

SINK YOUR TEETH INTO THE LASAGNE OF GHENT

Foreword

Ghent is a magnificent city waiting to be discovered. Who doesn't know the breathtaking view from the Sint-Michielsbrug of the three towers, or the medieval charm of the Graslei and Korenlei? But buildings like the Vooruit Concert Hall also capture the imagination. How many workers passed through its doors?

Ghent is literally layered with time: from the founding of the great abbeys in the seventh century, the city expanded and evolved century after century. Magnificent buildings were erected and sometimes later demolished. The city grew in spurts. In the late Middle Ages, it experienced a tremendous boom, reaching its peak in the fourteenth century. It then settled back into a tranquil provincial town, only to be rudely awakened by the Industrial Revolution, once again growing into a city of world renown. A fascinating way to discover all these layers is to see Ghent as a lasagne, albeit one where significant bites have been taken out here and there. Because the bottom layers, the medieval ones, have sometimes had to give way to more recent developments. But just as often, they remain intact, with new, more recent layers of urban development placed on top or alongside them.

Less known perhaps is that throughout every era, the food system has shaped the city. Feeding a city in times when refrigerators and trucks were nonexistent required a vastly different organization from what we are accustomed to today. Through this culinary lens, this walking guide leads you through Ghent. We invite you to sink your teeth into Ghent's historical lasagne. Discover how medieval Ghent fed nearly seventy thousand mouths each day, where goods arrived and were traded. Or walk where until recently a large slaughterhouse stood, a symbol of modern progress. One thing is certain, you'll only grow hungrier for this unbelievably layered city.



WALK 1.

FOURTEENTH CENTURY

Reading Guide

In the story below, we take you through the city and give directions for the tour in the sections highlighted in red. We will stop at several places. At each place take a moment to admire the charming buildings, while we consider and learn about aspects of the food system. Each time you stop to take in both the surroundings and the historical story, we invite you to close your eyes for a moment and imagine the medieval hustle and bustle as people go about their daily business. Of note is the text in blue boxes where we dig a little deeper into a particular aspect of interest. And in the red boxes you will find some tasty recipes from the late Middle Ages. But before we dive into the city, we give a brief introduction to illustrate how things were in fourteenth-century Ghent. You may choose to read the introduction at a later time, on a terrace or on your couch.



Register from the table
of the holy spirit

Introduction

Ghent in the Middle Ages: bread for all, meat for a few

Century-old paintings already depict Ghent as the city of three towers: the Church of Saint Nicholas, the Belfry and Saint Bavo's Cathedral, nicely lined up in a row. To this day, they are imposing witnesses of an impressive past. In the 14th century, Ghent was one of the largest and most powerful European cities north of the Alps. With its walled area of 644 hectares, it was larger than Paris, while Amsterdam was still a fishing village, and Antwerp did not grow into a metropolis until the sixteenth century.

Ghent's reputation as a thriving, prosperous city is rightly attributed to its role as a manufacturing town, and the center of the textile industry in the Low Countries. Together with Bruges, also revered as an international trading city, they made Flanders an economically prosperous county, with the city of Ypres also



Panoramic view of the city.

playing its part, Fabrics manufactured in Ghent were sought after all over Europe. The precious cloth was advertised and sold as far away as Russia. The textile workers of Ghent were a powerful and feared sector of society. They made up as much as sixty percent of the work force and helped Ghent earn the reputation of being a rebellious city. With numerous revolts, they claimed their share of power.

But in a large medieval city, how do you provide daily food for nearly seventy thousand mouths – especially without fast and efficient transportation like trucks or train, and with no preservation methods like refrigerator or canning? The answer to that question becomes even more interesting when you discover that Ghent not only had a sophisticated food system, but an established food trade that was a major source of income. Ghent became great and prosperous primarily through the production of its magnificent cloth. But the city also amassed some of its wealth by skilfully capitalizing on its strategic position at the confluence of Lys and Scheldt. The staple food at that time for rich and poor alike was bread. Flanders, already densely populated before that time, got most of its needed grains from the fertile agricultural areas in northern France – and more specifically in the catchment areas of Lys and Scheldt. Much of the harvest from this region was transported by boat via these rivers that passed through Ghent. So, while the supply of grain was excellent for Ghent because of its fortuitous location, the city also managed to acquire a quasi-monopoly on the grain trade in Flanders, with a busy export trade to other regions.

It acquired this monopoly through the so-called Staple Right. This meant that of all the grain brought in from northern France, a significant portion not only had to be stored in Ghent for a given period, it then had to be offered on the Ghent market before going further afield. This meant the bakers and brewers of Ghent had first choice. What Ghent did not need itself was exported elsewhere. The importance of the Staple Right cannot be overestimated; nor did it arise by chance. It was born from the greatest famine of the Middle Ages in the early fourteenth century. The Staple Right not only provided food security in hard times, it also created great economic activity.

So with the Staple Right, Ghent had direct control over the grain trade in most of Flanders, and earned a pretty penny on exports