

From *Short Breaks in Northern France*

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In the Flemish Mountains: Cassel and the Monts de Flandre

All over the European continent there are little patches where the official frontiers and the limits of the communities on the ground don't quite coincide, where the drawers-up of border lines, wrapped up in high politics, never took much care to ensure that speakers of one language were all on one side of a line while those of a neighbouring culture were all on the other.

Such a place is French Flanders, the compact strip of land between Lille, St-Omer, the sea and the Belgian border. A glance at the map and the place names – Zermezeele, Boeschepe, Godewaersvelde, all about as Gallic as Rembrandt's nose – is enough to show that this is not one of the historic heartlands of French culture. And yet this has been a part of France since the 1670s, when it was seized by Louis XIV. Today, it's a curious, distinct mix: French in language, but still Flemish in many of its customs.

Another thing that is known about Flanders is that it is flat. In France it is virtually obligatory in any reference to Flanders to quote from the Jacques Brel song *Le Plat Pays* ('The Flat Country'), which raised flatness to the level of a poetic image, a state of mind. And flatness is certainly its most overriding characteristic. However, Flanders does have some substantial hills, the *Monts de Flandre*, which are the reason why France wanted the area in the first place. Though all under 200m high, they are actually very steep, rising up out of the flat, wet Flemish plain. The abrupt contrast between the hills and the plains below creates a strangely awesome landscape, making the *Monts* a favourite with walkers. It also means they have wonderful views, and especially clear light and air that's kept alive by the uninterrupted winds. Their peculiar prominence has also given them a special role in the area's folklore,

religion and war. And on top of the tallest of them all is the little walled hill town of **Cassel**, one of the most atypically characterful historic towns in northeast France.

The idiosyncratic identity of French Flanders is also illustrated by the huge windmills on many of the hills, standing out like giant sailed monuments against the sky. There is a distinctive architecture, of step gables, belfries, rectangular churches, small brick houses, painted shutters and lace curtains. There are traditional Flemish games, the *carillons* of little bells that peal from the belfries, and a dense folklore of Carnival and giants that is celebrated each year. And as soon as you cross the River Aa by St-Omer the food changes, taking on a much more straightforward heartiness in place of the usual French elaboration. The great drink of this *terroir* – as in Belgian Flanders – is fine beer, produced by small traditional breweries. There are also special places to sample it, together with the best of the local foodstuffs. France-proper has never had real pubs (nouveau-Irish bars not counting); but Flanders does have, its *estaminets*, snug little bars with wooden tables and adorned with all sorts of knick-knacks that curiously have become French Flanders' most cherished institution. Locals have their favourites, but the most celebrated *estaminet* of all is **Het' Kasteelhof** , at the very top of Cassel's hill.

Performing Duck: *Caneton Rouennais*

Caneton Rouennais or *canard à la presse* , Rouennais duck, is a dish from the days when French *haute cuisine* was the only proper cuisine there was, and was served at banquets to whiskered gentlemen with expansive waistcoats and gold watch-chains. It was a particular favourite of King Edward VII, not a man you would associate with a light lunch. Drawn at some point from Norman country cooking, it's really a very theatrical, purely restaurant dish. The most renowned modern recipe is that of the *Caneton Rouennais Félix Faure* as defined by the patriarch of the Hôtel de Dieppe in Rouen, Michel Guéret, who based it on

that of Louis Convert, one-time personal chef to Edward VII, under whom he did his apprenticeship. The Dieppe (see p.192) is the great temple of traditional *caneton*, and the Guérets have founded an international *Ordre des Canardiers*, ‘master duck-preparers’, to ensure its survival. Order *caneton* at the hotel and it will be prepared at your table with all the right theatricality, by a *maître-canardier* with medal of office on a blue ribbon around his neck.

Essential to *caneton rouennais* is that the duck should be suffocated or strangled and not have its throat cut, so that the meat is unbled. Before you see it, the carcass is cleaned and the heart, liver and other giblets are minced and combined with a stock of beef, shallots, thyme, spices and red wine to make a *fond rouennais*, the special stock. The duck carcass is also spit-roast for 17 minutes. At this point these ingredients and other equipment are brought to your table, on a special trolley. The duck carcass is then intricately carved with a great deal of flamboyant movement, and the sliced breasts are put to one side while the wings are taken off to the kitchen to be breaded and grilled. Then comes the most theatrical part of the operation, the use of the duck press, the bizarre apparatus that towers up in the middle of the trolley. There are very few true duck presses in existence: even the Dieppe only has three, the finest an extraordinary piece by the famed Parisian silversmiths Christofle. The now carved and meatless carcass is cut into pieces and sealed inside the press, where it is compacted by turning the great wheel on top of the devilish machine, all to produce a little silver gravy boat-full of concentrated, bloody duck-juice. This is used in the last great performance, the making of the sauce, combining together the juices, the *fond rouennais*, butter, lemon, port and flambéd calvados or cognac, before it is finally served together with the breast meat and the breaded wings.

The result is extraordinary, an intensely powerful, deep, textured flavour, quite unique and with scarcely any similarity to conventional roast duck. It’s also about the richest dish

ever fed to man, with nothing at all to do with contemporary fashions in light food, so afterwards a leisurely afternoon, or port and cigars, is in order.

L'Amaryllis, Bayeux

If French cooking retains its traditional standing nowadays, when it's supposedly possible to find sophisticated restaurants serving far more varied, innovative, Italian-influenced-Pacific-Rim-global-fusion food in every city of the world, it's because of the depth of France's *culture gastronomique* – a phrase that never sits happily in English – the habitual level of interest in, knowledge of and concern for fine fresh food throughout the country. And one essential aspect of this is not the scattering of multi-starred famous eating-houses, but the number of skilled cooks in quite modest restaurants in relatively out-of-the-way places around France who, without any wish to grab the headlines or get their own TV series, are still prepared to work to the highest standards. It's not that every Frenchman in a restaurant is a great cook, or that there aren't bad restaurants in France. It is the case, though, that in every part of the country there will be at least a few chefs who, maybe with just a purely local reputation, work dedicatedly away at their craft, developing their skills, seeking out the very best ingredients and producing intricate, time-intensive dishes. And this dedication, this willingness to take the trouble, is the basis of quality.

Such a chef is Pascal Marie, of L'Amaryllis in Bayeux. His restaurant, at the quieter western end of Bayeux's main street near the market square, is small, neat and pretty, with décor in fresh pale blues and white, comfortable seating, a bar on one side and the essential fresh flowers on each table. He worked in several places before he and his wife opened L'Amaryllis in 1990, but always stayed close to his west-Norman roots – Courseulles, Villers Bocage, the Lion d'Or here in Bayeux, the prestigious Absinthe in Honfleur (see p.228). His refined, Norman-based dishes, though, would not be out of place in a far more high-profile city location – except that there the fabulously fresh country ingredients would be far harder

to come by.

Even the supposedly basic, c15 set menu offers a wide choice of pleasures. Of the first courses on a late-summer menu, *millefeuille de pommes confites et d'andouille de Vire* features a lovely contrast between slightly bitter-sweet apple and the deliciously smokey, rich flavour of authentically gutsy Norman sausage; an all-vegetarian starter, a *poêlée de légumes de moment*, is a warm seasonal salad that's both refreshing and substantial, and full of good things – green beans, broccoli, artichokes, tomatoes, mushrooms and quite a bit more. Among the main courses might be *jambonette de canard*, duck that has been boned and preserved in its own fat before cooking, producing extraordinary tender meat with an especially delicate flavour. Fish options could include fillet of red mullet with vegetables in a cider sauce – a perfect presentation of traditional Norman cooking – or skate offset by a subtle *confit* of shallots. With the basic menu you have to choose between a cheese course or dessert, but if you push the boat a little further out there's naturally a well-picked choice of Norman cheeses. Desserts run from fine fresh sorbets and a sophisticated 'soup' of red berries with wine and spices to a juicy version of an all-time local classic, *tarte aux pommes et calvados*, with or without *crème fraîche*.

A meal at L'Amaryllis is a demonstration of the virtues of the French cult of fresh ingredients and closeness to source at its most effective. All the birds used in the many duck dishes come from a farm just outside Bayeux, all the vegetables equally come from just down the road – and it shows. And, as you sit at one of the restaurant's snug little tables, watching the number of passers-by dwindle after the market on a Saturday afternoon, a meal here is a very pleasant experience too.

Sadly, but maybe significantly, since I wrote this in 2005 the Amaryllis has closed.