

Beaubon Bon Bon

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PHOTOS by RICHARD HAUGHTON



What is a double-starred forty-year-old doing in a humble but very elegant Stuart Little lookalike house, far from the residential development where he reigns unnoticed by most while carrying the reputation of a city on his shoulders? Why is blond forty-year-old Christophe Hardiquest in his light basketball shoes trampling the damp earth of the fields outside Brussels? Where is a man who never leaves his restaurant when it is open and always spends the weekend with his wife Stéphanie going? Christophe Hardiquest is paying a visit to the producer of organic vegetables Thibault Walckiers, who seldom moves from his beloved vegetable gardens, except for attending a few occasional weekly markets. Full stop and hard return.

Christophe takes a breath and answers with admiration: "He is one of a kind, just like the carrots and cabbage he has grown on plots far from Brussels since, upon turning thirty he decided to abandon his a brilliant career in film and radically change his life's direction". The two shake hands vigorously and the understanding between the two runs deep. All is captured on camera by Richard Haughton, the new Irish friend who has recently been recruited in the narrow circle of collaborators ever since, a few months ago, Christophe Hardiquest asked him to completely re-think the pictures of his Bon Bon restaurant website.

Moreover, what are young great Belgian chef Hardiquest and well-known Irish photographer Haughton doing together on a Friday morning, with one who has just arrived by Eurostar and the other already chomping at the bit in anticipation of the evening when he will premiere for us the initial stages of a radical rethinking of Bon Bon's journey? Together, they carry out a preliminary survey of fundamental products, not so much based on Belgian identity as much as on the subconscious bruxellois imagery. After walking up a downtown street, they climb up to the higher floors of the Cantillon Brewery along with its manager and spiritual father, an energetic entrepreneur who never separates the most up-to-date activities from experimental research.

"Cantillon beer nourished my adolescence like that of many peers for a number of generations. Products such as Gueuze, an intense dark beer, our Guinness of sorts, are the blood of our common identity. Here, however, they also produce outstanding cuvées, limited production experiments, that vanish as soon as they hit the market and that producers must keep an eye on to avoid speculation," explains Christophe Hardiquest while retracing the production phases of Gueuze surrounded by stills and higher planes, a beer made from blending different lambics followed by a second fermentation. "Our problem is not so much the production but rather as the control of the distribution. We could produce experimental beers, which given the quality and the time spent, might even have a 400 euro price tag per bottle. Not to mention people who buy the product and then put it up on eBay speculating with no end. But what is the sense of making money from the beer bottles?" Part mass production plant, part museum, the Cantillon Brewery is a venue of memory and experimentation with partially open doors. A place where beer is made in in old Amarone and whiskey barrels. Where one can take advan-

tage of Stephane Tissot's friendly complicity, the great helmsman of the new school of Jura mountain wines, stemming from the hop-morphing coming together with the meditative Vin Jaune.

Christophe Hardiquest can have a good laugh, entrenched as he is in Bon Bon's tree-lined treasure chest. He, who for years has kept a low profile without missing a turn, now finds himself in the eye of the storm. So much water has passed under the bridge since, more than a decade ago, Hardiquest trudged at the stove all alone in the first version of Bon Bon, which at the time no one would have even called pop up. Instead, Bon Bon has become perennial through the years, oblivious to the passage of time and fashion, set at the periphery of an empire, in the heart of Europe and of Brussels, its political and cultural capital. A prolific city that Hardiquest holds dear in his heart nestled between the lure of France and the pride of his own home. Moreover, if the bruxellois chef still professes, who knows why, boundless admiration for the emphasis of gesture and metonymy of Alain Passard's cuisine, it certainly took him a very long time to claim publicly his pride in being Belgian. About time.

Although it could be the title of a parody film, after coming out, for Christophe it is a fact: "Belgium is not an abstraction. Instead, it is a something that is deeply rooted in tradition thanks to its different terroirs. Belgium also is a multifaceted linguistic identity in which the Flanders perhaps were able to introduce their own peculiarities on the international scene before other regions - a popular and rural cuisine. Brussels has often been represented as a Sleeping Beauty, cradled by the certainty of the orbit of French influence and by sweet provincialism." For this reason, as well as many others, think of Yannick Alléno of the Terroir Parisien, Hardiquest has embarked on revisiting/rewriting his heritage. Let us call it "Bon Bon sur Senne" as he does, a new census of products, practices and cultures not only linked to food. Many of his dishes feature beer such as the Croquettes de Crevettes; the gargantuan black puddings made with blood as well as lungs then served grilled with mustard and raw onions, called Bloedpens; the Ragoût of tripe with Madeira wine named Choesels); the Cheeks of veal with Gueuze sauce and gingerbread; the Chicons - aka our endives but with a slightly more bitter note - that the whole world envies. A breviary that marks the stages of a long introspective journey with a regimental perspective. Which, paradoxically, has not produced - we are just starting - results that elsewhere would have been taken for granted.

Christophe had always been a master at bluntly diving his nose into the saucepans of the lower classes. As when he would insert it between two Tartars made of rabbit and Gueuze, Carrara lard with canola oil and umeboshi type prunes alongside Sushi marrow with fat drenching the rice - to echo the spirit of the tuna bull - also absolutely perfect sweetbreads blanched in Chianina cow's milk accompanied by an extremely mustardy celery remoulade. Enough to confuse the genre theory, oscillating between Yin and Yang and feminized masculinity. Intuitiveness and technical exuberance to hide shyness. This is Christophe. A big guy whose life revolves around "creation and the home", who never misses a beat and is seldom seen around. A man, who would never bend the unspoken rule of spending the weekend with the family for any reason, be it the government falling again or the Cossacks invading the streets.



Christophe Hardiquest and Jean Van Roy from Brasserie Cantillon



The Kaasmakerij cheese



Summer Green eel
Christophe Hardiquet and Thibault Walckiers





From top left:
 Shrimp tomatoes
 Rabbit tartare and Gueuze beer
 Brussels fried speciality
 Polar chocolate fondant

Moreover, that poor woman, “Saint Stéphanie”, could tell you incredible stories of when in the past years as a young couple they would run around squandering the money they did not have in the best French restaurants.

These are also undoubtedly the first signs of Christophe Hardiquet’s creative schizophrenia; a little “Jekyll” mixed with a lot of “Hyde” (unless it is the reverse). An idea and flavor bulimic that training and tradition should have nailed to comply with the rules of the game. It took weeks of courtship and cuddles (Stephanie forgive us!) to convince him to betray his wife and family for an entire weekend to come to “perform” in London. To create side by side with Crippa and Romito, Scabin and Bosi, Mathieu Rostaing and the rising star of the new Austrian cuisine Philip Rachinger (1) under the aegis of GELINAZ! This, right when Christophe is getting ready to launch Bon Bon’s new course, ready to take a step backwards in order to take three jumps forward. In studying his roots once again and while exhuming autobiographical territorial notes that had been done with, Hardiquet did not lock himself up in an ivory tower. Nor did he appeal to spin doctors of the Michelinian orthodox school. Smartly, this September he instead invited two all-terrain European chefs, Portuguese Leonardo Pereira and the immense Inaki Aizpitarte, to take part in a joint working session and improvised performing exegesis, hashing out together the space of an exceptional evening centered on the theme of rediscovered Belgitude.

An inner journey that as clear as daylight should lead him in a short, very short time to the gates of the much-coveted third star in a city that is overflowing with fantastic surprises, which are ignored by pneumatic/Gault Millau intelligentsia.

By the way, have you registered on the electoral roll to vote for Humphrey, the new locale at the former Noma Yannick van Aeken, just next to the distributor of independent record label Pias, which is without a doubt the best surprise of 2016? Caught between a rock and a hard place, trapped between the already high standards of

his doubly starred maison and the convergence point of unbridled renewal, Christophe probes his expressive range as he scatters clues behind every intitle of Carte Bon Bon. He encourages customers to break away from their passive spectator role and taster position to become actors instead in a real detective story. Discovering the founding ingredients of their generational autobiography, albeit sublimated or sometimes even too sophisticated up to the extreme limits of an offense.

Dishes of the first autumn/winter collection 2016/2017 parade on the podium with the lightness of Classics for All Seasons. Fennel Gazpacho in web-like emulsion with Japanese pearl-sized cucumber that roll onto the tongue and Mimosa egg flavored with smoked eel served in a palm duckling shaped coquetier. All this, before the vigorous Belgian triptych made up by a mutant Dim Sung, a herring / sardine liquid Bignet à la Bruxelloise with a nasturtium sauce, mussel croquettes with curry and pickles at will. Before the Shrimp Tempura as clear as hawthorn and then, after the Parmesan cheese fondue, just to remind everyone that that Brussels has always been half Italian, another masterpiece. Fermented milk of Kaasmakerij. Whose milk? Whose? Christophe explains: “Kaasmakerij literally means cheese manufacturer. An artisan like few others, known despite his sickly timidity beyond national borders for his extraordinary cheeses packaged in wicker baskets. When the period of choucroute begins, we pick up the serum from him to start lacto fermentation to which we add spices, vegetables, cabbage and pickles”. Fresh milk ingredients that Hardiquet also offers, before the new, more ethereal version of Rabbit tartare in Gueuze, with an extremely thin almost invisible layer of chicken skin, almost Redzepian in nature, accompanied by celeriac wafers celebrating a liturgy of tartness. The feeling is neither of being in front of untouchable masterpieces at the Louvre nor in front of the unassailable statues at the Wax Museum, but rather of finding oneself in a luxurious and sacrilegious version of the famous Friture René, place de la Résistance (and for 40 years the collabos have not allowed entrance: Sandro Pertini



1) Very shortly under Cook_inc’s magnifying lens.



The Beersel garden dessert



The Marolienne mussel's



would have made them Labor Knots). A Renaissance cavern of crafts and ancient flavors, including horse Steaks, Carbonade in sauce, garlic frog legs and mussels and cocks of all types that could raise up even the dead. "Tomorrow night we'll all go there for dinner together. It is close to the Molenbeek district, which people are talking about so much after the attacks in France in November last year. It is a part of the true reality of 2016 Brussels".

However, back at Bon Bon, in the meanwhile, Christophe Hardiquet runs like a maniac. He spouts creation after creation and dish after dish, a tightrope acrobat of contradiction between us - part of the scum - and the discreet charm of the high bred, as if he were following in the steps of Pierrot Lunaire, once known as Gagnaire. Raw mussels in horseradish gelée. A surreal vegetable soup with pasta in the shape of the alphabet and artichoke mousse. Somewhere between the irksome babyish food for children who dislike bitterness and the mellifluous but extremely radical criticism of comfort food for wealthy toothless patricians. A neither-nor masterpiece, neither for nor with, for perverse Le Monde Diplomatique subscribers rather than for readers of the eater.com newsletter.

Now that Christophe Hardiquet is rolling in in high gear, no one can stop him. Not even trusty Michel, the Jiminy Cricket sommelier, who

has many fixations himself. An odd couple, one could say, but more of an accomplice than Batman and Robin (with a slightly more Victorian Maître d'H tux, Michel could easily pass for Penguin Danny De Vito in front of Tim Burton's room). "This is just the beginning of a textual work on my identity that I kept on a short leash for a while," confesses Hardiquet with his head in his hands and disheveled hair in the midst of books, sketches of recipes and ideas to jot down. And if you cannot find a seating at Bon Bon - please reserve at least a few weeks before - peep in at the bar towards the mid / end of service to beg for a slice of bread with the most scrumptious cheese selection of the Belgian kingdom. You will see Christophe still in action, on stage in the open kitchen scene in front of the proscenium, frantic but smiling with everyone. Ready to high five the entire brigade on parade one by one. "Well done les gars".

Was it Zanicchi or Vanoni? When the music is finished and friends leave, Christophe stays for a little while longer at work. Away from prying eyes. Pulling the strings of a top-secret project in the shadows. But that magnanimous director Lady Morella will tell you about it word by word, with - ATTENTION! EXTRABONUS! - the photos of Philippe Vaurès in an exhaustive and deep insider dossier that will be printed in next spring issue of Cook_inc. To be continued - for sure ...



A detail of Jean-François d'Or Art designer

Bon Bon

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