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FOR PEOPLE WHO LOVE TO *read*, LOVE TO *eat*, AND LOVE TO *travel*



Belgium

WHERE ON EARTH

In De Wulf

by MELISSA BUOTE

... By 2005 he was the youngest Michelin-starred chef in Belgium...

“NIET. NO TAXI HIER,” THE BARTENDER AT the café says with a laugh. The glassy glares of the handful of men at the bar fill with sudden life as they turn briefly away from the cyclists hurtling across the TV screen to have a chuckle at a foolish question.

“Can you call us a taxi?” No. There are no taxis here.

We are in Poperinge, Belgium. By this point our table is scattered with blonde and lambic beers, a liquid surrender. We are stuck in this tiny village, our terminus on a hop-on/hop-off train journey to an even smaller village, Dranouter, in West Flanders. Our final destination: In De Wulf.

We left Gent by train mid-morning with plans to arrive at In De Wulf mid-afternoon. The trains rattled through the countryside, scattered rainbows of graffiti fluttering by like bright birds on tunnels and overpasses that creep up and down outside of small towns, Holstein cattle peppering fields with dots of black and white. As fields stretched larger, each subsequent town’s train platform got smaller. We passed tall, sleek windmills, rickety barns, and fields galore before we ended in Poperinge, the hops capital of Belgium. It’s a speck of a village attached to a train station small enough to give Anne Shirley pause.

A taxi eventually comes to us from Ypres. The meter was already running long before he picked us up and continues ticking forward in its upward climb through bumpy country roads and tiny, storybook villages. About twenty minutes and sixty euros later he drops us in Dranouter, which makes Poperinge look like Toronto.

One of just a handful of villages that makes up Heuvelland in Belgium, Dranouter appears to be not much more than a series of narrow winding roads surrounded by fields of tawny browns and bright greens. The pastoral patchwork is punctuated by country houses with sloping orange roofs, fluffy patches of trees, and lazy gangs of cows leaning against knotty fences. There are less than a thousand people in Dranouter. On the Wulvestraat, where In De Wulf is situated, I’d guess the population at less than a dozen.

In De Wulf is a restaurant and inn, a culinary destination created by Kobe Desramaults. One of the lauded ‘New Naturals’ in the culinary world, Desramaults, like Magnus Nilsson from Sweden’s Faviken, or Rene »

THIS PAGE
All food is sourced from the local farm at In De Wulf.

THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT
In De Wulf tasting menu;
Blossom surrounds the
restaurant entrance.



«Redzepi from Denmark's Noma, is a chef who specializes in authenticity. He uses local food and embraces the simplicity of foraging and farming, growing his own food or getting it from nearby farms or suppliers, bringing to light what it is that makes a place distinctly special.

The old cottage was once home to a small bistro run by Desramault's mother. After an apprenticeship at a restaurant in the Belgian countryside, he left to hone his chef's skills at restaurants like Oud Sluis in the Netherlands and Comerc in Spain. He returned in 2003 to take over the bistro, growing In De Wulf out of those fertile grounds. By 2005 he was the youngest Michelin-starred chef in Belgium.

With hours before dinner, my companions and I stow our bags in our rooms. My room, clean and modern, looks over green farmland that extends to the horizon. We take a walk up Wulvestraat, a pleasant country lane bent around a low hill where cows laze in sunny patches, and a lonely horse sits by a fence begging for a hello. As the evening cools and the sun gets heavier in the sky, we return to the inn.

The lounge, where we spend most of our time, is layered with texture. Rough wooden beams anchored

in matte white brick walls buoy the steep angle of the wood plank ceiling. One light grey accent wall sits behind a woodstove. The stove's tools hang beside the chimney over stacks of chopped lumber; the light, crispy greens and yellows of drying herbs and corn brush up beside them. Plush velvet sofas and chairs are given root by shaggy rugs and tables made of light, unvarnished wood. Dusky candles glow warmly on each table.

The transition from simple lounging to dining is seamless, like a low-key dinner party. A piece of gnarled wood with the night's menu is set next to our wine glasses, unannounced, along with the first of the night's amuse-bouches. A disc of fermented carrot is followed by airy porkskin dusted with mustard, and crispy potato nests topped with a potato mousse and bright pea shoots. Then we are led to the dining room.

Our first course at the table is whelks. Speared on a small twig, each fat sea snail sits in a shell, atop a teetering bed of rocks. It's a quick bite, beautifully briny, like the breath of the ocean sweeping by.

The sense of nature is immersive. Food is served on rocks and stoneware, plated with twigs, leaves, and flowers. There is simplicity to each dish, complexity



DINING

BELGIUM



THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT
 Chef Kobe Desmaraults;
 In De Wulf tasting menu.

found in imaginative and playful flavour combinations and artful preparation. The delicate scent of wildflowers will make way for the warm, turbid smell of smoke or the nutty, toasty scent of freshly baked bread.

Small servings, primarily vegetables and seafood, wash up in front of us in tiny waves: white dune asparagus from Ghyvelde, goat cheese from Uxem, Audresselle lobster, North Sea turbot and crab. A bowl carved from ice holds a delicate Ostend oyster, perfectly chilled in creamy whey sauce, topped with a bright yellow scattering of mustard flowers.

Reedmace — cattail — with a sauce of sorrel and a dusting of jack-by-the-hedge flowers is followed by slices of smoked mackerel topped with fermented beef, served on the arc of a dried fish body, the smoke from a burning bed of curry plant curling around it.


There is a nod to tradition with *kerremelkstampers*, a take on the traditional *stoemp*, a mashed potato dish. The In De Wulf version is a buttermilk potato purée with a roasted fingerling potato, tender and salty in a tomb of salt and clay.

A delicate tart, crisp flaxseed crust filled with a creamy pig's brain is a showstopper, served atop the pristine skull of a Duroc pig. A roasted kidgoat is brought

table-to-table by Desmaraults himself, a casual ceremony, eulogistic of the food we have been served.

The meal continues effortlessly, steadily, with taste of beetroot, sloe berry, sorrel, and spruce. And when we are so full that we retire again to the lounge, we are followed with malt cake, *pâté de fruits*, and *smoutenbollen*, warm round doughnuts dusted with cinnamon sugar. We collapse into bed.

A fresh country breakfast waits for us in the morning. In the garden, the baker collects eggs from scattered, chatty chickens, before scoring bread at the yawning wood-fired oven, coaxing plump balls of dough into airy, crusty loaves. Another of the young chefs snips twigs from a nearby tree to use for that night's whelks. We say our good mornings and take in the beauty of the farm one last time.

As we wait in the gravel lot for our taxi to the Ballieul train station, which will take us to Paris, one of our servers appears beside us. She asks how our night was, telling us that she has returned for Flemish lessons at the restaurant. We make friendly small talk and she leaves for home, pulling out just as our car arrives. We had arranged for it the previous day. As we well know: there are no taxis here. 

Cook
it

BELGIUM



SERVES 6-8

STOEMP

Also called stampot, *Belgian mashed potatoes are generally mixed with one or two other vegetables and make a filling, tasty side dish for sausages or stew.*

Potatoes 2 lbs, peeled and diced

Carrots 2, peeled and diced

Onion 1 small, finely sliced

Leeks 4 small, finely sliced, washed and drained

Butter 2 Tbs

Milk or Cream ½ cup

Buttermilk ¾ cup

Salt to taste

Freshly Ground Black Pepper to taste

Freshly Ground Nutmeg to taste

- 1 COVER** the potatoes and carrots with cold water in a saucepan, salt lightly, bring to a boil, reduce heat and simmer uncovered until tender. Drain and return to the saucepan.
- 2 WHILE** the potatoes and carrots are cooking, melt the butter in a skillet over medium heat. Add the onions and leeks and cook until very tender, stirring occasionally.
- 3 ADD** the milk or cream, salt, pepper, and nutmeg. Simmer, stirring, for two minutes.
- 4 IN** a small saucepan, gently heat the buttermilk. Do not boil.
- 5 MASH** the potatoes and carrots. Add the buttermilk to the mash and mix together. Add the leek and onion mixture and stir. Season with additional salt, pepper and nutmeg to taste.

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In De Wulf
www.indewulf.be



Cook
&

BELGIUM

THIS PHOTO
Preparing breakfast
at In De Wulf.



MAKES ABOUT 1 CUP

PORK SCHMALZ

A surprisingly healthy alternative to butter, pork schmalz is a favourite spread in Eastern Europe, and is customizable.

Pork Back Fat
1 lb, finely diced

Onions 2 small,
peeled and chopped

Apple 1, cored
and quartered

Garlic 1 clove,
slightly crushed

Bay Leaf 1

Marjoram ¼ tsp

Sweet Paprika
a pinch

Coarse Salt to taste

**Freshly Ground
Black Pepper** to taste

Pumpkin Seeds
4 Tbs, toasted and
chopped (optional)

**Toasted or Black
Sesame Seeds** 2 Tbs
(optional)

- 1 RENDER** the pork fat in a large frying pan over low-to-medium heat, until cracklings form. This will take anywhere from 30–60 minutes.
- 2 TURN** the heat to low and use a skimmer to remove the cracklings. Drain on paper towel and set aside. When the pork fat has slightly cooled, add the onions, marjoram, bay leaf, garlic clove, and apple quarters. Turn up to medium heat and cook for 20–30 minutes, until the onions are brown. Remove and discard the apples, bay leaf, and garlic.
- 3 IF** you would like a fine pork schmalz, strain the rendered fat through a fine mesh strainer or cheesecloth, into a ramekin or stoneware container. If you want the additional texture, leave the onions in when pouring into the container. As the fat begins to solidify, add the cracklings, toasted pumpkin seeds and/or sesame seeds. Season with the paprika, salt and pepper.
- 4 COOL** the mixture completely and store in the fridge for up to 4 weeks. Serve on crusty bread.

MELISSA BUOTE is a contributing editor and food columnist at *The Coast* in Halifax, the food photographer behind Bicycleette Publishing's *The TIBS Guide to Desserts*, and, at any time can think of 30 foods worth travelling around the world to eat. She tweets at [@buote](#)

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