

# Business Snapshots

BY ANDREW NOYES

## Belga Café: Expanding the Palette of Eighth Street

**T**here comes a time in every accomplished chef's career when the years of slinging hash for the masters comes to an end, and the would-be Wolfgang Puck can move beyond his mentors and achieve greatness in the kitchen.

After preparing feasts for the refined palettes of foreign dignitaries and world power brokers (and operating a successful catering company), what else is left to do? Open a restaurant, of course. And what better a spot than the budding Barracks Row?

Welcome to Bart Vandaele's renaissance. The 34-year old is ready for the big time, and he's banking on Belga Café to make his dreams come true. Discriminating DC diners, he hopes, are ready for something new and different—traditional Belgian food with influences from all types of cuisine.

Beneath Vandaele's youthful appearance—short-cropped hair, earnest eyes and a tall, lanky frame—the northern Belgian native is a proud, passionate chef whose accomplishments are nearly too numerous to name.

His parents, who raised him in the town of Kortryk near the beach and the French border, are both chefs. His grandparents were in the industry, and Vandaele's been cooking since age 12. It should come as no surprise he would opt to don an apron, but it was by no means obligatory. "My parents

always said, 'Do whatever you want with your life,'" he remembers, but perhaps he was just predisposed to this career path. "I literally grew up in the kitchen—my toys were pots and pans," he says.

He attended cooking school for six years until age 18, all the while filling his weekends and vacation time with working in restaurants, thanks to his father, who helped land him jobs with some of the best chefs in Belgium.

He trained in Bruges and has a series of prestigious executive chef positions in the United States and Belgium under his belt. Prior to moving to Washington, he was sous chef at Restaurant Scholteshof, an acclaimed eatery tucked away in the Belgian Flemish countryside, and gained experience at the renowned Restaurant Piet Huysentruyt from 1990 to 1996 as a chef. Most recently, he was the executive chef for the Dutch ambassador to the United States, during which time he pleased the palettes of dinner guests ranging from former first lady Hillary Clinton to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

Vandaele's cooking has been reviewed in various Belgian and international newspapers, and he has contributed to several cookbooks, including *The New Generation: Young Chefs from Belgium*, Original Restaurants: Jan Maesen; Piet

Huysentruyt; Eigentijds & Eigenzinnig. He also placed third in the "Best Junior Cook of Belgium" competition, and has cooked with star chefs as Michel Richard, Jean-Louis Palladin, Robert Widemyer, Todd Gray and others.

### A Work In Progress

Nearly a year ago, Vandaele's girlfriend first brought him to Capitol Hill, and as they strolled around the Eastern Market neighborhood taking in all the sights and sounds and dispensing "hellos" and "how are you's" to locals, it occurred to him that this friendly, community-oriented burg was truly unique to Washington, and it would be the ideal place to open the restaurant he had always wanted.

Within the span of several days, he secured a real estate agent and visited an empty retail space at 514 8th Street, SE. The spot felt right, and he never looked elsewhere. "It was the only space I saw, [and] it was the size I wanted. I looked around, took some measurements, and that was that," he muses matter-of-factly.

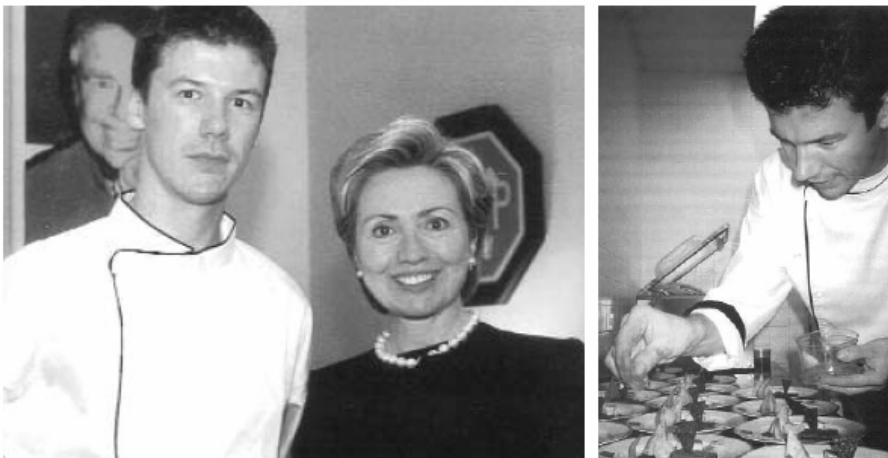
Some Capitol Hill residents may argue that the drab storefront's windows have sported "coming soon" signs for Belga Café for far too long with no apparent change to the former floral shop's façade. But major changes have been underway inside, Vandaele promises. A gander inside the space satisfies this skeptic. He and his 100 percent Belgian design team have hollowed out the pulp of the main room like a ripe, summer melon and are in the process of turning the bombed-out-looking building into something spectacular.

Barring major setbacks, Vandaele hopes to open the restaurant this month, but he can't quite pin down a date for the grand opening. "Only the construction guy and God knows," he cracks. "Not even myself anymore."

Belga Café will be rife with contemporary, comfortable seating inside the dining room and on the patio, and Vandaele even counts a rooftop deck among his future plans. But for a truly unique dining experience, the chef will seat patrons with friends, neighbors and even strangers at his 14-seater "community table" adjacent to his bustling kitchen.

The café will hold approximately 65 diners inside, 20 on the patio and 10 at the bar where he'll serve an extensive list of 30 to 40 Belgian beers.

Five or 10 years down the road, Vandaele hopes to open a "really small restaurant where I can really cook—where I don't have to think about the busi-



**Left:** Bart Vandaele has catered affairs featuring such dignitaries as Sen. Hillary Clinton. He brings his talents to Belga Café, opening soon on Capitol Hill. **Right:** Bart Vandaele is shown creating some of his signature dishes. The Belgian-born chef brings his talents to Belga Café, coming soon to Barracks Row.

ness and just be creative and crazy in my kitchen." Someday he'll own a small hotel and restaurant outside the city where local farmers will grow his vegetables. "That's the ultimate dream."

**What's Cooking?**

Vandaele won't forfeit a copy of Belga Café's menu, which is noticeably still in the works and speckled with scribbles and notes to himself, but he does permit a quick look as he thumbs through the pages, quickly revealing a palette-pleasing collection of appetizers, entrees and desserts.

"I looked back at classic cuisine and the cuisine I learned from my parents, and I went back to my roots and tried to bring something new," he says.

For starters, Vandaele touts his tomato crevettes—stuffed tomatoes with baby grey shrimp, the tuna and couscous terrine, or one of his favorites, the *Foie de canard*—smoked and poached duck liver with a sweet Flemish brioche.

He also offers six kinds of mussels, a Belgian national dish. You'll find steaming pots of mussels cooked in white wine, garlic butter crème, curry crème, white beer (and bacon) and the "Werner and Greta"—a special vegetable-infused dish named after the owner's parents.

A special Eurofusion portion of the menu offers sweet and sour duck breast with duck confit and celery root, among other specialties. For lunch, try the signature Belga burger—which will be beef, lobster, salmon or venison, depending on the chef's whim—or a smoked salmon steak grilled on waffle iron.

Vandaele plans to offer a brunch on weekends that is not to be missed. Scarf down his poached egg with salmon and asparagus, thick fruit-filled crepes, and, of course, Belgian waffles with an assortment of toppings.

To satisfy your sweet tooth, the café will feature an array of desserts including three kinds of chocolate mousse, and a heavenly Crème Brule. Eighty percent of the selections will be made from the finest Belgian chocolate—but would you expect anything less?

Vandaele's menu will also sport some "over the edge desserts," including an asparagus dish, which he admits "sounds kind of weird," but assures is delicious. Also, try the Belgian endives tart with chicory coffee ice cream, or the curious salsa made from cucumbers, strawberries and tarragon.

Presentation is very important to Vandaele. "You eat for more than 50 percent with your eyes," he says. Sometimes the chef even starts an imaginative dish by seeing the empty plate itself. He'll envision

the presentation that compliments the dishware and then come up with the kind of foods he can use to accomplish the look.

So how will the proprietor gauge success? Through the smiles on patrons' faces and repeat business. "A full house doesn't always mean it's a good business," he reminds us. "I'm happiest as long as I can cook and do what I want."

"I have a good feeling; I feel right here," Vandaele, who lives in the Lincoln Park neighborhood, says of Capitol Hill. He's bowled over by the number of people he has befriended in the span of only several months. "I believe in the cause here—bring back Main Street and being part of that—I love it."

**Diversions**


It should come as no surprise that one of Vandaele's cherished pastimes is flipping through cookbooks and trying out new recipes. "I hate copying," he maintains. "I have tons of cookbooks, I read titles of dishes and look at pictures for inspiration...and I figure it out for myself." The chef enjoys preparing different kinds of food and is most inspired by Asian food because of its creativity, appearance and superior quality.

Vandaele likes sampling some of Washington's most fabulous fare. His favorites include Marcel's French food with Flemish flair, Georgetown's acclaimed Citronelle, Maestro at the Ritz-Carlton in Tysons Corner, Todd Gray's lavish Equinox and mouth-watering mezzes at Zaytinya downtown.

When Vandaele's not in the kitchen, he enjoys sports like waterskiing and swimming, but proudly proclaims that he is "not the kind of guy who goes to the gym." He also likes to stay out late and go dancing—a "bad habit" of jet-setting "restaurant people" who work hard and play hard. Although he has been to New York City repeatedly, Vandaele is still smitten with the Big Apple and will make any excuse to visit. "It's different there. People here wear their ties too tight," he quips.

Speaking of ties, he welcomes them at Belga Café, but they are by no means a must. He wants to create a space that is casual yet refined. He teases, "Come to my table, come inside my house. I'm sorry you have to pay for it."

*Andrew Noyes is editor pro tem for Voice of the Hill. He revels in other people's delicious dishes—and can't wait to try Belga Café—but sadly lacks the knack for cooking, with the exception of his famous tofu stir fry.*



*Clock Restoration  
and Repair*

CLOCKS AND  
ANTIQUES BOUGHT

Estates Bought—  
One Item or Many

**HARRY FLOYD**  
202-543-6422

payneandcampbell@verizon.net

PROPERTY MANAGEMENT

C V O V C



**Your standard of living.**  
202.359.RENT evolveLLC.com



"Evolve helped me find a great apartment for my English Basement apartment. The new resident took great care of the apartment and he pays less rent on time. I'd love to live!"

Irene Khoshdel  
Satisfied Evolve Customer



**serendipity**  
GARDEN DESIGN

Serendipity Garden Design offers landscape design and garden consultation to connect people with their gardens, empowering them with knowledge to tend their own plot of land. Or, we can tend it for you.

*Julie Olson, Designer*  
202.544.7247

*Making gardens beautiful, no matter how small the patch of dirt.*  
www.serendipitygardendesign.com

\$200 Off  
on  
**ICE CREAM CAKE!**

Your favorite flavor of Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream

A layer of our fudgy, chewy, rich chocolate brownies

A nice surprise! Hand-dipped Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream

Safe brownies

Your special message

Fresh whipped cream or buttercream frosting

Call us with Ben & Jerry's. We will help you with other Custom cakes, too! Expires 8/31/04. Good only at:

**BEN & JERRY'S**  
VERMONT'S FINEST • ICE CREAM & FROZEN VOICES™

Eastern Market 327 7th St., SE • (202) 546-CAKE

the cancer diagnosis

frightening, maddening,  
confusing

but also a time for  
self-reflection and enhancement of  
personal development

individual, couples and group  
psychotherapy for those with cancer

joseph tarantolo, md  
board certified psychiatrist  
certified group therapist  
202/543-5290

