

NEIL EVANS
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What's Cooking in Belgium

**RECIPES AND STORIES
FROM A FOOD-LOVING NATION**

Contents

Introduction	8
Map of Belgium	14
Conversion chart	15
Starting off with shrimps	16
STUFFED TOMATOES	20
SHRIMP CROQUETTES	22
Travels around Wallonia	24
LIÈGE-STYLE SALAD	28
PEA & HAM SOUP	30
Down by the river	32
POACHED ITTRE-STYLE TROUT	36
FRIED TROUT WITH ALMONDS	38
Along the North Sea coast	40
SOLE MEUNIÈRE	44
HERRING OR MACKEREL MARINADE	47
Mussels and chips	50
STEAMED MUSSELS	54
BELGIAN CHIPS	58
FRESH MAYONNAISE	60

<i>Flemish classics: meat in pots</i>	62
FLEMISH BEEF STEW WITH BEER	66
POTTED MEAT	69
<i>Bring out the beer</i>	72
WHITE BEER POACHED SALMON	76
RABBIT IN BEER WITH PRUNES	79
<i>Plenty of veggies</i>	82
VEGETABLE PICKLES	86
VEGETABLE STOEMP	88
<i>Underground trio</i>	90
CHICORY WITH HAM & CHEESE	94
FLEMISH-STYLE ASPARAGUS	96
<i>Pork in all its forms</i>	98
GAUME MEAT PIE	102
BLOOD SAUSAGE	104
<i>About cows and steaks</i>	106
GRILLED STEAK	110
BEEF HUTSEPOT	112
<i>There's always minced meat</i>	114
BLIND FINCHES	118
LIÈGE-STYLE MEATBALLS	120

<i>Hunting season</i>	122
WILD BOAR WITH CHESTNUT SAUCE	126
BRABANT-STYLE PHEASANT	128
<i>For the love of chicken</i>	130
HOMEMADE VOL-AU-VENT	134
GHENT WATERZOOI	137
<i>The cheeseboard</i>	140
ARDENNES GOATS' CHEESE	144
CROQUE MONSIEUR	146
<i>Heavenly bread</i>	148
CRAMIQUE	152
FRESH GINGERBREAD	154
<i>Waffles and pancakes</i>	156
BUCKWHEAT PANCAKES	160
LIÈGE SUGAR WAFFLES	162
<i>Fruitful Belgium</i>	164
POACHED PEARS	168
CHERRY TART	170
<i>And for dessert: pies and tarts</i>	172
RICE TART	176
SUGAR TART	178

<i>In the biscuit jar</i>	180
BRUGES KLETSKOPPEN	184
CLASSIC SPECULOOS	186
<i>Chocolate, the nation's pride and joy</i>	188
CHOCOLATE MOUSSE	192
CHOCOLATE MOELLEUX	194
<i>The spirit of Belgium</i>	196
BELGIAN COCKTAILS	200
ALCOHOLIC COFFEES	202
HOMEMADE ADVOCAT	204
<i>Special occasions</i>	206
EPIPHANY CAKE	210
CHRISTMAS LOG	213
<i>Word of thanks</i>	217
<i>Biographies</i>	219

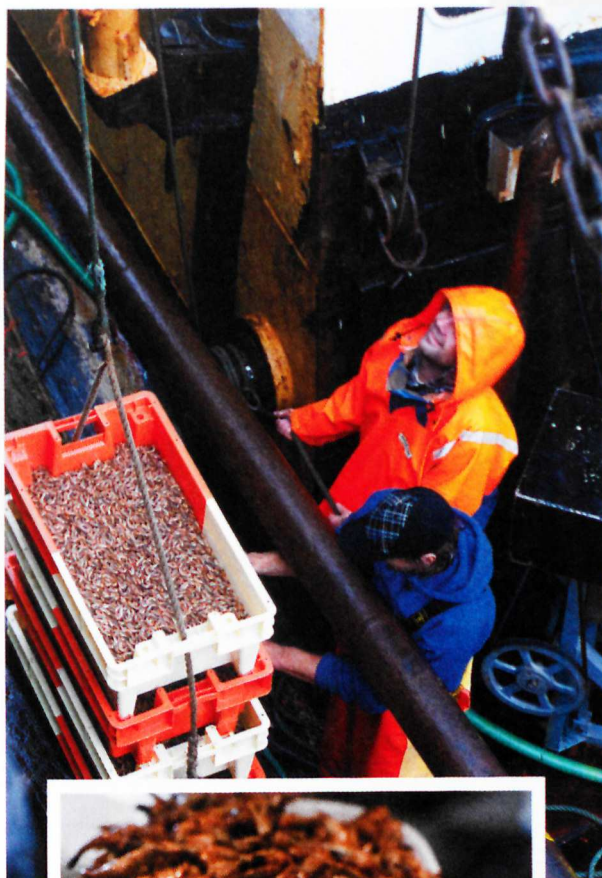
Starting off with shrimps



GREY SHRIMPS, KNOWN LOCALLY AS 'THE caviar of the North Sea', have a special place in Belgian hearts and on Belgian menus, with shrimp croquettes and tomatoes stuffed with shrimps among the most popular starters in the country.

The revered grey shrimps are mostly fished by boats off Zeebrugge, Nieuwpoort and Ostend as well as along the Dutch coast. In the Belgian coastal town of Oostduinkerke, the shrimp fishermen don't go out in boats but on horseback, keeping alive a tradition that dates back some 600 years. Sitting astride the large, working horses, the fishermen ride into the sea, dragging their nets behind them to catch the local delicacy. It is the only place in the world where this technique can still be seen.

Oostduinkerke is also home to an annual shrimp festival during the last weekend of June. The celebrations start with a religious service and a consecration of the sea, after which shrimp-fishing contests, frying fish and a shrimp festival parade are all on the agenda.





Time has not stood still in every respect though. Whereas in the past, grey shrimps caught off the Belgian coast would have been peeled nearby, today they are transported to north Africa to be peeled by cheaper labour and then flown back again for sale here. Such are the quirks of global trade.

That said there's nothing to stop

you from peeling your own shrimps, and the advantages aren't just environmental. One culinary bonus is that you can use the leftovers to make a flavoursome fish stock. Or if you're enjoying a day trip at the coast, unpeeled shrimps fresh from the sea are a popular snack to accompany a glass of beer such as a local Rodenbach. Peeling your own shrimps one by one may seem a fiddly and time-consuming activity, but sometimes it's good to slow down, and the reward is immediate and oh so tasty.



TOMATOES AND CROQUETTES

The classic starter of tomatoes stuffed with shrimps (referred to as *tomates crevettes* by the Francophones and *tomaat garnaal* by the Flemish), is a simple dish but one that has stood the test of time. Traditionally, it was a dish for special family occasions, not least because of the high cost of shrimps. Today, they are much more affordable and therefore enjoyed much more frequently.




As for shrimp croquettes, it is the contrast between the crunchy breadcrumbs on the outside and the creamy shrimp mixture on the inside that makes them such a delight to eat. Served warm and sprinkled with fried parsley, they're hard to beat.

Of course not all starters are based on shrimps. In the croquettes department, another popular choice is cheese croquettes. And there are salads, including the coastal salad made with shrimps, lettuce, tomatoes, boiled eggs and a generous serving of Belgians' favourite condiment, mayonnaise. And soups, not least shrimp soup. Okay, maybe there's no getting around it: shrimps are a staple for traditional Belgian starters.






Stuffed

TOMATOES

 2 servings
 1 saucepan
2 bowls
 30 minutes

4 large tomatoes
400g unpeeled
(or 200g peeled shrimps)
100g mayonnaise
1 lemon
1 large handful of parsley
Celery salt
Finely ground white pepper


- Using a sharp knife, mark a cross on the base of 4 big, firm tomatoes. Leave their green stems intact. Blanch the tomatoes by carefully placing them in boiling water for 15 seconds and then transfer them to a bowl of cold water. Dry the tomatoes and peel off their skin. Slice off their tops and set aside. Scoop out the seeds and discard them. Wet a finger, dip it into the celery salt and rub in the inside of the tomato cavity. Repeat with the pepper.
- For the shrimp filling, mix 200g of peeled shrimps together with 100g of mayonnaise [→ see the recipe on p.60], the juice of half a lemon and a large handful of finely chopped parsley. Generously fill the tomatoes with the mixture before putting their lids back on at an angle, like little hats. Decorate with a sprig of parsley, half a lemon cut into wedges and any remaining shrimps.


-  In Belgium, the shrimps are called *crevettes grises/grijze garnalen*, which literally means grey shrimps. In English, these are more often called brown, common, sand or bay shrimps. If these are unavailable, then the dish can also be made with prawns, crab meat, lobster, crayfish, clams or surimi.
-  Shrimp-stuffed tomatoes are traditionally served with a simple salad garnish. This can be made more substantial by adding a combination of the following: grated carrot, a few slices of pear, sprouted seeds, baby green peas, thinly sliced mushrooms, sweetcorn, lamb's lettuce and fresh coriander.
-  They can be covered in clingfilm and chilled in the fridge for a day.



SHRIMP

Croquettes

 16-24 croquettes

 1 saucepan

1 baking tray
(30x40cm)

2 small bowls

1 frying pan

(or deep-fat fryer)

 Preparation:

20-40 minutes

Refrigeration: 2 hours

Cooking: 20 minutes

250g whole shrimps

(or 175g peeled shrimps)

75g flour

75g butter

500ml milk

1 tbsp tomato purée

2 eggs

150g breadcrumbs

100ml oil

2 sprigs of parsley

Salt & pepper

Paprika


— The shrimps are best bought whole as their heads and tails can be used to infuse the creamy béchamel with their rich flavour. If they are uncooked, boil them in half a litre of salty water for 5 minutes, until they go pink and then peel them. Pan-fry the shrimps' heads and tails for a few minutes before boiling them in the milk for 10 minutes with a tablespoon of tomato purée. Sieve well before use.


— To make the béchamel, melt 75g of butter in a saucepan then add 75g of flour and fry it in the butter for a minute over a low heat. Add the shrimp-flavoured milk a quarter at a time and whisk until the sauce is smooth. As the sauce thickens, continue stirring regularly. Cook until the sauce has the consistency of a thick paste, which should take 8-12 minutes. Turn off the heat and allow to cool. When it is no longer steaming when stirred, add 2 egg yolks, a pinch of salt and pepper, and the shrimps. You may also want to add a few spices: a pinch of paprika will accentuate the pinkness of the shrimps.


— Mix the shrimps into the béchamel and then pour into a greased baking tray, about 30cm×40cm, to a thickness of 2-3cm. Cover with clingfilm and chill in the fridge for a few hours until firm.

— Cut the raw croquette into pieces the size of a pack of playing cards, then dip in beaten egg white before rolling them in breadcrumbs. Avoid the temptation to load the croquettes with as many breadcrumbs as possible as this will make them oily and doughy.

— They are now ready to be pan or deep fat fried at 180°C until golden brown, then tapped down with a paper napkin to remove any excess oil.

 Croquettes can be kept in the fridge for 24 hours or in the freezer for up to a month. If you are cooking chilled croquettes then it is advisable to put them in an oven at 180°C for 5 minutes after frying them in order to make sure that the filling is cooked through.

 Croquettes are served with bread and a sprig of parsley that has been fried in hot oil for a minute. Shrimp croquettes are garnished with a wedge of lemon.

 In many Belgian households, croquettes were traditionally made from the leftovers of the previous night's meal. In restaurants cheese croquettes are rectangular, meat croquettes like long, thin sausages and shrimp croquettes like short, fat sausages.





Travels around Wallonia

THE WALLOONS, THE FRENCH-SPEAKING BELGIANS WHO LIVE IN THE south of the country, pride themselves on their simple traditional food. While there is no one dish that represents Wallonia, what is common to almost all cuisine from this region is the use of local produce, be it cheese, butter and milk from the many dairy farms, trout from the rivers or game and smoked ham from the Ardennes forest.

The local dried ham known as *jambon d'Ardenne* [→ see also the section on pork, p.98] is a specialty that finds its way into many Walloon dishes, being added to winter soups, used in salads and chopped up into creamy sauces. Chunks of bacon, referred to locally as *lardons*, are another common addition such as in the sauce of Ardennes-style mussels or as a vital ingredient in a *salade Liègeoise*, a warm salad from Liège.

The popularity of dairy products can be seen from the number of *tartes* in Wallonia. A tart in this part of the world can be savoury, somewhere between a quiche and a flan, or sweet, a cross between a cake and a pie. As for sweet tarts, Verviers' rice tart is one of the best known, the recipe and story for which are included in the desserts section [→ p.176]. On the savoury front, there is for example Nivelles' green *tarte al djote*, made with chard and a local cheese, and Dinant's *flamiche* made with another local cheese, eggs and butter. In Jodoigne, the local *tarte au fromage* – or *blanke doréye* in the Walloon dialect – is a cream cheese tart that has become inextricably linked with the town's culinary heritage.

