`BRUSSELS: A SUSTAINABLE FOOD CULTURE`

By Sandra Shevey

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Brussels is a real food town.

The original market square, the Grand Place, functioned as a market until 1959 and became a UNESCO Heritage Site in 2000 after which in 2010 it was voted the most beautiful square in Europe. Since 1973 the market has operated as Mabru, a charitable status, located along the canal at Quai des Usines.

The old square still functions as an early morning market for the sale of plants, flowers and birds with surrounding streets testifying to heritage with commodity names such as butter,cheese, herring and coal.

In the 11th century an open air marketplace was set up around a dried-up marsh near the fort surrounded by sandbanks and situated along a Causeway commercial road linking Rhineland with Flanders.

In the 13th century three indoor markets were built including a meat market, a cloth market and a bread market. In 1504-1536 the cloth and bread markets were re-built to create the Bread House which is now a local history museum.

Most guilds ceased functioning as market halls in the Fifties, the exception being the Brewers Hall which functions as a museum whilst promoting local beer by way of daily blind tastings.

The re-located market at the Quai caters for wholesale and restaurant trade. There are five covered halls, four cafeterias and one restaurant. 150 producers and wholesalers sell fruit and vegetables, sausages, poultry, game, fish, shell fish, cheese, dairy products, flowers and plants.

In the 17th and 18th centuries an increase in population entailed creation of specialized markets and halls. Most occupied spaces around the Grand Place excepting the fish market which was situated in the tree-lined area flanking a remnant of the city`s old harbour on the north-west side of the Church of St. Catherine. St. Catherine`s Square still serves as the city`s local fish market where fish is sold early morning (5-7am) and eaten on the hoof later with a glass of white wine or beer. Most of the fish is local with the exception of Colchester oysters which are on every menu in town including the very fine Brasserie du Jaloa where I had lunch.

Brussels is renowned for three prime products: mussels, fries and beer all of which retain prestige and popularity. Originally popular and cheap because of their fecundity around the Flemish coast mussels are still visible on every menu in Brussels.

Mussels from Brussels are served everywhere and in a variety of ways. I plumped for mussels a l`ail (garlic) when dining at Vincent in Brussels Old Town. The 1905 restaurant surprisingly without a Michelin star or stars specializes in fish and chops. You enter its maritime shanty interior via the kitchens where the meat hangs and the grills blaze.

Vincent serves mussels in all varieties: marinieres, a la crème, parquees (raw with lemon-mustard sauce), a labiere (beer) or `Mosselsaus` (made of mayonnaise, mustard and vinegar).

Frites or fries are still popular having become a local dish in times past when in winter no fish or other food had been available. Inhabitants around the Meuse River had been eating potatoes cut or fried since 1600.

Despite the density of restaurants in the Michelin guide, such as Cospaia where I had some superb giant Kenyan shrimp, food is still largely eaten on the move. One of the best places to grab a bite is at Antoine Frit Kot in Place Jourdan. Frit kots or kiosks are dotted all around the city but this is one of the best places in town. Open from Noon until 11pm there is always a queue of nearby office workers as well as visitors. I chatted to a girl from London who was being married in Brussels and who just had to have her fix whilst she was in town.

What makes the Brussels fries special is their preparation. Fries are fried and dried twice so they are nice and crunchy. Sprinkled with salt they are served with mayonnaise, tartar sauce, ketchup or chilli.

Another reason for plumping for the Frites Kot in Place Jourdan is that it`s part of a beer and fries initiative. Ten local beer cafes allow you to eat your fries in the cafes provided you buy a beer or beers.

And the beer! You haven`t tasted beer until you`ve tasted Belgian beer. Trappist Beer, accessible in Brussels, and produced locally at six monasteries, is acknowledged to be the finest brew in the world.

Following brewing procedures established in the Middle Ages, Trappist beer is still brewed within the walls of Trappist monasteries; brewing must be of secondary importance within the monastery; the brewery is not intended to be profit-making and is meant to help people in need; and the monasteries are monitored to ensure sustainable quality.

I enjoyed a pint at Cafe Esperance along with local pensioners and retired people. The brew was stronger than I was used to but good when you got used to it. There was an understated bitterness, a fairly heavy body, a pronounced fruitiness and a discernible cereal character.

Two fabulous weekend markets are worth visits. The market at Place Eugene Flagey was named for Brussels mayor Eugene Flagey and opened in 2008. Situated in a magnificent square the market shares pride of place with an Art Deco building: the former Radio House (the acoustics are renowned worldwide) and Delhaize: Brussels` first supermarket which opened in 1957.

It was a lousy morning- wet and windy and cold. Nonetheless little could dampen my joy at visiting the market. Flagey is not a huge market. There are only about 25 stalls but the produce is sensational and the prices are competitive.

There was the fish stall selling the famous snail soup for which Brussels is famous and the deli counter purveying eels in spinach and chervil which is also a local delicacy. I will admit I hate eels but dressed and served this way they were surprisingly good.

I have a particular fondness for taramasalata- the kind where you can taste the fish roe. When in Paris I usually get a small amount at Monoprix supermarket which costs a few Euros. But here, at Flagey, I found a man who gets the tapas right from Lebanon, dispenses it amply and and sells it cheap as chips.

The pies and quiches are also very good- all home-made with crusts hand-crimped. I selected a pie of Belgian apples for my snack and found the taste similar but heartier than the Delicious or the Golden.

The smell of freshly roasted chicken, sausage and potatoes permeates and rouses appetite. Many locals consume poultry for breakfast along with fresh bread and a special kind of Belgian white cheese(s) topped with radishes or mixed with shallots.

The lady who sells snail soup on the streets of the Place du Grand Sablon was not around this weekend but the epicerie was open at 11am. The old lady who owns it has been around for half a century. She lives above the shop and bakes down below. Over the years she has roped in several helpers. Along with the most beautiful caramel custard I had ever seen there were hand-crimped quiches as well as exotic blood sausages.

The weekend antiques market has been going since 1960 in a square surrounded by houses from the 16th and 17th centuries and just below the Notre Dame Church with its aggregation in the gardens of guild statues which used in former times to embellish the Grand Place.

Seven antiques traders began the market which today numbers round 50 stalls all with bright red and green awnings.

What I like about the market is the presence of Belgian antiquities. There was an oil I sorely wanted to buy done in the early 20th century of the Grand Place as it used to be. There was another trader who specializes in antiquities from and about the Belgian Congo including relics, rare hides and old books about the ancient tribes. Heirlooms from every Brussels attic have been dumped here for evaluation and sale.

In conclusion here is something which you may want to ponder. The Brussels sprout, the staple Sunday lunch green, is said to have originated in Brussels. Fact is though I failed to see its presence on any restaurant menu and/or at any of the local markets.

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