise Brouwers, a pun on the flightless ostrich — a struisvogel, as it's called in Dutch — which appears on their logo. The name also translates as the Sturdy Brewers.

"We were bored of easy-drinking beers and wanted to make a strong one," Grootaert recalls, while drawing samples that show off Struise's range from sours, to hop-forward lagers, to



inky stouts steeped in whiskey barrels. "Not that we are sturdy people but from time to time we make sturdy beers."

Grootaert has little time to reminisce amid a stream of visitors on a Saturday. He slips away to lead another group of admirers through Struise's hand-assembled brewery works in a converted schoolhouse in Oostvleteren.

Crates of product line the entrance hallway waiting for buyers. Further inside, in the classroom-turned-bar, some beer hunters look over chalkboard dia-

grams of the brewing process, but most attention goes to the back wall where a row of taps is labelled by sticky notes.

Still among the country's most robust and sought-after brews in the export market is Struise's original: the dusky, spicy, palpably boozy Pannepot. As Grootaert tells it, fishing families in his home town of De Panne once juggled a strong home brew, which they would serve hot by thrusting in a fireplace poker, searing the beer with a roasted, caramelised flavour.

Who knows, but anyone who's visited the blustery Flemish coast can imagine the beer you'd want after a night hauling lines and nets in your pannepot, or a cooking pot of De Panne, as the locals called their fishing boats. Coutteau, Grootaert and crew sought to recreate the recipe, and rented Brasserie Caulier in Hainaut to brew up a batch.

It was a brash attempt to one-up the classic strong dark ales epitomised by Westvleteren 12, Rochefort 10 and St. Bernardus Abt 12. Pannepot certainly



fits that style, with a shadowy mahogany colour, powerful malt flavours, and a 10% alcohol punch that would warm a North Sea fisherman

They didn't know much about the market, Grootaert admits almost proudly. They sold some to specialty shops and restaurants — which still remains about the only way to find their stuff. Some went to Denmark, earning notice in that country's inventive beer scene.

And then in 2007, while still little-known in their homeland, Struise started exporting to the US.

"We got quite a lot of fuzz and buzz," shrugs Grootaert, a burly and affable 48 years. The attention abroad spurred some animosity towards the newcomer which, at the start, had no brewery of its own. Now it has the schoolhouse, but most of Struise's output still originates five kilometres down the road at Brouwerij Deca. Even in a rented facility, the labour and know-how are entirely theirs, Grootaert insists, "like using someone else's kitchen."

"Every bag of grain is put in by hand," he says. "When it's done in a very traditional, old way, people have more respect for it."

Hand Made

"There's just something to be said about somebody who's passionate about good beer and making it by hand," says Christian Gregory of Shelton Brothers, the distribution company that introduced Struise to America. But the key, he suggests, is Struise's reputation for unique and inventive beer.

"They probably don't even fit within what most people would consider the stereotypical Belgian brews," Gregory says in a phone interview, citing as benchmarks the top-volume Trappist brewer Chimay and the strong blond ale Duvel. "They fit more within the extreme beers of the world."

"We cannot compare ourselves to the other major brewers in Belgium," Grootaert says. But for all their moves toward the extremes, balance is practically the mantra for Struise — and, as it turns out, for Alvinne, too.

To demonstrate, Castelein pours a Cuvée de Mortagne, named for Alvinne's home region, and a high point of their experiments with ageing on wood. A young Pomerol barrel contributes oak bite and vinous red fruits to a strong dark base. The result calls to mind a

Pineau des Charentes, mingling wine and cognac. All the tastes are huge, but proportionate in a digestif-worthy beer.

Castelein explains that a beer must be selected to pair with the personality of each barrel. One of his specialities (Spiessens is the full-time head brewer) is sniffing out the nuances of tannic French oak versus the vanilla taste of American wood, even before considering the Monbazillac wine, whiskey or whatever else it once held.

Patience is another crucial ingredient. Tying up product and store rooms is expensive, but fits within the Belgian tradition of monastic brewing, or the multiyear process of blending lambic into gueuze. "With barrels, you never know when it's going to be ready for you," Castelein says.

Meanwhile, Grootaert likens Struise's production to an art gallery, bringing in new works to maintain interest, rather than a permanent collection to view once. "To us, creating beer is a form of creativity," he says. "Our public is the beer geeks," he adds, unapologetically. "We're not after the average pils seeker." ■

www.alvinne.be
www.struise.com

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Gentse Strop honours the proud in heart.

www.gentsestrop.be

Beer brewed carefully, to be consumed with care.



The good brewer

By Alan Hope

You start to see signs of Huyghe brewery long before you get there. All along the road through East Flanders toward the village of Melle there appear, without a word of explanation, signs depicting a lurid pink elephant against a grey background. The signs can be seen from 100 metres away, and like the symbols of some ancient cult, they lead eventually to the centre of this strange devotion.

The Huyghe brewery in Melle, near Ghent, produced its first Delirium Tremens in 1989 to a recipe originally developed for a fair in Italy. Its name was a whim, the label designed in return for two cases of beer by an intern who wanted to make a mark. The brand is almost an anti-advertisement for alcohol consumption, but no matter: It is now one of the most recognisable in Belgium and, as time goes on, in much of the rest of the world as well.

“Some colleagues used to call me the craziest brewer of Belgium,” CEO Alain De Laet admits. “That’s because we used to brew on demand. We have developed nut beer, plum beer, basically anything our clients asked for. However, we’re not financially strong enough to support 20 to 30 different brands, which is why we have been focusing more on our strategic core brands these last years. But that does not mean that we are no longer developing new beers. Innovation remains key and we are very proud that we have been appointed by the abbey of Averbode to brew their new Averbode abbey beer.”

The Huyghe range now includes the famous Delirium, augmented with Delirium Red, Nocturnum and Christmas, as well as Deliria, designed by a group of women beer-lovers to prove women are not all about sweet, fruity beers. Speaking of sweet and fruity, Huyghe starts half a dozen Mongozo beers and the Floris range with a wheat beer, spiking it with passion fruit, cactus, mango or chocolate, among other things. Beyond those, other brands were the product of early days plus acquisitions: St Idesbald, Campus, Blanche des Neiges, which is the basis for Huyghe’s fruit beers. La Guillotine, designed for the bicentennial of the French Revolution, is very big in France.

Business is booming, but De Laet remembers that the brewery was struggling until they came up with the “You

ask, we brew” strategy. That allowed them to brew to order, and it brought in enough business to keep the place ticking while they developed their own brands. Huyghe still brews for Tesco and Marks & Spencer in the UK, and it makes Tumult for Coca-Cola in France. Though that outside business is a smaller and smaller part of Huyghe’s turnover, De Laet still thinks it essential.

“They oblige me to maintain the highest standards, which are checked regularly via external audits. Thanks to that small volume of private label, they pushed me to go faster, to a level I would never have reached if I were working only with my own products. It gives me the motivation always to go higher. I don’t want to be the biggest brewer, I want to be the nicest and most quality-focused brewer, with the best name, so that whenever anyone would speak

about Huyghe, people would say; That’s a good brewer.”

That quest to be a nicer brewer has led De Laet toward two goals: ecology and cooperation.

The brewery has carried out a €7 million investment programme, completed in April 2012, aimed at cutting consumption of resources. De Laet estimates that the programme has already saved him €360,000 in ingredients, water and electricity. Huyghe also installed 2,700 square metres of solar panels, aiming to get 20 percent of its power from the sun by 2020. Every week he asks his engineers if they have found anywhere to save. “The brewery has nearly doubled its output in the four years since 2009, so I’m sure that my investments are paying me back very well, and I have a very positive image among people here in the village.”



“That quest to be a nicer brewer has led De Laet toward two goals: ecology and cooperation.



ence from a former underdog. How else have things changed, other than the balance sheet?

“The only big change for me is that for 17 years I had negative stress. How can I reach break even? Will I even survive? Since 2000, and more and more, it’s positive stress, it’s not a problem any more, it’s more the idea, don’t make errors.”

And the future? His father, in his 70s, goes every day to the Delirium Café in Brussels, a showcase bar stocking some 2,500 beers from around the world. De Laet meanwhile has a 12-year-old son. Son and successor?

“I would have a big problem if my son were to come to me one day and say, I’m not interested. Then I would stop investing, that’s for sure, because it’s about him that I’m thinking already, in a certain way. I’m not here working for money. Money is not what drives me, otherwise I could sell the brewery and walk away with a big bag full of money and live very well. But that’s not what I want.” ■

www.delirium.be

The cooperation part comes in the shape of the Belgian Family Brewers Association, made up of family-owned brewers anxious to protect the image and status of Belgian beer. They pool resources and share a seal of approval, meant to represent a high standard.

“Today we’re at 21, 22 members, and every year there are new candidates. Some bigger brewers are members, they’re still family brewers, but their interest is sometimes more about controlling than developing. My brewery

is growing, so I can only dream that my colleagues are also growing. If things are going well for everyone there’s no reason to be jealous. That’s how I look at my business. My table is here, my beer is here, and if someone is doing better, try to see why he’s doing better and improve your own system. I’m more and more a believer that working together is the way to keep us strong. We are not enemies. We are not competitors. We have to work together.”

It sounds like the voice of experi-



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Break on through *to the other side*

Dubuisson is built on an impeccable history and tradition, but their youngest creation may be pointing the way to the future. *By Alan Hope*

We have a slogan. We are proud to say we are the oldest and most authentic brewery in Wallonia.”

Marc Lemay, marketing director at Brasserie Dubuisson, needs few words to describe his brewery's claim to distinction. But while Dubuisson's long history is not unusual in Belgian beer, here is something that makes them stand out: Nowhere in their range of 11 beers will you find the name of a saint, nor an abbey real or mythical. In fact, Dubuisson doesn't even use its own name: most carry the name Bush (Bush Beer is simply the English translation of *bière du buisson*), and the most successful is called *Cuvée des Trolls*, which doesn't even sound like a beer at all.

Dubuisson's claim to authenticity, unlike many of those abbeys whose names are associated with beers, is that it has been brewing on the same spot for more than 250 years. “The buildings you see there are from the 18th century, and the others are from the beginning of the 19th century,” Lemay points out, leading us round. “Originally it was a farm and a brewery, and we've been brewing here since 1769. The founder Joseph Leroy was a brewer at the other side of the road, working for a local nobleman. The nobleman decided to give up brewing, so Joseph left the lord, crossed over the road and created his own farm brewery here.”

The business has stayed in the family, too: “Joseph had a great-granddaughter called Aline, and Aline married Clovis Dubuisson, and that's the reason why brewery Leroy became brewery Dubuisson. Hugues Dubuisson is today the owner, the eighth generation in direct line from the founder.”

The famous Bush beer, now marketed as *Bush Ambrée*, was created in 1933 by Alfred Dubuisson, grandfather of the current owner Hugues. “At that time, English beers were very popular in the area. They were stronger, and they were also a very special type. So Alfred Dubuisson decided to create a Belgian beer in the English style, but to make it stronger than the English beer. He made an amber ale using English hops, Goldings coming from Kent, and he also gave it an English name. This year we celebrate the 80th anniversary of Bush beer.”

That Bush beer is one without any natural counterpart in Belgium. Yes, it is clearly modelled on an English ale, but at 12% instead of the now-common 4 to



5%. It was the brewery's only product from 1933 to 1991, which says something for its popularity.

“When Hugues Dubuisson took over from René Dubuisson his uncle at the end of the 1980s, he began to create new products to put the brewery in a better situation, because being dependent on one beer at 12% was very risky. He created the *Bush de Noël* in 1991, a Christmas beer, and then in 1998 he created the *Bush Blond*,” Lemay says. The blond comes in at a slightly lower 10.5% — though still at the high end of Belgian beers.

“In 2000 we created the *Cuvée des Trolls*,” Lemay says, matter-of-factly, about something which in years to come will — we venture to suggest — mark a watershed in Dubuisson's production, but also another in how Belgian breweries face new market demands.

Dubuisson aimed *Cuvée des Trolls* very specifically at a younger market, the brand stripped of anything that might be considered old-fashioned and fuddy-duddy. In other words, it left all those commonly embraced trappings of Belgian beer like abbeys, châteaux, monks and so forth, in an effort to plant roots into what often turns out to be *Astro turf*.

It's ironic, then, that one of the oldest breweries in Belgium cast off the trappings of history and adopted an impetuous-look-

ing troll as its mascot. It was a shrewd move. The beer was aimed at young people, and at 7% it might be considered strong.

It also became Dubuisson's top-selling beer. They must be doing something right.

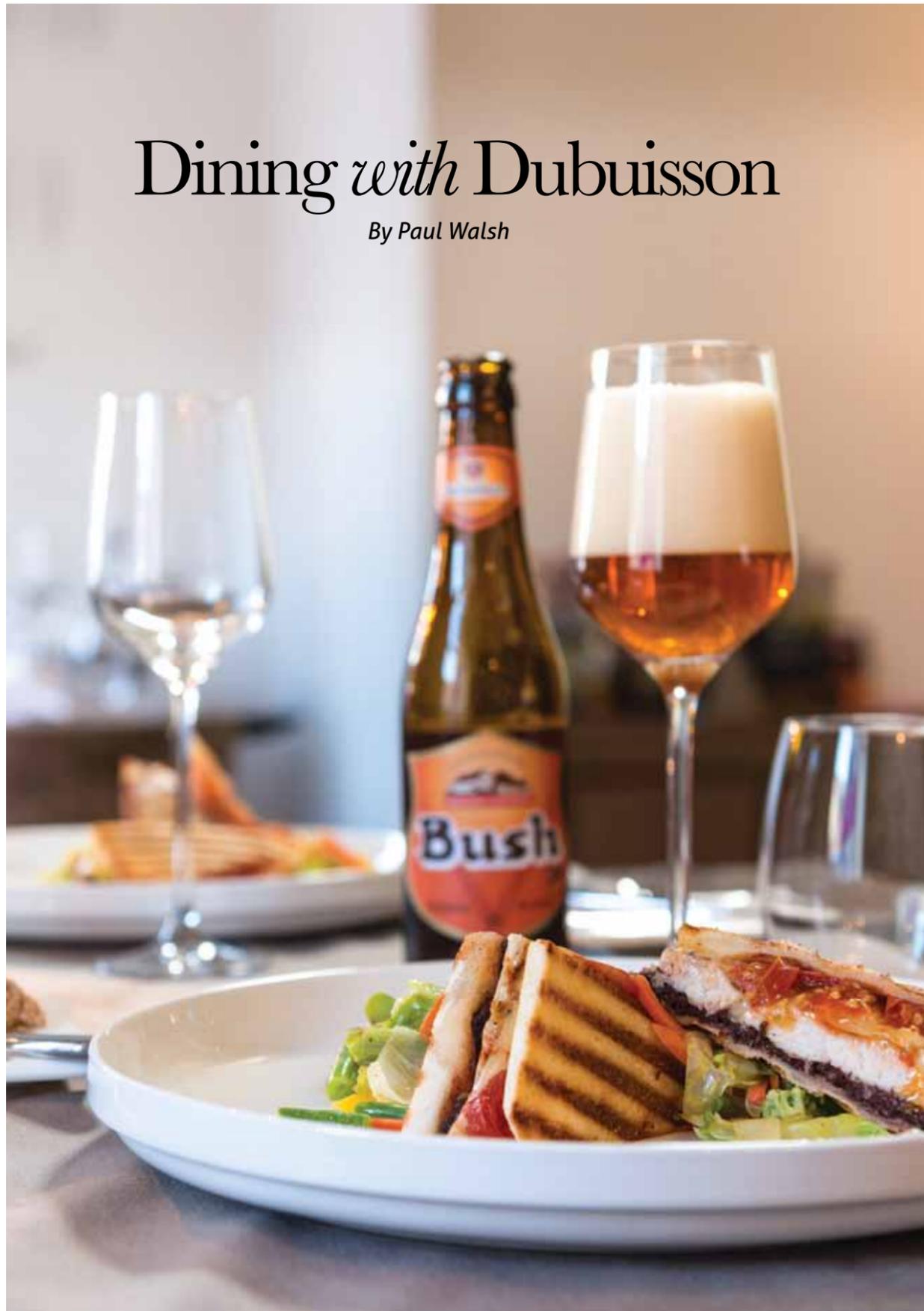
You can reviews of *Cuvée des Trolls* all over the beer-Internet. It doesn't score too well among beer geeks, but it's not meant for them, Lemay says — although the 75cl version, refermented in the bottle unlike the 25cl or 33cl, is a whole dimension apart from the standard product. It's sweetish but not bitter, fruity and fresh, balanced and complex.

Lemay states the obvious, which we'll never tire of re-stating: “The Belgians don't go for extreme beers. A good beer has to be *équilibrée*, with a good balance between sweetness, bitterness, acidity and so on. In the end, a beer has to give pleasure. It's not essential to recognise the bitterness, acidity and so on, the most important thing is that you get pleasure from drinking the beer.” ■

www.br-dubuisson.com

Dining *with* Dubuisson

By Paul Walsh



In the world of beer cuisine, Dubuisson should be easy to work with; after all this is the brewery that promoted gastronomic beer back when contemporaries were preoccupied with buying up brown cafés.

And while the brewing world is slowly catching on, Dubuisson has meticulously explored the dishes and flavors that go best with its products. They've even made self-consciously restaurant-style beers, like the Bush Prestige and Bush de Nuits.

On a Friday afternoon in a small town near Hasselt, beer-chef Hilaire Spreuwers wants to explore a bit further. He starts out with Pêche Mel paired with steak tartar; a rather adventurous choice, given that the beer is unapologetically sweet and fruity, something you'd expect with dessert, or even *as* dessert.

Actually it goes well with a strip of raw meat. And yes, the beer is front-loaded with peach flavors, although these dissolve quickly, bringing forth the steak's sweetness. Accompaniments of marinated tomatoes and spring onions add much-needed texture, and together the beer and the dish seem more complex than you'd assume, which may be the mark of a winning combination.

Next up, Bush Ambrée, bold and boozy on its own; a "men know why" type of beer. Turns out that a simple roasted chicken sandwich will put manners on it and bring it into the civilised world. Well, I say simple; actually it's a crunchy, decadent affair, heavy with Orval cheese, black pudding, and soft roasted chicken, that combine to soak up the beer's alcoholic warmth, leaving your taste buds room to enjoy the Ambrée's more genteel attributes of yeastiness and caramelised sweetness.

Hilaire serves the sandwich with

carrots (orange and yellow) and romanesco broccoli. But it's the balsamic vinegar that stands out, allowing this course's roasted malt, chicken and bread flavors, to separate and then blend together in the mouth.

The main course brings the most challenging beer of the afternoon: Bush Prestige; rich, oak-aged and, taste-wise, approaching a fortified

wine. "It's very difficult to work with something so delicate. If anything in the dish is too strong, you'll lose the beer's flavors." Hilaire serves mushroom toast and foie gras, and true to his word, nothing overpowers. The most prominent note is the goose liver's fattiness, which is really just a platform for the beer's port-like flavors to swirl around the mouth. ■



www.bitter-zoet.be
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The woman's touch

Female brewers prove there's no glass ceiling in brewing beer. *By Sofie Vanrafelghem*

Ellen Mertens was always interested in science. That's what led her to study bio-engineering at the University of Leuven. In the last year of her master's program she had five options, and she chose beer technology.

"In the second year we already had to choose a thesis topic," Mertens says. "The only thing that interested me out of all the topics suggested was the one from Professor Freddy Delvaux from the Centre for Malting and Brewing Sci-

ence. So it was logical for me to go for beer technology as a specialisation."

She graduated in 1994 and started an internship at the Affligem brewery in Opwijk, in the quality control department. Theo Vervloet, then general manager and now chairman of the Belgian Brewers' Federation, took her under his wing. "Thanks to Theo Vervloet I really grew into the job," she says now. "The experience I gained then still serves me every day in my current job."

The whole production process in Opwijk starts in the brewing room, where they still have the original copper kettles from 1946, with steam heating and hand controls, although they haven't been used in a long time. Brewing now takes place in ultra-modern stainless steel kettles, the fermentation in large cylindro-conical tanks.

After her internship she took over quality control at the Opwijk brewery. "Both in pre- and post-production, it's extremely important to work carefully as far as hygiene is concerned, so that the next brewing cycle can begin properly."

In 2012 she became innovation manager in charge of beer technology with Alken-Maes. "If anything needs to be adjusted, changed or renewed, I'm the one you come to." She's also responsible for the development of new beers. The Affligem Cuvée 950, for example, is her creation.

"The best part of this job is that you get to work with a living product. Sometimes, for example, your yeast just doesn't want to work anymore, and that's a challenge to say the least. The brewing process is not a machine, and you always have to know what you're doing. Working in such a large brewery means you have to keep an eye open every second, see that everything goes according to the established procedures, with strict analysis and quality follow-up."

The culture changed when Heineken bought Affligem in 2000. "All of a sudden we were an international brewery," Mertens says. "A small enterprise has a different way of working from a major multinational. But if you bring the two together, they have a lot to learn from each other."

De Ryck

The De Ryck family have been brewing in the centre of Herzele, a village in that part of Flanders known as the Flemish Ardennes, for more than 125 years. An De Ryck, the fourth generation, has no worries about succession. Her daughter Miek joined the company five years ago, followed by her son Bram.

But it all started with Gustave.

Gustave, the great-grandfather, started brewing in 1886. He bought a piece of land opposite the church for 5,000 francs and built a farm-plus-brewery. "In those days we were the Gouden Arend — golden eagle — brewery," An explains.



"After the First World War we dropped that name to avoid any connection with Germany, especially the eagle. In fact it was a wonder we still existed at all, because the Germans had commandeered our horses and our brewing kettles."

The brewery for a long time only produced draft beer. Only in 2006 did it install a bottling plant. "My father didn't see the point," An says. "In the old days people would come regularly to pick up 20-litre kegs to put in their cellars."

The spécial De Ryck is a typical example of the special belge ale created in the 1920's: an amber, moderately hopped ale at 5.5% abv. At one time, this sort of beer was enormously popular in Belgium, but sales have been shrinking. "My grandfather lived through the golden age of the special beer, when we couldn't keep up with demand even when brewing every day. For the people who live here in the village, our Special is their pils, their 'usual'. It's a light, drinkable beer, the ideal alternative for a pils."

The beer range of brewery De Ryck now includes 10 delicious beer, including the Arend blond, dark and tripel, the hoppier spicy 'Stenuilke' and a fruity beer range. The name for the Arend range, and in particular the anniversary beer 'Gouden Arend' are chosen as a tribute to the founder who started the brewery under that name. Soon after

its release the hop-forward triple began collecting medals in international competitions. "Those prizes were an encouragement for us," An says.

With a woman at the head of the brewery, and another at the head of marketing, An and Miek have pretty much trashed any prejudice concerning women and beer. "When I was an innocent young girl I used to hear that this was no job for a woman," An says. "But I loved my work, and I paid no attention to the critics, because that's just a waste of time. People used to call up and ask for the brewer, or the technical director, or I would receive emails addressed to 'Dear Mr. De Ryck'."

Miek adds: "I would go into the cafés, looking to sell our beers and the barowners used to test me, thinking the brewery had chosen only a pretty face to represent them, someone who had no idea how beer is even made. But when they found out I could answer every question they had, things changed."

Americans think it's great; a history of five generations is already enough to impress them — and then they see two women coming towards them."

Sofie Vanrafelghem is the author of *Bier: Vrouwen Weten Waarom*, available throughout Belgium at all good book shops and published by Uitgeverij Van Halewyck. ■



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Back to the roots

Sometimes the key to the future lies in the past.

By Alan Hope



“Can you imagine my email address? Albert-De-Brabandere-at-Brouwerij-De-Brabandere-dot-B-E. It's a nightmare. I had some people coming up with completely new names but I said no. Stick to what you are, go back to your foundations and you'll find the answer there. It's not your website that decides your way forward, it's your story.”

When we spoke to him, Albert

De Brabandere was marketing and retail manager at Bavik Brewery in Harelbeke in West Flanders. Now he does that same job for De Brabandere Brewery. He hasn't changed, and the brewery hasn't changed. As he explains it, they've simply gone back to their roots.

De Brabandere is the latest son of the family whose name the brewery now bears, groomed to take over as the fifth generation: a master's in

economics at Leuven, a master's in brewing science in Munich, another master's in entrepreneurship in Paris, followed by marketing and brand experience at Heineken. Last January he returned to the brewery run by his father Ignace, and a year later unveiled his master plan: the new-school heir takes the brewery old-school. The name Bavik now refers only to their Pils. The brewery goes back to the old name, still emblazoned across

the front of the building.

He spent his first year on the job surveying the brewery's strengths and weaknesses.

“The strong points were, we have passionate people working here, they're a great team and they all love their work. And we have good beers. The negative points: we have great beers but weak brands, and that's a problem, though it's better than the other way round. I learned about sales and marketing at Heineken, and if those guys do one thing well, it's building their brands and selling their beer. We were being told we had too wide an assortment, and their positioning wasn't very clear.”

The result of the survey was the establishment of four key values: people driven by passion; value-based authenticity; innovation driven by quality; and beer brewed for beer-lovers. In practice it came down to one thing — a story.

“We noticed that that was a weakness of the brewery: We don't have a story around our brands. And that's the second most important thing in the beer world nowadays, after having good beer of course. That's what's going to keep consumers busy trying

to understand more of your brewery. It's also a good way to get people interested enough to give your beer a taste. Everybody loves Facebook but I still think going to the pub and having a drink with your friends is the easiest and the best form of social networking, so I trust those people to tell our story to their friends, and if you have a good story on top of the good beer alone, then one plus one equals three.”

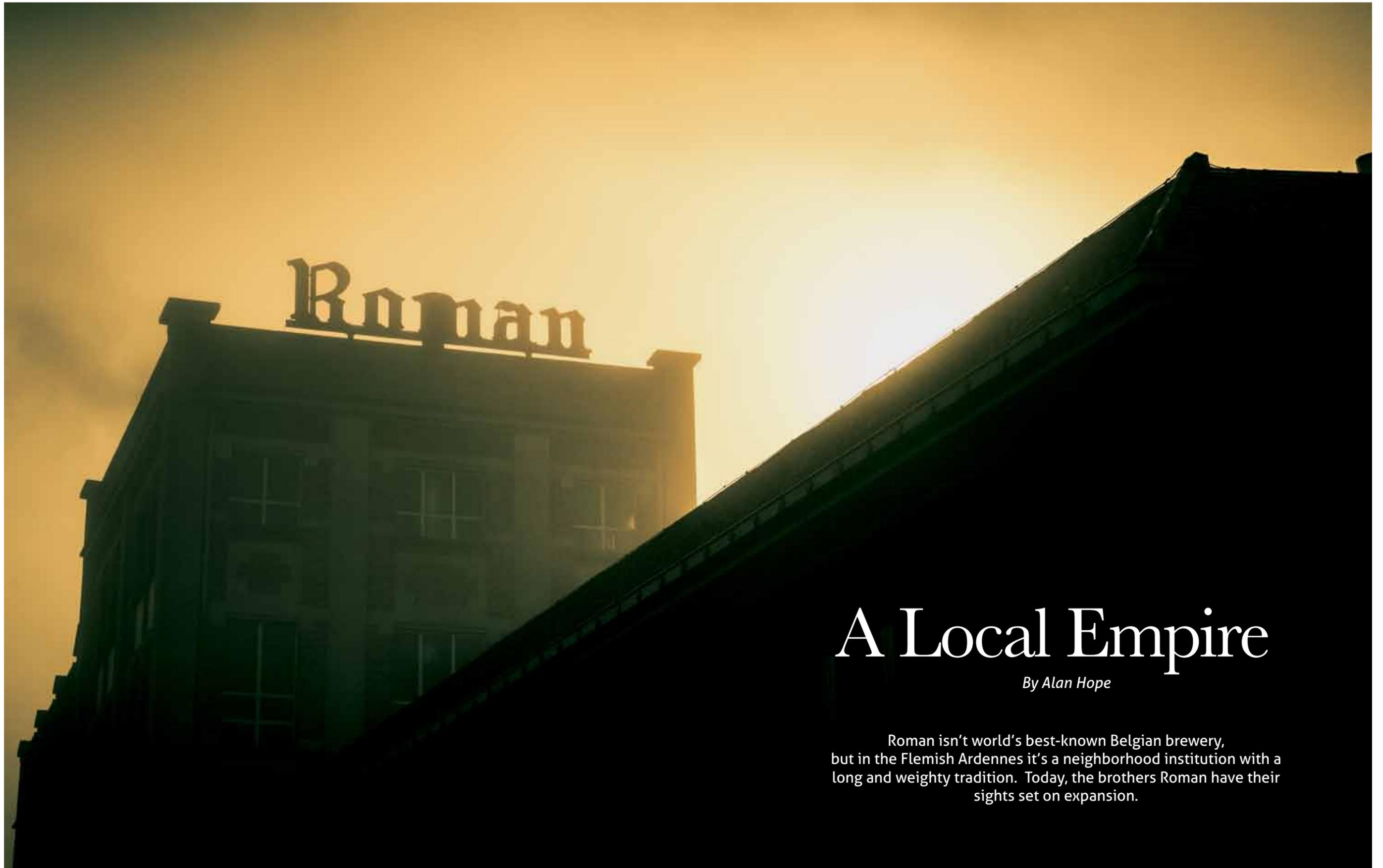
De Brabandere believes the beers are there already. There's the Petrus range of Blond, Golden Triple, Double Brown, Old Brown and Special, as well as the Aged Red and Aged Pale — the latter an unusual, award-winning cult favourite. If it weren't for Michael Jackson, who urged Ignace to bring it to market, it might still be the beer only used for blending with sweeter stuff. Others in the range include Wittekerke, a wheat beer named after a TV series, a fruit-flavoured pink version of the same beer, plus Bavik Pils and Export Pils.

January brought a release called 1894 to mark the brewery's 120th anniversary. Limited to 20,000 75cl bottles, the beer is subtitled “Oak & Hops” — but neither the wood nor the hops are overly aggressive. “We're trying to show that a small brewery can still come up with some surprising things that haven't been done before, which fits with our whole way of thinking and our values, and which also looks great,” De Brabandere says.

“This is the perfect moment to find back our authenticity,” he says. “To dig into our past and our history, and find out what it is that sets us apart from the rest. It's not about dressing up. It's about discovering your true values.” ■

www.brouwerijdebrabandere.be





A Local Empire

By Alan Hope

Roman isn't world's best-known Belgian brewery, but in the Flemish Ardennes it's a neighborhood institution with a long and weighty tradition. Today, the brothers Roman have their sights set on expansion.

When we arrive at the Roman brewery in Mater, a village on the edge of Oudenaarde in East Flanders, we explain we've an appointment to speak to Mr. Roman. The youthful, dark-haired man who appears moments later is mystified: he has no appointments with anyone in his diary for today. Is there some mistake? When we tell him what we've come for, the penny drops: it's not Carlo Roman we're there to see; it must be his brother Lode. And sure enough, it is.

When they talk about Roman brewery as a family business, the words have an exact meaning. Carlo Roman looks after the technical aspects of the business; Lode is the public face: "I do mostly the commercial part, so everything that's outside of the brewery, pubs, wholesalers, export," he explains. "But I have eight salesmen. My brother looks after everything that's technical and production. My father watches us to see how we are doing."

Roman traces its origins, with the help of customs documents, back to 1545. "In those years it was also a farm, a tavern and an inn. [This] Brouwerij Roman was created in 1927, and all the buildings you see here were constructed in the Thirties."

The Roman brewery is a square of brick buildings surrounding a huge courtyard, the whole structure dominated by a three-storey tower and a tall chimney. In summer the brewery hands the courtyard over every Wednesday evening to free concerts, served of course by a long bar supplying the various beers in the Roman range — 12 beer in all, including a non-alcoholic pils.

Inside, the building is all heavy wooden furniture, polished floors and coloured glass windows, with an atmosphere like a particularly strict Catholic school; you certainly wouldn't run in the corridors here. Likewise, Roman brewery is an institution in the area.

Such a long and weighty tradition, surely, must place a terrible responsibility on the sons of a family like the Romans. How, after a run of 14 generations, would it even be possible to turn your back on the brewing business and follow your own path?

"I was lucky, because I'm a big beer lover, so it's a product I would like anyway," Lode Roman says. "But my father

When they talk about Roman brewery as a family business, the words have an exact meaning. Carlo Roman looks after the technical aspects of the business; Lode is the public face.

never pushed us to come into the brewing business; we were allowed to go wherever we wanted, but of course he's very happy at the way things turned out."

Nevertheless, it's a huge responsibility being to take on.

"Yes, it's a huge responsibility. But it's a family brewery, so without us there is no brewery. There's nothing any more. We have a responsibility to those 14 generations and also to the 75 people who work here. We need to invest to go on and to grow, because when you don't invest you go backwards. That's a responsibility.

"We have good contacts with our people, they're very happy. They stay here for 20, 30, 40 years. Most of them also live within 10 kilometres, they're very local people and they're proud to work here. And they're our best publicity. When they're with their families and they go out at the weekend for lunch or for dinner, they talk about their work. We're also still a very local brewer. A lot of our beers are sold in the local area, so people make their money here but they also spend it where we sell our beers."

If the name Roman is not terribly familiar to you, blame geography. The company delivers its beers to pubs it owns across the country, and to wholesalers, but the concentration is very much in the area of East Flanders known as the Flemish Ardennes, south of Ghent and taking in Zottegem, Ger-

aardsbergen and Oudenaarde to Ronse.

Their beers range from Romy Pils, a simple lager which makes up 60 per cent of all sales; to the traditional brown beer of this area, the Adriaen Brouwer 5%, named after the 17th century painter born in Oudenaarde, whose name is also used for an award-winning Dark Gold at 8.5%; to the Black Hole premium lager aimed at young people; and the Mater wheat beer.

All of those are perfectly solid, respectable and, to be honest, rather dull. The Ename range (Blonde, Double, Triple and fruity Cuvée Rouge) looks and feels quite different from the traditional standards above. For one thing, while the bottle and glass are fairly typical, the label looks more modern in typography and colour; it's clear some designers have got their hands on it.

"There are 15 original abbey beers in Belgium, mainly old-looking or authentic looking," Roman says. "Okay, so we have a good abbey beers but so do other breweries, so the way you can do something else is by the presentation. We stayed with the classic abbey beer glass, and the change came with the presentation of the label. Home consumption is becoming more and more important in Belgium, so when you have a large range of beers the name has to be very readable, that's why we went for the white-on-black label. When the label is very busy, it can be very difficult to read the name from a distance. Also in the



pubs, if someone is sitting five metres away from you with an Ename you can read the name easily while other labels might be more difficult."

A similar kind of market-oriented thinking is evident, too, in the Gentse Strop. Its name refers to the noose (strop in Dutch) which the emperor Charles V made 16th century insurgents wear as they paraded barefoot before him in penance. The beer is only two years old, but it stands out in the Roman range with its sharp, bright hoppiness and almost champagne-like liveliness in the glass. It's certainly a beer you would notice from across the room, and the fact that the publicity material includes a small noose (and even a small gallows) is just another attention-grabbing gesture.

"Everything we do is very calculated. We are an old brewery but we will never do stupid things or take big risks that will bring the future of the brewery in danger. We do it in a small slow way: make a new product, bring it on the market, we watch the consumer and depending on the success or demand we decide how it has to be marketed."



lows us to make decisions very rapidly."

Would he ever consider developing an extreme beer of the sort that's trending more and more these days? Belgian brewers, after all, tend to be rather more conservative than, say, the Americans.

"Never say never. Yes, we could do that. When you do that, you know when you go extreme you won't make the volume, but that's a choice you make. That could be good publicity for the brewery. There's a lot of work to do but we are young, so we have the time. I think that day will come, in the near future." ■

www.roman.be

That's probably one of the main advantages of being a family business, I suggest.

"Yes, because we don't have the big hierarchy, so we have really only two or three levels: the family, then some directors, and finally the employees. We have consultation with everyone who's working here, so if something is wrong, if people have something — positive or negative — to tell us, they can simply come into the office and tell us. That al-



Lessons of history

Vander Ghinste looks to the future by paying tribute to its past.
By Paul Walsh

One of Belgian Beer & Food's aims is to tell the stories of Belgian breweries, but the truth is that we can only scratch the surface, dealing with the few that are still around today, while neglecting thousands that have been and gone, in some cases leaving barely a trace.

An example is Brasserie LeFort. Once a dominant feature in the prosperous town of Kortrijk, it sat on the city's old fortifications and sold its beer through its network of pubs in the city and surrounding area. As you'd expect, owner Felix Verscheure was a man of status and lived in an elegant townhouse adjacent to the brewery, itself one of the richest in the city.

However it seemed that his brewery's legacy would die with him.

Felix outlived his two children, and when he died in 1911 his grand-daughter Marguerite Vandamme inherited the brewery. In those repressive times that could have been the end of the story, except that she was married to Omer Vander Ghinste, who himself owned a brewery in the village of Bellegem, on

the outskirts of Kortrijk.

Omer's brewery was a much smaller concern, a local village brewery like thousands of others across Belgium. But the marriage brought Vander Ghinste a distribution network, equipment and property, and laid the foundations for the brewery that continues today as Omer Vander Ghinste, until recently known as Bockor.

Today's owner, who's also called Omer Vander Ghinste, remembers family members speaking about Brasserie LeFort with a kind of awe and respect. "It was certainly something in the town of Kortrijk, and integrating it into our brewery was a big deal. Really it's what allowed us to become who we are now."

And what better way to preserve an old legacy than by creating a new beer: Brasserie LeFort.

"Our brewers got to go off and exercise their creativity on a new product," says Nicolas Degryse the brewery's marketing manager. "It's not a recipe from that time, but we have found documents that say Brasserie LeFort was very well known for its beers of high alcohol con-



tent. That changed later in the 1880s or 1890s when taxes were increased on high alcohol beers. The brewery also made dark beers, but we don't have a lot of information about that."

Although it has 8.5 percent ABV, the beer's alcohol is not overpowering in the mouth. Instead it's a smooth, balanced, almost retiring brew, dark red with a fruity sweetness from the roasted malts, and deeper down notes of toffee and chocolate.

Omer Vander Ghinste says that restraint was an important element in the making of this beer. "After Omer (a blond beer released in 2008) we decided to look at to look at a different segment and started trying dark beers. Actually compared to blond beers there aren't many out there so we wanted to add something new. You know it's not so difficult to make a beer with roasted-malt over-powering the other flavors. We wanted something more delicate, more subtle and complex."

There is roasted malt in Brasserie LeFort but there's also pale malt, pils malt as well as wheat, an unusual ingredient

in a dark beer. "Wheat gives a softness to the beer, and when you drink it it's very smooth. Hops on the other hand play a minimal role, it's the malty, chocolate and coffee taste that come through, with the hops adding a gentle bitterness but not much more than that."

So as a tribute to the old Brasserie LeFort, you get a delicate beer, and in fact quite a modern one. "We had a blond beer of high fermentation (Omer) and now we have a brown beer of high fermentation. Normally we would have waited, but we found it so good. I don't know if it's the cleverest move. Maybe it would have been better to wait. But if you have the product and you have the story, why wait?" ■

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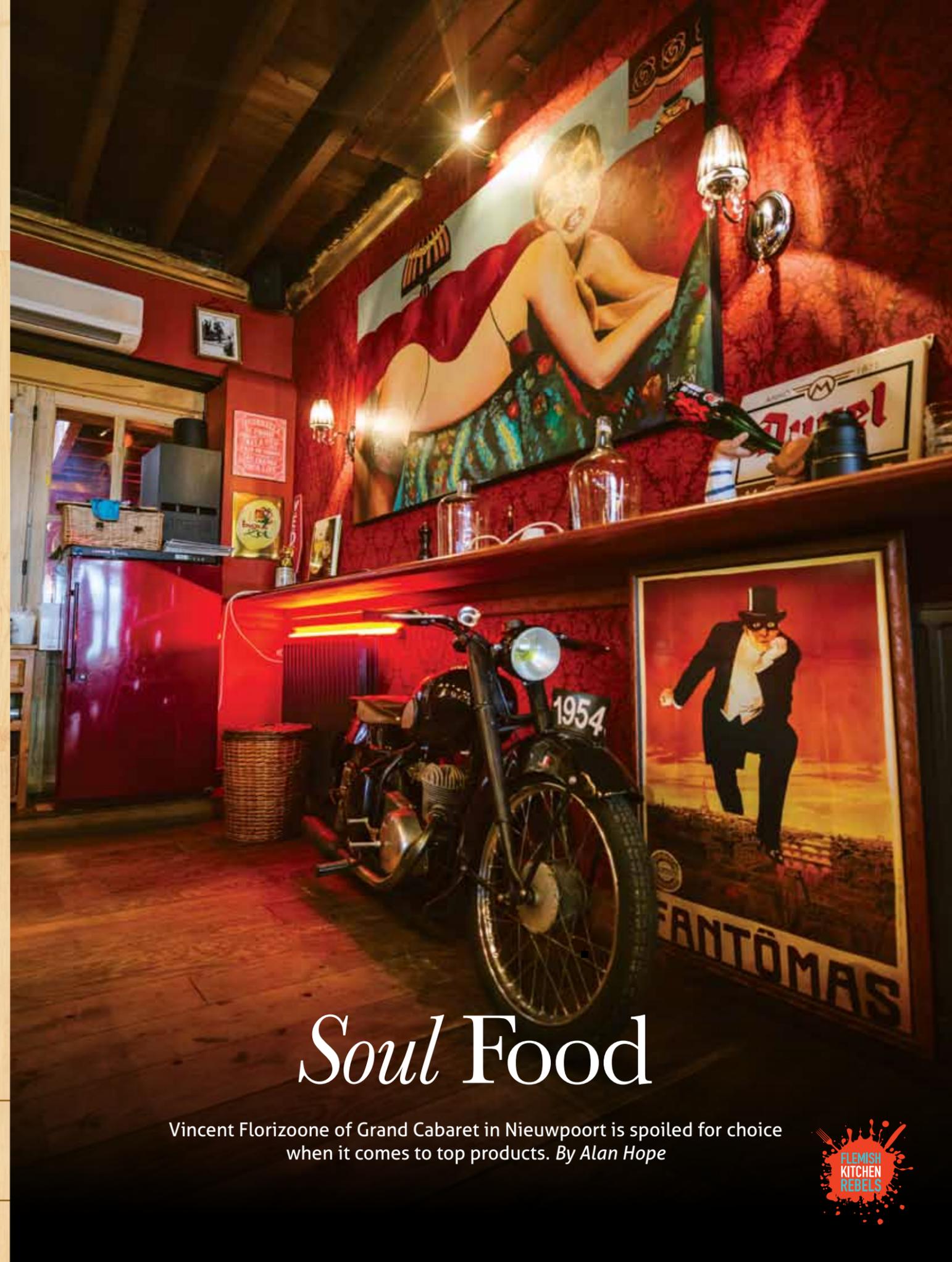
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Soul Food

Vincent Florizoone of Grand Cabaret in Nieuwpoort is spoiled for choice
when it comes to top products. *By Alan Hope*





When I arrive at the restaurant Grand Cabaret in Nieuwpoort, chef Vincent Florizoone is alone in the kitchen and there are 20 covers for lunch, but he finds the time to cook me a pork chop. You think you've had pork chops, but you haven't, until you've had something of the quality of this piece of meat, from a Saddleback pig imported from England and raised at the Houtsemse Vleeshoeve just up the road in Houtem.

"My inspiration is the products," Florizoone says. "Just good flavours and pure products, that's what I'm all about, as you can see from the pork chop. With a top product like that you don't have to do very much. The more you do the further you move away from the product itself. Good, fresh products, that's the most important thing."

It's served in its jus, a hint of truffle and the oak-aged Tsjeeses Reserva from the Struise Brouwers of Oostvleteren (see p. 8), who also brewed the Elliot double IPA that goes with it, and a mousseline based on mustard. The

meat is glistening from the butter in the pan, and has a thick rim of fat. "That's where the taste is," says Vincent. "These are not like commercially raised pigs that go to slaughter at five months old. That pig lived more than a year, and you can taste that." He's absolutely right. You wouldn't think it was possible, eating this, that anyone could ever choose to be a vegetarian.

So is all of his produce locally sourced? "No. I get everything from the markets in Paris at Rungis," he says, referring to the wholesale food market in the French capital that's as big as a small town. I drive down there every week. All my vegetables, fruit, fish except for things like sole and shrimp which come from here. Also beef, hung for three weeks to ripen, comes from Paris. Rungis, biggest market in the world, 360 hectares. In the market itself I do a round of 12 kilometres just to collect what I need."

However, it turns out, on further questioning that does in fact get much of his produce locally. The pork, as mentioned before, as well as beef comes from

a local farm where pigs and cows are raised on the rich land of the polders, that land behind the dunes of West Flanders which used to belong to the sea. So does the butter, which is unimaginably sweet. And of course the fish and shrimp are local, products considered to be among the best of their sort in the world.

Vincent himself is West Flanders through and through. "I was born here in West Flanders, in Poperinge, and grew up in Ieper. My parents were divorced and my mother lived at the coast, so I was backwards and forwards between the coast and Ieper."

When he was 18 he graduated from the Groene Poorte hotel school in Bruges and went to work at restaurant Bruneau in Brussels, then on to Don Alfonso near Naples, followed by an internship at El Bulli. "I started my own restaurant in 2006, Petit Cabaret. In 2007 I was named best young chef in Belgium. Petit Cabaret became too small, we only had 26 covers, so I came here to Grand Cabaret, and that's been six years now. Here we have 70 covers."

Why Nieuwpoort?

"My mother was from Koksijde, a few kilometres up the coast. Nieuwpoort is an up and coming town, it's now the second most expensive coastal municipality [after Knokke]. We have the biggest yacht marina in Europe for pleasure boats."

And the area has a wide selection of top-quality products, irresistible even to someone who thinks nothing of driving three hours to Paris to do the shopping.

Shrimp obviously spring to mind and Vincent gets them from the horse-back fishers in Oostduinkerke. "That's why I have four types of Rodenbach, because it goes extremely well with shrimp. We have the karnemelkstampers, that's kind of my deconstructed version of a typical dish from around these parts: potatoes cooked in buttermilk and beurre noisette, a poached egg on top and then fresh shrimp from the horse-fishers. Super. But right now, in January and February, there are no shrimp, so they're not on the menu. I won't have rubbish out of packets in my kitchen. Only the best. And here we have the best grey shrimp in the world. I work with the horse-fishers because the mother of my fisherman, who's 84 years old, peels the shrimp because I don't have the time. One kilo





can take half an hour to peel. Fished out of the sea in the morning, by lunchtime they're on your plate here."

The horseback shrimp fishermen are now officially recognised as heritage by Unesco, but the local fish are also world-class.

"Our sole also come from the Vismijn in Nieuwpoort, again always cooked in classic style, *sole meunière*, flour and then into *beurre noisette*, then at the end some lemon, a little bit of parsley in the sauce and three types of seaweed, purple, pink and green, to emphasize the sea flavour."

For meat Vincent usually doesn't have to look further than The Houtemse Vleeshoeve of Geert Decroos, which not only supplies sublime pork and beef, but also lamb and poultry, not to mention prepared dishes like spaghetti sauce and smoky bacon. Decroos trained as a butcher in Kortrijk, and later married Els, who's a vet, giving him the confidence he needed to branch out into farming.

"There's a butcher here, Dierendonck, one of the best butchers in Belgium," Vincent says. "He raises his own West Flanders Red cows, also brought up in polder ground around Diksmuide. There's one branch here in Nieuwpoort, and one in Sint-Idesbald. He delivers everywhere: Hof Van

Cleve, Karmeliet, Sergio Herman, everywhere that's anywhere."

And while clearly an admirer of these restaurants, Vincent keeps his own dining out habits close to home.

"I usually go out with friends here in Nieuwpoort at Feu d'Or, a classic brasserie. And I know those people very well." Chef Tim Meuleneire trained in Koksijde, where he ran De Koopvaardij for eight years, winning one Michelin star. He moved to Nieuwpoort in December 2012.

Vincent also recommends the Grill De Vette Os in Veurne, a long-established family restaurant known for its beef. "He's open until 2 am, so if we're finished on time we go over there."

And for really letting his hair down it's Cafe Lafayette in Ostend. "It's not a modern café, but it's based on music, soul, funk, jazz — and Marvin Gaye. Lots of beers, including all the Trappists. The owner is also one of the best DJs in the area. His style is something else. He has nothing modern, nothing. All old stuff, but he knows how to create an atmosphere. It's always peaceful, never any fights. People of all ages sitting together side by side. It's also warm and cosy with musical instruments all over the place. He also collects old posters, he's got a huge collection of old posters of Ostend, and the décor in the place

changes weekly.

"Across the road from Lafayette you have Manuscript, also a beer café. I like to drop in there, too. Somewhere else is Hotel Du Parc, you have to try the filter coffee, old style in silver. They also do a delicious salad of confit of duck gizzards. Simple, classic cooking, the good old toast cannibale, toast champignons, simple, classic and correct. And delicious." ■

"Vincent is one of the Flemish Kitchen Rebels. These are the new generation of young promising Flemish and Brussels chefs. You can find these chefs on www.flemishkitchenrebels.be".

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www.dehoutemsevleeshoeve.be

Vismijn Nieuwpoort

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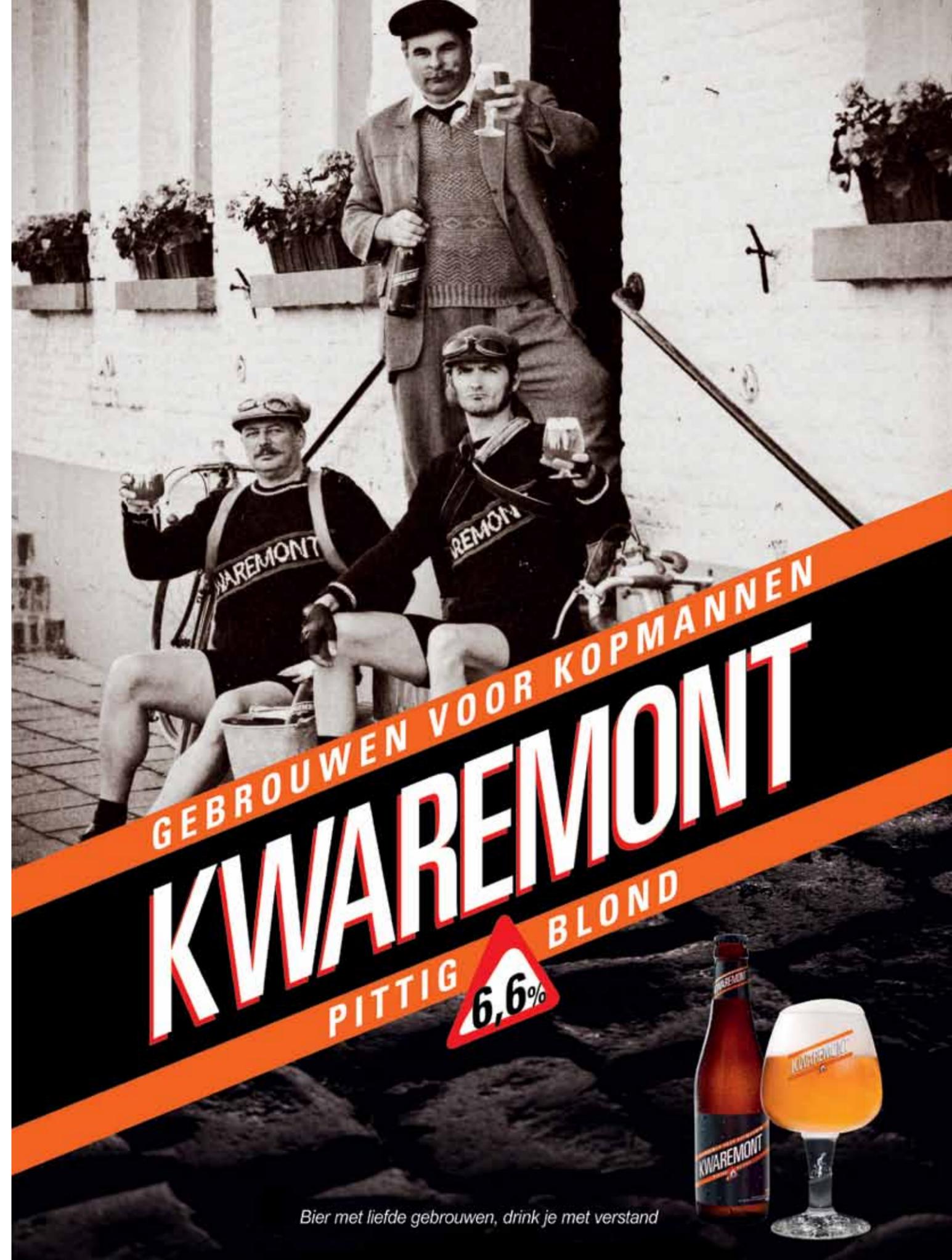
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Bier met liefde gebrouwen, drink je met verstand

The Hop Country

By Alan Hope

Poperinge is famous for two things: firstly for the respite offered to fighting men during the horrors of World War I, whether at Talbot House or the many bars and brothels which Pop — as the Tommies called it — provided; and secondly for its hops. Poperinge is the centre of hop-growing not only for Belgium but for the whole north-western corner of continental Europe.

Hops are a fascinating plant — cousin to cannabis, trained by human hand to grow six metres into the air. But the most fascinating thing about the Poperinge hops industry is that it all came about by accident. Or rather, nobody wanted to grow hops here until it was forced on them.

Since the 7th century Poperinge had been subject to the abbey of St. Bertin in the town of Saint-Omer in northern France. St. Bertin's abbot had the Count of Flanders issue a town charter in 1147. The town, then as big as nearby Kortrijk and Ieper, was busy buying English wool and making things with it, as well as growing flax and making linens.

However in 1322 the new Count of Flanders, Louis Nevers, banned the production of cloth outside a radius of three days walk from the centre of Ieper. The Poperingers revolted, earning them the nickname keikoppen, meaning cobblestone heads, for their stubbornness. It also sparked enmity between the two cities which lasts to this day, albeit in a less intense way.

To compensate the people of Pop-

eringe for the loss of their lucrative trade, they received the license to grow hops, which they would supply to Saint-Omer and its dependencies for the making of beer. The hop fields are still here, all over the landscape around Poperinge and the villages it has swallowed up — mainly Reningelst, Proven and especially Watou. The latter now is home to two of the municipality's three breweries, Sint-Bernardus and Van Eecke — the other is Joris Cambie's two man operation, De Plukker in Poperinge proper (*see p. 44*).

Given that history, then, it should come as no surprise that a magazine calling itself *Belgian Beer & Food* should show an interest in Poperinge. One of the pioneers of beer-based cuisine, Stefaan Couttenye, has his Hommelhof restaurant in Watou. The world-famous breweries of Sint-Bernardus and Westvleteren are within spitting distance of each other. One of the most interesting hop growers is such a fixture in Poperinge that the Hop Museum uses his family to illustrate displays.

And echoing the interest of the outside world in their region, the people of Poperinge are some of the most beer-obsessed you'll find anywhere. Our guides Edwin Ghequire and Guy Osteux of the Poperinge Beer-Tasters' Society (they have monogrammed shirts, to give you an idea) helped us explore the amazing beer culture there in this quiet little town tucked away in the farthest corner of West Flanders. We'd like to thank them, and everyone else whose hospitality we enjoyed. ■



Sons of the soil

The Belgian hop industry is shrinking, but staying strong.

By Alan Hope



For a country with such a stellar international reputation for beer, Belgium is — not to put too fine a point on it — a pipsqueak on the international hops scene.

There are about 45,000 hectares of hop fields in the world, with the market dominated by Germany and the US (see table). Belgium has 23 full-time hop growers, working 158.6 hectares in all. Most of that is in the immediate area of Poperinge in West Flanders. The rest is confined to a corridor east of Brussels covering Asse, Affligem and Aalst.

Legend has it, however, that it was Flemish farmers who introduced hops to the south-east of England, in the area of Kent, having brought the hops from Bavaria originally. Flanders has been all but left behind, though Poperinge still had enough prestige to host the International Hop Growers' Congress for the seventh time last year.

Kent paid back its debt: in 2012, Goldings accounted for 24.2 of a total 36.9 hectares of aroma hops (in all of Belgium). Cascade was a distant second on 5 hectares. Bitter hops production is dominated by Target on 40.6 hectares, and Hallertauer Magnum on 36.9 hectares out of a total 87.9 hectares. And in double-duty hops, Challenger is by far the biggest, at 29.3 hectares out of a total 33.8. (Figures from www.Belgischehop.be)

"Many many years ago there were typical local varieties, but those are all gone," Cambie told *Belgian Beer & Food*. "They're not produced any more. Belgium has always been very small in the hop market, so bigger producing countries made more effort and invested more money on research into breeding new varieties. We're too small over here to do that. So because of England, which is close and has the same maritime climate, we went their way. They developed their own varieties many years ago, in the 1960s and 1970s when there were about 1,000 hectares here still. Since then it's gone down until we are where we are now."

Nevertheless, Poperinge growers grow good hops, everyone agrees. They also grow versions of hops that differ significantly from their relatives elsewhere. Most growers (see above) stick to English and German varieties because of the similarities in climate. However, Cambie — who grows only organic hops — has been experimenting over

the last few years with Cascade, an American variety.

"We can grow it, and it's doing quite well, but it's not 100 percent the same. Genetically it's the same, but this is a different climate, lots of rain, cold summer. In America, in the Yakima Valley where they grow hops is almost a desert climate — it's hot every day and it never rains. They have to irrigate everything. So the conditions are completely different. And that gives the hops a different aroma."

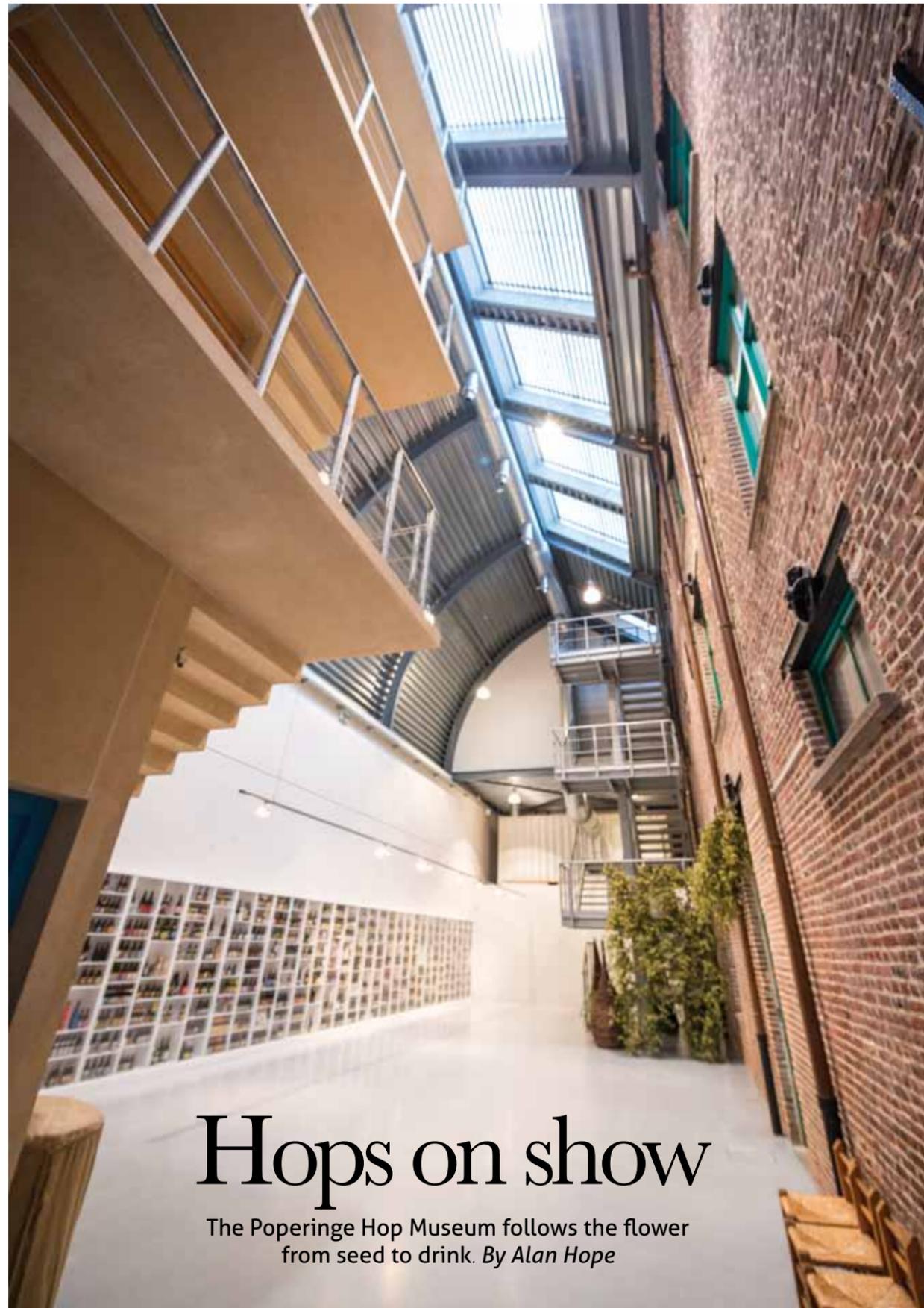
This is what wine people refer to as *terroir*, a French word also becoming common in the hop world, meaning basically every aspect of a location which affects the final product, whether it be grape or hop: soil, climate, exposure to sunshine, water and so on.

"It helps that we have good soil anyway. We're known for growing hops but there's fruit growing, a lot of vegetables, dairy, pig farming, we do everything around here. It's a good farming area. And it seems that the water table around this area is above average in height,

which is important for hop growing because it's a big plant growing up into the air, and it needs a lot of water. Even if we have a dry summer with little or no rain, we can grow hops with something like 75 percent normal production. If the same thing happens in Germany, with their soil and their conditions, they might reach 50 percent production, so that gives us an advantage."

The beer trade is doing its bit. In 2011 the Flemish government's agricultural marketing agency Vlam, together with hop industry representatives, started a campaign to encourage Belgian brewers to use Belgian hops. They introduced a logo for bottles and publicity materials for beers that conform to certain criteria. The main rule is that the beer in question should be brewed with at least 50 percent Belgian-grown hops. The logo is for each different beer, not for the brewery as a whole; some breweries can display the logo for one beer, but not for another. The idea is to allow Belgian hops to share the reputation enjoyed by Belgian beers worldwide. ■





Hops on show

The Poperinge Hop Museum follows the flower from seed to drink. *By Alan Hope*



The first thing that strikes you about the Hop Museum in Poperinge is the stateliness of the building, even on the rather dismal December day we visited. It was once the depot where growers brought their hops to be dried, packaged and sent off for sale, but the town has done such a job of cleaning up the place that it looks fit for chic loft apartments or a trendy concert hall.

The second thing that strikes you is the second thing that strikes you everywhere you go in Poperinge: just how dependent this town is on a single product, beer. One entire side of the ground floor is nothing but beer, hundreds of bottles from every part of Belgium, all displayed in an enormous vitrine.

It's a reminder of why we're here. Although we find out later on the tour that hops can be used for herbal medicine, for pillows to help you sleep better, and for getting over the change, in fact those uses are less than insignificant in

the scheme of things: Hops are a single-use crop, and that use is beer. You can't feed them to animals, you can't turn them into fibres or create biomass to generate green energy. Best thing you can do is deliver them to brewers.

The museum's four floors each cover a different aspect of the hop trade: history of the crop; how they have been grown; how they have been harvested; and finally what they have been used for. It's all very well laid out, and there are a few quirky side-tracks such as statues of holy men who each had some connection with hops. There is also the local game for children called Kabonger, involving all the museums of the Westhoek region.

The Hop Museum is open from March to November from 10.00 to 18.00 daily, except on Mondays when it's group appointments only. Group arrangements are also possible in the winter months. Tickets cost €5 for adults, €4 for over-60s, and €2.50 for those under 25. Children under six and Poper-

inge residents enter free.

The Museum is in central Poperinge, within walking distance of the Grote Markt and railway station. Because of changes to traffic directions in Poperinge in 2012, the museum advises entering Parking Oudstrijdersplein as the GPS destination. ■

Visit Poperinge

Capital of hops and the good life | Ambassador of Flanders' Gastronomy

Hop Museum



Poperinge's Hop Museum tells the enlightening story of hops, one of the most important ingredients in the production of beer. On your way down the four story building, local characters like "The Bagger" and "The Nose" will guide you through the four seasons of hop growing past and present. Finish your visit with a splendid view of the ultimate Belgian Beer Collection, with more than 1,500 unique Belgian beers, before tickling your taste buds with one of the great local beers!

www.hopmuseum.be



Taste beers with Belgian hops

All hops in Belgium are cultivated with much love and knowledge on family farms. The hop growers are rightly proud of their quality Belgian hops – a quality that results in the production of such top-notch beers as Sint-Bernardus, Keikoppenbier, Troubadour, Hommelbier and many others.

You can recognize beers brewed with Belgian hops by the logo 'Belgische Hop / Belgian Hops' on the label. A list of beers carrying the logo can be found at www.belgischehop.be

Beer and Hop Festival

With the triennial Beer and Hop Festival, Poperinge puts its two major assets into the spotlight: hops and beer. From hops to beer is just a small step in Poperinge. Come and enjoy this festival, scheduled for the third weekend of September in 2014, 2017, 2021, and its hop pageant, hop queen election, Bavarian style music and atmosphere, and the beer village 'Lekker Westhoeks'. www.hoppefeesten.be

Lekker Westhoeks

Taste delicious Belgian Hops beers and exquisite food from local chefs in the charming colourful tent village on the market square. This tasteful beer event takes place every year on the third weekend of September.

Poperinge Beer Festival

Poperinge Beer Festival

During the Poperinge Beer festival, 20 craft breweries present more than 100 beers. The organising Beer Tasting Company always surprises with a number of new beers and other delicious news. The festival happens the last weekend of October.

www.poperingebierfestival.be

Talbot House and Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery



A visit to Talbot House usually starts at the old hop barn, which was converted into a concert hall during the First World War. The ground floor's permanent exhibition on life behind the front should fulfil your expectations on a routine museum visit. The exhibition is a collage of experiences from different characters who lived near or in Poperinge during the War. www.talbothouse.be

Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery is the prime witness of more than four years of violent warfare during World War I. From 1915 until 1920 the hamlet of Lijssenthoek became the venue for the biggest evacuation hospital in the Ypres Salient. Today the cemetery evokes daily reflections of the Great War. The visitor centre offers you an interpretation of this unique site: www.lijssenthoek.be



www.pigsinspace.eu

Beer and Hop Festival



TOERISME POPERINGE



Growing Against *the Grain*

By Alan Hope



Joris Cambie is a hop grower. He insists on this fact half a dozen times in the hours we spend with him: “My father (pictured next to Joris) was a hop farmer, and his father and his father, and for as long as we know about. And on my mother’s side as well. But that’s not so special; this is the main hop-growing area of Belgium here.”

He’s also a local celebrity, an exception to the decline of the hop-growing industry in Belgium, a barley farmer, the widowed father of five children, and the brewer of a few exceptional beers.

Poperinge is by far the larger of the two main hop-growing areas of Belgium, although the crop originally was forced on the people in this part of West Flanders known as the Westhoek. Yet Belgium accounts for a minuscule proportion of the world’s hops these days (*see p. 39*).

The Cambie family are rooted in the Westhoek’s hop industry; on the walls of the Hop Museum (*see article, page 40*) there are huge blow-up photos of Joris’ father and two of his children, illustrating the practices of the past. He knows everyone in the beer business, and they know him. But the hop industry is in decline.

One reason is common to agriculture: People are getting older. “There’s no succession of one generation to the next, or less and less,” Cambie said. “But in conventional farming, if someone gives up, other farmers take over the land and things go on, and nobody notices the disappearance. But if a hop grower stops then the hops are gone. Nobody is interested in taking the production over.”

Nor is it an easy business. Prices fluctuate, and the market often wants varieties that are challenging to grow and offer poor yields. “In 2007 prices went up a lot, people were making long-term contracts, which is typical in hops, three- or five-year contracts. So 2007-2008 was the last time you could make a decent long-term contract at a good price. And that was great but in 2012 was the last year we could deliver on those contracts; the spot market went right down, and some varieties were unable to sell at all until today. Some varieties are in demand — and it seems the market always wants the ones that are hard to grow and give poor

yields. Something that grows well and produces good yields, nobody wants. That’s always the way.”

About 60 percent of the Poperinge hop production is Target, a bittering hop that is currently over-produced worldwide. Less than half of Belgium’s hop acreage is for aroma varieties, for which there is greater demand. It’s possible in theory to switch, but not so simple in practice.

“You can switch, but it’s not like potatoes or wheat or corn because it’s a perennial plant, so the roots keep growing,” Cambie said. “They keep coming back every year, so you can change but you’d have to take up the old roots and put in new plants. The first year you’ll have low production. It takes three years before you’ll have full production, so you can’t switch just like that. It’s a big decision.”

Cambie himself, however, is an exception to the problem.

“My farm is a bit special. For many, many years I’ve put my whole farm in transition to organic, including the hops, which have been organic since 1997, 1998, so that’s a completely different market. I’m a member of a cooperative of hop growers in England, in Paddock Wood in Kent, so my hops go down there, and they do the selling, because they have a good solid sales system, they know the market and all that. Selling is also a problem when you’re a farmer on your own, it’s better if you’re organised. So yes, I’m growing organic hops, which is a different market. This year I had about 10.5 hectares; that’s quite a bit above the average for local growers.”

He’s also an exception in that he doubles up as hop farmer and brewer. Across the fields from his farm stands a converted barn which houses the brewery De Plukker, where he works with business partner Kris Langouche. There they produce three beers, all brewed with Cambie’s own hops, all 100 percent organic, and all — for the time being — bottled by hand.

There’s the Single Green Hop, made during the harvest with hops freshly-picked just metres away. Each year is different, produced in a limited edition, unfiltered and unpasteurised, and bottle conditioned. There were 781 bottles of the 2013 edition (5.5% abv), brewed with Whitbread Golding Variety hops. It’s a difficult beer to find.



“ We now have three beers, but I have to farm hops. I’m a hop grower and that’s still my main thing. This” — that is, the brewing — “is like a hobby that’s got incredibly out of hand.”



Rookop is a brown ale formerly brewed in the village of Reningelst until 1963, the recipe revived as far as possible by De Plukker. It’s a dubbel-style ale (6.5% abv) brewed with Admiral and Golding hops, fruity and sweet with some chocolate notes.

The star of the show, however, is the Keikoppenbier, named for the people of Poperinge. It’s a blond ale brewed with Admiral, Golding and home-grown Cascade (6.1% ABV), mingling to give it a complex flavour profile that defies easy categorisation. Descriptions risk derailing into self-parody. It may be a beer that only a lifelong hop grower could brew.

“It was only just two years ago, in November 2011, that we had the first official brew here. We now have three beers, but I have to farm hops. I’m a hop grower and that’s still my main thing. This” — that is, the brewing — “is like a hobby that’s got incredibly out of hand.”

The hospitality and retail trades are snapping up what they can. “It’s going well, we could always sell more than we produce. Until now most sales are local or to specialised beer shops, but we haven’t made any effort at marketing because there was no need. We’re still not really depending on the brewery. We don’t live from it.”

So far they’ve kept going without incurring bank debt. That means they can afford to go slowly, but the pressure of increasing demand is pushing them to make some key decisions on future development.

“Distributors come in and ask for a pallet of each beer and we have to say, ‘No, we don’t have that much.’ Importers from America have been here, they’re really amazed at the story, and they say, ‘As soon as you can produce six pallets, let us know,’ but we don’t have that. It’s not really my intention to become a brewer. I’m a hop grower and I want to stay a hop grower. That’s the idea that starts the whole story.” ■

www.plukker.be

Have you ever lusted after a beer?

Words and Photos by Charles D. Cook



I mean, really wanted it, so much so that you'd do anything to get it? That's how a lot of people feel about the hallowed brews made at the Saint Sixtus Abbey, located near the West Flanders hamlet of Westvleteren, just north of Poperinge.

The hunt for Trappist Westvleteren

The brews of Westvleteren — namely the Blond, 8, and 12 — are hard to come by these days, even in their local area. When the members of the website

Ratebeer.com first voted Westvleteren 12 as the world's No. 1 in 2006, it set off a chain of events that made the beer a rare and expensive find.

Thankfully, there are inexpensive ways to try it in Belgium. The beer is available to customers at In de Vrede café, across the road from the abbey. Scoring a crate or two from the abbey itself takes a bit more planning and patience.

To order one or two crates, you'll have to phone the brewery's sales office during designated hours, which vary but

are updated regularly on the abbey's own website. If you get a busy signal — and you probably will — keep trying. If you get through, give the monks your car's license plate number and come by at the appointed day and time, usually about three weeks later, to pick up your treasure. Good luck.

The website explains which beers are available on which days. Sometimes only the Blond, a hoppy brew of 5.5 percent abv, is available. Other days the dark, rich Westvleteren 8 is on offer. Lucky ones might score some of the 12, a dark, strong, contemplative brew containing about 10.2 percent alcohol. That's the beer that created all the fuss.

Some might ask: Is it quality and taste that creates the demand for the Westvleteren brews, or is it the scarcity and legend of these beers? I'll just say: Get a bottle, and decide for yourself.

If you do embark on the quest to taste these beers at their source — and certainly it should be on every beer lover's "bucket list" — then nearby Poperinge is a great place to make your base for a night or three. Even if you do decide that Westvleteren's beers trump all others, Poperinge's local selection from De Plukker, St. Bernardus and Van Eecke are still well worth exploring.

Another one in the neighborhood worth a look, as famous for its tenants as for its own beers, is the Brouwerij Deca in Woesten-Vletern.

Deca Services

The Deca brewery is known among beer lovers for its beautiful, old copper brew kettles and open copper fermenters in hidden rooms. There aren't too many Belgian breweries left that still use an old open mash tun, or copper kettles set into the floor so that only the tops are exposed.

Seeing this 1930's brewery in action is a treat. Deca's own beers include Antiek Blond, which has been around for many years and has a Bruin brother. The brewery lately has been experimenting with barrel-aged brews, such as a Bourbon barrel-aged Vleteren Blond 12 and Port barrel-aged Bruin 12. At 12 percent strength, both pack a punch.

Even if you haven't heard of Deca,

you may have tried a beer that was brewed here. It produces many beers under contract for local businesses in the region, such as restaurants, shops and B&B's. It's also the place where the Struise Brouwers got started, and where they still brew some of their beers today (see article, p. 8).

Before that, another superb pair of Belgian brewers, Nino Bacelle and Guido Devos of De Ranke, brewed here until 2006. The Struise brewers started at Deca soon after. Before long they had built a strong following among international beer lovers, always keen to identify new objects of lust. ■



Tourist Attractions in Poperinge

The people of Poperinge point proudly to the fact that their town was once bigger than Ieper and Kortrijk, and that this is evidenced by the presence of three churches: the late Gothic church of St. Bertin, the 15th century Gothic Church of Our Lady, and the 14th century Gothic church of Saint John. Aside from the hop industry, represented by the Hop Museum (article, page 40), the area in and around Poperinge is marked by the First World War, and this year sees the beginning of a four-year commemoration which will likely bring a massive influx of war tourists from around the world putting pressure on accommodation for visitors.

Talbot House is one of the main attractions. This majestic 18th century town house was turned in 1915 into a refuge for British soldiers fighting in the countryside around Ieper (Ypres).

Half a million men found respite from the war there between 1915 and the Armistice, and the House was remarkable for its policy of being an “Every Man’s Club” – open to all without regard to rank or class. Talbot House is open every day except Monday from 10.00 to 17.30. Details: www.talbothouse.be

Elsewhere, there are a number of cemeteries around Poperinge maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. They include Abeele Aerodrome, Gwalia, Nine Elms, Poperinghe New and Poperinghe Old, as well as Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery. The latter is the biggest evacuation hospital cemetery in the Ypres Salient. A visitor centre is situated next to the cemetery and tells the story of this unique site. In commemoration of the Great War, the City of Poperinge also plans major cultural events. For more details, consult: www.lijsenthoek.be ■

HOW TO GET TO POPERINGE

• BY CAR •

From Ghent

Take E17 motorway to Zwijnaarde interchange, stay on E17 direction Kortrijk. At exit 2 Hoog Kortrijk join R8, then A19, follow signs for Ieper then Poperinge.

From Antwerp

Take E17 to Kortrijk, follow signs for Ieper and Poperinge.

From Brussels

Take E40 to Zwijnaarde interchange, then follow directions from Ghent (above).

From Lille

Take A25 then D23 to Belgian border, continue on N375 and follow signs.

From Calais

Take A16 towards Dunkerque, then exit 57 direction Ypres/Ieper, turn left onto D948 becoming N38 at Belgian border.

• BY PUBLIC TRANSPORT •

Hourly, direct trains from Brussels Nord, Central and Midi stations take two hours.

Any train from Ghent to Kortrijk (straight, some trains direction Ostend, trains towards Lille), then changing in Kortrijk for Poperinge.

Trains from Antwerpen-Centraal to Lille changing in Kortrijk, travel time 2.38

From Lille, hourly trains to Kortrijk, change for Poperinge, total travel time 1.20 www.belgianrail.be/en



Visitor Centre and Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery © B.A.D

drankencentrale Rotsaert bvba

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Ageing well

The machinery in Van Eecke's Poperinge brewery has stood the test of time. So have their beers. *By Alan Hope*



There are three breweries in the Poperinge municipality: the two-man show of De Plukker in Poperinge proper (*see page 44*), the renowned Sint — Bernardus in Watou (*see page 56*), and the middle-sized Van Eecke, also in Watou.

In fact, not much brewing gets done at Van Eecke anymore. The larger quantities come from sister brewery Het Sas, also known as Leroy, in Boezinge down the road.

But export manager Danny Dieussaert has shrewdly decided we've probably seen enough modern, spotless breweries like Het Sas to last a lifetime. So he's brought us here to Watou to look at some antiquated machinery that offers a refreshing change of scenery, and which has our photographer's antennae fizzing and sparking.

One such exhibit is a bottle-washing machine that looks as if it would be more at home in the engine room of

“Our brewmaster in Boezinge is the son of our former brewmaster, who was the son of our former brewmaster before him,”



Poperinge has a big parade and blow-out party every three years — the Hoppefeesten — to celebrate its favourite crop (the next is scheduled for September 19 to 21, this year). In the ‘70s the local authorities decided there ought to be a local beer to celebrate it. “We were chosen among other brewers to create a beer, and that was the Hommelbier,” Dieussaert says. “Since then the formula hasn’t really changed. I call it a beer de terroir, because we work with the local hops from Poperinge. But as it’s a natural product, one year you might have more or less lupulin, so it can change from one year to another, and we want to keep it that way.”

Hommelbier uses pale winter and summer malts, water from the brewery’s own well, and Hallertauer Magnum, Saphir, Brewer’s Gold and Challenger hops grown in Poperinge. It is then top-fermented with the house yeast and primed with white sugar. It’s refreshing and citrus-y, and hoppy in that typically Belgian way — the hops in this beer beguile you into submission rather than whacking you over the head and dragging you off to their cave.

The brewery also makes a Christmas beer, also at 7.5% strength, good enough to drink all winter long — “In fact we’d like to get rid of the name Christmas, for commercial reasons,” Dieussaert says. “I’m now drinking the Christmas beer from last year, and I have some from two years ago as well. It ages very well. I don’t know exactly for how long it ages well, but so far two years is just fine.” ■

www.brouwerijvaneecke.be

the Titanic than a modern brewery. “In the old days, and I’m talking about the end of the Fifties, this was considered a very modern washing machine,” Dieussaert says. “I believe you could keep on using it for another 50 years.” The manufacturer is no longer in business, but Van Eecke planned for that. “We bought up all the possible spare parts, so if something breaks down we can still repair it.”

Van Eecke sets some store by tradition. “Our brewmaster in Boezinge is the son of our former brewmaster, who was the son of our former brewmaster before him,” Dieussaert says. The current owners are brothers Hendrik and Philip Leroy. There has been a brewery on this spot since 1624. The Van Eecke family took over in 1862, and a century later the brewing Leroy’s inherited it.

The Van Eecke range is led by the abbey-style Kapittel range. Its brown ales are Pater (6%), Dubbel (7.5%), Prior (9%) and Abt (12%), joined by a Blond (6.5%) and Watou’s Wit (5%). One of the most popular and distinctive beers in the range, however, is the Hommelbier. Not to be confused: Hommel is the Dutch word for bumblebee, but it’s also West Flemish dialect for hops.

Tradition, Unreconstructed

How Sint Bernardus emerged from France, cheese and Westvleteren.

By Alan Hope





Belgian breweries prize their history and tradition, in theory. In practice it hasn't always worked out that way.

"I'm reconstructing our history, because I came here 10 years ago and they hadn't kept anything," says Marco Passarella, sales and marketing manager for Sint Bernardus brewery in Watou in Poperinge. "Everything had been given away or thrown out."

We're sitting in the visitors' room, the walls covered with enamel advertising signs. "Everything you see here I had to buy on eBay. And still today, there's a lot of stuff we don't own, all of our old signs for example. We've seen them on the Web. Somebody has them, but we don't."

Sint Bernardus has plenty of history. Not history built in years — they've only been around since 1904, and only brewing since 1946. But history built of story.

In 1904 the Trappist monks of Mont des Cats in northern France came to Belgium looking for refuge from

“There’s a beer for everybody, and you know the best part? When you find your favourite beer it’s not like a real marriage — you can still go out and look for something better.”

anti-clerical sentiment, and found it in Watou, where they established their Refuge of Our Lady of St. Bernard, where they made cheese.

"In 1934 the monks went back to France and sold the cheese factory to an individual named Evarist De Koninck. He took over making the cheeses, still called Saint Bernard. Then he became friends with the abbot of the Trappist monastery of Westvleteren, and when the monks were looking for someone to help them market their beers, he was asked to help."

Polish-born brewer Mathieu Szafarski came over from Westvleteren to become a partner at Sint Bernardus. He brought his expertise, the recipes, "and maybe most important," Passarella says, "he also brought the St. Sixtus yeast."

For 46 years they brewed beer here for the monks of Westvleteren. Then in 1992 the licence came to an end and the monks took over their brewing again.

But here's the twist: the old cheese factory took back the name of St. Bernard, and kept on brewing the same beer as ever, with the same recipe and the same yeast. Like Westvleteren itself, the beers have evolved over time and become more distinct. There are those who argue that the Sint Bernardus ales made here are as good as — if not better than — the ones brewed down the road at St. Sixtus.

Not that Passarella is remotely interested in a contest with Westvleteren. "The sun shines for everybody. They are happy with what they're doing and we're happy with what we're doing. Also don't forget that the monks are at peak capacity. They don't want to brew more and they sell whatever they want to sell. If they were to brew twice as much as they do they would still sell everything. But they don't want to."

By the same token, *Belgian Beer & Food* need not pick a favourite. Both the Westvleteren 12 and its counterpart, the Sint Bernardus Abt 12, are beers of the highest quality — rich, deep and complex, models of balance.

On the other hand, Sint Bernardus markets its beers widely. It appears in supermarkets, bars and beer shops and



ships abroad to about 30 countries. No need to go through the rigmarole of calling up the brewery for your limited supply and having to drive to deepest West Flanders to pick it up.

"Don't underestimate the power of not being able to get something," Passarella says. "It's something that's embedded in human nature to want something you can't have. If a beer is not available it becomes something bigger than itself, and I think that's something that has happened to the Trappist beers of Westvleteren. The monks didn't ask for all that hype, and it doesn't serve them any purpose."

The rest of the Sint Bernardus range deserves a mention, in particular the doughy tripel, heavy with cereals and yeast, and the St. Bernardus Wit, quietly one of the country's most characterful wheat beers. It's the white beer other white beers would like to be when they grow up. Soon, the company will open a subsidiary housed within the old walls of Ieper. It will take over

brewing the Grottenbier — a recipe from the late great revivalist Pierre Celis — and an entirely new beer. More news to come.

"I always say the most beautiful thing about Belgian beers is that there are so many different ones, and different tastes, that everyone can find his own favourite," Passarella says. "There's a beer for everybody, and you know the best part? When you find your favourite beer it's not like a real marriage — you can still go out and look for something better." ■

www.sintbernardus.be

Poperinge Pub Crawl

By Alan Hope

The strangest place you'll find in Poperinge has to be **Het Mysterie**. It looks innocent as can be: one of a long line of one-storey houses on this part of the road, tiny and tidy as a row of Monopoly houses, a bicycle or two propped against the façade while the owner waters himself inside.

It's anything but innocent. For **Het Mysterie** (the name means what you think it means) bills itself as a "volks-pelenkroeg" or "folk games pub" but it is also a centre of witchcraft. Now whatever you think of witchcraft, there are people who believe in it, and who consider themselves witches (always good

witches, for some reason) and they have their home here. Although the décor — plankboard walls and a ceramic tiled floor like a country cottage — is stocked with grotesque puppets and witch dolls, there are also true witches around here. Organised tarot readings are just one manifestation.

The folk games, meanwhile, refer to 25 old-time board games, inside and out, of the shuffleboard/skittles sort — something to keep the kids quiet, though grown-ups are allowed to play too.

Not that they're likely to bother you. If flame-haired proprietrix Lut is any measure, the level of sorcery here is chatty, friendly and slightly bawdy,

as a good hostess should be — and she speaks perfect English (as do the people at every bar we visited). The beer list extends to more than 40 bottles, including 15 local brews. Here is where I discovered the *Hercule* stout by Brasserie Ellezelloise, which admittedly isn't from Poperinge, and isn't even Flemish. But it was suitably black for the occasion, and quite delicious.

There's also a range of simple dishes if you're hungry, including the mouth-watering local potted meat (*bennepot*) and hop pâté. If you need information on where to visit in the area, you'll find that here, too.

All right, can we just take it for granted from now on that the bars we're mentioning all have impressive beer lists, mainly of the bottled variety? Because that seems to be the norm in these parts, and none of the places we visited would own up to having fewer than 100 different sorts.

The **Café de la Paix**, right on the central square and part of the hotel of the same name, has rooms upstairs for guests, and a kitchen run by chef

Koen, a graduate of the famous hotel school Ter Duinen (alumni include Peter Goossens***, Geert Van Hecke*** and Stéphane Buyens**), while hostess Linda takes care of the bar. Where we happened to meet a couple of English people, members of CAMRA, and regular visitors to these parts. That's a pretty good recommendation.

It's a good thing we had experienced brew-sherpas Edwin Ghequire and Guy Osteux of the Poperinge Beer-Tasters' Society to guide us, because the road from the centre of town to the pub **Au Nouveau St-Eloi** took us down a cycle path, into northern France, and then back out again. It's bang on the border. This is another spot for old Flemish folk games, though you may be at least as interested in the beer list — about 150 varieties. Great warm atmosphere, exactly what a pub should be. It's closed Thursday, the day we showed up. They opened it anyway thanks to our faithful local guides.

The bar at the **Palace hotel and fest hall** had the air when we visited of a theatre after the audience has gone home,



Café de la Paix



The Old Fiddler



Au Nouveau St-Eloi

as if good things have happened there, only to give way to melancholy memory.

In front there's a bar reminiscent of the old crush bars in theatres of days gone by, where the friendly barman let us taste a Rodenbach Vintage (2011), a beer with all the rich warmth of a fine port but the sour bite of a Rodenbach Grand Cru. In back there's a function room where from March on, this being the start of the area's four-year commemoration of the Great War, they'll be presenting two musical performances based on melancholy memories, correspondence between loved ones, and popular songs of the era. Groups of 30 get to choose which performance they see on the night, the others take pot luck. The Palace also has nine hotel rooms.

You might wonder what a place so steeped in Belgian beer as Poperinge would see in an Irish pub like **The Old Fiddler** which, decor-wise at least, could be in any country in the world except Ireland. But let's be fair: The people of West Flanders are entitled to their bit of the craic from time to time. There's a wholesome restaurant, and let's be honest: You can always force down a pint of Guinness if you have to, can you not?

Eric Lagache wasn't content with just growing hops and selling them, so he opened a bar called **Oud Vlaenderen** on Poperinge's main square, to remind himself of the point of growing hops in the first place.

The beer list features Struise, De Dolle, Bavik and St. Bernardus, which seems rather eclectic until you realise that most of the beers display the Belgian hop label and in many cases contain Eric Lagache's very own hops.

So pull up a bar stool, order a hoppy beer, and strike up a conversation with a hop grower about his favourite subject. You'll be in for a long night. "It's not easy to compete with the big producers in Germany and the Czech Republic," he told us when we visited. "Especially when many brewers are obsessed with price. But why shouldn't we continue, when we produce such a high-quality product. The market is tough for traditional hops like Target, but there's definitely a future for aroma hops in Poperinge, so we'll continue to grow them."

Our tour ended at **Flou's**, conveniently located by the town's railway station. From inside you can see the trains coming and going, although we don't advise waiting for one here with distractions like Keikoppen, De Brabandere's Aged Pale, and Nunnebier on offer. These are all carefully chosen by bar manager, beer enthusiast and head chef Bart Deflou. He runs an impressive little restaurant attached to the café with local classics like cod *aan de Schreve* — local Flemish dialect for the nearby French border — cooked in a light sauce with local beer and cream. ■

The details

Het Mysterie

Abeelseweg 29
0032 (0) 57 363 580
www.freewebs.com/hetmysterie

Café de la Paix

Grote Markt 20, 8970 Poperinge
0032 (0) 57 339 578
www.hoteldelapaix.be

Au Nouveau St-Eloi

Gemenestraat 4, 8978 Watou
0032 (0) 494 136 830
www.aunouveaust-eloi.be

Feestzaal Palace

Ieperstraat 34, 8790 Poperinge
0032 (0) 57 333 093
www.hotelpalace.be

The Old Fiddler

Veurnestraat 9, 8970 Poperinge
0032 (0) 57 363 525
www.theoldfiddler.be

Oud Vlaenderen

Grote Markt 14
8970 Poperinge
0032 (0) 57 368 685
www.oudvlaenderen.com

Flous Eet en Praat Kaffee

Ieperstraat 169
8970 Poperinge
0032 (0) 57 333 833
www.flouseetenpraatkaffee.be



Godfather
of beer cuisine
By Alan Hope

When you taste some of the beers they're brewing nowadays, some of them are not drinkable. I was on the jury of the Brussels Beer Challenge, and some of the things I tasted there..."

Stefaan Couttenye's voice trails off in what sounds like bitter disappointment. Bravely he continues, like a man reliving profound trauma.

"Beers that it took me half an hour to get the taste out of my mouth. You can't serve beers like that with food, because you can't taste the food any more. You're under a different kind of discipline than a brewer or a bar owner because you have to make the beer and the food go together."

Couttenye, chef-proprietor of the restaurant Brasserie 't Hommelhof in Watou, takes beer seriously indeed. And well he might: He's been working with beer in the kitchen for more than 30 years, a specialisation that has made his name across Belgium and beyond.

"Beer cuisine — in other words preparing food with beer — that's been around a long time," he says. "Our grandparents did it. But it wasn't common in restaurants. When I started here about 30 years ago I was one of the first. There was also someone in Mons, a Michelin-starred restaurant preparing food with beer. But I was the first in the world who served beer at the table in the restaurant. The owner of the building here was a brewer, Albert Van Eecke, I told him about my idea and he was outraged. That's also the reason why it took so long for beer to become common in restaurants. In the last five or six years everybody has started, but the biggest reason why it took so long before was because the brewers didn't believe in it. They weren't chauvinist enough. I always say, if France had been a beer-drinking country, the whole world would drink beer."

Beer, however, is not just a liquid used in place of wine; it has its own properties, and its own requirements.

"I started using beer in the kitchen, and then the question became, why don't we drink beer with this food? You can't use very much beer in the kitchen because when you start to cook it, you get a lot of bitterness,



“I always say, if France had been a beer-drinking country, the whole world would drink beer.”



so you have to be very careful."

It's a mistake, he explains, to think that one beer will be like white wine and another more like red wine — beer and wine don't map onto one another in an exact way, and anyone switching from wine cooking to beer needs to consider the vastly different flavour profiles.

Unlike cooking with wine, which is at the very basis of classic French cuisine, beer gastronomy is still being (re-)created and (re-)discovered. Couttenye is one of those writing the rulebook. Nowadays, the biggest names in the business take notice.

"For example, only about five years ago, if you invited someone to your home, you'd put a plate with cheese on the table, and a bottle of wine. Wine and cheese — that was the dream combination. But beer goes very much better with cheese than wine does, and people are only just beginning to understand. Now if you go to the big restaurants, to Hof Van Cleve or one of those, they're going to serve beer with the cheese."

www.hommelhof.be
Watouplein 17, 8978, Belgium
0032 (0) 388 024



THE MENU

The Hommelhof offers an à la carte menu, a "brewer's menu" and a gastronomic menu. We try the latter. Chef Couttenye always, he says, serves the same beer at the table as in the dish. We start with an aperitif of Cuvée het Hommelhof, brewed specially for the restaurant by Van Eecke (see page 52), then plunge into the courses.

The gastronomic menu, luridly:

Sandwich with wild boar pâté, pumpkin chutney, and salad with vinaigrette of Kapittel Pater (6%) from Van Eecke

Stew of red-legged partridge and wild mushrooms in a broth of Sint-Bernardus tripel (8%) and goat's cheese

Hare saddle with forgotten vegetables from the De Lovie sheltered farm, cooked in Pannepot (10%) by Struise Brewers
Chocolates and praline

Later, off-menu, we taste the latest beer from the chef's son Simon, who's not only a hobby brewer but the maître d'. He contributed the beer pairings for Chef Couttenye's most recent book, *Biergastronomie uit de Westhoek*. Its English edition is expected in April. Look for a review in our next issue.

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