

Secret FOOD TOURS, BRUSSELS

by ELYSE GLICKMAN



WHERE ON EARTH

PHOTOS THIS SPREAD
FROM LEFT

Brussels' historic architecture is distinctive; A musician performs in Market Square.

EVEN A FIRST-TIME visitor to Brussels will quickly realise it is one of the world's chocolate capitals as well as the de facto capital of the European Union and official capital of Belgium. It seems like every second or third shop in the city centre sells artisanal chocolate in seductively gorgeous packages with painstakingly detailed labels indicating the cacao beans' origins. As you would expect, there are also numerous waffle and frites (fries) shops interwoven between the chocolate boutiques, restaurants, and second-hand clothing shops (many which rival those in Paris, Milan and other European fashion capitals).

But which ones to choose? This is where a tour offered by **Secret Food Tours** proves to be a wise first-day activity. Many "beer and chocolate" tours abound, but this tour also brings the meat and potatoes... and then some. Mr Chan, our guide, presented a small but well-curated mix of picks to provide a definitive taste of the holy trinity of traditional eats (chocolate, frites, waffles) along with craft beer and a few surprises. Between stops, he also pointed out several quirky cafes that underscore Brussels' origin story as the birthplace and capital of

comic strips and books, along with the murals making up the city's "Comic Book Route."

Fittingly, the tour began at the Auguste Orts statue near a square that served as the city's main market a few generations ago, and ironically across the road from a McDonald's whose fries would probably be an afterthought if the lines at the frites shops are any indication. Although there are many rustic taverns, some that are a few centuries old, Chan is particularly fond of the **Librairie Manga Café** and the playfully gothic **Bar Le Cercueil** whose whimsical drink menu suggests the management and bartenders are inspired by the talents behind comic books.

The capital, of course, is famously described as a cultural hybrid of French (Walloon) and Dutch (Flemish) culture. In terms of food, French influences seem to dominate sweets while the stick-to-your-ribs savoury dishes reflect the Dutch influences, especially as the Belgians and Dutch share the same rugged weather system. There are flourishes on the sturdy dishes we try that not only add a touch of elegance but also nicely parallel the ornate decorations that distinguish Belgian Gothic architecture from its counterparts in France and the Netherlands. On a rainy day before the spring equinox, the dense sweet and savoury dishes hit the spot.

The first stop was **Aux Merveilleux**

de Fred, a French confection of a bakery with windows full of macarons and bright, sassy pastries. The decor loudly proclaims its Parisian origins (and those of chef/founder Frédéric Vaucamps). However, Chan stresses that different specialties make each location specific to its geography. In Brussels, it is the brioche which is humble in appearance but delicious enough to savour without butter or other accompaniments. We then headed to **Chocolatier Herman Van Dender** to wash down the brioche with freshly made hot chocolate and a chance to buy what our guide felt was the best chocolate in town even with many great contenders. Although my friends back home had differing opinions about the candy, the hot chocolate sipped on the spot was molten bliss.

Brasserie Ommegang, located in Brussels' Grand Place, was the tour's focal point. While its location is ground zero for tourists and the decor is a fun mix of English pub and Belgian brewery, it rates high on citizens' review sites for many good reasons. Mentioned specifically, a wide selection of craft beers (including its Mystic Cherry fruit beer, Primus blonde ale and Ommegang Abbey Ale), perfectly executed frites, croquettes, and their own take on Flemish *carbonnade*, a velvety stew made with beef marinated in dark beer. The meal we sampled as part of the tour included a choice of a shrimp or cheese croquette, and plenty of fries and stew to share. When the waiter recommended dipping the fries in the stew, I wondered if there was some sort of cultural connection between this and Canadian poutine. Along with the meal, there was also a little more history to dip into. The brewery and brasserie is named for the city's annual commemoration of the entry of Charles V into Brussels in 1549.

To end the tour on a sweet note (although we started with a few others), it's all about the waffles, which were offered at a food truck just off the Grand Place/Grote Markt (Market Square) in Central Brussels, loaded up with ice cream, whipped cream and toppings or in a minimalist state as nature intended. 



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ELYSE GLICKMAN is a freelance writer and regular contributor to **TASTE&TRAVEL** based in Los Angeles.



VERNE PHOTOGRAPHY / BELGIUM

SERVES 4-6

Carbonnade Flamande

IN BELGIUM, this classic beef stew is often served with fries and mayonnaise but it also pairs well with potatoes or buttered bread.

Beef Chuck

2 lbs, cubed

All-Purpose Flour

4 Tbs

Salt and Freshly Ground Black Pepper

Butter

1 Tbs

Onions

2 large, chopped

Dark Belgian Beer

1 x 12 oz bottle

Beef Stock

1 cup

Fresh Thyme

a few sprigs

Clove

Bay Leaf

Brown Sugar

1 Tbs

Whole Grain Mustard

2 Tbs

Apple Cider Vinegar

a dash

1 **TOSS** the beef cubes in a mixing bowl with the flour and season with salt and pepper.

2 **HEAT** a stew pot and melt the butter in it. Add the bacon and cook until starting to crisp.

3 **REDUCE** the heat and add the onions. Cook until softened but don't let them brown.

4 **DEGLAZE** the skillet with the beer, scraping up any browned bits from the bottom of the pot.

5 **ADD** the meat to the pot along with any seasoned flour remaining in the mixing bowl.

6 **TIE** the bay leaves and thyme together with kitchen twine and add the bouquet garni to the pot along with the clove and brown sugar. Add the beef stock and mustard.

7 **LET** the stew simmer, uncovered for 1.5 to 3 hours, over a low flame. Stir every once in a while and check whether the beef is tender. When the sauce has reduced to the desired consistency, cover the pot for the rest of the cooking time.

8 **FINISH** the stew with a splash of vinegar and stir well. Season with salt and pepper. Remove and discard the bouquet garni before serving.

Note: *The flavour of the stew will improve if allowed to rest overnight in the fridge so you can make it a day ahead if you wish.*