



What is Belgian Cuisine, Anyway?

Robert Wiedmaier, Full-Circle Chef, Defines his Homeland's Heritage

Belgium is a country with a dual-identity, and to the uninitiated, its cuisine can be downright confusing. Is it French? Is it Flemish? And what on earth is *waterzooie*??

There is probably no one better to sort it out for us than Chef Robert Wiedmaier, born in Germany to a Belgian father and American mother [who happened to be an excellent cook.] He was raised in Germany and Belgium, began his culinary training in The Netherlands, and fine-tuned his technique in Brussels. He is a saucier at heart, and takes pride in the labor-intensive, classic techniques of drawing the most flavor from every bit of an animal, to enhance dishes with the very essence of its ingredients; an avid hunter and fisherman, his relationship to those ingredients is truly 'full-circle.' Now one of the most celebrated chefs in the nation's capital [of the United States, that is,] Wiedmaier is known for his Flemish flair.

It shows up in subtle traces at Marcel's, his flagship restaurant serving the most refined French cuisine; and it is the reason he opened Brasserie Beck, a showcase for the heartier, less elegant, deeply flavorful fare of the north of Belgium. His trio of establishments in Old Town Alexandria, Brabo, The Market, and The Tasting Room by Robert Wiedmaier, are similarly Belgian in spirit.

He explains the distinct characteristics of food that might legitimately claim to be Belgian. “In the south of Belgium, you have the *Wallonians*. They speak a dialect of French, and are typically a more elegant people, with the highly refined taste of the French. Their food is essentially French. In the northern part of Belgium,” he continues, “what is known loosely as Flanders, the people speak Flemish, and are close in culture to the Dutch peasantry of the neighboring Netherlands. Their food is very close to the earth, much more hearty, and less refined. Root vegetables are a staple. I went to culinary school in The Netherlands, but when I got out and moved to Brussels, every single restaurant I worked in was French. No one ever thought to present Flemish cuisine to the public in a serious way.”

At elegant Marcel's, sure enough, there is a *boudin blanc* on the menu, and the filet mignon is served with a grain mustard cream; turnips, beets, onions and carrots appear in force, puréed, fricasséed, or in their natural state.

Brasserie Beck, on the other hand, proclaims its Flemish-ness from its soaring rafters, the interior modeled on a cool, bustling Belgian train station dating from the turn of the last century. They go through 1,000 pounds of mussels a week, and because this is a Belgian delicacy, that computes to mountains of *frites* and luscious mayonnaise accompaniments. The Beef “Carbonnade” Stew, a heavy dish deeply flavored with bacon and enhanced with Kasteel beer, is on the menu year-round – by popular demand. Germanic Alsatian touches appear in couple of house-made sausages and in dishes like the *Choucroute en Croûte* and the *Toasted Baguette with Poached Egg, Fricassée of Mushrooms and Spätzle*. *Waterzooie*, the classic stew of Flanders [from the Dutch *zooien*, 'to boil,'] is a hearty seafood feast in a bowl, with croutons and hearty *aioli*. The sides at Brasserie Beck are Belgian to the core, from the *Frites with a Mayonnaise Trio*, to the *Sautéed Brussels Sprouts*, the *Gratin of Endive or Cauliflower*, to the

Stompe, a root vegetable purée that is a mainstay of Flemish cooking. The desserts at this casual brasserie are naturally homey, modest, and again – Belgian. The top favorites are the *Pear Tarte Tatin* and the *Belgian Bread Pudding*, laced with chocolate and with cherries cooked in beer.

Speaking of beer, Brasserie Beck enjoys the distinction of offering the greatest variety of Belgian brews in the Washington metropolitan area – over 130 – including ten on tap at the sidewalk seating area alone, and *Antigoon*, which is custom brewed in Belgium for Robert Wiedmaier.

Wiedmaier's newest venture, Mussel Bar, takes the humble Flemish simplicity a step further, to a rustic extreme. It was inspired by the cheap old-world roadhouses in Brussels where he and his fellow cooks used to go to kick back and relax, “eating mussels, drinking beer, and listening to rock and roll into all hours, before we had to head back to the kitchen,” he reminisces fondly. “People enjoy that. It's good reasonable everyday food. It's comfortable. It's not Marcel's – and that is nice to have variety, wouldn't you agree?”

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