

Lest we forget... In de Wulf

27 Apr 2012 by Emma Read

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The drive from Bruges to Dranouter is sobering, not because the 'middle of nowhere' we are heading for is due to be hit by heavy snowfall, and we are travelling in a highly inappropriate vehicle, but because this is First World War country. The empty brown fields and desolate towns, punctuated only by military monuments and graves, seem endless. As I look from the window, searching for the right turn, I feel a sense of guilt, thinking our motives for coming here are hedonistically misplaced. This is a culinary pilgrimage - I am not prepared for the overwhelming, palpable sense of history and brutal conflict elicited by this quiet region on the border of France and Belgium.

This land is Kobe Desramaults' home, the source of his ingredients, and inspiration. After working in several kitchens around Europe, this quiet and thoughtful chef came back (at his mother's request) to take over the family business – and become the youngest chef in Belgium to win a Michelin star.

The rooms above In de Wulf are fully booked so we navigate the tiny lanes to get to Kobe's aunt's house, the recommended alternative. On a hill overlooking the restaurant and in the middle of farmland, it's a great spot and we can't wait to get inside and warm up. This trip is a (late) Christmas present for my partner, Stephen Harris, chef/owner of [The Sportsman in Seasalter](#), who, as he unloads the car, spots Kobe at the bottom of the hill, like a pied piper leading a line of chefs on a hunt for hedgerow spoils that haven't been killed off by the cold. 'Brilliant', says Stephen (a fellow scavenger), with admiration and anticipation.

The fashion for foraging has seen many chefs getting out of the kitchen, pursuing tiny wild treasures in the great outdoors, but it has also seen many reaching for the telephone to order bags of wood sorrel and indiscriminately using it to garnish dishes in which it has no place. Some foods, found at the roadside, should be left there as, although they may offer a romantic aesthetic, they offer little in terms of taste. Wild ingredients should have a context and, as is the case at In de Wulf, be used appropriately, to tell the story of a specific terroir.

Kobe is an expert narrator: he knows where and what to look for, but he also knows *how* to use what he finds. We brave the promised snow to find ourselves sat next to hunks of meat, wrapped in string, slowly curing next to the wood fire (the ham, not us!). This ham, dried for 18 months, is the first snack of the long tasting menu we have opted for, and is perfect with the glass of Jacques Lassaigue champagne in our hands, helping to calm our chattering teeth. As we toast, a further flurry of appetisers arrives. We love the wafer-thin, earthy-sweet cones of beetroot filled with refreshing yoghurt and the savoury flapjacks, a tribute to the cereals of the surrounding fields, topped with dainty herbs and crunchy cornichon.

With reluctance, we leave the fireside and move in to the dining room. There's another fire, with some mysterious, charred balls on top of it and a dozen or so simple wooden tables around.

The room is large and rustic and, despite the weather, and cancellations that probably ensued, there is a low buzz. The ingredients given centre stage in the dishes that follow are the unsung heroes of the North Sea. Humble whelks and winkles, undervalued and underused by many chefs, are Kobe's seafood stars. In cooking, he affords them the appropriate care and respect, so the whelk with mayonnaise has a firm texture but is not chewy (as is so often the case) and the winkles, soft and salty, are given added flavour through dainty use of mustard leaf and seed. A mousse of home-smoked mackerel with discs of radish works perfectly with the 2010 Caillottes Sancerre from François Cotat, a highlight of the exceptional, highly original flight of drinks that include cider and even homemade lemonade.

My favourite dish, Ostend oyster with cavallo nero and whey sauce is, sadly, just a mouthful. The cabbage and the whey skilfully identify with, and reinforce, the iodine and cream of the oyster: a perfect meeting of land and sea. Kobe knows that bleak winter poses a challenge in terms of using only what grows around him, but he prepares for this by curing, preserving and pickling. The 'fermented juice of leek' served with sole, is one such example and, though leek wouldn't have been my first choice of vegetable to juice and/or ferment, it works very well, adding a gentle acidity to the fish.

An English chef arrives at our table (one of the many young men and women who come from across the world to work in Kobe's kitchen), carrying one of those mysterious balls that had been sitting on top of the fire. 'It's celeriac,' he reveals,

breaking open the salt crust, before hurriedly returning to the kitchen. Minutes later he returns with a small piece of the vegetable, surrounded by some homespun buttermilk cheese and a foam made of the resulting whey. This dish, although it may appear to be an exercise in beige, is far from dull; the root is tender and yields to the tangy buttermilk.

A pigeon perched on hay makes its way towards us, sizzling like a fajita. These birds are stuffed with the hay, vacuum-sealed and left for a week before being cooked, allowing the woody, grassy flavour to penetrate the flesh more effectively.

Puddings at In de Wulf are certainly alternative, often using vegetables and herbs as their focus. This could have been a sticking point for me, a 'why is there no chocolate on the menu?' traditionalist, but actually the restrained use of sugar in the dishes means I end the meal feeling full, but not uncomfortably so.

A small Jerusalem artichoke (on a large plate) looks a little underwhelming but its gnarly skin has been brûléed, crunching satisfyingly and contrasting the bitter vegetable with sugar.

Pear, its rind replaced with burnt ash, comes with an ice cream made from Grevenbroecker (a local blue cheese) and crumble crumbs. It carefully walks the line between sweet and savoury and reassures us we're not missing out by declining a cheese course.

After petit fours (chocolate box ticked) and coffee, Kobe takes us for a look round the kitchen and introduces us to his brigade. He and Stephen exchange ideas and chat about restaurants they've been to - [Noma](#) and [Faviken](#).

Later that evening, back next to the fire (and the hams), waiting for our coats and wondering if the car will make it up the icy hill, I pause, remembering those fields and graves, and say thank you to those who gave their lives, so I would have the opportunity to be here.

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