

February 18, 2011

Flemish Comfort Food in French Flanders

By ALEXANDER LOBRANO

ON a Friday night at Estaminet 'T Rijsel, a restaurant in Lille, France, just 30 minutes from the Belgian border, my dining companion and I sampled a trio of dishes: waterzooi, carbonnade and pot'je vleesch. In France, the bones of history end up in the stock pot, so reading a menu can tell you a lot about where you are. This menu was telling me that I was in Flanders — more specifically, French Flanders.

Though the sliver of Flanders that lies in France was absorbed in the 17th century, and the locals now speak French, they still love to eat Flemish. "We find our identity at the table," said the cheerful waitress at 'T Rijsel, situated in one of Lille's oldest quarters. "All over the north, but especially in La Flandre, estaminets have never been more popular."

Estaminets are to northern French what bistros are to Parisians or winstubs to Alsatians — earthy, welcoming places to eat much-loved local comfort food. As the menu at Het Kasteelhof, another stop on my tour, put it: "An estaminet is not a restaurant, but you can eat there. It's not a cafe, but you can drink at them. They're just as simple as being at home."

When I arrived in Lille after an hour's ride from Paris on a Friday night, the stone-paved streets glistened with rain. 'T Rijsel, with boughs of hops decorating its beamed ceiling, brought immediate solace to two work-scorched Parisians — myself and Bruno, my favorite French dining companion and, better yet, a bona fide Ch'ti — the slang term for a native of the north of France.

I asked Bruno if he'd gone to estaminets as a boy. "Mais non," he said. "They were considered too populaire then, and no one here vaunted their regional identity 40 years ago." Indeed, in the French collective mind, the region was not only rainy, gray and industrial, but a gastronomic wasteland.

I knew this gritty reputation to be unfair. The northern French are famously warm and friendly, the countryside is beautiful and the region's estaminets — the word probably derives from the Germanic word "stamen," a post to which a cow is tied at the feeding trough — charmed me from the first time I went to one 20 years ago.

On a trip to Lille last year, I'd read that one of the area restaurants, L'Estaminet du Centre in Godewaersvelde, had for the first time entered the Michelin Guide as a *Bib Gourmand* (a place offering good eating at affordable prices).

Intrigued by this benediction, I decided to return — with a true Ch'ti by my side.

Estaminet 'T Rijsel

At this lively, candlelit estaminet, Bruno and I began with a sampler of five pork pâtés, flavored by an array of seasonings, each indelibly northern French: rhubarb, beer, Maroilles cheese, apple and prune. I loved the Maroilles, while Bruno favored the rhubarb.

'T Rijsel served as a good primer for the estaminet experience, thanks to that trio of classic entrees: carbonnade, beef braised in dark beer; waterzooi, chicken in a cream and egg yolk sauce, served with carrots, leeks, onions and celery; and the pot'je vleesch. This hearty dish of boned rabbit, veal, pork and chicken arrived at the table on a bed of white vinegar aspic with a huge bowl of frites, a soothing and satisfying segue from the trencherman's portion of pâté.

My entree, chicken in Maroilles sauce, disappointed; the leg arrived sauce-less under a slice of melted undistinguished, pre-sliced cheese. Knowing we had many estaminets before us, we went easy on dessert, splitting a crème brûlée, which was seasoned with powdered speculoos, the spice cookies popular in northern France and Belgium, and glazed with a crust of raw brown sugar. We finished our meal with two shots of genièvre de Houille, a gin-like digestif.

Estaminet 'T Rijsel, 25 rue de Gand, Lille; (33-3) 20-15-01-59; ruedesrestos.com/restaurateurs/rijsel. Dinner for two, 50 euros, or \$67 at \$1.34 to the euro. (All prices do not include drinks or tip.) Closed Sundays.

L'Estaminet de l'Ancienne Maison Commune

The next day, we headed east, to the pretty little village of Hondeghem. Following back roads through lush pastures and past the occasional windmill, we soon arrived at L'Estaminet de l'Ancienne Maison Commune, with its immaculate white-painted brick facade and terrace with potted boxwoods.

Seated at a wooden table in a rustic room dominated by an open fireplace, we ordered a bottle of Bracine, a superb dark beer brewed just a few miles away, and somewhat warily snacked on smout, a spread of lard with chopped shallots. "At this rate, I'll have to go to the gym twice as often next week," said Bruno, while I silently decided it would be easier just to let my belt out another notch.

We watched the owner, Dominique Hardy, grill plump farm-house sausages and racks of ribbikes, baby pork ribs sprinkled with a

“secret” burnt-orange spice mix that I’d wager contained nutmeg, turmeric, pepper and cloves, over the embers of a wood fire.

The pork ribs — from a small organic farm just down the road, Ms. Hardy told us — featured meat that was well-crusted, with a juicy, tangy interior; it arrived with a side of grilled Bintje potatoes that I heedlessly slathered with butter and crème fraîche. The sage-flavored sausage, which came with excellent frites, was succulent.

“We’ve never been so busy,” Ms. Hardy told me as we each finished up with a bistouille, an espresso with a shot of genièvre on the side. “If older people always went to estaminets, a new generation loves their history and good locally grown country food.”

L’Estaminet de l’Ancienne Maison, 105 rue de la Place, Hondeghem; www.estaminetancienmaisoncommune.fr; (33-3) 28-41-39-59. Lunch for two, 50 euros.

Het Kasteelhof

Atop a steep hill with stunning views over rolling fields, Cassel is among the prettiest towns in French Flanders and the location of the renowned Het Kasteelhof, which occupies an old yellow-painted brick house with two cozy bare-wood floored dining rooms chock-a-block with flea-market finds.

Arriving for dinner on foot during a squall that rendered my umbrella useless, Bruno and I were happy to sit by the chimney fire and start off with a bottle of La Rouge Flamande, an amber beer from the nearby village of Esquelbecq. It’s a good thing I’d developed a fondness for the local suds, too, since this resolutely Flemish spot doesn’t serve wine.

The owner, Emmanuel de Quillacq, recited the specials, which included a soup made with organically grown pumpkin and leeks that Bruno pronounced “super bon”; I tucked into a slice of tarte flamande made with three local cow’s milk cheeses. Before our main courses arrived, Mr. de Quillacq took to the floor and recounted the tale of the Reuze Papa, a legendary giant who once lived in a cave on this highest point in Flanders. Since he used a lot of northern French slang and the occasional Flemish word, much of the merriment went over my head, but from the communal laughter, his storytelling skills were apparent.

Back to the plate. My carbonnade was ruddy, soothing and fork-tender, while Bruno loved his gratinée au Maroilles, a casserole of sliced potatoes and ground pork baked with slices of cheese. Beer-and-brown-sugar tart and crème brûlée with chicory finished off this very good meal, which required an extended post-prandial stroll.

Het Kasteelhof, 8 rue Saint-Nicolas, Cassel; (33-3) 28-40-59-29; lvermeersch.free.fr/kasteelhof. Dinner for two, 60 euros. Closed Monday to Wednesday, the first week of July, the first two weeks of October and last three weeks of January.

L’Estaminet du Centre

On the Sunday of our visit, the streets of the tiny, well-scrubbed village of Godewaersvelde were surprisingly busy when the church bells chimed noon. We headed to L’Estaminet du Centre, hoping to see what had won those Michelin kudos.

Inside the restaurant, sun streamed into a warren of pretty dining rooms, decorated with sepia photos on its sea-blue and white walls. After a warm greeting, the owner, Béatrice Cleenewerck, showed us to a bare wooden table where we could see the interior terrace lined with planters of scarlet geraniums. Bruno studied the chalkboard menu with a frown — he’d had his fill of estaminet classics and wanted to try the other regional specialties on offer — so I let him off the hook.

He started with a large, deep-fried croquette filled with béchamel sauce and tiny gray North Sea shrimp, and followed with meaty Dutch mussels steamed with wine and shallots and served with the weekend’s best frites. For an estaminet finale, I began with pork muzzelle in a shallot-and-parsley vinaigrette of red-wine vinegar and olive oil — earthy, crunchy and very good — followed by the “flamiche du Mont des Cats,” a delicate open tart of cream, lardons and two cheeses, Gruyère and Mont des Cats, the latter made by monks at a nearby abbey.

“I hope you enjoyed your lunch,” said Ms. Cleenewerck as I went up to the zinc bar to pay the bill. When I complimented her on her restaurant’s atmosphere, she grinned. “Ici, Monsieur, la convivialité est toujours sur la carte,” (“Here, Sir, conviviality is always on the menu”), she said — a slogan that well-suited all the estaminets we visited in this delightful corner of France.

L’Estaminet du Centre, 11 rue de Steenvoorde, Godewaersvelde; (33-3) 28-42-21-72; estaminetducentre.com. Lunch for two, 60 euros. Open for lunch, Thursday to Monday; dinner, Thursday to Saturday.