

Now is the time to try authentic Belgian cuisine

If you have a friend who seems to possess an overflowing knowledge of almost every type of cuisine, ask him or her to describe the typical foods and specialties dishes of Belgium. Or, go back a step — what do you know about the cuisine of Belgium?

When was the last time you, or anyone that you know, dined in a Belgian-style restaurant (when, of course you weren't in Belgium)?

Even the most knowledgeable food enthusiast and cook probably doesn't know a great deal about the cuisine of Belgium, largely because of its physical proximity to France. Like a more successful big brother, France, the culinary mecca, has overshadowed Belgium, with a classic cuisine far more renowned than Belgium's own unique style of cookery.

BUT THANKS to the work of Enid Gordon and Midge Shirley, the foods of Belgium in all their glory and splendor are brought to the American public in new volumes, "The Belgian Cookbook" (Merrimack Printing Co.).

In an effort to explore the unknown delicacies of Belgium, noted region by region, Gordon and Shirley have put together a beautiful counterpart of scrumptious recipes and pictures of the Belgian landscape, which help the reader to understand and get a feel for Belgium and its people, and how these recipes have been a part of their lives for generations.

It is common knowledge abroad that Belgians love to eat and savor their food with intense pleasure. And according to Gordon and Shirley, in recent years a growing sense of regional identity and a renewal of interest in authentic cooking has led to a reappraisal of the cuisines of the Belgian provinces.

Belgian cuisine is known not only for the quantity: Witness the size of the portions served in restaurants.

THE PROOF that Belgians are very serious when it comes to the matter of food can be found in the street signs of Brussels, where more than 120 streets are named for some kind of foodstuff.

The authors of "The Belgian Cookbook" are first to admit that it is almost impossible to describe the cuisine of any country in just a few words of phrases, and the food of the Belgian provinces proved no exception.

There are features that are typical of a particular region or province. In Flanders, for instance, you'll find the velvety sauces made with butter, cream and egg yolks, not unlike those of Normandy.

In Limbourg there remains a tradition of cooking with red wine and, in the Ardennes, there is a predilection for rich, aromatic brown sauces that go well with game.

"The Belgian Cookbook" is not unusual in format, running the gamut of Belgian dishes from soups, stocks and sauces, through drinks, preserves and desserts.

THE RECIPES are written in accordance with the metric system but, for those not adept with metrics, there is a translation table at the back of the book, and the recipes listed here have their ounce and pound counterparts listed in parentheses next to the appropriate ingredient.

The manner in which this volume has been written makes discovering Belgian foods all the more enjoyable, and invokes a desire to discover more about this cuisine.

The following recipe for Troute Au Vin Rouge (trout simmered in red wine, from the Ardennes), reproduced from "The Belgian Cookbook," is a lovely example of the rich and flavorful sauces from that region.

The recipe is simple, as is the unwritten rule for most Belgian cuisine, but the results are both flavorful and texturally appealing.

TRUITE AU VIN ROUGE
Trout simmered in Red Wine, From the Ardennes

4 trout
100 g. butter (7 tbs)
3 shallots
100 g. mushrooms (3.3 ounces)
2 tbs. flour
Juice of one lemon
1 tbs. chopped parsley
¼ liter red wine (approx. ¾ cup)
Salt, pepper

(You will need a casserole big enough to hold the fish side by side and deep enough to take the liquid, and which can be used on top of the stove.)

• Melt the butter and sauté the finely sliced shallots until they begin to soften. Add the sliced mushrooms.

• Brown gently and add the flour. Mix well and when the flour has been

soaked up by the butter, add the wine. Bring slowly to the boil and simmer for 10 minutes.

• Clean and wipe the trout dry. Add to the wine, with salt and pepper, and cook very, very gently so that the liquid is just simmering for 15 minutes.

• Place the trout on a warmed serving platter and reduce the sauce to thickness slightly. Check the seasoning.

• Away from the heat, add the lemon juice and stir in a walnut-sized piece of butter. Sprinkle with parsley and serve with boiled potatoes.

The following recipe for Carre De Porc Aux Quetches (loin of pork with plums, from the Ardennes) is just another flavorful example sure to entice us all to learn more about this wonderful cuisine.

CARRE DE PORC AUX QUETCHES
Loin of Pork with Plums, From the Ardennes

1 loin of pork (1.2 kg; 2 ½ lbs.)
750 g. dark purple plums (1 lb, 9 oz.)
3 shallots
2 onions
4 cloves
100 g. butter (7 tbs)
1 small glass can-de-vie
2 tbs. red currant jelly
3 tbs. cream

¼ tbs. flour
¼ tbs. butter
Salt, pepper

• Season the pork with salt and pepper, stick the cloves into the fat of the pork. Melt 50 g. butter (¾ tbs) and brown the pork on all sides. Add the chopped onions and shallots, and cook for a further 5 minutes.

• Surround the pork with 250 g. of the plums (¾ oz.), place in a hot oven and cook for 1 hour 15 minutes or until the meat is cooked.

• In 50 g. of butter (¾ tbs) stew the rest of the plums and cook gently over low heat for 15-20 minutes. The

plums should still look like plums and not be mushy.

• When pork is cooked, remove to a warmed serving dish. Pour off excess fat from the roasting tin and strain the rest of the juices and plums through a sieve, pressing all the juice and goodness from the plums.

• Return to roasting tin, add the can-de-vie and flame. Add the red currant jelly and cream, cook gently for 2-3 minutes, add the beurre manie a bit at a time, check the seasoning.

• Arrange the cooked plums around the pork and serve the sauce separately.

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