

Cooking in the 'Hop Garden'

Two new cookbooks celebrate cuisine a la biere

My most treasured cookbook, a now-battered paperback, contains no fewer than 19 recipes for beef "aromatised" with beer. So much for the idea that the only one is carbonade Flamande (though in the cool of autumn that classic stew is a fortifying dish, especially with Belgian fries, cooked twice, in horse lard).

Nor is the use of beer in the kitchen restricted to beef dishes. That cookbook, published in Brussels decades ago, in French, contains "the 300 best" recipes employing beer. All the brews used are Belgian, and they are specified according to style, ranging from pale lagers to wild-yeast brews, wheat beers and ales. (Recipes that just specify "beer", wherever they appear, are not worth pursuing).

The book is called "La Cuisine au Pays de Gambrinus." Who was Gambrinus? The name is a corruption of Jan Primus, the first Duke of Flanders and legendary King of Beer.

A brand-new, large-format, beer cookbook from Belgium restricts itself to about 70 recipes, more current in style, and is published in English. The syntax can be quirky but the recipes are easy to follow, and there are pictures of the finished dishes. The book is called "Cooking with Beer at 't Hommelhof" ("The Hop Garden"). That is a cottagey restaurant in the village of Watou. The restaurant is in a building that was once a brewery-owned dance-hall and earlier a courthouse

Watou is the only place I know with a statue of a brewer in one of its main squares. He is not a named brewer, just a personification of the local art. The village is near the hop-growing town of Poperinge, not far from Ypres, and within striking distance of the Channel ports and tunnel. The Belgians call this distinct little region the West Hoek ("corner") of their country. The book also features photographs of the countryside, though irritatingly fails to caption them. There are also two unexplained shots of a drinker-diner who turns out to be me.

The Hommelhof (tel 00-57-388024; fax 388590) is one of several Belgian restaurants specialising in cuisine ^ la bière. Anyone enjoying a meal will taste Westhoek brews like the hoppy Poperings Hommelbier, the complex St Bernardus ales or the malty specialities from the Trappist abbey of West Vleteren.

Among my favourite dishes from chef-patron Stefaan Couttenye is fried foie gras served in pumpkin soup scented with the spiced beer Karmeliet (a pale version of Leffe, more easily found in Britain, would be a lesser substitute). A dish of slightly caramelised vegetables and scallops in red wine is adapted to use a reddish-brown, sour-ish, ale, which he feels performs better. This would work well with the nearest British equivalent, Greene King's Strong Suffolk Ale. Chicory stuffed with whiting is served on a salad with a vinaigrette of raspberry beer. Saddle of hare with figs is presented in a sauce made by de-glazing with a barley wine rather like the British Thomas Hardy's Ale.

The Belgians' extraordinary diversity of beers, and their love of gastronomy, have long emulsified. At least as far back as Escoffier, terms like "Belgian" or "Flemish" usually indicated that a dish contained beer.

The influence of Belgium is readily recognised by British writer Sue Nowak, whose new "Beer Cookbook" is a densely textual paperback with more than 150 recipes. In my own writings, I have always laboured the point that beer can be used in many different ways: as a marinade, in braising, sauces, batters, doughs, and so forth. Nowak goes into more detail, adding notes on the making of aspic with beer, caramelising, poaching and preserving, for example.

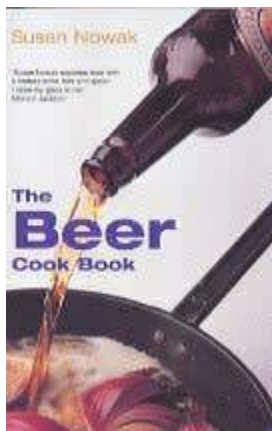
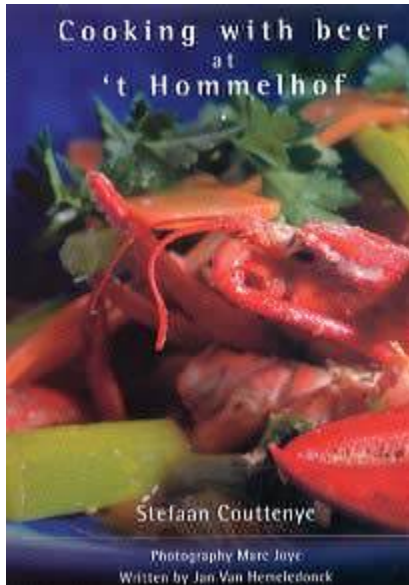
Many of the recipes are her own; at least one is mine, passed on by way of Sophie Grigson. Others are from restaurateurs such as Rick Stein (cod with pale ale); Keith Floyd (chicken with dry stout); and Albert Roux (beef braised in India Pale Ale).

Nowak also writes an annual paperback guide to British pubs that serve good food. Some of these feature in her cookbook. Heather Gant, of the Skirrid Mountain Inn, near Abergavenny, Gwent, contributes a paté with porter. Phillip Buswell, from the Tollemache Arms, Harrington, Northamptonshire, offers smoked halibut with stout. Helen Stephenson, from the Mason's Arms, Windermere, Cumbria, proposes chicken with damson beer. Catherine Maxwell Stuart, of Traquair House, Innerleithen, near Peebles, uses her own castle-brewed Scottish ale in a caramel-ish, crusty, rice pudding.

Nowak's cookbook has chapters on every imaginable category of dish, from starters and soups to vegetarian and cheese plates, separate sections on hot and cold desserts and baked items.

She also proposes some menus. I like the one that finishes with plain chocolates and Gordon's Scotch Ale.

"Cooking with Beer at 't Hommelhof" (1,950 Belgian francs, approx £32.50, plus postage) is published by Roularta, of Belgium. It can be obtained from Mark Joye, in Affligem, near Brussels: tel 00-32-53-662945; fax 662952. Susan Nowak's two titles are widely available in bookshops. The "Beer Cook Book" (£9.99) is published by Faber. "Good Pub Food" (also £9.99) is in its fifth edition, from CAMRA.



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