

Flanders gala dinner showcases Belgian cuisine

By Jason Heppenstall

Gourmet dinner highlights the refined nature of Belgian cuisine - with plenty of beer and chocolate thrown in for good measure

WITLOOF,' says the man sat to my left. 'Come again?' I say. 'It's witloof with ganda ham and goat cheese', he says, pointing at my plate with his fork. The man speaking to me is Jos De Clercq, the Investment and Trade Commissioner with the Belgian embassy, and the event is a lavish culinary dinner at a plush seaside hotel in honour of, well, witloof.

I can only guess what witloof is. Is it some kind of meatloaf? 'No,' says De Clercq 'it is a delicate root-like vegetable grown in the dark and one of the cornerstones of Belgian cuisine.' The English term for witloof is the equally-baffling - 'endive' - and the closest meaningful explanation I can find is that it is the anaemic leaves of a species of chicory, the roots of which are sometimes used as a coffee substitute. It is also his country's national vegetable and the specimen on the plate in front of me tastes very fine indeed.

Most of the 80 or so guests seated around large circular

tables in this opulent dining hall have some connection with Belgium. All of us are here to experience the finest of that country's cuisine. And beer, of course. Belgium is rightly famous for its beer and chocolate, but the wider national cuisine is less appreciated. It seems clear that tonight all of that is about to change as a team of waiters bring out large plates of food and place them before the dozens of hungry diners gathered beneath the chandeliers.

It might seem unusual to drink beer with a meal of this sort but that is exactly what we are doing. Waiters expertly pour different brews with enticing names - Wittekerke, Triple Trappist Westmalle, Gulden Draak, Corsendonck. - into the clusters of glasses placed before us. But of course, Belgian beer, which is smooth, dark and full of flavour is a world away from the pale fizzy lagers that most of us associate beer with. As such it makes a pretty good tippie to accompany a meal with the added advantage that the alcohol content is less than wine, alleviating the sore-headedness of the morning after.

Head of the guest list is the Belgian Ambassador Marc Van Craen, who tells the assembled guests that 'All the important decisions made in Belgium are taken around the dinner table,' which may go some way towards explaining Euro MPs' expense claims.

Aside from celebrating the



Belgian Ambassador Marc Van Craen addresses the diners. Inset left Hannelore Muyliaert and (inset right) a sample of witloof

taste of gourmet Belgian food, the evening is being organised by the Flanders Investment and Trade Copenhagen association with the intention of drawing attention to the opportunities afforded by the region. The association sets up links between the Flemish business community and overseas partners. Flanders, for those unsure,

is the northern Belgian region where the residents speak Dutch (as opposed to French, which is spoken in the southern Walloon Region) and includes major cities such as Brussels and Antwerp.

After the witloof and ganda ham (a cured pork speciality) have been devoured we are presented with creamy witloof soup, and that's when the evening's greatest surprise occurs. Two guest performers have been flown in from Ghent to provide the entertainment. Pieter Smout and Hannelore Muyliaert are both classically-trained musicians whose burgeoning popularity in their home country means that their star is a rising one. Peter plays piano with gusto while Hannelore provides the vocals. She sings mostly in French but also provides a couple of songs in

Flemish and English. But it is Edith Piaf ballads that are her forte and she bewitches the guests with her tantalizing and explosive performances, many of whom sit spellbound, their soups going cold.

Next comes gratinated - yes - witloof with cooked ham before the 'main' course of rabbit cooked with beer. Danish guests exhibiting signs of squeamishness have to be reminded that rabbits are considered to be food in other countries, rather than pets. And all the while the beer glasses keep getting topped up as we listen to speeches and enjoy more songs from Hannelore and Pieter. Speakers enlighten us on topics ranging from the culinary history of Belgium and the possibilities for exporting witloof to Denmark - where it is still known as 'jule salat' (Christmas

salad) and costs a small fortune.

Of course, a Belgian meal just wouldn't be right without chocolate and that's exactly what we are presented with for dessert: in this case chocolate and beer cake with ice cream. The clock was already striking midnight by the time we retired to a vestibule for more rich chocolate and a glass of piping hot beer with a dash of whipped cream on top. Yes, that's beer served hot in a glass with added brandy and cream on top.

Who needs coffee when you can finish a meal off with that?

The Belgian culinary evening was organised by Flanders Investment & Trade Copenhagen - www.flanderstrade.com. To find out more about Pieter and Hannelore visit www.hannezingt.be

No 247

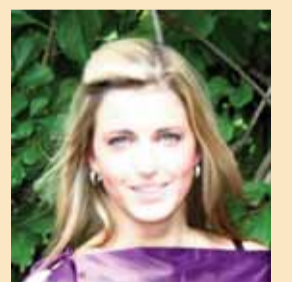
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| Across | Down |
| 1. Infant (4) | 1. Savage (8) |
| 3. Interrogate (8) | 2. Fundamental (5) |
| 9. Answer (7) | 4. Excessively (6) |
| 10. Urge forward (5) | 5. Alpine dog (5,7) |
| 11. Collection (12) | 6. Entreat (7) |
| 13. Maintain (6) | 7. Invalid (4) |
| 15. Disclose (6) | 8. Condole (12) |
| 17. Fear (12) | 12. Noisy ringing (8) |
| 20. Happening (5) | 14. Paramount (7) |
| 21. Dizziness (7) | 16. Tremble (6) |
| 22. Urgency (8) | 18. Hibernian (5) |
| 23. Scorch (4) | 19. Profound (4) |

Post Quick Crossword No 245
Across: 6 Heroism; 7 Lurid; 9 Below; 10 Dispute; 12 Recognition; 14 Disposition; 18 Release; 19 Twirl; 21 Amiss; 22 Journey.
Down: 1 Rebel; 2 Jocose; 3 Ask; 4 Puppet; 5 Fiction; 8 Dignity; 11 Possess; 13 Dilemma; 15 Please; 16 Onward; 17 Greed; 20 Job.

Ask the Expat

Name: Piret Liivak
Age: 28
Occupation: Student
Country: Estonia
Arrived here: 2005



What were your first impressions of Denmark? Good study conditions, friendly, reserved people, dark Autumns and Winters, wonderful Springs

Where is your favourite place to go in the city after a hectic day? I avoid the city after a hectic day - prefer the beach or a park

What do you miss most about home? Going skiing then relaxing in a sauna

Describe Denmark in one word. Promising

Maria Gade, Sales Manager

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