

DRAFT MAGAZINE

A HEAVENLY COMBINATION



Get in to Mellow Mushroom now to check out a divine take on a classic combo. Immort Ale from Dogfish Head coupled with our Phoenix Pie. They won't be around for long.

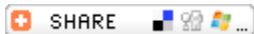
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By Shirley Moskow

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Step into Belga Cafe, the first true Belgian restaurant in Washington, D.C., and you'll instantly be transported to Europe: Menus are printed in Flemish and English; dark wood furniture fills the intimate, friendly atmosphere; and top-notch service awaits. This is what makes the four-year-old restaurant a neighborhood favorite, and the kind of place travelers love to discover. It's "a little bit of Brussels on the Hill," says owner and chef Bart Vandaele.

Vandaele grew up in the kitchen of his parents' restaurant, trained at culinary school in Europe, and held the executive chef position at many high-end restaurants before opening Belga, where he celebrates the role of beer in gastronomic culture. The Belgian beer pairing dinner he prepared last year at the James Beard House in New York showcased many items found on Belga's "Eurofusion" menu, including halibut poached in Kasteel Bruin ale with a beer sabayon, paired with a La Chouffe "Big Chouffe" collectors bottle from 2006 and Duvel golden strong ale. Desserts starred a Belgian beer crème brûlée and apricot ginger and peach beer float, served with Brussels speculoos (caramelized gingerbread), and Bruges kletsoppen (fine, crispy, cinnamon and almond cookies). Coffee and espresso arrived with chilled Belgian "Citroen Jenever." Although jenever originated in Holland, he says it is traditionally served in Belgium on "bachelor's night."

No doubt, the menu at Belga specializes in beer dishes, and Vandaele's enthusiasm for

Belgium's bubbly brews fuels the inspiration behind the gastronomic experience.

"No country in the world can boast so many different varieties of the frothy brew as Belgium," says Vandaele. The restaurant doesn't hesitate to showcase the variety, as it serves 120 Belgian beers, each in a distinctive glass that identifies with the beer's name and the brewery. It also lists 250 wines from all over the world.



"The kind of respect reserved for fine wine in most countries is, in Belgium, accorded also to great beer," he says. "People who genuinely appreciate fine wines, as opposed simply to embracing the snobbism, can hardly be blind to the complex aromas and flavors of great beer."

But Belga is more than an instant trip to Belgium, it's become a neighborhood meeting place, of which Vandaele is especially fond. Tuesdays from 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m., he hosts a "Ladies and Babies Lunchtime."

"I like to host family celebrations," he says. "I have no problem with people who want to bring kids."

And on the last Tuesday night of each month, there's a beer tasting dinner. A couple of times a year, the gastropub features a "Drink your Beer and Steal your Glass" night, "when we have enough glasses," jokes Vandaele.



Address: 514 8th St. SE, Washington, D.C.

Web site: www.belgacafe.com

Most popular beer: Duvel

Famous for: Pomme frites (Belgian fries)

Crowd: Friendly neighborhood types

Songs you're likely to hear on the jukebox: Always changing: An iPod plays selections from classical to pop.

Specialty drink: The Belga: Vodka with crème de peche a

dash of lime juice and Brouwerij Van Honsebrouck St. Louis peach beer

Most popular menu item: Belgian Beef Stew

Article Score:



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Comments: None Yet.

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