`SUNDAY MORNING AT THE BRUSSELS AND LIEGE MARKETS`

By Sandra Shevey

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Africans haggle with Polish and Romanian butchers about price and quality whilst stuffing copious bags of meat into caddies or trolleys.

This is the old Brussels abattoir market near the canal at Anderlecht on an average Sunday morning. The market runs from 7am – 2pm Friday, Saturday and Sunday but Sunday is the day to catch the action.

The 1888 livestock market, redeveloped as a dead meat market in 1992, sustains in its original premise- a Great hall, listed in 1988, considered to be an outstanding example of industrial architecture.

Designed in 1888 by Charleroi architect Emile Tirou, who was inspired by the La Villette market hall in Paris, the large metal building makes innovative use of `mild steel` trusses which had not yet been used as the Eiffel Tower as not yet built in mild steel.

The market hall entrance, designed in 1901 by Henri Rieck, testifies to the sale and the slaughter of cattle with two bogus caste bronze bulls (still there) by sculptor Isidore Bonheur (brother of Rosa whose painting `The Horse Fair` still revolts in its subordination of animals)

A respected `animalier` Bonheur refused to invest animals with human qualities and depicts them instead as exploited beasts of burden. Replicas of the Anderlecht bulls can be seen around the world, including England where the location is the Deloitte building on Hills Road in Cambridge.

In the old days when livestock sales took place, Anderlecht was considered a respectable area for the Brussels middle class. These days with the redevelopment in 1992 as a dead meat market and the clientele mostly Africans who live in and around Ropsy it is the brave soul who ventures into the historical market and benefits from the sale of some of the cheapest produce in Brussels.

Several cases of rape have been reported which is even more of a deterrent. Thus the Michelin star La Paix- the sole surviving classy restaurant in the precinct- no longer caters for dinners but restricts itself to weekday lunches.

Unfortunately at Anderlecht on Sunday I was unable to book for Sunday lunch. La Paix is open for lunch weekdays, with dinner too on Friday only.

Open since 1892, serving Belgian cuisine and fabulous Holstein steaks, La Paix used to be an old brewery where transactions took place between cattle sellers and buyers. Bills of sale and old receipts decorate the walls and vintage cash registers divert the eye from the open kitchens where you can watch your meal being prepared.

Whilst redevelopment of the old market hall is on the cards for 2020 there is still time to see the place as it was and is. The old cast iron animal pens still exist as does the administration building- a one-floor affair longer than wide- which is now used for market storage.

Redevelopment of Anderlecht as a dead meat market siphons off some of the action from the ancient Midi market (said to compete as largest in Europe with Ventimiglia in Liguria) The fish shop Mediterranean opened here a few years ago as part of the redeveloped market and is doing great business. Their cafe next door is great for Sunday brunch and does as good a fish and chips as any you`ll find in London.

At Anderlecht it is all about price and before any redevelopment takes place this remains a market for locals by locals. I mean, where else could you buy Italian Muscat grapes for 1.50 Euros per kilo? Mangos and papayas cost next to nothing. Even at the Midi market, you`ll find Muscats cost 2.50 Euros per kilo.

It is also a market that benefits from trader origins as those from Morocco, Turkey and Lebanon know their produce. Clementines with leaves from Morocco are not only cheap, they are delicious.

Smoked goat- smoked tail of beef are on offer as is pork for 4 Euros a kilo.

Whilst the Africans buy and go, the eastern Europeans and other immigrants who subsist off this market stay and enjoy. There are communal tables and stalls that sell- not cosmetic food offered at the Midi market- but local beer, sausages, sauerkraut, pickles and horse radish. At 10am when I arrive most of the locals are already quite high and getting higher. Fights were reported around Christmas time.

Most of the Polish and Romanian shops have adverts or logos which show an African lady buying sausages and other eastern European produce whilst other signs near the iron bars for livestock pens and drains read- `Do not tie your animals to the rails`. It`s all very evocative of times past.

Stalks of corn are thrown `a la pannier` on the table. 10 stalks cost 2 Euros. 20 mangos cost 10 Euros. As the day progresses prices drop. By 2pm they are giving stuff away.

Produce is delicious. Much is grown locally. Carrots, sweet, are grown in sandy soil whilst green beans are from Holland and vine tomatoes from Flanders.

Whilst the Anderlecht abattoirs are defunct the market still maintains a connection with animals. I had to look twice as the standard carousel was being pulled not by mache horses but real ones- lovely pintos with liver and white coats.

What`s more, a Flemish lady sells live animals at `Delto-kip` and sells some very rare breeds indeed including hens without cholesterol and silk Chinese chickens. There are geese, rabbits, hamsters, pigeons and ducks which as in the film `Delicatessen` have necks large enough for forced feeding.

Curiously there were a large number of Islamic buyers ostensibly buying for the holiday which coincided with my visit where Islamics sacrifice animals. Whilst I had assumed inspection had to do with feeling the animals for pulchritude, a local mentioned it had more to do with the jugular as blood from the animals is part of the ceremony ritual.

You can walk to the Midi market from Anderlecht and whilst it`s been going for over 100 years and is considered to be as great as Ventimiglia (450 stalls) it has come down in recent years as produce is just that much more expensive than Anderlecht.

Of course being within walking distance of the Gare attracts visitors from all over Europe. For the middle class it`s still dirt cheap as well as safe. For them Anderlecht is `out of bounds`.

Flowers and plants remain of good value as well as Flemish spices and herbs and tomatoe plants. There are lemon thyme as well as white thyme from the mountains of south of France. Prices are low. 30 Euros for a palm tree, an olive tree, or a fig tree. And there are good qualify small cypress trees.

Still, the Midi market (a Sunday market open 6am – 1pm) is more compatible with visitors and Yuppies for whom it caters. There is something of old Covent Garden in its deportment pandering as it does for couples making for brunch after a night at the disco or visitors from elsewhere.

There are queues around the street for the Moroccan crepes of filo pastry served sweet or savoury and washed down by mint tea or strong Arab coffee. Fillings include feta cheese and honey or artichokes, chillies, cheeses and olives.

There is also something endearingly honest about the traders who prefer to sell cheaply at the kiosks instead of opening a deli or a cafe. I was particularly moved by the prosciutto stall with its wide range and age of hams, as well as the availability of the finest Parmesan all at prices far less than the Brussels delis.

Whilst street food is great I was saving an appetite for dinner at Taverne du Passage on Galerie de la Reine.

This bistro opened shortly after Cluysenaer built the Galeries Royales Saint-Hubert in 1847. The Galleries, giving locals an option to shop in a covered arcaded area, presages the origin of the international shopping mall.

Taverne which has been around for over 100 years is a credit to Belgian`s sustaining food culture. Food, French/Belgian, is still prepared with lots of butter and cream and cooked for hours and hours so meat falls off the bone as you eat. New ownership threatens to erode the tradition and already requests to `speed it up` have come down from on high.

The 19thc ambience sustains. Waiters wear jackets with gold epaulettes and there`s a row of tables down the centre with private booths and more tables on the sides.

Ostend sole, mussels or pepper steak in cream are all good but I had a lamb cassoulet that has been cooking for hours and was superb.

Sunday is also the day to visit the `Batte` market in Liege. `Batte` means `quay` in old Walloon and this market is positioned alongside the quay at the River Meuse.

I arrived in Liege at the new rail station created in 2009 by Santiago Calatrava. Made of steel, glass and white concrete in the neo-futurist style, the architect credits inspiration from Finnish Eero Saarinen (whose home in the Finnish lakes to me is one of the great joys of modern architecture) Still I think he derives greater inspiration from Philip Johnson`s Lipstick building in New York City.

The Batte Sunday market is the largest and oldest in Belgium and is in the tradition of the old medieval fairs with brightly coloured striped canvas awnings.

Starting at 8am and finishing about 2pm the Batte starts in the Market Square- an area with rare Mosan style architecture- 16th and 17th c brick and greystone buildings including the old meat markets at the centre.

Boulets la Liegeoise (meatballs with fries) are sold at every stall as well as local cafes along with a local syrup made from apples and pears ( sounds like cockney rhyming slang) This is called `Sirop de Liege and is smeared across Liege waffles (thick, oval), bread, cheese and almost everything else you can think of.

The local cheese- Le Carre de Liege- is exceptional- Ying and Yang- soft cheese with a strong taste.

The Confrerie du Gay Boulet awards a crystal `boulet` each year in the restaurant serving the best boulets.

Le Bistrot d`en Face (facing the quay) won last year, I think. This rustic ancient beamed 17thc building- opposite the 16thc former meat market- does a wicked boulet (pork and beef) with its own local homemade syrup.

At lunch time on Sunday the place is packed. You must book ahead and you must also arrive in time as they stop serving promptly.

Liege is the city of Charlemagne`s birth and also boasts as native the writer George Simenon whose flat in Lausanne I saw when I was there a few months ago. Simenon`s early novels are filled with tales of the under-life of Liege- the cafes, the bars, the hostels, the markets.

Much of the earthy early 20thc ambience survives thank goodness which is why a visit to the old street markets of Brussels and Liege should feature in everyone`s diary.

Hospitality...www.belgiumtheplaceto.be

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