

BELGIAN

# Beer & Food



## THE ANTWERP ISSUE

*Exploring the best beer, breweries and bars in Belgium's proudest city*

—  
OLD BEERSEL / SILLY / HALVE MAAN / PALM CRAFT BREWERS

Inside: A sneak preview of the new Antwerp City Brewery Visitor Centre

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**Beer &  
Food**

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## Editorial

As if to absolve themselves after years of ignoring their country's brewing culture – and swilling champagne while doing so – Belgium's politicians have decided to devote a large building in the centre of Brussels to beer.

Belgium won't be the first country to get its own national beer promotion centre, but it's making up for tardiness through sheer grandiosity: where Guinness gets a storehouse and Heineken an experience centre, Belgian beer gets its very own palace.

It was originally to be a temple, and may eventually become a mansion, but whatever they call it, it's very likely to usurp Manneken Pis as the place you simply must visit when you come to Brussels.

The company charged with designing and branding the centre, in the city's old stock exchange, say it's going to be full of authenticity, with virtual barmen, virtual brewers, and a feature that lets you create your own virtual beer.

"The Belgian Beer Palace is supported by a Belgian mindset: a lively place that will have new activities on the agenda throughout the year," they say. "You'll visit it, and want to visit it again, because there'll always be something new to discover: the centre of beer craftsmanship will surprise you on every visit."

Another organiser adds that it's an interactive environment where people from all backgrounds will experience their own journey through the wonderful world of Belgian Beer.

Before you rush to book a ticket, note that it's not going to open until at least 2018. So here's a suggestion of what to do in the meantime.

Two sons of Brussels recently decided to start a brewery in the city. They had little experience and even less money, and needed a way to promote themselves in a saturated market. So they hatched a cunning plan. Instead of getting contract brewers like Anders or Proof to brew for them while they busied themselves with brand-building on Twitter, they decided the best way to stand out was by actually making beer themselves.

They bought bits and pieces of equipment and got to work. Soon they were able to rent a little shop in the Marolles area and invested in more bits and bobs. Now, people can drop in to watch them brew and buy one of their beers. For tourists and locals, there are worse ways to spend a few hours in Brussels.

Think about it as a gift: you take the beer back home and say, "I was in Brussels last week. I watched a guy make this beer and bought some off him. Let's try it."

They're called En Stoemelings, they're as fresh as two twelve year old girls and full of enthusiasm. Now's the time to get to know them, before they become too cool.



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# Beer and the city

Hans Bombeke talks Alan Hope through Antwerp's brewing industry over the centuries

Belgian cities, for some reason, are not home to many brewers. Brussels has three, only two of which are up and running; Ghent has only the city brewery Gruut, which is tiny and, though its products are mediocrally influenced, very recent. Bruges has three and Mechelen only one, while Leuven is HQ of the biggest brewer in the world, and apart from InBev also has the micro-brewery Domus.

Antwerp is no exception, as BB&F found out when we spoke to Hans Bombeke, beer connoisseur, festival organiser, part-time brewer and local authority.

"There's De Koninck, which has had some troubles but survived thanks to Duvel Moortgat," he says. "Then there's Het Pakhuis, which was working in the shadows until about two years ago because of some internal reorganisation. I think it's now ready to come out firing, which is nice. It's a very small operation. And we're about to hear more about Johan Van Dyck's Antwerp Brewing Company. I think they will soon announce the opening of a third brewery in Antwerp. I hear rumours all the time; finally they may

turn into reality."

The city of Antwerp never had much of a brewing tradition, because of the state of the water. In the 11th and 12th centuries, thanks to work carried out to deepen the channel, the river Scheldt became tidal, which meant that the waters all the way up into the city, and the streams and canals leading off the river, became undrinkable. "Some breweries lying higher up – Antwerp is not Rome, but it does actually have some heights – had access to better water than others lower down."

The people of Antwerp found their beer in surrounding towns and villages, and from as far away as Hamburg – the Homburgsche ton became a standard liquid measure at the time – and Haarlem in what is now the Netherlands.

Then, in the 16th century, along came Gilbert Van Schoonbeke, who was not only a brilliant engineer but also a very clever businessman, perhaps the result of the fact he was the illegitimate son of a well-connected father whose estate he was unable to inherit. Van Schoonbeke became involved in the construction of new city fortifications, which he undertook to find finance for if, in return, he was allowed

“So you have a concentration of breweries on the Brouwersvliet from the 16th century on, until the late 18th, early 19th century



“A lot of people seem to forget that lots of breweries went down because of the popularity of pils

to develop land outside the existing walls, in the Nieuwstad or New Town, which he intended to turn into a port and industrial area.

“Antwerp at that time had lots of space inside the walls of the city,” says Hans, “and what he did was to start building new quarters in the city, like Wapper – where the Rubens House now stands – Hopland, Schutterhofstraat and Graanmarkt, where the Opera is. That was all open meadows in those days. He also had some investments in brewing, and he came upon the idea of building three canals on the north of the city with the goal of forcing all of the breweries in Antwerp to come to the Brouwersvliet – the Brewers’ Canal – to control operations by controlling the distribution of water.”

As part of his reward for this rationalisation of the brewing industry, Van Schoonbeke was allowed to levy a small tax on every barrel of beer produced – a tax of only pennies that soon accumulated into a fortune. “So you have a concentration of breweries on the Brouwersvliet from the 16th century on, until the late 18th, early 19th century. The very last of them was still there at the beginning of the 20th century.”

Jump forward to the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century.

The more recent history of Antwerp brewing is not such a great story, he explains. At one time it was dominated by large breweries like Tivoli or Bavaro-Belge, which was taken over by Haacht in 1939 and stopped production, brewing hundreds of thousands

of hectolitres until they closed. “One of the things we mustn’t forget is the important role played by the two world wars in the closing of Belgian breweries, not just in Antwerp. I think there were 3,215 breweries in Belgium in 1910, and only 750 left after World War Two. That’s not only a result of the Germans taking the materials to make munitions and so on: it also had to do with the Depression in the 1930s, and the popularity of pils and lager beers in which only rich breweries could invest. We were all making top-fermented beers around here, and I think the least you could say is that they were probably rather poor in general: very small breweries making very indifferent beer.

“An uncle of my father had a brewery near Ghent in about the 1920s, and he quit because he couldn’t compete with the big pils brewers any longer. A lot of people don’t know or seem to forget that fact. Lots of breweries went down because of the popularity of pils. Then came World War Two, then you had a wave of consolidations, with big breweries taking over small ones and closing them down immediately – and not only small ones. Artois took over big breweries, too; even those making 300,000hl were being taken over. One of the remarkable stories I read this year was about Van Roost, which made Jack-Op, a huge brewery that went down completely as its style of beer lost popularity.”

Which brings us back to the present day. We’re sitting outside, each of us with a Bolleke in front of us – the standard order when you’re in Antwerp, and the local name for a glass of De Koninck.

“The growing popularity of pils from 1910 to 1940, and the smaller breweries’ problems caused by competition from pils, led De Koninck to create a new style that would allow smaller breweries working with top fermentation to brew a drinkable, low-alcohol, top-fermented beer. That was the idea,” Hans explains. “Whether it came from the Belgian brewers federation or from Leuven university brewing school is for others to say. But the fact is a new style was born, which is this special ale, or Speciale Belge, like a pale ale but a bit lighter. De Koninck, being the only surviving Antwerp brewery, is something of a flagship for this style.” ■



## The British influence

Belgian beer has always been open to foreign influence, with perhaps the biggest impact coming from Britain. Two Belgian classics – Bush from Dubuisson and Duvel from Moortgat – are both derived from British recipes, and the two world wars meant British brewing left an enduring legacy on Belgian beer.

Another factor is the port of Antwerp, where barrels of British and Irish ale rolled in by the thousand. This was thanks to the work of John Martin, who set up a drinks distribution and im-

port company in Antwerp in 1909. He started importing Scotch whisky, then moved to Polish vodka and Schweppes tonic water, before negotiating with Bass and then Guinness in 1912 to launch their Irish Extra Stout in Belgium as part of an initial 90-year contract.

Although interrupted by the First World War, by 1922 John was on his feet again, bottling Schweppes and Guinness for consumption in Belgium and beyond. Growth continued steadily throughout the 1920s and 30s before the Second World War, but he picked up his company again after that and

soon was stronger than ever.

Today, John Martin – The Finest Drinks Company continues under the stewardship of John’s grandson Anthony and has grown to be a force in the world of Belgian beer. Although it’s no longer based in Antwerp – the headquarters are now in Genval, Walloon Brabant – the company retains strong historical ties with the city. Among a varied range of beers are its British-influenced Martin’s Pale Ale and Martin’s IPA: reminders that Belgian brewing owes much to the British tradition.

*Among other things Hans Bombeke is one of the main organizers of the Modeste Beer Festival held this year in Antwerp on October 3rd and 4th. It’s well worth checking out: [modestebierfestival.be](http://modestebierfestival.be)*

# Whose round is it anyway?

A bar crawl in Antwerp? Alan Hope has the itinerary

**H**ans Bombeke, the fount of all local knowledge about beer in Antwerp, drew up a list of pubs worth a visit, and BB&F checked them out. It's tough work, but somebody has to do it. The list below, sadly, is by no means exhaustive.

**Billie's Bier Kafetaria** is a tiny place round the back of Dries Van Noten's ultra-trendy flagship store, but it has a huge selection of beers. Co-owner Stefaan is a beer expert, while his partner, Helena, looks after the kitchen side of things. So who's Billie, you ask? Billie is the dog that's snuffling around your feet. Eye-catchers on the blackboard included Raging Bitch BIPA, Green Flash, Thornbridge and Brewdog, as well as Dutch brewery Emelisse. On tap they have Rodenbach Grand Cru, as well as Karmeliet, Saison Dupont, Crime Passionel and Great Eastern IPA. A handful more customers and the place would have been nice and cosy, but unfortunately this came at the end of the tour and it was time to get back to the real world (they only open at 16.00 on weekdays). Definitely somewhere to make a regular stop at when in Antwerp, though; as Helena

explained, the guest beers change regularly. *Kammenstraat 12*

**De Rooden Hoed** is actually a restaurant, a most stately one at that, under the shadow of Antwerp Cathedral, but they have some tables and stools by the bar, and no objection to anyone who simply wants something to drink. The atmosphere, with waiters rushing around in long aprons beneath chandeliers sparkling even in the daytime, is like something out of a painting by one of those degenerate French Impressionists. The beer selection is mainly Duvel Moortgat, but they get full marks for the two tiny pint-pots filled with green and black olive tapenade that came with breadsticks to accompany my beer. Top class. *Oude Koornmarkt 25*

**Gollem** was probably the best of this rather narrow selection of bars we visited. It's conveniently placed, right off the Grote Markt, has a huge terrace and a wooden interior that's reminiscent of a saloon in some old Western. And what can you say to 30 beers on tap, starting with a Zeezuiper from Scheldebrouwerij. The bottled selection is 10 times more varied; you'd be better to ask what they don't have. I

**Meet Billie,**  
the pint-sized boss of  
Billie's Bier Kafetaria  
The beer is Den  
Bangelijke from  
Antwerp's famous  
micro-brewery: 't Pakhuis.  
[www.pakhuis.info](http://www.pakhuis.info)



noted Struise, Pakhuis, Brouwers Verzet, Het Nest, De Graal, Brasserie de la Senne. This is the sort of place where you spend your time looking to see what other people are having, because there's just too much on offer for you to have what you want. *Suikerrui 28*

**Bar Deco**, a former fish restaurant, has a beautiful old marble-topped bar and a death-defying staircase up to the toilets, and not much else to make it stand out. But it's the sort of place you could easily grow attached to, with just enough beers to provide some variety and, most importantly, the newspapers properly folded and complete. A place to retire to from the crowds elsewhere. *Torfbrug 2*

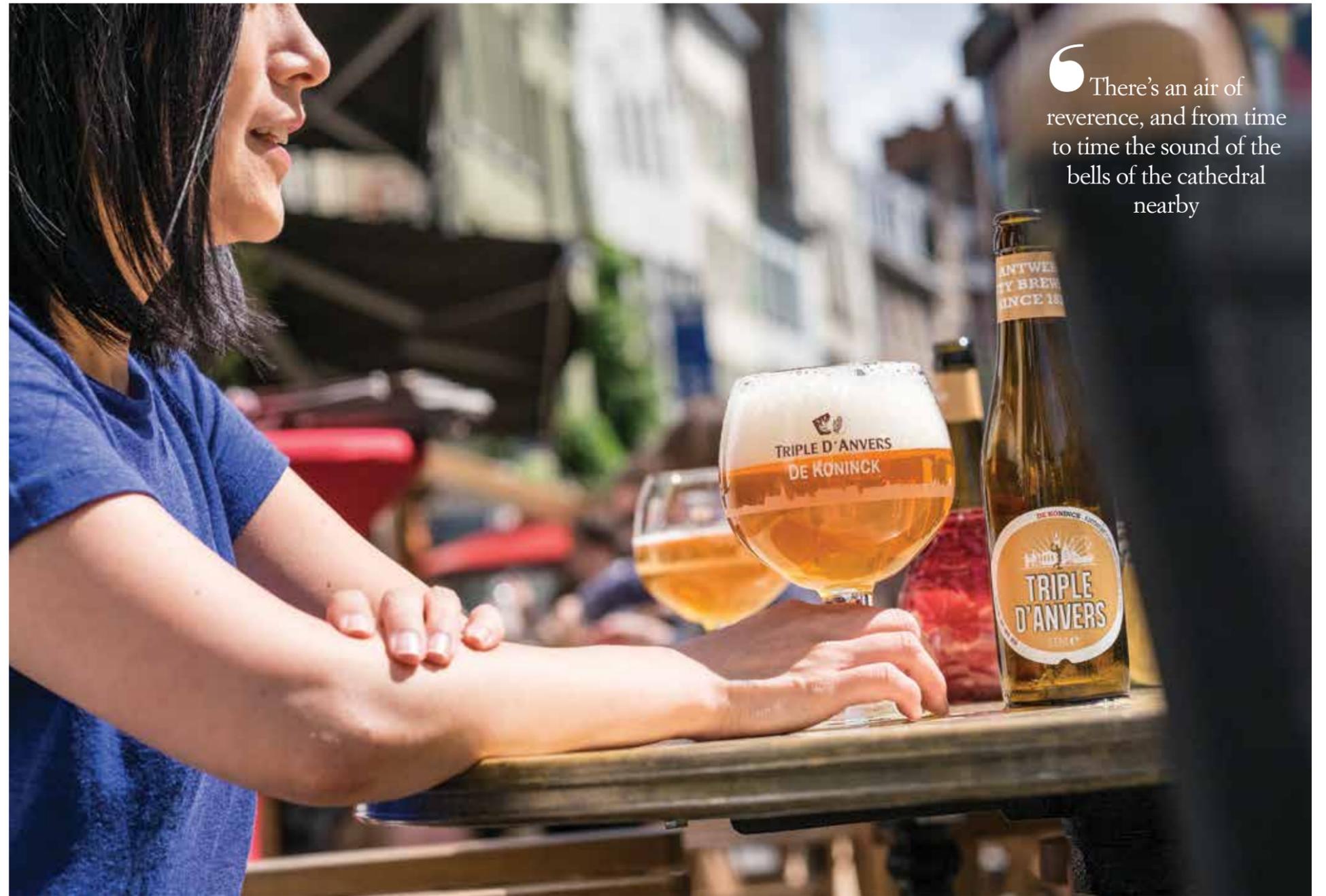
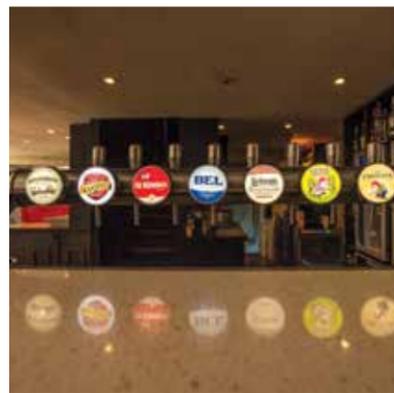
**Highlander** claims to be the only Scottish pub in Antwerp, which is a claim that's too outlandish to not be true. Elaine and George (the Scottish angle: he's from Whitburn, in West Lothian) ran the place at another address for 26 years and moved here only last year. They do a traditional Scottish breakfast every Sunday, and have a magnificent collection of Scotch whiskeys displayed in an equally magnificent cabinet in the back room. *Stadswaag 21*

**Waaagstuk** is where the city weights and measures department used to be, in what was the middle of the merchants' district. In recent years it's become known as a temple to beer, thanks to the aforementioned Hans Bombeke, who still owns the building and lives upstairs, though he no longer runs the place. That's the job of Alex, who hails from Heber City in Utah and used to manage a programme for US students with offices just round the corner. He's not interested in building up a massive beer list because, he told us, it's more important to keep the list manageable so the beer can be conditioned and served properly. Music to our ears. *Stadswaag 20*

**De Groote Witte Arend** has something of the monastery about it, is your first thought: waiters glide about in long aprons and silence, there's a pillared arcade and in the courtyard, long wooden refectory tables, and even a chapel. There's also an air of reverence, and from time to time the sound of the bells of the cathedral nearby. The property did in fact for a time belong to an order of nuns, but now it's a restaurant and cafe, with a selection of local speciali-

ties and a list of beers including a wide range of lambic-based beers, a good selection of 75cl bottles perfect for people eating together, and the Brewery in the Spotlight, which changes irregularly and on our visit featured Omer Vander Ghinste Oud Bruin on tap and Omer and Le Fort in bottles. The courtyard looks like it's open in all weathers: there were at least three heaters stashed out of the way. *Reyndersstraat 18*

**Antwaerpse Bierhuiske**. "300 beers; 300 stories" proclaims the slogan on the facade of this tiny dark pub, the front of which has been entirely opened up this sunny afternoon to let the air circulate, and it's a mercy. We take our place in the back beside the beer fridges, which are indeed stuffed with bottles too various to name, including Struise, Brewdog, De Ranke, Dochter van de Korenaar and Brasserie de la Senne, all names you'd expect to see wherever beer is taken seriously. They also have Pannepot and Taras Boulba among their taps, and an unblended, unfiltered Rodenbach foederbier that turned out to be more interesting as an idea than in the glass. But why quibble? There's something here for everyone. *Hoogstraat 14*



“There’s an air of reverence, and from time to time the sound of the bells of the cathedral nearby”

**OTHER SUGGESTIONS**

**Kulminator**. Reputed to be the best beer cafe in the world. Whether it is or not, it's still a pretty good one. *Vleminkveld 32*

**Bier Central**. Two minutes' walk from Central station, which of course means only two minutes' walk back to get your train. That fact will become important when you see the beer list. *De Keyserlei 25*

**De Batavier**. Nothing better, weather permitting, than a sunny spot on the Eilandje, close to the site of the MAS museum. The beer list is pretty uninspired, but the location makes up for it. *Sint-Laureiskaai 13*

**Duke of Antwerp**. If for some reason you fell out of the door of Bier Central, you wouldn't have far to stagger to this gastropub serving breakfast (not full English, sadly), high tea and a full menu. *De Keyserlei 29*

**De Koninklijke Snor**. Also in the docklands of Antwerp, this quirky place (the name means 'The Royal Moustache') is the headquarters of the Antwerp Moustache Club. *Adriaan Brouwersstraat 33*

**Oud Arsenaal**. A typical brown bar, so-called because of the heavy wooden surroundings and the nicotine stains on the walls and ceilings.

The beer list is limited but they have a good excuse: the place was built over a covered canal, so their cellar space is limited. "If you fall through the floor you have to swim," we were warned. *Maria Pijpelincxstraat 4*

# Wild things

A new visitor centre due to open in Antwerp this autumn will unite artisans and experimental brewing, as Alan Hope discovers

Some time after the summer, in August for some parts and September-October for others, the new Stadsbrouwerij visitor centre will open at what used to be the De Koninck brewery in Berchem in Antwerp.

Much of De Koninck's production has now moved to Duvel Moortgat's main facility in Breendonk, after Duvel took over in 2010. But there remains a brewing installation in Antwerp that will continue to be used, master brewer Dennis De Potter explains, to carry out experiments.

"When people come into the experience centre, there will be all sorts of exhibits on the craft of brewing, on Antwerp and on historic cafes; a total of ten exhibits in all," he says. "Then you pass through a tunnel and come into the brew hall, and you'll see an actual working brewery in operation. We'll be brewing De Koninck and Wild Jo, and there'll be a tasting room where people can try the beers."

Wild Jo is a new addition to the De Koninck range, launched in May, a blond beer that's refermented in the bottle using wild yeast, which gives a sour, citrus but above all refreshing touch.

"There are so many new beers coming out, IPAs and so on, but somehow wild yeast hasn't really been a part of it, so we thought it would be interesting

to try," says De Potter. "It was certainly a good time to present something new. Everyone was experimenting, and we were ourselves busy with experiments relating to the opening of this new centre, so that's how it all came together."

De Koninck has been active on the site on Mechelsesteenweg, right at one of the main entry roads into the port city, since 1833, when it was set up by Johannes Vervliet, who is honoured in the naming of Wild Jo. It was originally called De Hand, referring to a signpost at the city limits bearing a hand, the symbol of Antwerp, but the name was eventually changed in 1912. The brewery produces a Triple d'Anvers but is best known for its top-fermented De Koninck beer, developed in 1913 as an attempt to counter the juggernaut competition from pils.

De Koninck was one of the beers in the category of Spéciale Belge, considered slightly old-fashioned at the time of the Duvel takeover, which analysts in the press attributed more to De Koninck's rich property portfolio than to its beers. However, Duvel Moortgat also had a reputation within the beer world for nursing its acquisitions, even if they seem to be on the way out. It happened with Liefmans and its classic red-brown ales. It happened too with De Koninck, whose eponymous beer – a glass of De

Koninck is known as a Bolleke – is intimately identified with the city of Antwerp.

"That was the chance we were given by Duvel, to use their resources to work on improving the quality of our beer," De Potter says. "But the Bolleke is the same now as it ever was."

Elsewhere in the visitor centre, De Koninck has recruited a number of other artisans: a butcher, a cheese refiner, a chocolate maker, a chef and a food photographer. Each of them will have a presence in the centre, where the public will be able to watch them at work. There'll be a restaurant and a shop, but the brewery will continue to function. And, De Potter assures us, we can look forward to future brews that, like Wild Jo, push the boundaries.

"We'll keep on experimenting, with a new beer every three months or so. That's important to keep people's minds occupied," he says. "Otherwise you come once and you've seen it all, with no reason to keep coming back. But if you're continually producing new things, people have a reason to keep up to date with what's happening, and to come back if it's something that interests them."

"A lot of the buildings around here are still the property of De Koninck, and that means there's enough room for new projects for the next five or ten years."

© Diego Franssens

“There are so many new beers coming out but somehow wild yeast hasn't really been a part of it, so we thought it would be interesting to try”



© Diego Franssens

# The chef

When you enter Bert-Jan Michiel- sen's restaurant within the City Brew- ery, you'll be confronted by a glass wall through which will be visible the work- room of master butcher Luc De Laet. Bert-Jan was bitten by the butchery bug long before he decided to become a chef.

"When I was 15 I was out in Hove and I went into Luc's shop to call my parents to come and pick me up," he recalls. "It was going to take them an hour to get there, and he said, well, if you have to hang about for an hour you might as well get to work, gave me an apron and that's how it started. That's where my interest and my passion for meat came from."

Later he trained as a chef, and has so far worked in other people's kitchens. Most recently, De Schone van Boskoop of Wouter Keersmaekers in Bouchout, where he met sommelier Luc Dickens, who's making the move with him. It was Luc De Laet who opened his eyes to the City Brewery project, which is close to where he now lives in Antwerp.

"At some point, Luc told me about the construction work in the brewery. He said Bert, there's a lot going on in your backyard. I realised this was the moment for me to start converting my dreams into concrete plans."

Those plans turned into Butcher's Son. "It's going to be pretty much a

meat restaurant, with an open kitchen. There are four food artisans here in the brewery: a butcher, a cheese affineur, a chocolatier and the restaurant. The idea is that the public can see every- thing that's going on, and that's true in the restaurant as well. They'll be able to look into Luc's shop and see a butch- er at work, and they'll see what they're about to eat from us, and the whole thing will be more of an experience."

It's a restaurant beside a butchery, but it's also inside a brewery. Are there plans for working with a beer menu? "We'll be working with beer, but I think mainly in the kitchen, cooking with something like the Triple d'An- vers which comes from right here in the brewery. There are lots of other ways to cook with beer of course. But I'm not sure we'll have a beer menu, matching beers with food, I think that can get a little bit boring for a whole meal."



# The affineur

Michel Van Tricht has already been busy inside what is now the City Brewery, where he has a refinery of eight temperature-controlled cells in which cheeses are matured to the perfect point of ripeness before being sold in the family shop in Fruithoflaan, run by his wife, Jeanine. The shop was named by the Wall Street Journal as the best cheese shop in Europe in 2010.

The maturing section is not open to the public for reasons of food safety and hygiene, so now Michel, who runs the maturing business with his son Frederic, is busy planning the opening of a small retail and tasting outlet in the City Brewery complex.

“The shop looks out on to Boomgaardstraat. We share an entrance with the Butcher’s Store and the Butcher’s Son restaurant,” Frederic explains. “People can come and taste our cheeses while they look out on the street. But this is not going to be a copy of our shop on Fruithoflaan. Let’s just deal with the rumours about that: the shop will not be closing. In the City Brewery what we’ll have is a small shop with no charcuterie, no ready meals and no wine. You can of course enjoy a cheeseboard there, with a beer to go with it from the City Brewery.”

The new shop also won’t compete with the main shop. “No, because it’s a whole new concept, a little bit more modern,” Michel agrees. “People will

have to serve themselves for the most part. There will be nine or ten bar stools where people can have something to eat – but only cheese. This shop will be a lot more basic.”

He’s also going along with butcher Luc De Laet in introducing some transparency – literally – over how they work. “The whole floor will be made of glass, with a ripening cell below that people will be able to see under their feet. That way they’ll have a sort of contact with the ripening that’s going on in another part of the complex.”

He already works closely with top restaurants, who know they will get from him a cheese or a cheeseboard that’s perfect for consumption that day – the very essence of the art of the affineur as such master artisans call themselves. So Van Tricht will be working with the adjacent restaurant, Butcher’s Son, and with the brewery on cheese-and-beer pairings, such as the one we wrote about in BB&F back in issue three.

# The butcher

Luc De Laet is a master butcher with a shop and a next-door restaurant in Hove outside Antwerp, which he took over with his wife, Peggy, in 1992. In 2004 they started a wholesale business delivering to restaurants, including some of the most renowned in the land. Among them is Sergio Herman, which chose De Laet & Van Haver to present its wares to VIP guests at the premiere of the documentary about Sergio, the unusually titled *Fucking Perfect*.

Most people, probably, would prefer the work of even a top butcher to be tasted and not seen. These days, people tend to maintain a distance between the production of their food and the consumption. But it's a trend on the turn: food-lovers now insist on a close link between themselves and what they eat, and carnivores in particular no longer find it ethically defensible to pretend that meat is not the product of a bloody process.

Luc will be moving into one of the City Brewery's new spaces next to the restaurant run by Bert-Jan Michielsen, which he'll also supply. Visitors to the restaurant will be able to see through a glass wall into his work-room. But he's not worried they'll be put off.

"There's not going to be blood all over the walls, I can assure you of that," he says. "It should look delicious, above all. But we are going to show the customers and the people who come to visit just how we work. We want to be completely transparent. But we also want to be accessible and innovative. This will be a sort of laboratory we'll be creating, to develop products for the future."

The shop in Hove will remain, with a broader selection of goods including wines from France, Spain and Italy, the catering business and the restaurant *Cuinaire Comfort*.





# The chocolatier

Of all the artisans taking their place in the City Brewery complex, Jitsk Heyninck is the youngest. He's also moving into his own shop for the first time.

"This is my first outlet. I'm only 25, but I've been working with chocolate for years and doing demonstrations worldwide," he says. "The last couple of years I've had a business but on a very small scale. Then the brewery asked if I'd be interested in moving here, to have a complete production and selling facility."

The road to becoming a chocolatier was for him a long and winding one. "I went to culinary school to become a chef, but after a while I realised that wasn't really my thing," he says. "I stayed with food and went through bakery school to become a pastry chef. After a time I decided I liked that but I wanted to do something more special, so I started working with chocolate, and since then I've become addicted, let's say."

At the age of only 18 he was making his name on the international scene. He was the youngest chocolatier at the World Expo in Shanghai in 2009, and followed that by touring the globe for Chocolate World, which produces chocolate-making equipment. Along the way he started producing his own brand chocolates, with the name Jitsk (pronounced Yitsk).

The chocolate scene in Belgium covers a multitude of styles, from ingredients sourced in the most faraway

corners of the globe to ingredients you'd never dream of finding inside a praline. The word Heyninck uses most often is "pure".

"The thing we want to do with chocolate is to make a very pure product, without anything outlandish, to offer people a nice experience with pure ingredients. To allow them to rediscover ingredients they already know, but done in the right way. Very high quality ingredients treated in a very pure way. No weird combinations. Simplicity and very fresh ingredients."

And how do those products taste? Take it from the consul for Qatar: "They're like a circus in your mouth."

Jitsk's products are not just pralines but also chocolate bars, spread, macarons, ice cream and desserts. All are made by hand in his workshop: a time-consuming process, but the only way, he says, to guarantee quality. It won't surprise you to learn that just like the other spaces, his workshop is behind a glass wall so visitors can watch. "I have absolutely no secrets from my customers," he says. ■

• De Rooden Hoed



# Hats off

More than just a place to eat:  
Breandán Kearney on a restaurant that's part of the fabric of Antwerp

LUNCH MENU  
@ 19,50  
VOORGERECHT  
+  
HOOFDGERECHT  
+  
KOFFIE MET  
CHOCOMOUSSE  
EN ADVOCAAT

This is the oldest restaurant in Antwerp,” says Cas Goossens as he shows me around Grand Café De Rooden Hoed in the city centre. “It’s maybe the oldest restaurant in Belgium. This place lives. There’s a lot of history here. I get goose bumps from it.”

When Cas and his business partner, Hans Lachi, took ownership in May 2013, the restaurant was frequented mostly by tourists and was suffering from financial difficulties and a declining reputation. But Antwerpenaars Cas and Hans believed in its potential.

In their attempt to restore it to its former glory, the new owners sought inspiration from the restaurant’s heritage, casting aside the existing red-and-white checked tablecloths and bringing in chic tables and chairs, chandeliers and decorated mirrors for a retro Grand Café vibe. Their efforts were rewarded, and Antwerpenaars came back. Today, 80% of their customers live in the city.

There are various versions of how The Red Hat got its name. One story revolves around a local clergyman forgetting his red hat in the dining room after eating there. Another relates to the red tiles found on the floor of the oldest part of the restaurant. Yet another is that the red tiled roof that pokes out among the buildings of the Oude Koormarkt makes the perfect reference point for city dwellers on the lookout for a place to meet.

Whichever story is correct, the name De Rooden Hoed is once again synonymous with good food; the current menu has been modelled on the restaurant’s historical specialisation in seafood as well as its classic Antwerp dishes such as filet d’Anvers smoked beef.

But there’s something else that’s fuelled the restaurant’s revival. “What’s special here is our focus on pairing dishes with beer,” says Cas. “For example, we like to pair our seafood platter with Liefmans Cuvée Brut. When you take oyster and clam and you pair it with this cherry beer that’s a little bit sweet and a little bit sour, it’s fantastic,” he says.

Despite still being relatively young, Cas has amassed plenty of experience working with food and beer. At the age of 19, he managed a beer-themed restaurant called Zytho, and in recent years he’s gained accreditation as a beer sommelier.

He also hangs out in the right circles.



“When you take oyster and clam and you pair it with this cherry beer that’s a little bit sweet and a little bit sour, it’s fantastic”

“I spent a lot of time with Nicolas Soenen, the sommelier of Duvel Moortgat,” Cas says. “I learned a lot from him. And I’ve also learned a lot of lessons from Ben Vinken. It’s great to have really close contact with him.”

Cas has history with the restaurant on a personal level, too: he worked here for four years as a student, and this emotional connection is obvious when he describes the changes he’s seen over the years.

“What’s very nice is that eighty-year-olds who came here fifty years ago are coming back,” he says. “But now they’re coming with their children and their grandchildren. They want to show them De Rooden Hoed. They want to show

them their Antwerp roots. They want to show them where they had their first date with their grandfather.”

Those same 20-year-olds who are dining at De Rooden Hoed with their grandparents now come back a few weeks later with their boyfriend or girlfriend in tow. “This place is not mine,” Cas says. “It belongs to the people of Antwerp.”

# 25

# Playing it Seef

A historic Antwerp beer is making a comeback. Alan Hope meets the man who made it his mission to revive it

Some brewers are born into their recipes, some achieve recipes, and some have recipes thrust upon them. Johan Van Dyck went hunting for his, and eventually found it in some long-discarded papers.

Johan is, to all intents and purposes, the Antwerpse Brouw Compagnie. In the beer world, he's better known as the former head of marketing for Duvel Moortgat. Three years ago he gave up that job to chase after a chimera: the revival of Seef (pronounced 'safe'), a type of beer once drunk all over Antwerp and its surroundings that completely vanished without trace.

"Beer has always been my thing. I worked at Hoegaarden, then at the Dommel brewery in Halle, then six or seven years at Duvel Moortgat. Turning your hobby into a job, that's always a good feeling."

The switch was flipped when he happened upon a book on the history of brewing in Antwerp. "The book explained that the most popular style of beer from the 1800s to the First World War was Seef beer; so popular that they even named part of town, the Seefhoek, after the beer. There was a brewery there, but in the whole city there were more than a hundred breweries that made that type of beer."

The argument over whether Seef beer was named after the Seefhoek or vice versa will likely never be resolved, but each side is convinced they have it right.

Like many breweries in the years 1914-1918, the Seef breweries were affected by the German invasion, and the plundering of their equipment by the occupying forces. "Some of them started



up again after the war, but many did not. Thirty years later the whole story repeated itself with the Second World War and they all disappeared, and with them the style of beer.” Not only the style, but also the recipe, the book explained.

“My first reaction was, that’s too bad, but then I thought if there were more than a hundred breweries, maybe the author just didn’t do his homework. There must be a recipe out there somewhere. So that became a hobby which in retrospect got a bit out of control. I contacted the city archives, families who used to own breweries, I even talked to old brewers in retirement homes, which didn’t help a lot but it was fun. It took about three years, and then I finally found a family whose great-grandfather had had a brewery just outside Antwerp where they also produced Seef. They had some documents so I went over, and there was a big shoebox full of pictures and invoices and stuff, and a small notebook with his recipes and notes.”

The result was Seefbier, launched at the city hall three years ago and going strong, particularly after winning gold at the World Beer Cup in 2012, followed by two golds at the World Beer Awards and another at the Global Craft Beer Awards 2015.

And now they’re trying it again, this time with a new recipe, one which was intended to honour the Red Star Line Museum in Antwerp, which commemorates the passage of thousands of Europeans by ship to the New World. The museum’s cafe happens to be where we’re meeting, for the Antwerpse Brouw Compagnie does not for the time being have its own brewery: the beers are brewed at Roman in Oude naarde (see BB&F, issue one).

“The idea came because when this museum opened, we were impressed by the whole story behind it. For our second beer we wanted to create something different and new, not a copy of an existing style. What we created is an amber-red beer which combines aspects of Belgian and US beers.”

The new beer is hoppier than Seef, using a mix of Belgian and American hops, including Cascade and Citra, added at six stages of the brewing process.

“In terms of spices, we’ve combined coriander, which is often used in Belgian beers, with ginger, which is not

“I thought, there must be a recipe out there somewhere. It became a hobby which in retrospect got a bit out of control”



often used in Belgium. We also use the historical yeast we use for Seef. So it’s a perfect marriage between new and old, which is also kind of a theme here.”

The beer is called Bootjes Bier (the Beer of the Boats). “It’s another historical Antwerp beer name. It used to exist, there was a brewery in Hoboken which brewed a beer called Bootjes Bier that disappeared in the sixties. We’ve made a new beer, but we took the name because we liked it.” ■



© Bart Van der Perre

## Brussels Beer Challenge comes to Antwerp

It’s not as crazy as it sounds. Since it was launched in Brussels in 2012, the BBC has kept its name but moved to Liège in 2013 and Leuven in 2014. Why Antwerp? We asked beer sommelier and competition organiser Luc De Raedemaeker.

“It’s the city of Rubens, of diamonds, of fashion, a port city...” he explained. “The sum of all these different aspects is what makes Antwerp a real city: a vibrant, welcoming metropolis, which is also great fun and heart-warming, with green areas where you can relax and peaceful corners. Antwerp is a veritable cultural capital, which prides itself on its impressive architecture and splendid art. And it’s a fashionista’s dream destination thanks to the stores of its world-re-

nowned designers. The cafes only serve the best beers and foodies can enjoy the most delicious traditional and multicultural cuisine in the city’s restaurants.”

The competition, meanwhile, exists to promote quality beer, to offer consumers a quality seal awarded by people in the industry, and to offer a promotional tool to beer producers. Entries close on 16 October.

The competition is spread over two days, in which a tasting panel of 60 international beer connoisseurs taste around 850 beers from all over the world. The beers are divided into categories based on origin and style, with the best in each category given gold, silver and bronze medals. Last year’s gold medals included the Atlantic Pale Ale by Sharp’s Brewery in the UK, Affligem Patersvat from

Belgium, Bamberg Schwarzbier from Cervejaria Bamberg in Brazil and Pilot Rock Porter from Caldera in the US. The Best Belgian Beer was our cover star from issue four: Liefmans Goudenband by Duvel Moortgat.

This year’s contest takes place from the opening reception on Friday, 5 November to the announcement of the results on the Sunday.

[www.brusselsbeerchallenge.com](http://www.brusselsbeerchallenge.com)

# Gimme five

Five great places to eat and drink in Antwerp, as recommended by locals to **Breandán Kearney**

The people of Antwerp are proud of their city. They're proud of their diamond trade, art scene and fashion industry. And they're especially proud of their rich and diverse food culture. The city's port – one of the biggest in Europe – ensures their seafood cuisine is varied and exciting, and Antwerp's emergence as a creative and business hub has created a need to keep up with trends in fine dining, as well as a desire to create a few new ones of its own. We asked five Antwerpenaars to recommend their favourite places to eat and drink in the city.

## Bún Antwerp

Recommended by *Els Debremaeker*

As a sinologist and a chef, I have a weak spot for Asian food, especially street food. The smells always take me back in time. I lived in China for several years and travelled through Asia extensively, so when this restaurant opened in Antwerp, I had to try it. It's a true meeting of East and West, where the owners, Hoa and Huibrecht, offer a tranquil and warm reception.

The beautiful pottery dishes in which the food is served (as well as the woodwork

in the restaurant) were handcrafted by Huibrecht. Hoa's parents arrived here by boat from war-torn Vietnam and today she shares her passion for authentic Vietnamese street food, with all its colours, textures and tastes, with the people of Antwerp.

Sint-Jorispoort 22, [www.bunantwerp.be](http://www.bunantwerp.be)

*Els Debremaeker is a chef and food writer. After travelling in Asia, she moved back to Belgium and cooks her way around the world from her own kitchen*

[www.njamelicious.be](http://www.njamelicious.be)

## Grand Café De Rooden Hoed

Recommended by *Erik Verdonck*

It's always hard to pick out one particular place in your home town. Do you go for the best meal, the atmosphere, the setting, the choice of beers or the live music? Nostalgia could have a hand in this, but few places are still the way they were 30 or more years ago.

Bearing all this in mind, I would go for Grand Café De Rooden Hoed. Why? Because of the welcoming staff, the fine meals, the nice beers and the unique setting. The former mussel restaurant has been transformed into a brasserie. Pick a table with a view of the cathedral, at the terrace, on the first floor, in the oyster bar

or in the historic cellars. Wherever you sit, you're sure to feel welcome.

**Tip:** Order their seafood menu, and ask owner Cas to pour you a cocktail, prepare a sabayon with Liefmans Kriek Brut at your table or just serve a beer. Watch and enjoy.

Oude Kooymarkt 25, [www.deroodenhoed.be](http://www.deroodenhoed.be)

*Erik Verdonck is a story teller going his way through the wonderful worlds of beer, food and tourism. Be his judge or advocate at*

[www.beertourism.com](http://www.beertourism.com)

## Bakkerij Goossens

Recommended by *Luc De Raedemaeker*

Goossens is a well-known artisanal bakery in the city centre. You won't have much trouble finding the place, because there's always a long queue of people waiting outside. After tasting the bread, you'll understand why.

You could go for the sucre or raisin bread, but the masterpiece for beer lovers is a Keuninckske, produced with the local beer, De Koninck. As soon as you put this bread to your lips, you notice its incredible aroma; it smells like all the warm, yeasty maltiness you get hit with when you walk into a brewery.

When you take a bite, your mouth fills with the perfect combination of dense, chewy, crusty and moist textures. It delivers the wonderful flavours you love in a great beer: caramel, malt and yeast, except this is like a beer you can chew.

Korte Gasthuisstraat 31

*Luc De Raedemaeker is director of the Brussels Beer Challenge and editor-in-chief of Bier Grand Cru and the Beer Link (China). He's also Doemens Diplom-Biersommelier and owner and founder of Beer matters.*



## Dock's Café

Recommended by *Ben Vincken*

Piet Vannieuwenhuysse has just received the Cornet Beer & Food Pairing award, a yearly award given by Bierpassie magazine. Piet is the owner of Dock's Café, a brasserie that's been on the Antwerp culinary map since the early 90s. He gets a lot of foreign guests, and they've played an important role in the wide range of 39 Belgian speciality beers he offers.

He has several beers on tap, thanks to the innovative tapmaster from Palm Craft Brewers, which allows him to keep the draught beers fresh for three weeks. The rest of the beers are in large bottles,

and he serves them on ice buckets and in small wine glasses, the way the beer sommeliers advise. He serves beers as an aperitif, and also pairs them with his dishes. Some examples are oysters with Dame Jeanne Brut, a local beer, Bresse chicken with Palm, red meat with Cornet, desserts with Rodenbach Caractère Rouge. You can also ask for your own pairings: choose a dish and pair it with your favourite beer. Piet will advise.

The design of the Art Deco-style brasserie is by Antoine Pinto, timeless and stunning. It's definitely a place to be for beer and food aficionados.

Jordaenskaai 7, [www.docks.be](http://www.docks.be)

*Ben Vincken is a beer sommelier, journalist, publisher and specialist in beer brand development. Since 1992 he has worked as a journalist and publisher on titles such as Michael Jackson's 'Great Beers of Belgium' and the Bierpassie/Bièrepassion Magazine. Every June he organises the Beer Passion Weekend in Antwerp*

[www.bierpassieweekend.be](http://www.bierpassieweekend.be)

## Café Kamiel

Recommended by *Iris Debremaeker*

Two years ago, brother and sister Frederik and Ans converted an old pub into a no-nonsense corner café. It's next to a lovely park with a playground for children: a perfect family place. The menu displays a love for everything authentic: the vegetables they use in their quiches and salads come from a local farm and the lemonades and beers are organic. It's also a great place for breakfast on Sundays, with a buffet of croissants and homemade bread, yoghurt, granola and pancakes. And on sunny days the terrace is a hotspot for young families.

Markgravellei 90, [www.cafekamiel.be](http://www.cafekamiel.be)

*Iris Debremaeker loves food, travel, books and beer and writes about it on her blog*

[www.swonderfulnotebook.blogspot.com](http://www.swonderfulnotebook.blogspot.com)

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# The Martino: *Sandwich of Legend*

Joe Stange goes in search of the origins of a piece of Antwerp (or is it Ghent?) culinary history

Antwerp's version of the story goes like this: it's 1951 and footballer Albert De Herdt is working in a sandwich shop on De Coninckplein, north of Central station. This is the same year, incidentally, that he would be the Belgian league's top scorer, with 25 goals for Berchem Sport. (Salaries were lower then, obviously, or else here was a man who loved sandwiches as much as he loved football.)

One day, fellow footballer Theo Maertens – nickname: Martino – walks into De Hert's sandwich shop. He has, we can suppose, a hunger of the sort that high-energy top-level athletes can have. He asks for a broodje with everything De Herdt has left in the kitchen.

This is what Maertens gets: fresh, raw steak américain, cayenne pepper, ketchup, onions, pickles, pili-pili, salt, Tabasco and Worcestershire sauce.

A legend is born. That is the classic Martino – according to Antwerpeners, anyway. Ghent has a different story, but we'll get to that. First I want to find a proper Martino in Antwerp, ideally with a glass of beer.

So on a summer evening I return to the Martino's birthplace. De Coninckplein has no great monument, no plaque, no commercialised Martino Museum to commemorate that watershed moment in Belgian culinary history. But the place is full of life, with neighbours from overlapping cultural enclaves gathering to sit and talk or play basketball. De Herdt's shop of 1951 is long gone, of course, but there are several busy cafes around the square.

Only one has a Martino on the menu: a small bakery named De Coninck. For €2.25 and despite the absence of anything beer-like, my friend and I give it a try. After obscured goings-on behind the counter we receive sandwiches on tough, stale bread, loaded down with carrots, lettuce, tomatoes, pickles, onions and boiled eggs, glued together with a tangy, red, vaguely meat-like paste.

Clearly this is not the real thing.

We're both hungry enough to choke down about half before remembering that life is too short, stomach space too precious. We move on, as we need something to unclog our throats. So we head to the Paters Vaetje, the

“I think different people invented it in different places. Who knows? They're all dead, the people who invented it”



classic cafe in the shadow of the Cathedral of Our Lady. While perusing the list of 100-odd beers we glance over the snacks and – lo and behold – there is a Martino. This is fate speaking. Or is it doom?

I order one, despite not being especially hungry any more. What I receive resembles the imagined Martino of legend – fresh bread, plenty of pickles, onions, spicy sauces – except that the beef is cooked. It turns out the Monk's Casket has two Martinos on the menu. The waiter had apparently sized me up – hmmm, tourist! – and decided that what I really wanted was the Martino burger, not the Martino américain.

So I eat the burger. And it's good – punchy heat, juicy beef, tangy pickles, all doused with a brightly bitter Taras Boulba. Yet Mission: MartinoQuest is incomplete. I must return later to the Paters Vaetje for the real thing... but first, a detour to Ghent.

### The Other Martino

Here is one tale I hear – not fully researched, mind you, just an explanation from my friend Jim, a fellow enthusiast of odd Belgian snacks. “I think the sandwich you're referring to is the broodje Martino, which is definitely from Ghent,” says Jim, who lives there. “The version sold in Antwerp and other parts of Belgium often omits the essential anchovies and is looked on with derision by the Gentenaars.

“The story goes that during the German occupation, a soldier went into the Martino snack bar in Ghent and asked for the best sandwich in the

house. The owner, trying to get back at the occupiers, constructed a sandwich from préparé, onions, egg, anchovies and tabasco sauce. To his surprise, the soldier loved it, and the broodje Martino was born.”

It's a good story, but it has problems. The Martino cafe in east-central Ghent, on Vlaanderenstraat near the red light district, only opened in 1954 – nine years after German occupation ended. 1954 is also the year that Raymond Noe claimed to have invented it. Notably, that's three years after De Herdt's Antwerp claim.

“I think different people invented it in different places,” says Pascaline Noe, Raymond's daughter, who now runs the Martino with her brother Didier. “Who knows? They're all dead, the people who invented it.” She's right, of course: Noe died in 1979, De Herdt in 2013. But I am alive, and I am hungry. So I order a Martino from Pascaline.

“We don't have it.”

What? You don't serve a Martino in the place where it was invented?

“You can't get a broodje Martino here any more, it's too much trouble. Everybody wanted it in different ways.”

Do people ever try to order it anyway?

“Every day they come in and ask! We've not served it since 2007. And they still come in and ask for it. You're the fourth or fifth person today.” It's 10pm, incidentally, and the cafe has only been open since 6pm.

Dispirited and confused but still hungry, I ask for a suggestion. It seems one of the Martino's current specialities is a cheese and egg burger. Like a dis-

tillation of all that stuff you eat while drunk in college – Ghent is a student city, after all – it arrives as a cooked beef patty smothered in cheese, fried egg and a tangy red sauce. I eat it with a comforting, numbing Westmalle Tripel. And I like it.

But MartinoQuest remains elusive.

### Back in Antwerp

De Herdt later opened a relatively upmarket restaurant on Amerikalei called *Ciro's*. It's still there, popular and efficiently run by new ownership. But like in Ghent, the Martino is not on the menu. So the next day, it's clear what I must do. I return to the Paters Vaetje and order the correct Martino – américain for the American, *alstublieft*. It's fresh and cool and tangy, even if it lacks the spice of the burger version. I add hot sauce to compensate, and more pickles to give it some crunch. I believe this is legal within the bounds of the classic. The beer manages to meet the Martino's intensity, just. It's dryish and bitterish with a subtle acidity from half-wild fermentation – it's the Wild Jo, in fact, the new one from De Koninck.

A local beer is only appropriate, after all. Antwerp has the better claim. ■

# Beer and *the meaning of life*

He's been through personal tragedy, but as he explains to **Paul Walsh**, Palm's Jan Toye still has a lot to be thankful for  
(With additional reporting from **Johan Wanne Madalijns**)

As he sits down for our interview, Jan Toye counts his blessings. "To be a part of the beer world, to create a product that gives people pleasure, to have inherited all of this," he says, nodding to the brewery across the street.

Toye – managing director of Palm Belgian Craft Brewers – is a fortunate man, I suggest. "That's right," he says. "Well, I lost a son..."

His son Christophe killed himself in 2004 at the age of 21 and Toye often speaks openly about the tragedy, and how it changed his life, not just personally but also professionally.

Today our discussion touches on his son's death, suicide prevention and the meaning of life, but also hop varieties, wood ageing, beer distribution and a brewery that has changed radically since the glory days of the 1970s and 80s. Then, as Toye puts it, everybody had to have Palm Special Belge: his responsibility was to not so much to create demand but to meet it, through investment, expansion, innovations and, above all, hard work.

At the back of his mind, were there niggling apprehensions that this beer would fall out of favour? "Honestly, no. The train was just steaming ahead, and I found it wonderfully natural. One large brewing hall, another brewing hall, extra tanks, bottling lines, warehouses. As an engineer, I thought it was fantastic. It was exponential growth, and it wasn't planned. It just happened. We did diversify: buying Rodenbach and buying fifty percent of Boon. But for a long time people couldn't get enough of Palm Special Belge. I just needed to increase production. Streamline it. That's how I saw my role."



But during this frenzy of growth, tastes were slowly evolving. Palm, once the homegrown alternative to industrially produced pils, was starting to look old-fashioned. People wanted to expand their horizons to Trappist beers, strong blond beers and even traditional sour beers. This evolved to today's phenomenon in which people are attracted by everything that's small and local.

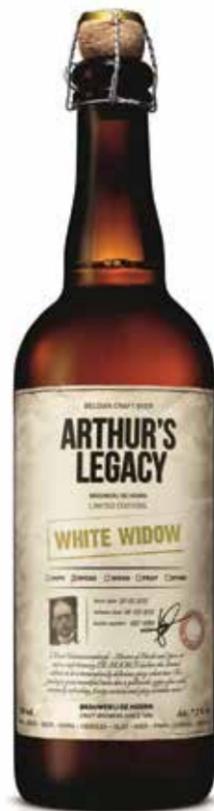
Now, however, Palm – or, I should say, Palm Belgian Craft Brewers – aren't going to miss out. Toye and his team are making their brewery smaller so people can participate in creating beers through tastings and focus groups.

"I have a very clear picture of our *raison d'être*," he says. "The bottom line is that everyone who works with us – our brewers, our sales people, marketers – should all be innovative and creative. They should be able to interpret our story, and to talk about how we work with our ingredients to make great beer."

The flagship beer of the new Palm Craft Brewers is Cornet, a heavy (8.5°), fairly dry blond ale with a subtle, sophisticated wood flavour with velvety mouthfeel that rivals that of an oak-matured wine. It's named after Theodoor Cornet who, according to the census of 1686, was innkeeper, brewer and distiller of De Hoom inn in Steenhuffel. He was also a steward of the Count of Maldeghem-Steenhuffele, Lord of Diepensteyn.

At the count's request, Theodoor brewed a stock beer that was kept in oak barrels in the cellars at Diepensteyn Castle. Today's beer is served in a tall glass chalice that bears the Count's battle mask on the foot.

Another innovation is Arthur's Legacy, a range of limited edition beers, each based on one particular discipline: hops, fruit, herbs or wood.



Another innovation is Arthur's Legacy, a range of limited edition beers, each based on one particular discipline: hops, fruit, herbs or wood. The name refers to Toye's great-uncle Arthur Van Roy, a brewer who always believed in the success of high fermentation beers.

The brewery is also innovating in how it interacts with the market. "Our pub owners are our ambassadors; we don't evaluate them on volume. We're looking for people with passion for beer, people who can infect others with that passion. Money isn't coming easily but we're learning a lot and becoming much more connected with the consumer."

Listening to Toye, it's tempting to be cynical about his attempts to restyle Palm as a local, craft brewery. After all, these days everyone seems to want to be craft. But he appears entirely sincere. Does his tragic story mean we should give him the benefit of the doubt?

In an interview with a Flemish trade union organisation in 2012, Toye mentioned his son's belief about consumerism being a new form of slavery. "That's what he thought. The Western model is a predatory model. We plunder mines, forests and seas. We use fossil fuels without thinking what we'll do when they're exhausted. Meanwhile, we're heating the earth with predictably destructive consequences. And people just keep on consuming; creating their own, accelerated destruction."

Bleak as it may sound, this is not end of the story. The answer, according to Toye, is to return to local production. "Flowers and beans that can be grown in Belgium are in fact flown in from Kenya. It's quite incredible," he says. "Today, a high level of prosperity equals a high ecological footprint. A low level of prosperity has a low carbon footprint. So we have to evolve into a model in which we can reach high prosperity with a low carbon footprint: a new eco-economic model, which again will be more local."

He could go on all day. This is Jan Toye the optimist, the idealist: the 67-year-old entrepreneur who still feels he has to prove himself as a businessman. It remains to be seen whether he will turn Palm Craft Brewers into a successful venture that's also ethical, local, ecological and credible. But given everything that he's been through, you can't help but admire the effort. ■

## Bosteels looks to the future

The people at Brouwerij Bosteels in Buggenhout value tradition.

Antoine Bosteels is the seventh generation of the family to run the brewery. Its three distinct brands – Kwak, Tripel Karmeliet and DeuS Brut des Flandres – each have unique stories rooted in local history.

But every brewery must move with the times and Bosteels have been involved in a process of modernising the brewery for several years. This is perfectly illustrated by their recent acquisition of a new mash filter.

It's a Meura 2001, a state-of-the-art multiple frame filter which sits side by side in the brewery with their old copper stills. "What we're looking for is a mix between a traditional brewhouse and modern technology," says Antoine.

The new filter will do the job of a lauter tun but will offer more control. "I think this has a positive influence on the stability of the brew," says Antoine. "It gives us the opportunity to add some more brews in a day but without compromising on quality." ■



## Bar Vélo

The Four Points by Sheraton, a hotel on Rue Paul Spaak off Avenue Louise in Brussels, has opened a new bar dedicated to both beer and cycling. Bar Vélo will promote beer from small breweries across Belgium, with different guest beers on draught throughout the year.

Brasserie de Bastogne featured at the bar's opening event and their Belle d'été will be on draft at Bar Vélo during the summer months.

The bar also features a beer library where visitors can bring a beer and exchange it with one that previous visitors have left.

## Ommegang Charles Quint Adopts Belgian Hop Logo

Ommegang Charles Quint, the top-fermented blond beer brewed by Haacht brewery in Boortmeerbeek, has adopted the Belgian Hop logo guaranteeing it is brewed with at least 50% Belgian hops.

The system was introduced in 2011 as a way of promoting the use of Belgian hops. The production of Belgian hops is limited these days to 150 hectares, mainly in the region of Poperinge in West Flanders, as we explored in issue two of Belgian Beer & Food. Hops being one of the principal ingredients in the brewing of most beers, it was decided to promote the home-grown crop by awarding a special logo to those beers which use Belgian-grown

hops in their beers.

"The growing of Belgian hops has for generations been in the hands of small family businesses who bring passion and know-how to the production of quality crops," said Karel Vermeiren, winner of the Michael Jackson Award 2015 and master brewer at Haacht, the third-largest brewing group in the country...which we covered in issue four. "In order to support them, we have decided to brew our Ommegang with more than 50% Belgian hops, and for the rest to use varieties of aroma hops which are not yet grown in Belgium."

Ommegang is a top-fermented blond beer, straw-coloured with the aroma of citrus. The taste is floral and

spicy thanks to the hop varieties used, which also give a complex bitterness. Unlike the other beers in the Charles Quint range – the Rouge Rubis and the Blonde Dorée – the Ommegang is re-fermented in the bottle, which gives it even more pronounced aromas and a more refined flavour.

"The Belgian Hops logo recently awarded to the Ommegang will soon appear on the packaging, with the emblem of the Crystal Taste Award which the beer won last year," said Baudouin van der Kelen, director of marketing. Ommegang Charles Quint is available in drinks wholesalers and supermarkets in the Colruyt group. ■



## Battle of Waterloo gets the tribute it deserves

This year marks the bicentenary of the Battle of Waterloo, a town to the south of Brussels nowadays, but in those days an agglomeration of hamlets close to the main road to Brussels. It was that

location which meant the battle was fought there, but the name of the town has now become synonymous with hubristic defeat.

Waterloo beer has until now existed in two forms: Tri-

ple Blond and Strong Dark. To mark the anniversary of the battle, the John Martin brewery is bringing out a new beer, based on what we know of the type of beer drunk at the time of the battle. It's a pale, top-fermented saison-type beer of 6% alcohol, available only on draught. Unusually, it's being brewed on the site of the Ferme de Mont-Saint-Jean, which existed at the time of the battle, although the topography of the area has changed somewhat since then.

The farm is itself being transformed into what promises to be a highly attractive visitor's centre with restaurant and tourism facilities. "In the long term, we want to become an economic motor for the region," said Anthony Martin CEO of John Martin brewery. "We want to become a tourism of destination, and put an end to fast-food tour-

ism, where the buses deposit their tourists at the foot of the Butte then leave half an hour later for Bruges."

Legend has it the beer gave the soldiers courage, strength and vigour, but that could be just the word of the beer-drinking northerners who won, as opposed to the wine-drinking French who lost. Martin says: "This is a summer beer, but different in that it's made with 30% wheat and 30% malt. You could categorise it as a 'pseudo-blanche' because it looks like a blanche, but the character we wanted to give it with the hops makes it more like a blond."

The slogan of the beer is "The beer of bravery". It was almost – and the old version remains on some old publicity material – "The beer of victory". "As a British person," Martin says, "I thought that was a little arrogant." ■

**Brasserie de Silly**  
Tél.: 068/55 16 95

**www.silly-beer.com**

**BELGIAN FAMILY BREWERS** .be

*Une bière brassée avec savoir se déguste avec sagesse*



# Survive and thrive

By Paul Walsh

**D**e Halve Maan is on one of Bruges's main tourist trails and has become the most visited brewery in the Benelux region. Yet far from the sweetened crowd pleasers that you might expect at such a location, its beers are complex and finely balanced, tending to the dryer end of the spectrum, and often surprising in their inventiveness. This might be part of the plan: a tourist brewery that makes beer for connoisseurs. It's a place beer lovers would visit even if it lay in the remotest corner of West Flanders and not in the centre of Belgium's largest tourist hub.

Then again, De Halve Maan was brewing beer long before it became a tourist attraction. It dates back to the 15th century, with current owners the Maes family becoming involved in 1856 and pushing the brewery forward in the face of industrialisation and standardising tastes.

It's not entirely clear how they succeeded, but today De Halve Maan is the only brewery in a city that had at least 20 at the start of the last century.

"For a long time, the story of Belgian breweries has been one of constant decline," managing director Xavier Vanneste says. "It's only very recently that the number has started to increase again. And for the most part it's only the ones that were innovating and keeping up with trends that survived. You saw this with the brewers who got into bottled beer first, and then larger beer and more recently speciality beer."

But De Halve Maan still felt the strain of market pressure, and 20 years ago it was forced to sell its biggest brand, Straffe Hendrik, and everything

connected with it.

This wasn't the end of the story, though; just the beginning of a new chapter.

"My family always believed in running an independent small brewery," says Xavier, whose mother and sisters are very much involved in the operation. In 2005 the family restarted brewing on the original site, with a new brand called Brugse Zot, which has since become their biggest seller. It's given them the means to buy back the rights to Straffe Hendrik.

Not only did they restart the old range, they also expanded it with limited-edition beers that are clearly not directed at the mass market. The first was Straffe Hendrik Heritage, a version of Straffe Hendrik quadruple aged for one year in oak barrels, which brings together the original's spicy and bitter flavours with a touch of wine and oak from the aging process.

"It started as an experiment: we bought forty tuns, and it was really interesting to see what happened because every barrel has a different evolution," says Xavier. "We always work with French oak, and this year we're working with barrels from different houses. We're also using new barrels, because we'd like to have our own barrels eventually. But it's a very limited edition. We have a small cellar where we age the beer in barrels and we fill it once a year."



The Heritage is certainly not something you'd guzzle during a walking tour of Bruges, although it is something you could buy and take home as a souvenir, perhaps.

Then there's Straffe Hendrik Wild: the original Straffe Hendrik triple bottle-conditioned with wild Brettanomyces yeast. This creates an aroma and taste of grapes and apricots, but the tripel's delicate dry finish remains.

Most high-fermentation brewers will do whatever they can to avoid wild yeast lest it contaminate their equipment. At De Halve Maan they only add the strains at the bottling plant, which is in a different location to the brewery. But this doesn't mean the process was easy.

"It was another experiment, and I know that bottle-conditioning with brett is dangerous, because you never know how far the brett will go," Xavier explains. You just need to taste a lot because there are so many kinds of brett and they develop all kinds of flavours. We selected one type, but it's an ongoing process. It keeps us sharp and interested."

The beer itself is unique, although the use of wild yeast and the fact the beer rounds out with age mean that comparisons with Orval are unavoi-



“We bought forty tuns, and it was really interesting to see what happened because every barrel has a different evolution”

able. “The Orval of Bruges” was how sommelier Sofie Vanrafelghem described it at a recent tasting.

It's clear that Xavier is keen on innovating, but only in a way that respects the tradition of his brewery. So it's perhaps no surprise that he's also president of the Belgian Family Brewers, an organisation that promotes independent family breweries that have been making beer for at least 50 years. Their slogan is “where innovation meets tradition,”

and while they all respect tradition, Xavier says that the interpretation of innovation can be different from brewery to brewery.

“There are a lot of breweries, with a lot of history and tradition, and you can be innovative in several ways. In the way you market your beer, in the ecological measures you introduce... Now we have twenty-two members. But there is so much diversity there.” ■

[www.halvemaan.be](http://www.halvemaan.be)



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## Spot the difference

Beer festivals in Belgium tend to follow the same tried-and-trusted formula: a big hall, free entry, lots of beer stands, tokens, a Dixieland jazz band and greasy food.

There's nothing wrong with this, of course. But with so many festivals popping up, it's only natural that some will try to put their own twist on the format. Alvinne craft beer festival is at the fore-

front of this, and its first innovation is to bring in international brewers. This is great for people who are used to the beer festival circuit and are familiar with the same old faces. Alvinne has brought in brewers like Jester King from the US and Italy's Brewfist that you generally won't find in Belgian shops or bars.

The next step, though this perhaps wasn't intentional, is to put the festival in a hard-to-reach location. The organisers

chose Bierhalle Deconinck in Vichte, West Flanders, a magnet for beer lovers but somewhere without direct access by train. The result is that there were very few tourists or passers-by at the festival: people were there to sip and enjoy beer, not to get drunk and have a party, so the atmosphere was very laid-back.

The final and most important change was to feature food from a pop-up version of Nuetnigenough, the Brussels bastion of beer cuisine. So if you wanted to, you could sit and have a decent meal paired with great beer. If you have a partner who doesn't love beer quite as much as you do, the restaurant is a great way of convincing them to come along.

As Kevin Desmet pointed out in his Belgian Beer Geek blog, having the Bierhalle Deconinck next door – essentially a giant beer warehouse – also brought great advantages: all the beers on offer at the festival were available at the store, so you could stock up on your new favourites. ■

# What's in a name?

Brasserie de Silly isn't as silly as it sounds, but neither do they take themselves too seriously, as **Alan Hope** explains

If you're looking for a beer that's guaranteed to put a smile on someone's lips, the safest bet is Silly. That's the name of a brewery in the town of the same name, within the triangle of Hainaut created by Ath, Enghien and Soignies. The area is traversed by the river Sylle, from which the village gets its name.

There's been a brewery on this spot since 1850 and, like most breweries of the time, it was joined on to a farm. The current managers, cousins Lionel and Bertrand Van der Haegen, are the sixth generation. The fifth generation, Lionel informs us, show up virtually every day, in the way of brewing family ancestors everywhere.

"It started as a farm and they brewed only in the winter when there was less activity in the fields," explains Lionel. "They were making Saison Silly, which is a beer that was served to the farm labourers. The farm was there until 1947. We were allowed to carry on brewing during the two world wars."

While hundreds of breweries were stripped of their equipment during World War One, many of them unable or unwilling to open again after the conflict was over, Silly escaped severe damage. "They came and took some copper

away, but our brew kettles were bricked in so there wasn't a lot of copper showing. They took parts, but not enough to force us to stop. A lot of other breweries had to stop then; some started again and many didn't. Before World War One there were I think seven breweries just in this village. After World War Two there were only two left. The name of this brewery at that time was Brasserie Meynsbrughen, which was the name of our grandmother, and when the last competitor in the village stopped in 1973 we changed the name to Brasserie de Silly since we were the only one left."

Not only did it survive, Silly thrived, and all because there was a company of Scottish soldiers billeted in the village. "They came to my great-great-grandfather and asked if he could make a Scottish-style beer for them. He said it's difficult, I don't have the raw materials and I don't know exactly how to make it. They said to him, 'No problem, one of the soldiers here is a brewer in Scotland, he'll help you make the beer.' Jack Payne was his name, and he stayed on at the brewery after the war for the rest of his life."

And the Payne line continues. "His great-grandson was at school with my cousin. His grandson Ronald still has a house in the centre of town. He was





“A company of Scottish soldiers came to my great-great-grandfather and asked if he could make them a Scottish-style beer”



a hairdresser. Jack had the opportunity to help my great-grandfather make the beer and everybody was happy with it. When it was time to go back, he found a wife and he stayed on.”

The Scotch beer that resulted is a fine example of the type. It forms part of Silly’s wide range, which includes the two Double Enghien beers, brown and blond, named after a neighbouring village whose brewery was taken over by Silly in 1975. There’s also an Enghien Noël brewed each year for Christmas.

The Enghien name presents a problem for a brewery that now exports 45% of its total production: people find it difficult to pronounce (it should be pronounced Ong-gyen with the nasal French n); most English-speakers approximate with ‘Double Engine’, while the Americans went so far as to ask for a change of name. They won’t get their wish, but the company intends to rationalise its range.

“We want to have a wider range to be able to meet the demands of the customers,” Lionel explains. “We have one conventional range and one organic range; we have the pils style, then we have all of the specialities – a white, a



saison, a fruit beer, a special belge, a triple, a Scotch. A wide range allows most customers to find something they like. We’re now working on a way to have a line run through all of that, because if you look today, it’s true that you see some brands under Silly, three under the name Enghien, and there’s no simple line, so we’re working on that.”

That means bringing three beers – Titje, the wheat-based white beer; La Divine, the strong amber; and Super 64, a special belge – under the Silly name as Blanche de Silly, La Divine de Silly and



Super Silly. The Silly name stays for Pils, Pils Bio (organic), Scotch and Saison. The Enghien family remains. And there will be two outsiders – Abbaye de la Forest, an abbey beer which depends on its monastic link, and Pink Killer, a very unusual brew based on white beer with added grapefruit juice and a hint of lime.

“That’s our only fruit beer,” Lionel says. “It goes go down very well in Asia and in France.” We tasted it on our visit. Asia is welcome to it: this is one Silly beer that Belgium can do without. ■

[www.silly-beer.com](http://www.silly-beer.com)

# Generation Z

A move to Leuven helped kick-start the Zyθος Beer Festival. **Breandán Kearney** explains how the event plays a vital role for Belgian brewers



Zyθος may deliver a range of activities in their mission to promote Belgian beer culture, but by far the most important is the Zyθος Beer Festival, held on the last weekend of April each year. Since it moved to Leuven from Sint-Niklaas four years ago, the festival’s visitor numbers have increased by 10% each year.

“Our thanks go to Leuven,” says Zyθος president Jan Rumes. “They convinced us to make it a complete experience, and they’re telling the story with us now.” The collaboration with the city saw more than 17,000 people attend during the two days of the festival this year.

The festival’s importance to breweries can’t be underestimated. “For me, it’s my main marketing instrument,” says Ronald Mengerink of De Dochter van de Korenaar. “I think Zyθος do a great job

of organising it. It gives me the chance to try to win the consumers award, to get a lot of feedback from international importers and to actually sell my beer.”

But it hasn’t always been plain sailing between Zyθος and the breweries. “There was a period of about five years where we didn’t come to the festival,” says Glenn Castelein of Alvinne. “We had a little disagreement with the people who were organising Zyθος back then about how small breweries were being treated and we thought it wasn’t really fair.” Changes were made, and Alvinne is now back at the festival and on good terms with the current Zyθος board.

Zyθος have also improved their relationship with the bigger breweries in recent years. “The first time AB Inbev came to our festival, they brought a forty-foot trailer stretching over 118 square metres,” says Jan. “We told them they

were getting ten square metres.” It’s been a conversation, he explains. “We’ve been trying to tell AB Inbev over the past few years to bring something new. Initially they didn’t understand, because they didn’t understand the audience. But now they’re here with the Leffe IPA. It’s not the IPA the beer geek is looking for, but it will be the stepping stone to other IPAs. It’s a really big step forward. They finally understand what it’s all about.”

Zyθος haven’t been unaffected by one of the more controversial developments in Belgian brewing in the last few years. The rise of beer firms – companies who create beer products but don’t brew the beers themselves – has raised question marks from some in the industry over their participation at the festival. “We don’t like the beer firms to be here,” says Mark De Neef of De Glazen Toren. “They ruin the business. They have more money for publicity and gadgets and whatever. We spend all the money we earn on brewing.”

Indeed, it seemed at one stage that for the first time there would be no beer firms at the festival in 2015. “This year we rearranged some of the booth islands, and we were left with 16 fewer booths,” says Jan. “At the same time, our festival has become big and important for breweries and they began to realise they should be there and they started to subscribe earlier. These two facts meant we were sold out before we could invite the beer firms.”

He denies that there was a deliberate policy to squeeze beer firms out. “There was a lot of commotion, with people saying we were boycotting them, but none of this is true,” he says. “There are firms who subscribed on the reserve list and so there were four or five of them at the festival. Others found space with the brewery where they brew their beer. So there’s no boycott at all. It is what it is.” ■

[www.zbf.be](http://www.zbf.be)



# The simple life

Beer pairing specialist Hilaire Spreuwers creates dishes for three beers from Brewery Lefebvre

**B**eer pairing doesn't have to be complicated, says pairing specialist Hilaire Spreuwers, as he places a plate of raw green vegetables and feta cheese in front of us.

Though simple, there's an array of flavours and textures here – bitterness from the asparagus, freshness from the cucumber and creaminess from the broad beans – and they all serve as a base for the sharp saltiness of the feta that lies on top. Giving added crunch and texture are pine nuts, and underlying the whole dish there's a faint touch of garlic.

Once the cheese's saltiness has covered your palate, you'll need something robust and flavourful to merge with it and break it down. The deep-blond, honey-infused Barbar from Lefebvre fits the bill.

Lefebvre uses real honey in the making of this beer, and there are certainly honey notes in the aroma. The nose is also floral and spicy but above all citrusy, a note that becomes more prominent once you taste. As well as malt, wheat is also used in the brewing of this beer, giving it a roundness that doesn't become heavy. In the finish there's a soft caramelised burnt-sugar note, which merges well with the feta.





the citrus, clove and banana aromas that you get in the nose of many classic tripels, this beer offers wood, vanilla and ripe apple. The palate is breadly, slightly bitter, with a finish that brings caramel and liquorice.

In response, Hilaire offers monkfish garnished with juice of tomato on a bed of black pudding. The fish is tender and breaks off if you so much as touch it with the fork, while the tomato brings a tanginess that goes well with the beer's sweetness, and the bed of black pudding brings a rich, homey fullness, raising the dish's intensity so that it stands up to this formidable beer. ■



This dish works as a starter, but it's also something you could easily prepare at home as a beer snack. Looking for a healthier, tastier alternative to crisps? This is it.

Next up is fried eel coated in pesto, accompanied by broccoli and garnished with fresh herbs. Usually Hilaire would use a saison-style beer to pair with this dish, but we wanted to see if it would work with the lighter Blanche de Bruxelles wheat beer. Hilaire scatters lemon zest over the eel, which adds a summery new dimension and picks up the citrus note in the beer.

The beer is delicate and Hilaire's challenge is to make sure that nothing in this dish overpowers it. Right enough, the pesto, while complementing the fish's oiliness, highlights the gentle coriander note in the beer without smothering it. The dish is rich, creamy and tasty, while the beer is crisp, smooth and refreshing: it's a solid, no-nonsense pairing.

The next beer on the menu is Flor-effe Tripel, and where you might expect



“The nose is floral and spicy but above all citrusy, a note that becomes more prominent once you taste

*Hilaire Spreuwers  
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## Bruin in the USA

**B**elgian Beer Café NoMad on New York's Fifth Avenue is an impressive celebration of everything Belgian. It also makes a statement: that Belgian beer is a sophisticated product that deserves to be presented with care and attention.

The restaurant is a beautiful replica of a fin-de-siècle Brussels brasserie, although cleaner, shinier and with friendlier staff. The food is classic Belgian fare, with an emphasis on seafood: mussels, oysters, cod and salmon all feature, but there's also carbonade flamande, steak tartare and vol au vent. There's nothing too adventurous here, but that's fine: this brasserie gets the

big things right and serves as an introduction to Belgian cuisine for the uninitiated. It's that all-important first step.

The staff are knowledgeable about beer and have a decent list to work with, from classics like Westmalle Tripel to less well-known offerings like Saison St-Feuillien and Vanderghinste Oud Bruin.

And this place doesn't just want to serve Belgian beer: it wants to educate its patrons about Belgian brewing traditions. Through its Perfectly Paired series, customers learn how to match the flavour profiles of abbey brews and cheeses, and they can also discover how Belgian beer influenced the American craft beer movement. ■

[www.bbcnomad.com](http://www.bbcnomad.com)



# It's all relative

How will private chef Els Debremaeker fare in our food-pairing test? **Alan Hope** throws down the gauntlet

Taking up the food-pairing challenge this issue is Els Debremaeker, a private chef who also works for home-furnishings chain Dille en Kamille doing food styling and creating recipes. She's the author with her sister Iris of two books: *Brunch* and *Ingemaakt* (Preserved). Given three beers from Omer Vander Ghinste to work with, she drew inspiration from her family's food memories.

**The beer:** Vanderghinste Oud Bruin

**The dish:** Fresh grilled mackerel with roasted rhubarb

This is our starter and it's the perfect way to wake up the senses. Those bold mackerel flavours are balanced by the tanginess in the roasted rhubarb and this in turn goes very well with the balanced sweetness and milk sourness of Vanderghinste Oud Bruin. Overall this pairing offers assertive flavours in the dish balanced with by a thirst-quenching, refreshing and delicately sour beer.

**The beer:** OMER blond is now the brewer's most successful brand. Perhaps coincidentally, the former Bockor later decided to change its name back to the original Omer Vander Ghinste.

**The dish:** Boudin blanc, fennel and apple chutney, crusty bread.

"The minute I opened the beer I thought kermis [the annual fair held in every small town in Flanders]. My grandfather was a butcher in Halle, and for me the smell of kermis is the smell of boudin. The beer reminds me of this."

The boudin is served simply pan-fried, with a loaf of crusty nut bread.

"Normally I would bake it myself but there wasn't time." It's accompanied by a chutney of green apple and fennel, made according to a recipe from Els's second book. The first, *Brunch*, went down so well the publisher came looking for a second.

"They asked me to come in for a chat and said they wanted to bring out a second book, and I could choose what it would be about. I said when I was travelling I used to make chutneys and pickles, in China I learned how to make kimchi and they said, ok, let's do that. It wasn't at all fashionable then. Now the trend for fermentation and pickling is everywhere, I'm getting a little bit sick of it."

The boudin has a distinctive peppery flavour, so the chutney is light and fresh – absolutely fresh, as it happens. In three weeks or so the preserve will be at its best.

Boudin is fatty, however, and the Omer, with its light orange and lemon notes and lively carbonation, is perfect for cutting through that fattiness, and cleansing and preparing the palate for the next mouthful. It feels like the kind of beer you could sip all the length of a sunny afternoon, or a typical kermis day, but watch out: at 8% ABV, this one packs a punch.



**The beer:** Brasserie LeFort  
**The dish:** Pastéis de nata, hazelnuts, Greek yogurt flavoured with verbena.  
 “The beer has a very nutty flavour, which immediately made me think of pastéis de nata. My grandmother used to make custard tarts. The way I went about this whole challenge was really just to go with the idea that first sprang into my head.”  
 The free association – something most chefs will tell you is a major source of their influence – led to the celebrated egg tart pastry popular in Portugal and known wherever Portugal had an influence, from Angola to Brazil to even China via Macau. Also known as pastéis

de Belém, they’re the sort of delicacy nobody but one’s own (grand)mother can make properly, which doesn’t stop people who are not Portuguese from spending a fortune on them wherever they are found.  
 Pastéis are all about mouthfeel: flaky, buttery pastry and unctuous egg custard. A beer like Brasserie LeFort, which is nutty and fruity at once, complements that rather bland flavour, together with its roasted malts balanced by pale, a caramel note that echoes the brown patches on the tart where the egg has caramelised. Le Fort, with its subtle alcohol warmth (8.5% ABV) is also well-suited to ending a meal on a high note. ■

# Poperinge Beer Festival

BEELGIUM 



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# By the light of the moon

Family-run Brasserie Caulier brews its abbey beer by the full moon. **Breandán Kearney** finds out why

“The people here don’t buy water. They go to the spring and take it from there. This is extremely important for us in making the beer”

ery from Brussels and paid homage to the origin of the family business by creating their Bon-Secours range. “For us,” says Vincent, “it was an opportunity to get our hands on second-hand equipment that wasn’t too expensive. We also took on an experienced brewer who helped us build the brewery, and we were able to start in 1994.”

In the early 2000s there was a clear switch in strategy away from distribution to focus on brewing. Vincent’s brothers, Laurent and Bertrand, arrived; Vincent joined in 2012. “The brewery had some difficulties before I joined,” he says. “It was a tough period.” Perhaps his background – he studied at Vlerick Business School, then worked at the Federation of Enterprises in Belgium – was the reason he was asked to step in. “No,” he says, “it was more to say: I’m leaving my job, we’re in the same boat and we’re going to do it. We are five: my mother, my father, my two brothers and me, and it may be difficult now, but in five years’ time, it’s going to be awesome.”

This familial trust has been the root of their success. They are now a team of 10, have tripled the capacity of the brewery since Vincent’s arriv-

al from 3,500 hectolitres to almost 11,000, and last year successfully launched Paix-Dieu.

The Cauliers may look to the moon for inspiration, but they source all their ingredients much closer to home. “We’re lucky to be right next to Malterie du Château, one of the most famous maltings in the world,” Vincent says. “We use hops from Poperinge, all of which are cultivated in small quantities on a small farm by a guy we know. And we get our sugar from here in Belgium.” The yeast culture they use initially came from a special source in Belgium, but Vincent is reluctant to divulge any more details. All he will say is that it has evolved into their own strain.

It’s the water they use that Vincent speaks about with most enthusiasm. Hainaut is home to breweries as revered as Dupont, Dubuisson and Silly, and he says, “I think it comes from the fact the water is extremely good in the area.” In old French, the name of the village, Péruwelz, means ‘stone’ and ‘water’. “The people here don’t buy water,” he explains. “They go to the spring and take their water from there. This is extremely important for us in making the beer.”

The Paix-Dieu has an aroma of yeasty earthiness and notes of citrus; it’s sweet, fresh and lively with a spicy hop finish. Vincent admits they’re more interested in complexity than extremes. “The recipe is different from our Bon-Secours,” he says, “but the aim is to make something equally balanced. We didn’t have a recipe from the abbey, but the plan was to make something that could have been brewed there 200 years ago.” ■

[www.brasseriecaulier.com](http://www.brasseriecaulier.com)



It’s only brewed during the period of the full moon,” says Vincent Caulier as he pours a cloudy golden ale into a bulbous glass. The beer is a Paix-Dieu, named for the abbey in Amay which previously housed the nuns of the Cîteaux order and for whom Vincent and his family now produce beer.

Vincent, who runs Brasserie Caulier with his parents and two brothers, explains: “The lunar calendar was very important for the nuns, particularly in

agricultural and brewing matters. Every bottle is vintaged, indicating when it was brewed.”

The Cauliers have been involved with beer since the 1930s, when Vincent’s great-grandfather Charles stopped working in the local mines and set up as a beer distributor. The business of distribution became so big that the family was forced to move the company from the village of Bon-Secours to its current home in Péruwelz. In the mid-1990s they bought a closing brew-



# A matter of taste

Ellen Mertens of Alken Maes talks to **Sally Tipper** and **Paul Walsh** about art and science, tradition and innovation



“With abbey beers, you have to stay true to the history. Years of experience and knowledge have gone into them

**E**llen Mertens has been part of the Alken-Maes family in Opwijk for 20 years. In that time, while working her way up to brewery manager, she’s supervised an overhaul of the brewery’s methods, the creation of a bespoke anniversary brew for the monks of Affligem, and, the latest venture, helping create a new kriek lambic with Mort Subite’s master brewer Bruno Reinders.

Her role as innovation manager and master brewer requires a sensitive palate, creativity and a scientific brain. But was it the science or the creativity – or simply a love of beer – that led to Ellen’s calling? “My parents and grandparents sold beer

and wine, so I had the opportunity to get familiar with these things, and I was confident at tasting,” she explains. “I was always interested in science and I studied bioengineering at the University of Leuven. When I was choosing which path to take, I learned about a brewing course you could do in the final year. I had to choose a subject for my thesis and there was only one subject I was interested in: it was this, with Freddy Delvaux, the beer professor. Until then, professors had been distant, academic people, but Freddy was different. He was more social, he came from the industry. I did my thesis in his laboratory in 1993-94 with three other students. We were the first.”

Unsurprisingly, plenty of fellow students volunteered to be on Ellen’s tasting team. “People tend to think, I know a lot, I drink a lot, but it’s not that simple,” she says. “You have to be sensitive and have the right genes, but you also have to study. Even now, I’m learning every day, becoming more sensitive to new flavours.” She believes creating the perfect beer is a blend of art and science; the best of both worlds. “Science is very important,” she says. “You have to understand the processes to know how to fix something, whether to adjust the time or the temperature, to add more hops or spice. And yeast is a living organism, so you have to know how to treat it.”

In 2012, the monks of Affligem approached Alken-Maes and asked them to create a beer for their 950th anniversary. “We started from a blank sheet,” explains Ellen. “Did we go for low alcohol or strong; blond or dark? It was to be a spring beer, so we decided on a fresh, blond, slightly lower alcohol beer. And there had to be a connection with the abbey.” The abbey’s hop farmer had recently retired, so hops were no longer cultivated there; instead Ellen visited the abbey gardens to see what herbs they could use. “Our first attempt was 90% there,” she says. They fine-tuned the recipe and the second brew was the commercial one: the Affligem Cuvee 950.

Her current job requires an eye on the whole business, from production to packaging to sales: coming up with new beers and processes, translating ideas from the marketing department into the finished article. “When I started in Opwijk,” she recalls, “there were no procedures in place. One of my first jobs was to introduce standard procedures, so the

quality of the beer was safeguarded.” At the time, the brewery of Affligem was brewing 35,000 hectolitres; soon after Heineken took over in 2000, volumes increased significantly. For a small brewery, such a growth in production is intense. “Eventually we became a 24-hour operation, but that requires new ways of working, new people, a lot of investments like a new brewhouse, a water treatment plant... There’s lots of contact with different countries; I’m never bored.”

Her favourite beer is the Affligem Patersvat. “It’s the hoppiness I like,” she says. “I like a blond hoppy beer, but it has to be balanced.” And can she really enjoy a beer when she’s off duty?

“A sensory analysis is something I do spontaneously; friends laugh with me about that. I like degustation beers but I can really appreciate a nice, fresh lager. I’m always looking for a beer’s distinctive character and origin, but of course I’m sensitive to possible off flavours as well. Every type of beer has its own difficulties, but the lighter the beer, the less masking effect there is from the character and alcohol. Diacetyl can make dark beer softer and rounder, but it’s awful in light beer.”

And what of the Mort Subite kriek lambic? “It’s a completely new craft beer,” Ellen explains. “It’s a guaranteed traditional lambic beer made with a blend of young and old lambic with kriek lambic, resulting in an average age of at least one year. It’s a very rich unfiltered beer, with a high percentage of Belgian cherries added, giving a very nice balance of sweet and sour. The fruit beer market is stalling and we thought there was the potential to push lambic. People don’t know it so much, but there’s real craftsmanship involved.”

Centuries-old craftsmanship and innovation can go together, Ellen believes, provided you respect the tradition. “With abbey beers, you have to stay true to the history,” she says. “Years of experience and knowledge have gone into them. Anything you do has to be well thought-out. You can’t do crazy things with these beers.” ■

[www.alken-maes.be](http://www.alken-maes.be)

# Dubuisson Pairing

Private chef Els Debremaeker and the beers of Dubuisson come together in this issue's food-pairing challenge. Alan Hope adjudicates



In a pairing challenge for us, private chef, author and blogger Els Debremaeker has three beers from brewer Dubuisson to work with. Her menu choices take their cue from north African spices, the seasons and her travels in China, as well as pickles taken from Ingemaakt, her book about preserves.

**The beer:** Surfine saison, a revival of a beer that was popular from the 1930s to the 50s. It's made with three malts and three types of hop, which they've started growing for themselves. It's also made using three yeasts, the last a wild yeast for re-fermentation.

**The dish:** Flaked haddock marinated in ginger, fish sauce and mirin and cooked en papillote, served with spring onion, pickled ginger and a flash-fried leaf of baby spinach.

"The mirin and fish sauce are reminders of my time in China, but my inspiration here was the season, and something about the fish and the North Sea said summer to me. I always try to use North Sea fish for all kinds of reasons."

The pickled ginger Els uses she made herself, from a recipe contained in her second book, full of recipes for all kinds of preserves: chutneys, pickles, jams and fermentations.

A saison is not only a perfect summery beer, it also has the low-key flavours needed not to overwhelm a delicate dish of white fish: citrus, herbs, the yeastiness of fresh bread, but nothing that dominates. It's also slightly sweet, which balances the flavours of the marinade.

**The beer:** Bush Tripel. Created for the brewery's 75th anniversary, this powerhouse is the Bush Amber re-fermented in the bottle to a knee-buckling 12% ABV. (NB: Beers carrying the Bush brand in Europe are re-named Scandis for the American market.)

**The dish:** Rabbit fillet pan-fried, pearl couscous with dates and pecorino.



“Rabbit is a much ignored meat, but it was the mouthfeel of the beer and its slight sweetness that made me think of it. Normally I’d have liked to marinate the meat in the beer, but there wasn’t time.”

The couscous is served now as a salad but is open to variations, with other accompaniments better suited to other seasons. The dates and pecorino give a perfect balance of sweet and salty.

Rabbit, though a white meat, has a robust flavour and texture, which require a robust beer. The Bush Tripel has nuts and stone fruit, a sweetness but also a

bitter edge common among triple beers. With its alcohol kick, it’s more than big enough to take on a strong dish. Too bad we missed the marinated version, but that’s one to try out at home. The result is likely to be spectacular.

**The beer:** Bush Prestige de Nuits tops the alcohol level of the Amber Tripel at 13%. It is the Bush de Noël matured for six months in barrels used for the Nuits-Saint-Georges burgundy wine then re-fermented in the bottle. It’s produced, like the Noël, only once a year.

**The dish:** Slow-cooked shoulder of lamb shredded by hand with a sauce of jus and honey, glazed carrots, ribbons of rhubarb, orange segments, naan bread, garnished with yarrow.

“The wine notes of the beer immediately made me think of lamb, and the matured beer is reflected in the 48-hour marinade in a spice rub, followed by five to six hours cooking at low temperature in the oven.”

The lamb is rubbed with Els’s own spice mix, leaning towards the Moroccan on this occasion, though she points out that something more Provençal would also be interesting. The meat is placed on a trivet of red onion and garlic bulbs, basted from time to time with pomegranate juice.

The rhubarb provides the necessary acidity to cut through the fattiness of the lamb. “The rhubarb comes from my father’s garden,” she says. “Before I was old enough to count I knew summer was on the way when the rhubarb appeared.”

Bush Prestige de Nuits has everything a fine wine has and more: a complex range of fruity and vinous flavours, but also the body of a beer, with a yeasty sediment that must not be poured away. There’s a sourness that is a welcome accompaniment to most meat dishes, but the stature of this beer really needs something as powerful as roasted, spicy lamb to do it justice. ■



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# From father to son

Usually, a brewery is passed from father to son. In the case of Oud Beersel, as **Alan Hope** finds out, the next generation took matters into his own hands

**A**t the end of 2002, the Oud Beersel brewery closed down,” explains Gert Christiaens, who now runs the operation. “At the beginning of 2003 I was sitting in a pub in Brussels: the Zageman in Rue de Laeken, which is now closed, but then it was famous for its old-style gueuzes and krieks. I used to go there often to drink with my friends.

“The owner told me, ‘These are the last bottles of Oud Beersel; next time you come I won’t be able to serve you because the brewery has closed down.’ I always used to drink Oud Beersel, because I used to come here when I was a little boy with my dad when he was buying beer. My parents don’t live far from here.

“A couple of days later I looked up the number in the Yellow Pages and called the old brewmaster, who told me his nephew had been keeping the brewery going for the last ten years but was fed up: the brewing installation wasn’t workable any more, there had been no investments for the last thirty to forty years, so everything was old and hard to work with. And he was also managing the bar next to the brewery, where the

flower shop is now.”

The owners sold the bar and everything in it, including a valuable old organ and all of their bottled and barrelled beer.

“I went to see the old brewmaster, because I was interested in keeping the lambic beer tradition alive. I had to start learning how to make lambic beers, here with the old brewmaster and at a course in Ghent every Saturday morning for two years. I had studied economics with IT management, so I knew nothing about beer production. I was a good consumer but I didn’t know how to make beer. I started learning with the aim of safeguarding the traditional lambic beer culture, and that’s still what we want to achieve today.”

By Belgian brewing standards, Gert is still wet behind the ears, with barely a decade of experience in a world that counts its background in generations, not years. Maybe there really is something magic in the air in this part of Belgium known as the Pajottenland, reputed to be the only place in the world where the micro-flora is perfect for the creation of the uniquely Belgian style of beer known as lambic, which is the basis of gueuze and krik.

“I was a good consumer but I didn’t know how to make beer. I started learning with the aim of safeguarding the traditional lambic beer culture”





“For me it’s very important that we can present beers that are enjoyable not only for beer fanatics”

Something is going right, because Oud Beersel keeps on winning awards, most recently gold and silver at the Brussels Beer Challenge in November (for oude kriek and oude geuze respectively) and gold and silver at the European Beer Star 10 days later, for oude kriek and Bersalis Tripel.

And the business is doing well.

“We launched lambic beers in 2007 again, and then the brewery was completely dependent on me. If I had a problem we had to stop. It’s very important that the brewery can run by itself. For that you need to be profitable, and we’ve been breaking even for the last five years and made a profit for the first time last year. Now we have three employees, for administration, a sales

representative and one person responsible for production. That also allows us to take things to a higher level.”

That higher level is no more and no less than the preservation of an old tradition, with a passion seen more in recent converts to a cause rather than those who are to the manner born.

“We’re known for our mild lambic beers. That vinegar acidity is not for us. You have some producers who want to make extreme beers. Our aim for the brewery is actually to safeguard traditional lambic beers, and if you want to safeguard them you have to produce them, and people need to buy them and enjoy them. If they don’t enjoy them then you don’t have customers any more and the traditions will disap-

pear. For me it’s very important that we can present beers that are enjoyable not only for beer fanatics.”

We’re tasting a young lambic, about 14 months old, which has been ripening in a first-use barrel from Chateauneuf du Pape. Unlike some lambics, it’s dry but not biting, not overly sour but also not sweet.

“This is pure 100% traditional, but we work very hard to keep our lambic mild. Making sour lambic with vinegar acidity is easy: if you expose your lambic to oxygen and high temperatures you have vinegar, it’s very simple. We treat our barrels very well, we take a lot of steps to make sure our lambic stays mild. Not all breweries do that.”

[www.oudbeersel.com](http://www.oudbeersel.com)

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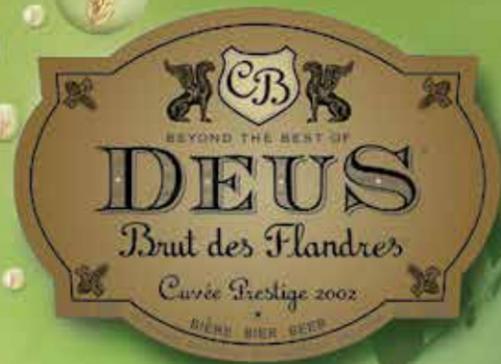




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