

Powered by an urban farming revolution and a non-conformist spirit, Belgium is quietly emerging as home to Europe's most creative, eco-minded cooking. *Clare Vooght* digs in

Photography by Guillaume Megevand



50.5039° N, 4.4699° E

Kitchen confidential





Look closely at The Jane's stained-glass windows and instead of the usual cast of saints you'll see cartoonish images of gas masks, forceps, vegetables and demonic, fork-wielding figures. Just call it punk-Gothic. The ceiling of this former military hospital chapel flaunts its water-ravaged, blackened state, adding a behemoth metal starburst chandelier weighing nearly a tonne, while experimental EDM flows through the space; a DJ begins his five-hour set, building to deep, bass-heavy house. It's hardly your average soundtrack for a 12-course, two-Michelin-star tasting menu. But then – crisp, white tablecloths aside – little about The Jane conforms to type.

"I very much like to entertain," smiles The Jane's Netherlands-born chef, Nick Bril. No kidding – Bril might be the only two-Michelin-starred chef to spin a successful side career as a techno DJ, regularly playing at Belgian mega-festival Tomorrowland, no less. "In the summer quite often I'll do lunch, then at 4pm I'll leave for a festival, play for two hours and then I'm back here for 8pm [dinner service]."

Dishes on his seafood-heavy menu, though respectful of classic culinary techniques, are strikingly experimental: a glühwein slushie replaces sorbet as a palate cleanser, a Bloody Mary oyster is served with plankton, and chestnuts are – as in Noma – thin-sliced in savoury dishes, raw, rather than roasted or candied. And it seems Belgium has an appetite for such irreverent experimentation: The Jane is always booked three months in advance. Bril isn't the only culinary maverick around here, though. >



Opening pages
Beetroot ravioli with buttermilk emulsion and barbara cress at Humus x Hortense, Brussels; the restaurant's owners Caroline Baerten and Nicolas Decloedt prepare lunch in sustainable denim uniforms

Clockwise from top
Dishes from the restaurant at August, including hamachi crudo with beetroot, black garlic and wasabi; The Jane's splendid setting is a former military hospital chapel in Antwerp; Nick Bril, DJ and chef-owner of The Jane



THE JANE BY PIETER DHOOP



"Sustainability plays a huge role in the Brussels food scene"

A century ago the country was a hotbed for Surrealist artists like René Magritte; today, the rebel creatives here are chefs, many of whom are combining avant-garde cooking with a sustainable ethos. The idea that Belgian cuisine is all hunger-sating waffles and moules frites, swilled down with strong beer, frankly, sounds stale. This year – for the first time – Belgium’s second biggest city, Antwerp, will host The World’s 50 Best Restaurants awards. Held most recently in Singapore (2019) and Bilbao (2018), it’s a ceremony with a reputation to draw attention to a destination’s food scene. So, the secret will soon be out. Are Belgium’s eco-minded cooks ready for the limelight?

“The only reason we don’t have much awareness so far is because the people are quite humble,” says Bril. “Nowadays the whole world is being progressive with sustainability and very good produce – but we’ve been on that road for a very long time. In Belgium, it’s in the DNA to not buy huge; to go to a vegetable farm, to go to a butcher to buy meat. For us, it’s normal to have that short chain.”

I walk off lunch around the old military hospital’s sprawling compound. These freshly renovated, red-brick buildings, both barrack-like and grand at the same time, are the heart of Het Groen Kwartier (The Green Quarter), an eight-hectare pedestrianised area south of central Antwerp. Just across the courtyard is August – one-time nuns’ quarters, now a boutique design hotel, where a more informal restaurant (also overseen by Bril) excels in zingy, fresh, modern flavours: sashimi-like hamachi crudo with beetroot, black garlic and wasabi; a hearty whole turbot with beurre noisette, parsley and capers.

Turn onto the next cobblestone street and you land on PAKT, a set of ex-warehouses populated by coffee roasters, bars, restaurants, NGOs and a rooftop farming project that aims to show urbanites how food production works. In other words, the epicentre of Antwerp’s eco food scene. Up here, amid clucking hens and aquaponic tanks (neatly, the fish fertilise rocket and watercress crops, which in turn filter the water for the fish), I meet farmer’s daughter Adje Van





Left Quentin Declerck from Le Champignon de Bruxelles, holding some nameko mushrooms

Above A doorstep sandwich served at Racine, a cafe within PAKT, Antwerp

Oekelen, a co-founder of the project. “We want to inspire as many people as possible to relate back to where their food comes from,” she says. “Farmers aren’t surviving in the countryside – in 10 years who is going to produce all the food? We need to find other models. We want this rooftop to inspire different ways of farming.”

PAKT’s 150 members can come up and feed the chickens or plant seeds in the lava-stone soil of their own square-metre plot. The Jane has its own larger plot for growing kitchen herbs and edible flowers in summer. Meanwhile, PAKT works with four farmers near Antwerp whose produce goes straight to restaurants in the city; they, in turn, bring their leftovers to PAKT for composting.

Forward-thinking Antwerp isn’t the only Belgian city to be turning its disused spaces into urban farms. On the outskirts of Brussels, Peas & Love rents patches of rooftop space, tended by a community farmer, above a fashion outlet. A few streets away from busy Gare du Midi, greenhouses full of tomato and basil crops flourish on the roof of a slaughterhouse, courtesy of urban agriculture start-up BIGH. Below the same abattoir, Le Champignon de Bruxelles operates a subterranean mushroom farm. >



Above
Tending to
the basil
crop at
PAKT's
rooftop
urban farm

When I arrive here on a freezing winter morning, to the sound of mooing cows, the warehouse buildings, with their large square windows, are how I imagine Copenhagen's Meatpacking District would have been pre-gentrification. Quentin Declerck, one of the directors of Le Champignon, shows me to the cavernous, nearly 150-year-old cellar, where the temperature never fluctuates beyond 11–20°C – perfect for fungi. Mushrooms were grown down here in the 1930s, but production halted during World War II. Fast-forward several decades and Declerck remembers going to 4,000-capacity parties with rip-roaring DJ sets here as an 18-year-old. “It’s so weird to come here every day to work now,” he laughs.

New fire regulations put a stop to its status as a nightclub; these days Le Champignon’s 18 staff are its only residents – one of whom I spot whizzing past the pasteurising machine on a skateboard (not a bad way to get around this 10,000m² underground mushroom lair). As well as microgreens, Le Champignon grows *eryngii* oyster mushrooms, fairytale-like nameko, shiitake, maitake and shimeji – all from substrate mixed from wood pellets, cereals, water and spent beer grains, which they get from local organic breweries such as Cantillon. The heat that

pasteurisation generates is used in the mushroom dehydrator; efficiency is paramount.

“Sustainability plays a huge role in driving the Brussels food scene,” says Declerck. “People are more aware of environmental issues – and there’s a great increase in local products. People like the story of the project being circular, and in the centre of Brussels. In one year, we’ve doubled our income.”

Le Champignon now makes all its central Brussels deliveries by bike – which beats importing these specialist mushrooms from Asia in terms of carbon footprint. Declerck tells me about a dish at Brut, a restaurant in the Ixelles neighbourhood, which Le Champignon supplies. Made from ultra-thin-sliced, dehydrated *eryngii*, it’s almost transparent when laid flat on a plate. “It’s beautiful,” he says.

I have to see what the fuss is about. Thirty minutes later, I’m in mushroom heaven, tucking into the produce-driven, seasonal menu in the modest timber and teal interior of Brut. There’s a cockle-warming dish of roasted mini-squash, stuffed with umami-rich shiitake, nameko and *eryngii* mushrooms, artfully topped with crispy ribbons of parsnip.

Another Ixelles eatery with a true knack for vegetables is Humus x Hortense. Everything they >

serve is sustainable, co-owner and chef couple Caroline Baerten and Nicolas Decloedt are keen to point out – right down to the staff denim uniforms by Brussels label Façon Jacmin. The nine-course set menu changes constantly with the produce that’s readily available in and around Brussels. “I often say we don’t have four seasons, we have 24 seasons,” says Baerten. Dishes revolve around vegetables that may have been dried, pickled, simmered in broths, or fermented for up to six months. “There’s a lot of complexity behind each simple vegetable,” she adds. “It’s way more layered with flavours.”

In summer, Decloedt explains, the whole team go foraging in the gently rolling hills of The Pajottenland, an hour south-west of Brussels, to pick wild meadowsweet. “We make three meadowsweet infusions, one in oil, one in white wine and one in vinegar.” These go into a hollandaise sauce that’s drizzled on sliced yellow beetroot in a salt crust – a riff on a classic technique used to cook fish.

Decloedt and Baerten return from the kitchen to present a dish of ravioli, made with fine-sliced beetroot instead of pasta. It’s stuffed with kale and pumpkin-seed miso, with a buttermilk emulsion, decorated with some deep green barbara cress. This is swiftly followed by a glazed leek with potato rosti, given supreme depth from a thick, roasted vegetable sauce and fermented red berries. A sprinkling of dehydrated then deep-fried Belgian quinoa provides extra crunch. This is fine dining as far as taste and technique is concerned, only delivered in a delightfully informal way – diners scoop out their own cutlery from a hatch in the wooden tables.

That’s exactly what Belgium’s new crop of free-spirited chefs are all about: cooking with their local, seasonal and organic produce to an entirely different beat. And even if they aren’t inclined to shout about their ingenuity, the restaurant industry bigwigs will come knocking this summer nonetheless; when they do, they’re likely going to be in for a big surprise about what little Belgium has to offer. ■

ANTWERP EAT

Graanmarkt 13

Expect creative dishes made from ingredients grown on a farm just outside Antwerp at this chic but cosy restaurant in the city’s old town. graanmarkt13.com

Native

Colourful, seasonal veg dishes, natural wines and warm “feel-at-home vibes” at chef Benjamin Somers’s charming organic bistro. native.bio

Racine

Informal café at PAKT serving cold-pressed juices, seasonal soups, salads and doorstep sandwiches made with quinoa bread. racinepakt.be



Above Brussels restaurant Brut’s take on lasagne replaces pasta with layers of finely sliced, seasonal vegetables

BRUSSELS EAT

Brut

What’s made in Belgium stays in Belgium, with an ethos firmly placed on locally sourced produce. They don’t work with any suppliers who use plastic, aiming to be as near zero-waste as possible, while tables are reclaimed marble from the old Brussels Nord station. brutfood.be

Humus x Hortense

It’s Nordic-inspired foraging at this fermentation-happy veggie restaurant. Go for the house-made kombuchas and an affordable yet technically excellent tasting menu. humushortense.be

SLEEP

Pillows Grand Hotel Place Rouppe

This place strikes the perfect balance between classic and contemporary. Its warmly lit rooms are all cosy-meets-modern minimalism, while the restaurant acce-sses classic fine dining with soupçons of global influence. pillowshotels.com

SLEEP

August

A heritage-meets-modern boutique stay with a wellness area offering a sauna, hammam, ice scrubs and an outdoor swimming pond. august-antwerp.com



Etihad offers one daily direct flight from Abu Dhabi to Brussels.
etihad.com