

TALKING TASTE

WRITER: KIMBERLEY LOVATO

For 'foodies', the abundance of fantastic restaurants is one of Belgium's biggest draws. From Michelin stars to hidden snack stands, there is always something delicious to try. But beyond the border, what do people really know about the cuisine? We pull up a chair with four Belgian chefs who are also making a name for themselves abroad.

NICOLAS SCHUERMANS

Nicolas Schuermans, 'Nico' to his friends and family, studied at the prestigious CREPAC School of Culinary Arts in Belgium and apprenticed at La Villa Lorraine (two Michelin stars), before working at Comme Chez Soi, (two Michelins). Schuermans has cooked for many celebrities and has travelled the world working in prestigious kitchens.

What is your fondest memory of Belgium?

Spending summers at my grandparents' home near Barvaux (Ardennes).

Where do you like to eat when you visit?

I make it home every other year to see family, and always eat at Le Passage (Uccle) and enjoy the wood-fired steak at L'Etable in Barvaux.

Who has influenced your cooking the most?

My grandfather. He is a great lover of food and the ritual of dining - an apéritif, a great dinner followed by

cheese and a whisky. Chef Freddy Vandecasserie of La Villa Lorraine was the greatest influence in my professional career.

What's the most embarrassing thing that has happened to you in your restaurant?

Having a Flemish guest speak to me, and only nodding and smiling because I had no idea what he was saying

What does 'Chambar' mean?

My grandmother came up with the name - an old French phrase meaning 'when the teacher leaves the room, all the kids go crazy!' In French it is spelt chambard - the 'd' is silent.

What advice would you give to someone dining at your restaurant for the first time?

Be open-minded and without expectations. Leave your day at the door and enjoy the experience of brave food, great wine and a vibrant atmosphere.

Chambar Restaurant

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BART M. VANDAELE

Bart M. Vandaele was born in Roeselare and studied in Bruges. He has held various executive chef positions in the United States and Belgium and most recently for the Dutch Ambassador to the US. "When I arrived 12 years ago, I immediately knew I loved this place," he says.



Left:
Nicolas Scheurmans

Right:
Bart M. Vandaele

What is your fondest food memory of Belgium?

My dad's whole braised squab with baby potatoes. The best squabs always came from my granddad's pigeon house.

Who influenced your cooking the most?

My dad. He had his own restaurant and raised me in his kitchen. I also had the privilege of having two important mentors, Piet Huysentruyt whose restaurant of the same name received one Michelin star, and Roger Soevereyns whose restaurant, Restaurant Scholtesh, earned three.

What is the most popular Belgian dish on your menu?

Vlaamse stoverij (carbonades flamandes), a beef stew with a special beer sauce, served with fries and mayonnaise.

Washington DC diners are fairly sophisticated. Are they curious about Belgian cuisine or do they have preconceived notions?

We definitely have much more to offer

than waffles and chocolate! For example, I have rabbit or pigeon on my winter menu, something Americans rarely eat. Shrimp croquettes are a favourite. We make them fresh, using baby grey shrimps imported from Belgium.

Do you ever let others cook for you?

Of course! When I'm not working, I love to be invited for dinner. What I love most are the simple things.

Tell us something about you that would surprise those who know you. Do you have an Oreo Cookie fetish, for example?

No, sour gummy bears and Cola bottle sweets! I also love raspberry jam on Gouda cheese or on peperkoek (Dutch spiced cake), but the rest of my fetishes are for another conversation...

Belga Café

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Pascal Lorange

PASCAL LORANGE

In Verviers, Pascal Lorange is a 3rd generation Belgian chef, whose nephew has just taken over the kitchen at L'Art de Vivre in Spa, where all his relatives still live: "They are my breath of fresh air; they give me a lot of energy."

What is your fondest food memory of Belgium?

My father always eats at Le Grillon in Ostend. I love their croquettes de crevettes, mussels and sole. It's my favorite place to go when I come back to Belgium.

Do your Belgian roots have an impact on your cooking style?

My style has definitely changed from when I started. The creation of the Fig &

Olive menu with founder Laurent Halasz allowed a complete new way of cooking.

How would you describe your style of cooking?

I try to keep a Mediterranean inspiration and touch, and try to find the right olive oils that will complete the dish perfectly.

In your opinion, what makes a great chef?

Simplicity. You don't want too many flavours on the plate, but you want the right ones with the right ingredients.

Which cooking tools or gadgets are indispensable to you?

I finally got a Berkel Manual Slicer - I now want one in all my restaurants. The customers love to see us cut prosciutto or jambon in front of them. The Pacojet is also an amazing creation. It makes fabulous ice cream and tapenade.

Where do you see yourself in ten years?

I lived for seven years in the Canary Islands and loved it. I think I'll end up in the south of France or Spain, but I'm not ready for that yet.

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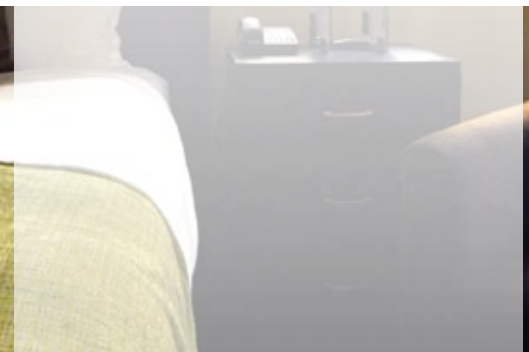
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TASTE



TOUCH



Nicolas De Visch
© Louis Lesko

NICOLAS DE VISCH

This young energetic chef, born in Braine l'Alleud, Belgium, has clients clamouring to get into his restaurant in the Dordogne region of France. De Visch combines the fine ingredients of the Périgord with world spices and the local seafood, inspired by his love of travel and years as a chef at the opulent Burj Al Arab Hotel in Dubai.

What is your fondest food memory of Belgium?

Like everyone, my mother's cooking - tarte au sucre, boulettes sauce tomate, carbonade flamande and croquettes aux crevettes

How often do you get back to Belgium to visit?

I don't go back that much, but at least once a year. We now have the line open between Bergerac airport and Charleroi. I can't wait to take a quick break after the season and fly over.

What's the most embarrassing thing that's happened to you in a restaurant kitchen?

Calling Sheikh Mohamed al Maktoum,

the ruler of Dubai, 'Your Majesty' instead of 'Your Highness' in front of everyone when he visited my kitchen.

Who in your life has influenced your cooking the most?

Philippe Cassart, of Le Piano de Julien, for my start in the job; Atillio Basso of Ecailler du Palais Royal, for a real taste of hard work; Yves Mattagne, Sea Grill, Radisson SAS Brussels, for finesse.

When you're not working, what do you do for fun?

I love playing football with my local team and cycling. I also love to play Texas Hold 'Em with my friend and neighbour, Russ.

Do your Belgian roots have an impact on your cooking style?

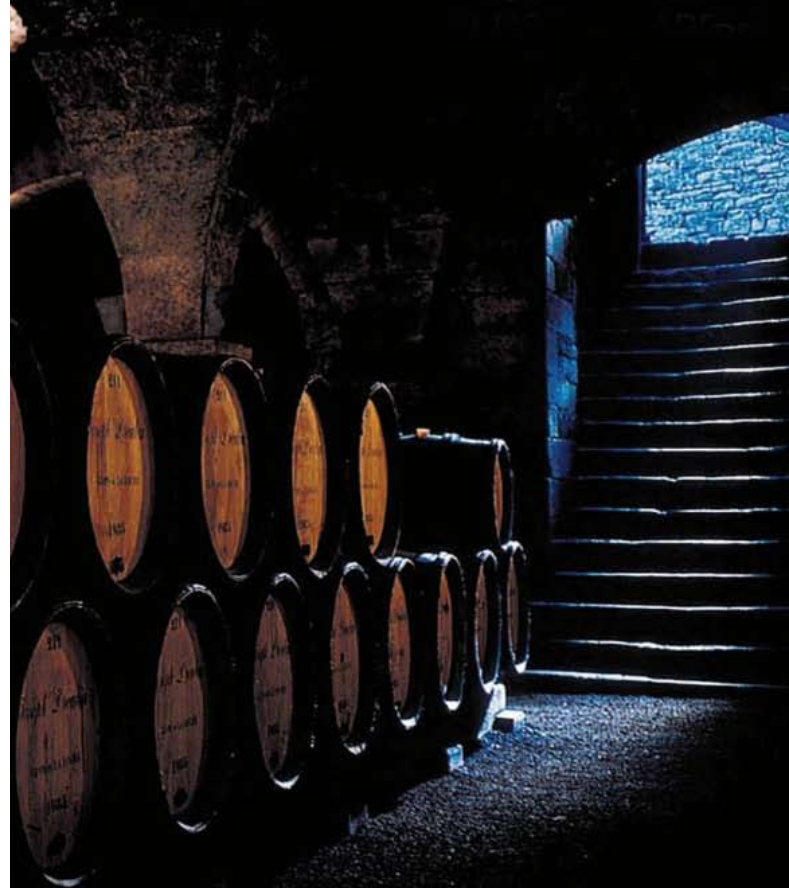
As a Belgian, I love taking pleasure in life and having the ability to laugh at oneself. Belgian is not a style; it's a way of life. ☺

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