



A CITY TASTING TOUR: GHENT FOOD GUIDE

A walking tour of Ghent's best food, Belgium's lovely town has much to offer in terms of not only beer and waffles but typical dishes you will remember.

BY NOAH CHARNEY (/PEOPLE/CF250674-1977-4565-BDBB-0001D24E38EE/NOAH-CHARNEY/) ON DECEMBER 02, 2013

Ghent may be the coolest small city in Europe. It combines an incredible history (for a long while it was the second largest city in Europe, behind Paris), with great art (Van Eyck's *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* is the single most-influential painting in history), kind people (who speak excellent English, making it easy for visitors), charming atmosphere, exotic gothic architecture, and a vibrant, avant-garde youth culture (with 60,000 university students in a city of only around a quarter million). But what surprises many visitors is just how good the food is. Belgium isn't known for its food, waffles, beer, and moules-frites aside. There are top restaurants, of course (with quite a few Michelin stars), and everyone loves fries, waffles, and beer, but a culinary tour of Belgium doesn't have quite the same ring as its equivalent in France, Italy or Spain. A trip to Ghent, however, might just change your opinion. I recently spent four days in Ghent, but it's a city I've visited often and come to love. It all began when I was researching a book, a history of *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*, one of the most famous paintings in the world, colloquially called *The Ghent Altarpiece*. It was the first major oil painting, and was hugely influential from the moment it was completed, in 1432. It is also the most-frequently-stolen artwork in history (featuring in the upcoming *Monuments Men* film). I was also interested in exploring the culinary side of the city and I was not disappointed.

Temmerman Sweet Shop

Kraanlei 79

While there are many places to buy sweets in Ghent, the go-to stop is *Temmerman's*, a house full of gingerbread in a house that looks made of gingerbread itself. The owner will be happy to tell you the stories of her family's recipes, including what is said to be the original *Ghent Cuberdon*.

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Cuberdon, affectionately called “noses,” may be found all over Ghent, and there are some carts that do a brisk business in cone-shaped candies, with a main ingredient of raspberry syrup, and a firm gummy consistency outside, with a slightly soft center. They are very sweet—too sweet for some tastes—but unique to Ghent. Like the legendary Ghent mustard, Cuberdon are not exported. They must be eaten within three weeks of making, or else the surface starts to crystallize. Beware of blackened or cracked Cuberdon, a sign that they are not fresh! Temmerman Cuberdon have faces on them, making them easy to spot. The shop is known for other goodies: cookies, caramel waffles, gingerbread, and much more.



De Frietketel

Papegaaistraat 89

Ghent is called “the veggie capital of Europe” and indeed, it has more vegetarian restaurants per capita than anywhere else. Thursday is the official, city-wide “Veggie Day,” encouraging everyone to eat only vegetables one day per week. Now I love vegetables, though I also love meat too much to be a vegetarian. But if the idea of an all-veggie Thursday doesn’t immediately appeal, consider that the fries at *De Frietketel* are vegetarian, and you can eat a chin-high mound of them in good conscience. Unlike the traditional Belgian fries, which are fried twice in ox or horse-fat, these are cooked in vegetable oil. The proud owner explained that the potatoes are cut fresh each day and fried twice, the second time within an hour of the first round—a key difference from generic fry stands. This is considered the premier fry shop in Ghent, but you wouldn’t stumble on it—it’s about a ten minute walk from the historic center. Hugely popular, especially with students, they fry up around 200 kilos of potatoes on quiet Mondays, and 300 kilos Fridays. The fries are great alone, but the Belgian tradition calls for an assortment of exciting, difficult-to-pronounce accompanying sauces for dipping. Try the *Stoverijsaus* (a rich meaty stew) and *Samurai* (a spicy mayonnaise), homemade at *De Frietketel*.

Mokabon Café

Donkersteeg 35

Step into the *Mokabon*, and you step back in time. This very traditional, unpretentious café is like a time-warp to the 1950s—it opened in 1937. The *Mokabon* brand coffee is good (though not very strong in flavor), and is often taken with whipped cream to top it off.

Tierenteyn-Verlent

Groetenmarkt 3

The biggest discovery for me in Ghent was the mustard. It is the best I’ve ever had, hands down, and I’ve spent a lot of time in Dijon. It is sharp, strong, and makes anything you put it on sing. It is also never exported, includes no preservatives, and must be kept refrigerated and consumed within a few months. This makes it that much more precious, and something of a hidden secret. The mustard is at its best at *Tierenteyn-Verlent*, a tiny shop full of porcelain jars that looks like a 19th century pharmacy. In the back stands a wooden vat in which floats an enormous wooden spoon. The mustard is ladled, with remarkable accuracy, into containers of any size (I bought about 2 liters of the stuff, in plastic for easy transport). It is surprisingly inexpensive—a month’s supply at least for about 2 EUR.

Max

Goudenleeuwplein 3

Outside of Belgium, we think of waffles as “Belgian waffles.” In Belgium, they are called “Brussels waffles.” Both are misnomers, as it turns out, because the waffle was invented in Ghent, at a



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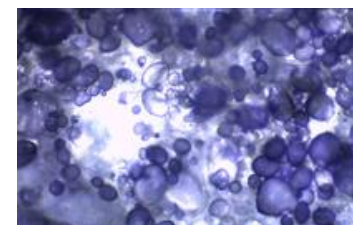


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restaurant called *Max*. The charming art déco interior contains a line of hundred-year-old waffle irons, nimbly manned by Yves, whose family has been cooking waffles for six generations. The proper *Max*'s waffle (which is to say the proper Belgian waffle) must contain 20 squares (4x5) and when finished the cooked dough must be translucent. He held up a few specimens to the light for me to see. *Max* waffles are light as air, not the least bit greasy, and the locals eat them only with powdered sugar. You can also get them with whipped cream, fruit, chocolate, and more, but the classic is worth trying, because it will be airier and tastier than the equivalents you're probably used to. *Max* also specializes in apple beignets, lightly battered and fried apples served with ice cream. Not on everyone's diet, but you'll be eating a bit of history. And next time someone mentions "Belgian waffles" you can remind them that they should actually be called "Ghent waffles."



De Vitrine

Brabantdam 134

The talk of the Ghent foodie community is a group of young chefs, inspired by avant-garde cooking like that of Noma in Copenhagen. Three buddies, dubbed "the rock n roll chefs" by local press, have restaurants in the city that have drawn rave reviews, not just from locals but from major league chefs from around the world. I've yet to try Jason Blanckaert's J.E.F. or Olly Ceulenaere's Volta (good to have something to look forward to on the next visit), but I did try chef Kobe Desramault's De Vitrine. Best known for a rural restaurant a good long drive from Ghent, this is his first city enterprise. He remodeled a former butcher shop and offers just a few tables, and a fairly strict prix-fixe (although the waiter kindly said that the menu could be altered to taste—a nice and unpretentious touch, though unnecessary for our party). What followed was a four-hour meal, and one to remember. From Ostend oysters served hot with horseradish and spinach to poached egg with chicken skin, from an incredible melty pork belly with oyster mushroom mayo to a milk caramel with apple ice cream and a hazelnut crunch that resembled a sepia-tone beach scene, it was a fine meal from a very promising chef, representing the top echelon of young Ghent, Belgian, and indeed European chefs.

De Rechtvaardige Rechters

Sint-Baafsplein 23

My favorite meal of this trip was at a restaurant beside the cathedral, named after the *Righteous Judges*, the title of the one panel out of the original twelve that comprise *The Ghent Altarpiece* that is missing—it was stolen in 1934 and never found. The restaurant is small, less expensive than most of the good ones in town, and has a limited menu. I consider this a blessing, and always prefer restaurants that do a few things very well, rather than boasting encyclopedic, confusing menus. The night I ate there, chef **Marijn Dierinck** was on hand, sharing a bottle of wine with friends, and the whole atmosphere was elegant while remaining cozy and informal. I ate a mind-blowingly-good *Stoverij*, a local Ghent specialty that is essentially beef stew braised in dark beer

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(the other Ghent speciality to try is *Waterzooi*, a creamy stew made with vegetables and either chicken or fish). I had tried the sauce of *Stoverij* on my fries at *De Frietketel (Stoverijsaus)*, but I'd never had the full-blown dish before. There was a richness to the flavor, layered with not only dark Westmalle dubbel beer, but also the famous *Tierenteyn* mustard and brown sugar (some recipes even include crumbled gingerbread). It was out of this world and, best of all, meals come with a giant bowl of fries with homemade mayo—and if you finish, they offer to refill your bowl for free! Unlimited fries? It put this restaurant over the top.

Oude Vismijn

Sint-Veerleplein 5

On a Saturday night around 630pm, I was pretty sure I'd have no trouble finding a table for dinner. I was armed with a list of recommendations from locals sent in to my host from the Tourist Board via Twitter, and I stopped in at four different places. All of them were fully booked! Word of warning: reserve ahead of time for meals out in Ghent on the weekends. I ended up at a swanky new restaurant on the river, in the old fishmarket, refreshingly modernist in a Gothic-to-Baroque city—just about the only one with any tables available. We had just filmed a sequence for a BBC documentary there (it screens on BBC2 on 21 December), and I'd remarked on how distinctive the sleek modern interior looked, in comparison to the traditional interiors of most restaurants. I was rewarded with a baked cod dish—nothing traditional, but perfectly cooked, and a nice juxtaposition to the Ghent-specific dishes I was tasting at most restaurants.

Cassis

Vrijdagmarkt 5

My last meal in Ghent was at *Cassis*, recommended to me by a helpful pharmacist as a place that locals like to go. *Cassis* was like a lot of restaurants in Ghent, and elsewhere in Belgium and the Netherlands: hugely stylish, very good food, full of locals, and quite expensive. Wandering the city (and in my travels elsewhere in the Lowlands) I've been astounded by how fashionable and cool so many of the restaurants look. It's a bit like Williamsburg, Brooklyn—each place looks cooler than the last (not to mention the uber-stylish clientele.) This makes it hard to choose where to eat, and in my experience it's hard to find a bad restaurant. Let it be said, however, that eating out in Belgium is expensive by American, and indeed European standards. Expect to pay 20-30 EUR for a main course. It will be delicious (like the deer stew with apples, pomegranate, and chicory that I had here), and filling, but it bites the wallet. Strangely enough, appetizers tend to be about the same price. And yet these restaurants are always full, with locals and tourists alike. The expense of eating at restaurants is balanced by the ability to get excellent, inexpensive street food (I already mentioned the fries), but it is noteworthy that some of the Ghent-based friends consider high-end New York restaurants to be wonderfully cheap! It's all a matter of what you're used to.

Visit Ghent for the atmosphere, the architecture, the friendly folks, the art, the history, the style and culture. But be prepared to have your eyes opened to the excellent food, beyond the staples of fries, waffles, and beer. Ghent is a sophisticated culinary destination town. You'll want to stay a few nights at least, to work your way through the good eats on offer.

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