



Game on

Can Flemish Kitchen Rebel Wim De Jonghe create the perfect match for three beers from the esteemed Huyghe Brewery? Alan Hope puts him to the test

The challenge: We present a top chef with three beers and ask him to come up with three perfectly paired dishes.

The chef: Wim De Jonghe, of Het Land aan de Overkant in Leuven, one of the new crop of chefs chosen as this year's Flemish Kitchen Rebels.

We chose three beers from Huyghe which all won medals at the recent World Beer Challenge awards in Portugal. These are Averbode, which won a silver medal for best Belgian-Style abbey beer, La Guillotine which won a gold medal for Belgian Style Strong Speciality Ale, and Delirium Tremens which won a silver medal for best Belgian-Style Tripel.

The preamble: Before the starter come the starter-starters, or amuses as they're known. A dish of radishes marinated in vinegar with cucumber cream and flatbread spiked with fennel seeds and black olive granules is fresh and palate-opening, but will by the time I write this be replaced by rutabaga cream and baby turnips

accompanied by an oatmeal cracker. Then comes salmon marinated in gin and juniper berries, and blood sausage with an apple cream. There's also the restaurant's trademark bread, which comes from Namur, with two types of butter: raw-milk butter with sea-salt from France, and butter creamed with anchovy.

The starter: The real starter is a play on a traditional dish from West Flanders called karnemelkstampers, with the mashed potatoes replaced by a parsnip cream made with buttermilk. The grey shrimp – perhaps the most outstanding single product to come out of Belgium – are bathed in a little bisque, all topped off with a slow-cooked egg. The whole is rich and complex, although the composition is really pretty simple. The Averbode accompanying the dish is lightly bitter with a bright carbonation intended to counter the sweetness of the parsnip, shrimp and bisque, and to cut through the filming effect of the egg.

The main: A blindingly white piece of supreme of cod, just the right side



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chips atop a pumpkin cream spiced with bergamot and lemon. The cod sits in an orange sauce with orange zest, and the plate is scattered with single leaves of Brussels sprout and Belgian endive. The dish was constructed to pick up the orange and spice notes of La Guillotine, a strong golden ale with high alcohol and complex yeast flavours. The hops add not only bitterness, picked up by the bergamot and the garnish, but citrus flavours which are echoed in the orange sauce. This was a perfect pairing in every detail; although the three beers we provided are not remarkably different one from the other, the chef has dug deep to single out and work with the distinguishing characteristics. It's also an accomplishment to work with a bergamot powder which is intensely bitter (he brought some to the table to show us) and make its presence felt while not allowing it to overpower.

The ending: Delirium Tremens has notes of citrus and pepper and is somewhat sweet, with yeasty flavours of warm bread, making it a perfect accompaniment for a dessert like lemon meringue pie, which Wim has deconstructed into silver dollar-sized buttery



biscuits, meringues no bigger than a raspberry, and a stiff lemon custard. Each element of the beer is reflected in the dish, even the peppery baby basil garnish – and if that's not the essence of beer and food pairing, what is?

The verdict: We've already seen the range of Wim's talent in the kitchen, and the depth of reflection in his conception of dishes. This challenge illustrates how well he identifies what's particular about each of an admittedly narrow selection of beers, and uses that to invent something (almost) perfectly appropriate.

Identity parade

The elements of Wim De Jonghe's style are simplicity, quality and balance, as **Alan Hope** can testify





When I was in primary school we had a little library and there was one cookbook. Each week we had to take home one book to read, and I always took the cookbook. At ten I was cooking with my father, making apple sauce with him, standing on a chair by the cooker.”

Ever since he can remember, Wim De Jonghe wanted to be a cook. Now he’s not only chef and co-owner of the restaurant Het Land aan de Overkant in Leuven; he’s also one of the up-and-coming chefs selected by Visit Flanders as the Flanders Kitchen Rebels, representing the near-future of Flemish food.

So what’s his favourite dish? The answer, without a second’s hesitation: “Balletjes in tomatensaus. I could eat that every day. Meatballs in tomato sauce.”

Is that his father’s influence? “No, that comes from my grandmother. She was always cooking. Things like balletjes, coq au vin, eclairs. When I got up in the morning she had made fresh eclairs and things like that. Any time I went to her house she was always cooking.”

Wim went to the hotel school VTI in Leuven, then worked around the place, spending two years here at Het Land in the cold kitchen before passing through an early restaurant of local boy-turned-superstar Jeroen Meus. Then he was back here as sous chef.

“We’ve been working together a long time,” says co-founder Luc Rolandt, who works the front of house. The third partner, Dr Patrick Wijns, isn’t involved in the day-to-day operation. “The restaurant has been here now for fifteen years, and Wim has been with us for seven years. He’s been a partner now for almost four years. Before, there was another chef, but he lives in Namur now, and that was too far for him to continue working here.”

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Roelandt explains the name of the restaurant, which means The Land on the Other Side. “The land on the other side of the mountain is where the grass is always greener. We’re trying to take you to that land on the other side, and try to let you forget your daily worries. That was the idea.” It’s a bit of gallows humour: the restaurant is on one side of Leuven’s inner ring road. On the other side is Leuven Centraal prison. The other side from the Land on the Other Side is anything but a promised land.

His philosophy is simple: “The concept is to give people good food, to let people have a good time and feel good. Good food, good wine, top quality, but always trying to do better.” He describes the place as “not too chic”, but it’s very chic indeed. The building was constructed in two intersecting rounds, the terrace and the dining room like a Venn diagram of indoor and outdoor space. The dining room is furnished with table of what looks like driftwood with steel legs, and comfortable black leather dining chairs. All around, sculptures by Rita Van Even, Lieven D’Haese, Luc Versluys and Fred Bellefroid, and paintings by Serge Clautriaux. Considering Roelandt’s modesty, my companion and I agree the look is “refined elegance”. It’s all extremely tasteful.

The menu in turn is extremely flavourful. Wim shrugged off the question about his inspiration, about what he was trying to achieve with his food. He denied even having a signature, but the menu shows he has a very definite identity in his food. Having dined here only once, I’m confident I could pick his dishes out of a line-up.

His trademarks include simplicity – each dish has a maximum of four main

ingredients, and there’s nothing on the plate that isn’t pulling its weight. Each dish is beautifully balanced, with something of an Oriental thread running through the whole menu, at least when we visited. Hand in hand with simplicity goes intensity of flavour: fermented vegetables, black olive granules, roasted garlic, tomato confit, goat’s milk ice cream: each dish includes one explosion of flavour and a supporting cast of perfectly matched accompaniments.

The products are mainly but not always local; what’s important is that they’re top quality. “The important thing is to use very good products,” he says. “If we find them here we will use them, but that’s not always possible. The important thing is taste. A carrot from Provence tastes like a carrot. You go to Delhaize and the carrots taste like water. It’s all about taste. Same with the beers: we’re not just going to sell the top-selling beers, we try to find beers that have a special taste.”

That means working with people like the young and iconoclastic Brouwers Verzet from Anzegem in West Flanders, or local brewer De Vlier, which used to be in Kessel-Lo and is now in Holsbeek. There’s no beer menu as such, but there’s no problem with switching the wines that go with the menu for beers instead. Depending on the dishes on offer, they’ll have a beer to go along. On our visit, the beers ranged from the little-known Ichtegem Flemish red ale to the more available Saison Dupont – and the sommelier knows his way around beer as well as wine.

The menu, meanwhile, changes every six weeks, one section per week. There’s also a lunch menu that changes every week.

www.hetlandaandeoverkant.be





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THE MENU

Aperitif: Ichtegem Grand Cru Flemish Red Ale

Amuses: fresh and pickled radish, cucumber cream, dried black olive granules, toasted bread

- Saison Dupont
- Cracker of puffed rice, raw tuna, horseradish cream
- Carpaccio of pigeon wrapped in a slice of fermented turnip
- Herring, green beans, Kalamata olives
- Romanesco tempura,

- cream of roasted garlic
- Crayfish, seaweed ribbon, green tomato gazpacho, yoghurt, sea berries
- Tomato confit, burrata, anchovy
- Vitello tonnato: crostini, tomato, tartare of veal, smoked vegetable bouillon, edible flowers
- Suertes del Marques Trenzado.
- Hommelbier 2013
- Squid, roasted courgette and clams, basil sauce
- Calamar, cream cheese, Israeli couscous, piment d'espelette

- Sevre et Maine Muscadet Wolf 7 blond
- Dover sole slow cooked in butter, trio of carrot – roasted, fermented, puree – goat's cheese curds
- SP68 Sicilian Occhipinti Gageleer organic gruit beer made with bog myrtle
- Grilled spring chicken marinated in yoghurt, chickpea sauce, okra, green asparagus, yellow zucchini, coriander
- Peach with wild pepper, peach sorbet, goat's milk ice cream, ganache of white chocolate
- Bera Moscato d'Asti

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