

Ghent is my landlord

The city of Ghent has opened a rental office to match responsible tenants with property owners

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Miracle material

Researchers in Antwerp are helping bring to market a new substance that will change mobile phones forever

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The literary city

Amid a wealth of bookworm activities, Antwerp is putting in a bid to be a Unesco Creative City of Literature

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The urban vibe

Antwerp and Hasselt share the prize for ground-breaking, people-friendly city planning

Alan Hope

Antwerp and Hasselt have shared this year's Thuis in de Stad (At Home in the City) prize, worth €150,000, for innovative city planning projects, both of which have attracted national and international attention, as well as the interest of other cities in Flanders keen to adopt the ideas for themselves.

The Thuis in de Stad prize was handed out last week by Freya Van den Bossche, minister for housing and social economy, at the first evaluation day of the government's Innovation in the City programme. The evaluation day brought together 300 policymakers, business people and academics, to look at 28 ground-breaking projects from across Flanders.

The prize has been given out since 2001, when it was won by the Penitentenstraat residential project in Leuven. This isn't the first time it's been shared: In 2010, Ghent and Genk won, and in 2011, Genk triumphed again with the C-Mine industrial reconversion, the prize for which it shared with the Micro Marché project in Brussels, a platform for designers and artists to sell their work.

Some of the other winning projects, like the city museum STAM in Ghent or the transformation of De Coninckplein in Antwerp, are now considered exemplars of creative planning.

"Why didn't we think of that?"

This year's shortlist also included the Velo bike-rental system

in Antwerp, the Gentenaar 2.0 digital information project in Ghent, the Biloba House for seniors in the Brussels commune of Schaarbeek, the H30/Villa32 artistic workplace in Mechelen and the renovation of the 19th-century casino in Sint-Niklaas.

The Badboot in Antwerp, which received massive press and attention when it opened last summer, is an open-air public swimming pool that floats in the River Scheldt in the Eilandje area of the city (*pictured*). It was designed by Sculp(IT) architects and produced by V-Zit, both based in Antwerp. It also includes a sundeck and cafe, and for the winter months has been transformed into an ice skating rink.

According to the prize jury, the project is "an example of slow urbanism, which incorporates the water and the movements of

FACE OF FLANDERS

Alan Hope

Chris Lomme



Last week actress Chris Lomme became one of the first public figures to get the new personalised LEIF card, an initiative of the palliative care physician Wim Distelmans and his Information Centre on the End of Life (LEIF) in Wemmel. The card, the size of a bank card, is a portable declaration of what is known as a living will, covering four main areas: the desire for euthanasia under certain conditions; discontinuation of treatment aimed only at prolonging life; conditions to apply to the holder's funeral arrangements; and a statement of willingness to donate organs after death. The purpose of the card is to show paramedics or doctors the wishes of the cardholder, in case of medical emergencies, and anyone can now apply to get one. Chris Lomme was born in Kortrijk in 1938, the daughter of a father who loved amateur dramatics and a mother who had trained as a soprano at the Conservatory in Brussels. Lomme herself went to the arts academy in Kortrijk at the age of 15, studying music and diction. The following year, she made her stage debut next to her father in an amateur production of Sophocles' *Antigone*.

► www.leif.be

At 18, she followed in her mother's footsteps, studying drama in both French and Dutch, which was possible at that time in the Conservatory. Three years later, Lomme appeared in the TV comedy *Schipper naast Mathilde*, already a success at that point, as the adopted daughter of Matthias, the sailor of the title. Matthias was played by Ferdinand "Nand" Buyl, 15 years Lomme's senior. The pair became an item in 1961 and married 40 years later. Buyl died in 2009 after a stroke – not, Lomme stresses, as a result of euthanasia, although his papers were in order. Now she volunteers in a palliative care day centre. "I advise people to prepare their documents now and not to put it off," she told the VRT programme *Reyers laat*. "We're the first country in Europe where it's possible, at all levels, and that's something to be proud of." The launch of the LEIF card was also attended by philosopher Etienne Vermeersch, singer Bart Peeters, filmmaker Nic Balthazar and other celebrities – including Veerle Claus, widow of Hugo Claus, who died by euthanasia in March 2008.

News in brief

Flemish minister-president Kris Peeters and Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte will lead a **joint Dutch-Flemish trade mission** sometime this year, the Dutch foreign affairs minister Frans Timmermans announced last week.

Five members of a **Brussels family were killed** when their Cessna light aircraft crashed at Charleroi Airport last weekend. The dead include the pilot, retired architect Jean Dumont, his daughter-in-law Anne-Sophie Binst and her three children, aged seven, six and three. According to reports, the airport had advised the pilot to de-ice the wings of his plane, which he decided against. The plan encountered problems immediately after take-off and crashed while trying to re-land. The airport closed for a few hours.

The prosecutor's office in Dendermonde is seeking the prosecution of six doctors and eight pharmacists in the area who are alleged to have prescribed or dispensed **2,800 packets of Ritalin** to a man who was addicted to the drug, commonly used to treat hyperactivity and attention deficit disorder. The man is estimated to have taken an average of 46 pills a day, whereas six is the recommended maximum.

Municipal councils in the Brussels communes of Molenbeek, Schaerbeek and Watermael-Bosvoorde have called for supermarkets to be obliged to give **leftover food to food banks** and social restaurants rather than discard it.

The city of Genk is applying to become the site of a **new prison planned for Limburg** province, mayor Wim Dries announced. The idea was one of the recommendations included in the strategic action plan drawn up by a group of experts to help revive the province's economy after the closure of Ford Genk in 2014.

Cafe Monk, a celebrated Flemish wateringhole in Brussels, will reopen on 16 April, offering live music and jam sessions. The café, which closed last year due to financial troubles, has been taken over by four partners involved in the local restaurant Henri and the Leuven restaurant Hungaria. Monk's former smoking room will be converted into a buffet for up to 60 people.

The court of appeal in Antwerp has overturned a previous judgement that would have forced a school for Jewish girls **to accept two boy applicants**. The lower court had ordered the Benoth Jeruzalem school to comply or face a fine of €1,000 a day.

Irish prime minister Enda Kenny was in Leuven last week to attend the opening of the **newly restored Irish College**, founded in 1607 for Irish Franciscans. The restoration took a decade and cost €16 million, paid for by the Irish government and private investors. Following the ceremony, Kenny met with Kris Peeters to discuss the current Irish presidency of the EU.

The computer crime unit of the federal police has warned of a new kind of malicious software, or **malware, which appears to be a police communication** but which can block computers if downloaded, later demanding a "ransom" of €100 to release the machine. Users should install good anti-virus software, while backing up important files to an external drive, unit head Luc Beirens advised.

The owners of the former **Land van Ooit theme park** in Tongeren have been given three-year suspended sentences and fined a total of €11,000 for charges including fraudulent bankruptcy. The couple Marc Taminiau and Marjan Van Jook, who are in their 70s, and their

son Tobias were also ordered to pay more than €1.85 million in damages to creditors left unpaid when the park went broke in 2007. The three plan to appeal.

A woman was seriously injured last week after **falling through a ventilation panel** of the Troon metro station in Brussels. The accident in the Montoyerstraat was caused by the metal grid over the vent not being properly attached, transport authority MIVB said. The woman fell two metres and is being treated in hospital. Police have opened an investigation.

Italian criminal **Leonardo Notarbartolo**, the mastermind behind the 2003 robbery of the Antwerp Diamond Center, is heading back to a Belgian cell, after being arrested in Paris while travelling from the US to his home town of Turin. A warrant was issued for Notarbartolo's arrest on charges that he was in breach of parole conditions imposed on his release from prison in Antwerp in 2009, after serving part of a 10-year sentence.

Police in Turnhout have appealed for **witnesses in connection with the death** of an English man found dead from a gunshot wound last May in the canal at Beverlo in Antwerp province. The man was identified as 57-year-old Kevin Beringer, whose grey Audi was later found burned out nearby. Information can be delivered to 0800 30 300.

Flemish-Dutch cultural organisation deBuren has issued a **call for young writing talent**, with a chance to win a summer stage in the Biermans-Lapôtre house in Paris, which annually hosts students from Belgium and Luxembourg. Candidates must be under 30 and write in Dutch. The deadline is 18 March.

► www.deburen.be

FLANDERS TODAY

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OFFSIDE

Alan Hope

Food for thought

While large parts of Europe are up in arms over what's been allowed into supermarkets – horse, basically – here in Flanders the scandal has been over what was not allowed in. In Stabroek, Antwerp province, the newly arrived Dutch supermarket chain Albert Heijn banned school children from the store, after local kids got involved in an egg fight. That might seem reasonable (not least to those who've ever tried to clean up broken eggs) but not to Bruno Vanobbergen. He's the Flemish commissioner for children's rights, and he says that Albert Heijn is guilty of age discrimination. Of course, he told *De Standaard*, egg fights are not acceptable behaviour in a supermarket. But the best approach would be for AH to "get around the table"



© Ingimage

and talk it through with the youngsters. "Above all, this is unenforceable," he pointed out. "A shop worker is not allowed to demand an identity card." Retail federation Comeos, meanwhile, has a different view: "A supermarket is private property, and, as an owner, you're allowed to refuse access to anyone." Anyone, for example, like the shopper in a Colruyt store in Averbode, Flemish Brabant, who was also shown the door last week. The man was ejected for having spent two hours partaking

of all the samples on offer around the store. "He was making a meal of it," a Colruyt spokesperson said. "The other customers were becoming upset." Luckily for Colruyt, the man restricted himself to coffee, alcohol and sweets. It could have been worse: Also last week, Colruyt staff in two locations in Flanders discovered packages of cocaine hidden among shipments of bananas. Fortunately the discovery was made in distribution centres, and not a store.

The urban vibe

Thuis in de Stad rewards museums, art projects, senior care and bike rentals

► continued from page 1X

the water into the city. The Badboot is also evidence of planning talent and a participatory vision."

"This is the sort of project where I can imagine people in other cities thinking, 'Why didn't we come up with that?'" said Van den Bossche during the evaluation day. The minister oversees the prize as well as the Innovation in the City programme. "It's an exceptionally creative way of tackling the problem of a lack of space in the city. It might also be an eye-opener for other cities on the water: Creative use of space opens up all kinds of perspectives."

CityDepot in Hasselt, meanwhile, is a "smart distribution" network, in which city-centre businesses have goods delivered to a depot on the edge of town instead of to their doors, thereby cutting traffic in the city centre. The goods are then transported to the businesses by electric van or cargo bike, with deliveries bundled to reduce the number of trips. The system, which now has some 70 business customers in Hasselt, is expected to be extended this year to Leuven, Ostend, Roeselare, Ghent and Genk. The jury described it as "a perfect example of how a city can contribute to co-operation, sustainability and social employment. It offers an innovative answer to an intolerable problem that confronts many cities." Hasselt's alderman for planning explained the reasoning for the project. "The pedestrian zones in Hasselt, which are set apart by pop-up bollards, make permanent loading and unloading difficult. The city subsidises CityDepot for €75,000 a year, but the ultimate aim is for the service to become self-financing via the value they provide to transporters and distributors."

Van den Bossche calls CityDepot "brilliant in its simplicity. After barely a year, the results are



BUDA::lab in Kortrijk is a workshop open to everyone, kitted out with the tools for making great ideas real

so impressive that now Ghent, Roeselare, Kortrijk and Antwerp are considering pilot projects, and other cities have also shown an interest. Once you have distribution centres like that on the edge of town, it's easier to make mutually beneficial arrangements with the transport industry all across Flanders. With

From cargo bikes to city beaches

As well as the prize award, the evaluation day also involved a rundown of 28 interesting and innovative city projects from all over Flanders, including those shortlisted for the prize.

"The *badboot* is an exceptionally creative way of tackling the problem of a lack of space in the city"

only a limited amount of starting capital, you can create a snowball effect that has a major impact on road safety, enterprise-friendliness and environmental quality in our cities."

Green Track in Leuven aims to decrease the ecological footprint of the cultural sector, in partnership with the social environmental organisation Ecolife. Most of their courses, given by, among others, "low impact man" Steven Vromman, are free to artists and organisations that receive subsidies from the Flemish government. The advice includes using environmentally friendly ink for publications, avoiding surpluses of posters and flyers and not using stage make-up that has been tested on animals.

Made in ArtiZan in Brussels is a game about sustainable food based around the artisanal food store ArtiZan in the canal zone in central Brussels. The game, for anyone over the age of 10, is intended to stimulate interest in sustainable food as well as communicating the other work done by the organisation.

Max Mobiel in Ghent organises bike rentals, repairs and couriers, as well as a shuttle bus scheme, and now it's moving into the sharing of *bakfietsen* – freight or cargo bicycles used to transport larger than usual loads. As the CityDepot project in Hasselt shows, they can be used as an alternative to motor vehicles for deliveries or

transport, but most people don't need to own one all the time. About 70 people have already signed up.

Social grocers in Ghent is only a business plan at the moment, for the establishment of two grocery stores in the city that would offer products more cheaply as a result of a careful purchasing policy and the use of local sources to keep costs down.

Budafabriek in Kortrijk offers BUDA::lab, an open workshop kitted out with the tools for making great ideas real: 3D printer, laser cutter and vacuum machine, but also a range of simple hand tools. The workshop is open to all – individuals as well as companies, students as well as established designers.

DOK Strand in Ghent is, as the name suggests, a beach laid out on waste ground in the old harbour area in Ghent with all the appropriate trimmings, not least snacks and cocktails. The project is part of DOKgent, which runs a canteen and offers workspace, while also providing a place for people living in the old docklands area to get together.

Poepsimpel in Roeselare tackles a problem everyone has experienced at one time or another: dog mess. It's run by the animal care expertise centre of the local university college and aims to teach residents of the city about the environmental problems of dog poop, the legal situation for dog owners and innovative ways of dealing with the issue (so to speak). Finally, **Bazart in Leuven** is a child-friendly arts and culture project that uses the city itself as a source of inspiration. It's run by the non-profit organisation Mooss, which provides all sorts of cultural and heritage activities, including circus courses for young people, the SeeMyLeuven contest (which uses the online photo-sharing site Instagram), training for youth workers in arts education and the public arts depot OPEK, which last year won the city's prize for architecture.



Minister for housing and social economy Freya Van den Bossche

Staying in the city

"It's so exciting to see how creatively the question of urban planning is being considered in Flanders," said Van den Bossche. "I'd even go as far as to call it an urban vibe, and I want to go on supporting it with things like the Thuis in de Stad prize, subsidies for original and innovative projects and the Urban Renewal Fund."

The minister also talked about being impressed by how different instruments are "constantly being adapted to social realities, and amended if need be."

The focus for the coming years, she said, would be on urban child-friendliness. "The great paradox is that the birth rate has never been higher than it is in our cities, yet people start having doubts about remaining in the cities the moment they have children. It's crucial for us to make an effort towards child-friendly cities."

► www.thuisindestad.be



The CityDepot project finds massive delivery trucks being stopped at Hasselt's borders and goods transported into the city on small trucks or cargo cycles

Gordel will return with a new name and bigger programme

The September event promises more tourist, music and sports activities

Alan Hope

The Gordel – the annual walking and cycling tour of the municipalities surrounding Brussels – will be back this year with a new name and in a new form, with concerts and an increased offer of sports activities, the Flemish government has announced.

Last year's Gordel – the name means "belt" in Dutch – was billed as the last and attracted only 29,500 participants, some 50,000 fewer than in 2010. While organised by the sports agency Bloso and aimed at family activities, the event was also a statement that the communities surrounding Brussels are part of Flanders. Cyclists often found their way strewn with tacks, street-signs were switched around, and last year the council of Sint-Genesius-Rode, which is mainly French-speaking,

declined to give permission for the event to start from the municipality.

The government's plan continues to stress the family-oriented and recreational basis of the event and leaves open the possibility that the Gordel's successor (a name has still to be decided on) might last longer than the traditional one day. The sporting activities could be extended to include running, sports minister Philippe Muyters suggested. The event will also be extended to as many as 40 municipalities in a broad circle around Brussels. One thing, meanwhile, remains the same: The event, like its predecessor, will take place on the first Sunday in September.

A separate but related event, the Gordel for schools, will also go ahead in June as usual.



The last mass gathering: the Gordel in 2010 attracted some 80,000 people

Former party member says he spied on Vlaams Belang

Bart Debie, security adviser and spokesman for Vlaams Belang president Filip Dewinter, has admitted he worked for three years as a "mole" for the federal security services, reporting on the movements and contacts of the party leadership.



Debie (pictured), a former Antwerp police officer whose tough tactics led to several legal actions against him, made his admission following controversy over a leaked report by the state security service. The report appeared to suggest that the security services were spying on politicians – something federal interior minister Annemie Turtelboom strenuously denied. "What they did with other politicians I don't know," Debie told *De Standaard* last weekend, "but state security followed the Vlaams Belang with a great deal of interest for years." Debie says that he served as an informant from 2007 until he "was thrown out of the party" in 2010.

Debie stressed that he had made the first approach in response to a "stunt" Dewinter had planned, which involved buying illegal weapons that would be presented at a press conference, to show how easy they were to obtain.

"I made it clear to him that I didn't approve because it involved illegal actions," said Debie, "and I already had a criminal record." In 2003, Debie was accused of assaulting Turkish suspects, an incident that led to his suspension from the police and later a year-long prison sentence. "That's when I made contact with the intelligence service – partly to cover myself and partly because I was sick and tired of that sort of practice within the party."

Debie's revelations led Dewinter to call for a full explanation from the interior minister. Dewinter also said he was considering legal action against Debie for breach of the confidentiality clause of his contract.

Storms ravage East and West Flanders

A severe storm caused by a windspout – a type of tornado – severely damaged homes in East Flanders last week. In Oosterzele, 96 homes were damaged – nine were declared uninhabitable – but no one was reported hurt. There was also widespread material damage to garages, greenhouses and barns. The civil defence force and local fire services later turned out to help clear up

the damage.

In West Flanders, meanwhile, strong winds gusting to speeds of more than 100 km/h caused damage in Meulebeke, Ardooie, Oostrozebeke, Waregem and Roeselare. In Meulebeke, a 65-year-old man died later in the week when he fell after climbing onto the roof of a tyre depot to inspect the damage caused by Tuesday's storm.

Children not worried about privacy online, says study

Only one in nine children in Belgium between the ages of nine and 16 is concerned about giving out personal information on the internet, according to a study carried out by the University of Leuven for the EU Kids Online project.

Children in the age group are active in large numbers online, particularly on social media like Facebook. While most see no danger in posting personal information, they have greater concerns regarding problems like cyber-bullying – a worry for 19% – and upsetting video clips on sites like YouTube, which was reported to be a problem by no fewer than 32% of children.

The final report for the EU project, including the section contributed by KU Leuven, can be found at www.tinyurl.com/EUKids.

As part of the EU Kids Online project, local authorities have drawn up a guide to safer internet use for children and parents, which includes advice such as: know who you're talking to, don't believe



everything you read, do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

► www.clicksafe.be

FIFTH COLUMN

Anja Otte

Of barons and dukes

Understanding the structure of Belgium is much like rocket science. This is especially so for Brussels. Prepare for a short lecture.

Brussels, which consist of 19 *communes* such as Schaarbeek, Anderlecht and Brussels City, is a *region* of its own, officially the Brussels-Capital Region. Also officially, this is home to two *communities*: the French-speaking and the Flemish Communities. All of these have their own institutions, the region roughly having territorial responsibilities (mobility, environment...), while the communities typical deal with personal matters (education, culture...).

How many Flemings there are in Brussels is unknown, as headcounts are banned and no-one is ever asked to identify as Flemish. Also, many *Brusselaars* would rather not choose between the two communities. They may, for instance, use French at home but send their children to Dutch-speaking schools. Either way, the Flemish do form a minority in Brussels and their rights are protected accordingly.

This may seem very complicated, but to most people in Brussels it comes naturally. You do not have to know how a clock works to observe that it does, as Brussels minister Guy Vanhengel (Open VLD) once said about the situation.

However, over the years the mechanism has shown some blips. Most people agree that the idea of 19 communes is outdated, especially since it results in absurd situations such as each having its own parking regulations. For efficiency reasons, the Flemish especially have long asked for some sort of centralisation, in which the region absorbs some communal responsibilities.

Getting rid of the communes has long been a taboo with the French-speaking parties, though, as they are reluctant to let go of their power bases – "baronies", as the Flemish call them.

But look and see, last week, a prominent French speaker – none other than the Brussels minister-president Charles Picqué – presented a plan to reduce the 19 communes to just six zones, with some 200,000 residents each. The plan also includes devolvement, with every citizen having access to public services at a distance of maximum one kilometre.

To many Flemish, this is a step in the right direction, although Brussels minister Brigitte Grouwels (CD&V) does warn that the 19 baronies should not be traded in for six "even more powerful duchies".

Baronies, duchies... will Brussels ever shake off its medieval origins?

THE WEEK IN FIGURES

8

17th-century stained-glass windows originally made for the Park Abbey in Leuven purchased by the Flemish culture ministry from Yale University for €38,000. Other parts of the 41-piece series are held in Washington, DC, and Louisville

56%

of Belgians cite tailgating as the biggest annoyance in traffic, according to a survey by the national institute for road safety. Also high on the list were not using indicators and being overtaken, then cut off

€30,000

finest for Telenet and Mobistar from the telecom regulator BIPT for failing to give proper billing information to clients. Scarlet, a subsidiary of Belgacom, was fined €10,000

350th

seal taken in by the Sea Life animal refuge in Blankenberge last week. The pup was named Lola by North Sea minister Johan Vande Lanotte, after his granddaughter

390,000

birds, a new record number, counted by more than 10,000 volunteers who took part in the latest bird count weekend organised by Natuurpunt

Hold the front page

A new Dutch-language newspaper is targeting Flanders' Turkish community

Alan Hope

A new newspaper is about to appear in the Flemish media landscape. *Zaman Vandaag* is a project of the Zaman media group in Turkey. It will soon launch its first edition of a weekly newspaper aimed mainly at the Turkish community in Flanders, but published entirely in Dutch. Zaman used to have a website in Dutch, part of the Turkish Zaman Benelux site. According to *Zaman Vandaag's* young editor-in-chief, Mete Öztürk, it will soon re-appear in a new form at zamanvandaag.be (*zaman* is Turkish for "time"). The Benelux operation covers the Netherlands and Flanders, with offices in Zaventem and Rotterdam, employing an editorial staff of five there and eight here. The Turkish edition already reaches 10,000 people in the Netherlands and 7,500 here.

Positive differences

The Zaman group, Öztürk explains, is strongly associated with the Gülen movement, named after the Turkish imam Fethullah Gülen, who lives in the US. The movement is active in education and health care and, Öztürk explains, operates on principles of dialogue between cultures and religions. Zaman Benelux was an offshoot of



Mete Öztürk in the Zaman Vandaag offices in Zaventem

Zaman Europe, which was based in Germany, where people of Turkish origin form the largest single minority – about 3.3 million people. The paper in Turkish worked with the main editorial department in Istanbul, which contributed most of the articles. But there was a demand here for a version in Dutch. (There were already editions in French and English.) "We're the second or third generation of Turkish origin," says Öztürk, 29. "I was born here, I'm

Belgian, I'm Flemish, my kids go to school here, they're going to grow up here and form part of the future of Belgium. We have a different background, and there are cultural differences, but we see those differences as an added value. Unfortunately, what we see in the media is that those differences are seen as a problem. We know there are really positive things being done, but they never make the news." So *Zaman Vandaag* will present

another perspective, "covering the common problems we share here," he continues. "We believe that different ethnicities and different cultures can live together – not beside each other, but together. So to help that along, we want

planted in Flemish soil.

"We have a group of readers whose Turkish is perhaps not so good, and we want to inform them about what's happening here. We also want to come into contact with other communities and with

"We believe that different cultures can live together – not beside each other, but together"

our news coverage to focus on exemplary people, projects and stories that focus more attention on the positive aspects."

A new perspective

Öztürk studied international relations at the HUB in Brussels and worked as a teacher and pedagogical director in a school in Anderlecht, where he was recruited to run the new paper. His parents came to Flanders when his father went to work in the mines in Limburg. Now Öztürk, too, is married with children and travels every day to Zaventem from his home in Genk. He represents the target audience for the paper: young people with a Turkish background but with roots firmly

policymakers, academics, social-cultural organisations – to show them how the Turkish community regards the problems of the region, what their vision is and what they are doing. It's important for them to get a perspective they won't always find in other papers, where the editorial staff may not have that diversity or the knowledge." Öztürk says that the word "integration", for instance, isn't always applicable. "Who needs to be integrated? Someone from outside," he says. "But I was born here. You can't talk about integration or I feel excluded, as if I'm an outsider. We don't talk about integration, we talk about participation. I also want to take part; I want to help build our common future."

A place to call home

An innovative new rental scheme in Ghent looks to protect both tenants and landlords

Daan Bauwens

Last week, the city of Ghent launched Huuringent, Flanders' first ever rental office run by a municipality. "It is not always easy to find affordable and quality rental houses in Ghent," explains council member for housing Tom Balthazar (pictured), who is chair of the project. "We have also noticed that the supply of rental houses is declining," Balthazar continues. "Owners tend to stop renting out their properties after experiencing non-payment and poor maintenance. That's why we started this initiative. We want to assure owners of timely payment and decent maintenance, while at the same time making it easier for tenants to find an affordable house or apartment."

The new office will actively seek and rent houses from private owners and sublet at a fair price. "On average, the landlord will receive 85% of what he would normally get if he rented it out himself," Balthazar says, "but we offer guarantees and advantages. We focus on private landlords of



© Dominique Dirckx

modest homes with an average quality and will in no way compete with rental agencies." He added that the project aimed to actively discourage owners from selling their properties and that the share of the city's office would probably stay just below 1% of the total rental market.

Huuringent will serve as a pilot project for the rest of Flanders. "For some, it is very hard to find an affordable and decent rental in Ghent, as in the rest of Flanders," says Flemish housing minister Freya van den Bossche. "We will learn which strategies are most efficient to convince owners to rent out their homes via this system and how a municipal rental office can provide a large enough supply of renters." While the rental office will have a policy favouring singles, those with a low income and people already living in the city, the system is not comparable to the existing social housing scheme. "This is a complementary system," says Balthazar. "We are aiming at people with an income that is higher than the income of people who are eligible for social housing. In the same way, we are looking at houses with an average rental price. We just want to assure that people are paying an honest price for their homes."

► www.huuringent.be

Local museums nominated for European prize

Four museums in Brussels and Flanders have made the nominations list for the 2013 European Museum of the Year Award (EMYA): The Librarium inside the Royal Library of Belgium in Brussels; the Parlamentarium, the European Parliament's visitor centre; the Museum aan de stroom (MAS) in Antwerp; and STAM, Ghent's city museum. Notably, all four museums opened within the last three years. The four are on a list of 28 museums from across Europe, and the winner will be announced during the European Museum Forum's Annual

Assembly, which takes place from 15-18 May. The assembly is being held this year in Tongeren at the Gallo-Roman Museum, winner of the EMYA in 2011.

The European Museum Forum looks for museums that make special efforts to attract audiences with a unique atmosphere, imaginative presentations and a creative approach to education and social responsibility. Nominations for the award are open to museums in any of the 47 member countries of the Council of Europe. Lisa Bradshaw

► www.europeanmuseumforum.org



The inventive Librarium is a nominee for the European Museum of the Year

THE WEEK
IN BUSINESS

Air ▶ Qatar Airways

The Qatari national carrier, based in Doha, last week increased flights to Brussels to one every day.

Banks

▶ BNP Paribas Fortis

French-owned BNP Paribas Fortis will renovate its historic headquarters in downtown Brussels at a cost of €135 million. Work on the 90,000 square-metre building is not expected to start before 2015, with completion scheduled for 2020 at the earliest.

Biscuits ▶ Lotus

Lotus Bakeries, which specialises in *speculoos* biscuits, has signed a sales and development agreement with Shanghai-based Goodwell China to increase its foothold on the Chinese market. Lotus, based in Kaprijke, East Flanders, has also taken over the Willems Biscuits company in nearby Eeklo.

Food ▶ Damhert

Damhert Nutrition, based in Heusden-Zolder, Limburg province, will build a new factory after signing agreements to produce the natural sweetener tagatose, a healthier alternative to sugar, for drinks giant PepsiCo and dairy foods manufacturer Yoplait. (full story in next week's issue)

Finance ▶ bpost

CVC Capital, the investment fund that owns 49.9% of Belgian postal services bpost, will float up to 20% of its stake on the Brussels stock market this year. The Belgian state, which owns 50.1% of the company, is unaffected by the decision.

Tourism ▶ Hotels

The 237-room Pullman hotel across from Brussels South Station will open in June. Meanwhile, the Steigenberger group, which took over the capital's Conrad Hotel on 1 January, is also considering opening an InterCityHotel.

Transport

▶ Japan Railway

Japan Railway, the world's largest company in terms of passengers carried, has created a subsidiary in Brussels to study rail developments in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. It will also handle negotiations with international institutions and associations.

Wealth ▶ Savings

The amount in savings accounts in Belgium reached a record €236 billion at the end of 2012, a €17 billion increase on the year. The population's total liquid assets topped the €1,000 billion mark for the first time in history, making Belgians the richest citizens per capita in the European Union.

De Lijn announces
“biggest investment ever”

Nearly €93 million will be invested to keep up with commuter demand

Alan Hope

Flemish public transport authority De Lijn last week announced the purchase of 386 new buses at a cost of €93 million – the group's “largest investment ever”, according to Flemish mobility minister Hilde Crevits. The purchase is intended to help meet growing demands on the industry.

“For several years, we've been making inroads into research on electric buses, hydrogen-powered and hybrid buses,” commented Ingrid Lieten, Flemish minister for government investments and a former CEO of De Lijn. “Those long-term efforts are beginning to bear fruit.”

Flanders' two major bus manufacturers will together supply 103 buses. VDL Bus in Roeselare, West Flanders, will deliver 27 ordinary buses and 41 smaller bell buses; Van Hool in Lier, Antwerp province, will deliver 27 articulated buses, three which run on hydrogen,



and three electric buses, which will run in Bruges. Another 123 hybrid buses will form the subject of a later call for tenders.

Based on its bid, the remaining 160 buses will be provided by the Lyon-based Irisbus, which immediately gave rise to protest. A spokesperson for VDL said the company welcomed

the order but “regretted” that part of the total package would go to a French manufacturer.

Van Hool spokesperson Dirk Snauwaert said that his company was “delighted” to provide buses using the latest technology but that such a large share of the order “going abroad could have consequences for

employment in this country. We cannot rule out the possibility that Van Hool may in time have to face temporary economic redundancy”. The reason that Irisbus could bid the lowest price, according to the Flemish bus manufacturers, is because the company, a subsidiary of Fiat, has manufacturing facilities in low-wage countries like China, India and Argentina.

“Every producer who takes part in a European tender would like to build all of the buses, but we have to take account of the European rules on public contracts,” responded Flemish minister-president Kris Peeters. “Together with De Lijn, we carried out a careful evaluation, including elements such as sustainability and energy efficiency. Because of that, there will be another tender for hybrid buses. With the know-how Van Hool has in that area, I expect them to take part in the bidding.”

Strategic plan to support organic agriculture

Flanders' minister-president Kris Peeters, also minister of agriculture, last week launched the government's new action plan for organic agriculture. The plan promises future growth for the sector by making it easier to start up and for existing farms to convert.

The plan contains proposals for helping the bio sector grow to meet increasing domestic and foreign demand; to develop operational know-how; and to inform the consumer in an effort to influence purchasing habits. That would include teaching the principles of organic food consumption in schools.

In implementing the plan, the government also established a steering committee, including representatives of the agricultural unions Boerenbond and the General Union of Farmers, the Flemish agro-marketing agency VLAM and industry federations Fevia (food) and Comeos (retail). The plan has an annual budget

of €3 million.

“Organic food at this point is integrated into our daily lives,” said Peeters. “You can now find an organic alternative in the shops for almost every product, and nearly nine out of 10 customers buy those products. This is an economically important sector, with sales of €435 million a year, and it has become a major player in the Flemish agricultural sector.”

Last year 25 new organic farming and growing businesses arrived on the scene, bringing the total up to more than 300. In addition, 63 new processing and marketing companies appeared in the organic sector.

“For several years now, we've noticed the number of organic companies and the share of organic farming in our total arable land have been growing,” Peeters said. “With this strategic plan we aim to lift the bio-sector in Flanders to the next level.”

In related news, last week the quality label



Kris Peeters presents the strategic plan to educate both farmers and consumers about organics

Responsibly Fresh celebrated its first birthday. The label, awarded by the union of Belgian growers' cooperatives to companies that implement sustainable practices, has now been given to 4,500 fruit and vegetable growers.

▶ www.vlaanderen.be/landbouw/bio

Adviser finds Electrabel guilty of
fraudulent practices

Energy supply company Electrabel is guilty of abuse of its dominant market position, according to an opinion handed down last week by the adviser to the Competition Council.

According to the council adviser, whose advice is not binding, Electrabel used fictitious purchase orders to justify price increases on the wholesale market, although the electricity it was supplying was its own. It also made double use of the strategic reserve – maintained to ensure national power supplies in cases of emergency – to raise money. In total, Electrabel made some €56 million through fraudulent practices.

The adviser stressed that the company had cooperated in its investigation, which covered the period 2006-2010, and merited a

“substantial reduction” in any fine the council may decide to impose. The maximum fine possible is 10% of the company's turnover for 2010, which was nearly €15 billion. Electrabel, meanwhile, denies the adviser's opinion categorically.



Unions to protest on 21 February

The socialist trade union ABVV last week pulled out of negotiations on a future agreement between workers and employers and promised a major demonstration in Brussels on 21 February.

The union quit the so-called Group of Ten – which includes five representatives from both unions and the employment sector – in discussion about the reorganisation of working hours, which would leave more scope for overtime and flexible hours. The union is calling for more structure, to prevent employers using overtime to make up for laying-off other workers. ABVV also opposes government plans to freeze pay and to review the annual indexation of wages – something employers have long called for.

The demonstration next Thursday is expected to cause severe disruption to traffic and services in the capital.

The ABVV will be joined by the Christian union ACV, which stressed it would remain inside the Group of Ten to carry on talks.

In related news, about 8,000 federal civil servants took to the streets of Brussels last week in protest at reform proposals from civil service minister Hendrik Bogaert, including scrapping the principle of payment according to years of service. Bogaert plans to introduce instead a more performance-based pay, based on evaluation by superiors. Meanwhile, a survey carried out by HR consultants SD Worx revealed that Belgian civil servants are happier in their work than their counterparts in the private sector. They scored higher in how useful and varied they saw their work and also feel they have more autonomy. But they see fewer opportunities for career advancement than those in the private sector.

21st-century plastic

Bendier than rubber, stronger than diamond – it's graphene, and researchers in Antwerp are helping bring it to market

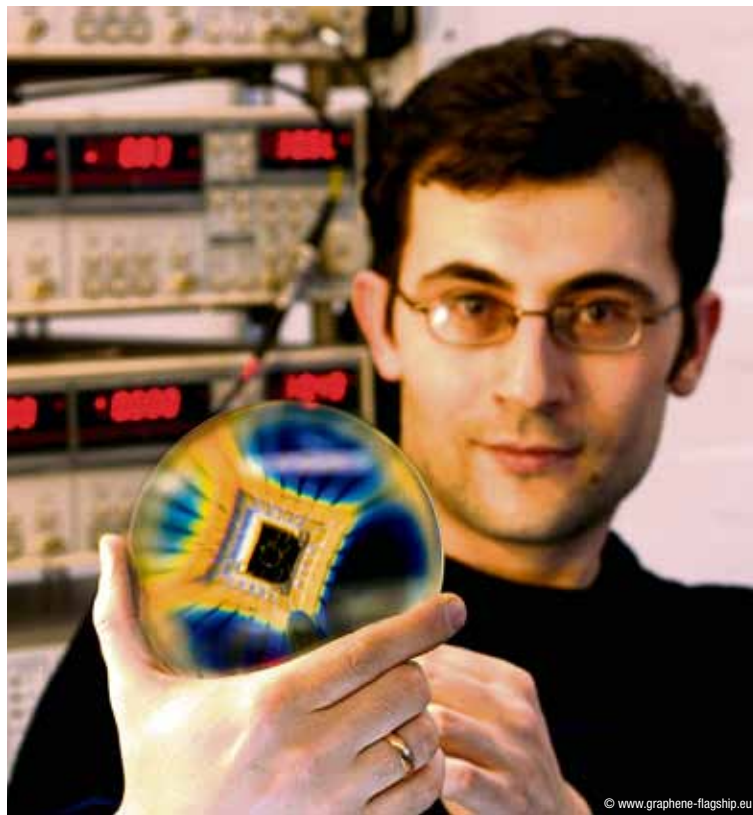
Senne Starckx

There's a new gold rush going on, but it's got nothing to do with mining, nor with the precious rare earth metals of which semiconductors and solar cells are made. The rush is all about patents – or, to be precise, patent demands. The new gold is graphene, and thanks to its pure carbon composition, it's as cheap as plastic. But it's the wide range of possible applications that is really exciting, as a team of researchers at the University of Antwerp are discovering.

Graphene was invented (or discovered, depending on how you look at it) by Britain-based scientists Andre Geim and Kostya Novoselov in 2004. In 2010, they were awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics for their work.

Graphene consists of a layer of carbon a single atom thick; but it is nevertheless stronger than diamond, more flexible than rubber and a million times more conductible than copper. Imagine what you can make with such a material; the answer is basically "anything". A random selection: mobile phones as flexible as wristwatches, super-strong and ultra-light airplanes, superfast computer chips (without expensive rare earths from China!) and transparent touch screens.

But all these applications are still – at best – in the pipeline. There's



Dr Leonid Ponomarenko, a colleague of the Nobel prize winners who discovered graphene, holds a chip containing a graphene transistor

of graphene) and the commercialisation of a product is not an easy one, and it takes time – often many years. Europe, the "birthplace of graphene", has now

it into a marketable product. The numbers are clear: Europe accounts for 36% of the world's graphene production (a leading position), but only a fraction of the roughly 2,000 graphene patents filed to date are held by EU countries.

"It's an alarm bell, but the race is not yet over," says François Peeters, spokesman for the Flemish researchers inside the Graphene Flagship. "Most of these patents still have to be approved because all these applications are not yet developed. A large part of these patent demands comes from the Asian triangle of Singapore, China and Korea, with companies like Samsung giving a huge boost to graphene research in Asia. But if we start right now investing significantly in Europe, we can still avoid our graphene knowledge

being outsourced to Asia and the United States."

Europe's Silicon Valley

Peeters leads a research group at the University of Antwerp, where he performs computer simulations on the strength, flexibility and conductivity of composite materials based on graphene.

"By combining graphene with other materials, or 'doping' it with other atoms, we can make a whole new range of materials, with unthinkable properties," he says. "For example, one future application of a graphene composite is an invisible coating that stops every possible gas molecule. Such a coating could be used to treat plastic bottles with, to avoid outside contamination of the contents."

Another application is a super-efficient, semi-transparent solar cell. "Graphene has marvellous properties as a semiconductor and, above all, it is transparent," explains Peeters. "Imagine a window consisting of these solar cells that captures light and turns it into electricity."

The Graphene Flagship is co-ordinated by Professor Jari Kinaret of Chalmers University in Gothenburg, Sweden. During the 10-year period, it will bring together more than 100 research groups from 15 EU member states. According to Neelie Kroes, the European commissioner for the Digital Agenda, who inaugurated the Graphene Flagship two weeks ago, the €1 billion investment is peanuts compared with the potential return.

"In difficult economic times," she said, "this is the kind of investment on which we must focus." She ended the press conference by referring to Silicon Valley, the booming high-tech area in California, dreaming aloud of a Graphene Valley in Europe.

► www.graphene-flagship.eu

"We can make a whole new range of materials with unthinkable properties"

one exception: Korean electronics producer Samsung says it will soon come up with the first commercial application of graphene: a bendable smartphone, based on a multilayer version of the wonder material.

The European paradox

The crucial step between the generation of fundamental knowledge (the discovery

decided to push things a little, with the recognition of graphene research as one of the Future Emerging Technology Flagships of the EU's R&D policy. For the next 10 years, €1 billion will be spent to "bring home" the R&D on graphene. It's called the European Paradox: The old continent is good at producing cutting-edge scientific research but stumbles when it comes to turning

Q&A

Kristiaan Versluys, director of educational affairs at Ghent University, discusses the advantages of online lecturing

When can the UGent students start to follow classes in their pyjamas?

We are starting the recording of the lectures next month. Next academic year, these lectures – in total six courses in human and medical science and the hard sciences – will be available online. After watching the videos at home, small groups of students will receive more explanation on the theory and do concrete exercises during practical lessons at school.

Why are you convinced this is the best way of teaching?

We examined several successful examples from abroad and

organised our own modest experiment last year. We divided veterinary science students into three groups: The first received only an online lecture, the second a lecture in school and the third was taught in the "blended" manner we are trying out now. The last group clearly showed the best results. As lecturers spend less time explaining basic theory, they can devote more attention to the intensive practical sessions. We also feel the system will help students to prepare for the exams, as they can rewatch the video any time they want. For the university, it also solves the problem of overcrowded auditoria.



Can students ask questions online?

There are always discussion forums for students online, which are monitored by academic assistants. They can step in at any moment if a discussion is going in completely the wrong direction. We are also

considering whether chat sessions would be useful.

A similar experiment at the University of Leuven in 2011 didn't work

There is a big difference: Different groups of KU Leuven students just had to follow classes alternately online and in school. Our system is more structured and balanced, so the students should adapt to it quickly. However, a team of academics and students will evaluate the results and reactions thoroughly after a year. We also realise the system cannot be applied to all studies in the same way. **interview by Andy Furniere**

THE WEEK IN SCI & ED

Flemish environment minister Joke Schauvliege has launched a **new call for forestation projects**. Until 30 April, municipalities and provinces can request subsidies to buy areas for forestation. The minister will provide €1 million in total for projects. In Flanders, every deforestation has to be compensated, either with a financial contribution to this fund or with a compensatory forest. Forests on the outskirts of cities, "recreational forests" and local forest expansions are always priorities. Starting this year, special attention will be paid to projects in the Special Protection Areas, which the EU established to safeguard the habitats of migratory birds.

Scientists at the laboratory for molecular virology and gene therapy at the University of Leuven have discovered that a protein that plays an important role in the spread of HIV has the same function in the **development of an aggressive form of leukaemia**. As there is already a treatment available that blocks the interaction between HIV and this protein, the researchers hope this breakthrough can lead to a cure against leukaemia.

For the first time, students at Ghent University were given the go-ahead to **nominate an honorary doctorate**, which rewards individuals of exceptional merit. The Ghent Student Council chose gay rights activist Frank Mugisha from Uganda, where homosexuality is illegal. The honorary doctorate will be awarded during the Dies Natalis celebration on 22 March.

Volunteers from computer software giant Microsoft and telecoms company Belgacom visited 150 primary schools in Belgium last week to **inform children how to surf safely on the internet**. The action, in cooperation with Child Focus, the European centre for missing and sexually exploited children, was part of the international Safer Internet Day. The volunteers taught 9,000 students from fourth, fifth and sixth year how to protect their computers and smartphones against internet threats.

STEM studies (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) at universities are **increasing in popularity**. Statistics released by education minister Pascal Smet show a rise of 3% in registrations. However, girls remain in the minority, with only 33%. There is a remarkable increase of 16% in the number of students in applied biological sciences, in contrast with political and social sciences, which attracted 18% fewer students than last academic year. **AF**



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Healing holidays

A record number of Flemings on low incomes are enjoying a break thanks to the Holiday Participation Centre

Andy Furniere

In this last month of winter, many people are planning a getaway to reload the batteries. The Steunpunt Vakantieparticipatie, or Holiday Participation Centre, part of Tourism Flanders, negotiates discounts with local tourism enterprises to make such holidays affordable to people with low incomes. The centre recently received international awards for its unique concept. At the programme's annual forum last month, Flemish tourism minister Geert Bourgeois announced that 2012 had been a record year: About 105,000 people went on a trip in Flanders for one or more days thanks to the centre's intervention. In 2001, the year it began, only 752 people benefited from the service, which was then limited to holidays provided by local social service agencies, such as summer or weekend camps. "Today, we also provide discounts on day trips and longer individual or group holidays," says co-ordinator Marianne Schapmans. "Our latest catalogue includes deals with 450 Flemish tourism enterprises."



According to studies, holidays provide an energy boost and improve self-esteem

Holidays good for mental health

Although Flanders is a prosperous region, statistics show that about one in seven residents is part of a family that cannot afford a week's holiday. Because the government of Flanders considers tourism a universal right, the Holiday Participation Centre asks hotel owners, for example, to provide discounts of at least 30%. The rates are further adapted to people's income and family situation. "We never give subsidies, nor ask for free holidays," explains Schapmans. "It's a matter of pride for disadvantaged people to pay for services, like everyone else." To prove that a holiday is a basic necessity, and not a luxury, Tourism

Flanders examined the effects of time off away from home with researcher Lynn Minnaert at the University of Westminster in the UK. The conclusion was that holidays are essential for mental health because they provide an energy boost, increase perspective and improve self-confidence. The small team at the centre in Brussels reaches its target group through a network of approximately 1,200 social organisations like welfare offices and food aid associations. They help disadvantaged people with practical issues, such as train tickets, but also support them in overcoming psychological barriers. "People living in poverty often feel they don't deserve time off," explains

Schapmans. Those who don't take part in the programme have an alternative: Social travel agency Rap of Stap offers advice to people on options provided by Tourism Flanders. It started in Limburg five years ago, and services in other provinces are on their way.

International recognition

The economic crisis increases the need for social tourism options, as more people end up in poverty after bankruptcy, illness or divorce, for instance. But the centre stimulates not only social well-being in difficult times but also the tourism

sector. Tourist enterprises realise the opportunities, according to Schapmans: "Just like the ecological dimension, social initiatives improve the reputation of their establishment." The centre is attracting attention worldwide. At the end of last year, it received an award from the World Tourism Organisation, the UN agency promoting responsible, sustainable and universally accessible tourism. A year earlier, the centre was put in the spotlight as an example of good social tourism at the World Leisure Expo in Hangzhou, China.

Holiday reviews

About three years ago, Luc De

Schepper from the Brussels commune of Ganshoren went on a holiday for the first time in 15 years. "With my disability allowance, I could not afford to go away, but now I regularly stay at a youth hostel close to the sea. As I am prone to depression, these holidays are essential moments when I can clear my head. Living in a crowded and noisy apartment block, it's a relief to walk next to the water and breathe in the fresh air. When I come back after a relaxing stay and a good night's sleep, I again have the energy to enjoy life." 't Roodhof, a hotel in Oostkamp, near Bruges, offers discounts to people with a low income and also employs people with physical, mental and social challenges. Co-ordinator Paul Vaernewyck has much experience in social tourism. "Disadvantaged guests need the first day to shake off a certain unease, and they tend to stay close to our premises. They need a nudge to explore the area, but we take care to not push anyone; on holiday, you are free to do what you like. What's remarkable is their warm and direct way of thanking us for the stay; their sincerity is very tangible."

Peggy Piret advises those who come to the De Schutting homeless shelter in Brussels on holiday possibilities. "For people living in this hectic city, it's an absolute joy to walk on the beach with their dog, for example. Children in particular benefit greatly from a holiday or just a trip to the zoo. We also organise a group holiday abroad every two years: Next year we are visiting the Eiffel region in Luxembourg and western Germany."

More testimonies can be found on www.nieuwsvakantieparticipatie.be

► www.vakantieparticipatie.be

STREEKPRODUCT SERIES

Alan Hope

Vet spek from the Kempen

It's been a while since we last delved into pork products – in deference to certain vegetarian sensibilities here on the editorial floor – though the category figures prominently on the list of approved *streekproducten*, or regional products. Now the moment has come again, with the recent award of the *streekproduct* label to VOF Janssens of Mol, in the Kempen area of Antwerp province, for their bacon. Not just any bacon, but the local variety that carries the rich voluptuous name of *vet spek* – fatty bacon. It comes from the belly



of the pig and is typically sliced much thicker than we're used to in breakfast bacon. The *vet spek* Janssens produces has been a delicacy in the Kempen since 1930. The business is now run by third-generation Peter Janssens, but still working away at his side

every day from 5.00 is his father Jef (pictured), now approaching 70. Jef went into the family business in his teens and now finds it impossible to walk away. It's a tough job, but he loves it, he told the VRT's *Koppen* series last year. "When you wake up at five every morning, everything is creaking and cracking," he admits. "But once you get busy, everything is fine." The bacon comes from heavy pigs, weighing 120 or 130kg, which provides the fatty texture that was so welcome to agricultural workers preparing for a day in the

fields. It's carved, then rubbed with a mixture of fine and coarse salt and left for eight days. Then the salt is washed away, and it's hung up to dry. The ideal result is 60% fat and 40% meat. It's best treated with patience in the kitchen: cut into thick slices by the butcher, and fried slowly in its own fat, which can later be used for other purposes. I like to take a larger, whole piece of up to about a kilo, wrap it in foil and roast it in a very low oven (80-100 degrees) for anything up to five hours. The final result is like toffee, dark and sweet and melting in the mouth.

By tradition in the Kempen, it can be paired for breakfast with a pancake made with buckwheat from the area, which coincidentally also just received a Streekproduct label. Buckwheat and rye were in the past the only crops the sandy soil of the Kempen would support, and it's still widely used in baking, in pancakes and as a breakfast cereal similar to porridge. A pancake or two, a couple of slices of *vet spek*, the whole topped off with some apple syrup from Limburg, and the working day is ready to be tackled. Even if you're only going to your desk.

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Literary haven

As Antwerp works to be recognised by Unesco as a literary destination, the city's movers and shakers tell us why it already is

Karishma Bhansali Mehta

The Antwerp World Book Capital accolade put the port city on the international literary map in 2004. Since then, Antwerp has become a beacon to both writers and readers with its creative methods of spreading the written word.

Poet Michaël Vandebril is the driving force behind Antwerpen Boekenstad (Book City), which promotes the port city as a literary capital. "There is a dynamic literary life here, and we want to provide that extra impulse to make the atmosphere conducive to writing," he explains. Citing the 2004 project in which the verses of then city poet Tom Lanoye were suspended from the KBC tower, Vandebril says that "Antwerp is unique in that it has a municipal policy on literature. We have a specific budget for our own events and we can enhance other literary festivals taking place in the city." Vandebril, who just won the Herman de Coninck Debut Award for his poetry collection *Het vertrek van Maeterlinck* (*The Departure of Maeterlinck*), is currently being kept busy on a number of projects, including this summer's Felix Poetry festival.

Garden of poetry

It used to be that any Flemish author had to go through a publishing house in Amsterdam, but now those publishers, such as WPG, have opened shop in Antwerp. In addition, the Creative Writing organisation supports young writers and cultural venues like De Studio devote programming to literature. Whether it's the Stichting Lezen,

© Jess De Gruyter



Andy Fierens (left) and Maarten Inghels host the animated Tournee Literair across the centre of Antwerp

which promotes reading; high-profile literary events, like the currently touring Saint Amour; or the Permeke library, where poets present their work once a month, all the city's literary organisations have learned to be on the same page. During Flanders' recent Poetry Day, Antwerp's botanical garden was renamed De Tuin Der Poëten. In the opening speech, poet Peter Holvoet-Hanssen said that Boekenstad's initiative gave "the timeless word a place within everyday city life". The day included the unveiling of

26 portraits of Flemish and Dutch poets by Flemish photographer Andy Huysmans, which now form a permanent backdrop to the greenery. Poetry readings and performances will take place here in the summer. Antwerp is also of course home to the Boekenbeurs, the largest book fair in Flanders, and the international event Mind the Book, which is held every March alternately in Antwerp and Ghent. This year, it's Antwerp's turn. It's an "alternative and intellectual meeting of minds," says Vandebril.

Next stop, Unesco

Vandebril certainly makes an exceptional case for Antwerp, and now comes perhaps the biggest challenge he has yet faced: Unesco recognition. "I am in the process of making a bid for Antwerp to be a Unesco Creative City of Literature." His eyes gleam when he adds, "and this title is permanent". Last year Norwich was awarded the distinction, which is part of the Unesco Creative Cities Network. There are seven categories to fulfil to hold the coveted title, and Vandebril is convinced Antwerp has it covered. The city has less (and less famous) bookshops than Amsterdam or Paris, but the poetry and literary inscriptions on the city walls, pavements and trams are unique. "We want Antwerp to visualise its literature in its public spaces. In fact, I think authors in Amsterdam are a bit jealous of our literary life here."

A translator's view

Point noted by Willem Groenewegen, a Dutch-English poetry translator normally based in Groningen, the Netherlands. He is moving to

Antwerp for at least the next two years.

Groenewegen, 41, is arguably the most called-upon translator of Dutch-language poetry. He has translated Flemish poets Maarten Inghels, Erik Spinoy and Bernard Dewulf, among many others. "I have wanted to move here and contribute to this creative beehive ever since the workshop De Werkplaats last year," he explains. De Werkplaats found writers and visual artists working together one day last February to create new work in different spots around the city.

The Flemish Literature Fund has invited Groenewegen to stay at its residences in the Zurenborg quarter for a month while he translates a film by Marc Neys (aka Swoon) featuring 11 contemporary poets. The film will be part of the Scottish literary festival Stanza next month. Groenewegen comments on the ease of accessibility to writers and the general public in Antwerp. "There is a much higher threshold for events taking place in Amsterdam; the vibe there is much more stand-offish." During his time in Antwerp, Groenewegen hopes to contribute to translating the poetry anthology *Hotel New Flandres: 60 jaar Vlaamse poëzie* into English. "We have a Dutch anthology of contemporary poets, but there is no Flemish equivalent," he says. Indeed, translations are a sore point for Flemish publishing. In the two year period 2011-2012, only 18 Flemish works made it into English. Flemish Literature Fund director Koen Van Bockstal hopes to change that. "At every book fair, be it in Frankfurt, London or Beijing,

we meet with a new publisher every half hour. We are making a substantial increase in the pace of our translations. Every three days, a Flemish title is being translated somewhere in the world."

Right now, the fund is working with the Netherlands to be selected as the guest of honour at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2016. "This will give a huge boost to literature in Antwerp," states Van Bockstal.

"It's the punk mentality"

It's also the DIY mentality of Antwerp writers that gives the city so much wattage. Two years ago, 36-year-old performance poet Andy Fierens and young literary sensation Maarten Inghels launched Vonk & Zonen. "It's for the poets by the poets; it gives us complete artistic freedom," says Fierens, who organised Flanders' first poetry slam 13 years ago. "When I was 16 and started writing poetry, I thought the literary scene was too dull here. So I didn't publish initially but just started performing my poetry. It's the punk mentality; there is always an audience."

A particularly inspiring event is the monthly Werktitel, where a handful of writers talk about their works in progress.

Inghels, meanwhile, points out that, contrary to popular belief, the literary market is not in decline. The closing of independent bookshops doesn't indicate a lack of sales. "It's the mediums that have changed," he says.

Vonk & Zonen is currently working on a project with daily newspaper *De Morgen*. "Five poets will write a poem based on a news event; one poem will be published every week," explains Inghels. "So poetry can be read by everyone." Poems are published every Thursday until the end of February.

The wish of a city poet

And Antwerp, naturally, has a city poet, which is currently Bernard Dewulf. "Antwerp is a pioneer," he says, matter of factly. "We know how to communicate a story to the street."

He divulges his most sacred spot in the city, behind the medieval castle 't Steen on the right bank of the Scheldt. "Right behind the Steen, it's empty, but then the river curves around, and it gets very interesting. If you walk 200 metres ahead where the boats are docked, the last dock is where the story of the Red Star Line starts."

The Red Star Line Museum recounts the history of the ocean liners that took emigrants from the port of Antwerp to the New World. When it reopens next year in its new location, it will be the Ellis Island of Antwerp, says Dewulf. "That's where I want my poetry to be displayed."

► www.antwerpenboekenstad.be

GETTING YOUR PROSE ON IN ANTWERP

Antwerp is chock-a-block with poetry cafés and literary events. Here are some dates and addresses to look out for. All events are generally in Dutch.

Tournee Literair Maarten Inghels and Andy Fierens of Vonk & Zonen amusingly chart the literary life of the Antwerp of 40 years ago through its bars and other hangouts

► www.vonkenzonen.be

'Nuff Said popular poetry slam and comedy night *every first Friday, CC Berchem*,

► www.nuffsaid.be

De Spreekende Ezels open mic for word, music and stand-up once a month in Antwerp, Ghent, Brussels and Leuven *15 February 20.00, Arenberschouwburg*,

Antwerp,

► www.desprekendeezels.wordpress.com

Demian bookshop according to Maarten Inghels, this is Antwerp's Shakespeare and Co *Hendrik Conscienceplein 16*,

► www.demian.be

Normo go to this coffee bar to have a *tête à tête* with Antwerp's literary talents *Minderbroedersrui 30*,

► www.normocoffee.com

Den Hopper this jazz café is a stalwart hangout of seasoned Antwerp poets *Leopold de Waelplaats 2*

Werktitel a handful of writers present their works in progress *every third Thursday, De Studio, Maarschalk Gérardstraat 4*,

► www.destudio.com



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Together we STAN

Antwerp's Leading theatre collective specialises in independent, multilingual performances

Tom Peeters

Next year the Antwerp-based *toneelspelersgezelschap* STAN (for obvious reasons, better known as tg STAN) will celebrate 25 years of creating and performing without an artistic director. In the early 1990s, their choice to work as a real collective was a breath of fresh air on the Flemish theatre scene. "We still don't want to work for someone who tells us what to do," says founding member Jolente De Keersmaeker.

Over the years, cross-pollination with guest actors and companies both national and international have kept the inspiration flowing at tg STAN, which has become one of Flanders' leading contemporary theatre groups, giving old repertoire a new life in modern times.

Flexible in switching between Dutch, French and English, they still grace stages across Europe. Next week sees the local premiere of *Nora*, their striking deconstruction of a happy marriage, based on Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen iconic *A Doll's House*.

Toneelspelersgezelschap means theatre players' company, while STAN stands for Stop Thinking About Names, meaning it functions as a group, not as a bunch of individuals. In 1989, forming a collective was the shared ambition of four graduates of the Royal Conservatory of Antwerp. Today, it is still their main goal.

"We didn't want to work for someone who would tell us what to do," says Jolente De Keersmaeker, one of the four founding members. "Being a collective was our basic principle, our fundamental, and it has been our biggest achievement ever since."

Addicted to independence

Working without a director was not simple, De Keersmaeker admits, "but we couldn't do it otherwise. Our teachers at the conservatory taught us to think for ourselves: Josse De Pauw and Matthias de Koning helped us out with our graduation projects, but they made sure we were the ones creating them."

For the actors, it has been a self-emancipatory road. Not only did they have to create their own structure "by trial and error", but with every new production they also had to ask themselves the same questions: "Who am I, as an actor, but also as a human being? What do I want to see? What do I find interesting?"

"But once we tasted this candy, we were addicted to it," smiles De Keersmaeker. "We still don't want to work for someone who tells us what to do."

Taking decisions collectively means giving and taking, not only in a scene, but also on a personal level. "You can only succeed if you grant



The backbone of STAN, from left: Sara De Roo, Frank Vercruyssen, Jolente De Keersmaeker and Damiaan De Schrijver

every member of the collective his or her freedom," explains De Keersmaeker. "At the same time you have to accept that your personal freedom is not primordial."

Throughout their common career, STAN actors have also worked outside of theatre. De Keersmaeker, for instance, has collaborated with her sister, Brussels choreographer Anne Teresa, and her dance company Rosas. STAN colleagues Frank Vercruyssen, Sara De Roo and Damiaan De Schrijver are also TV and movie actors, and you can see the latter two now in the new Flemish series *Met man en macht*.

At the kitchen table

"We don't have to work together all the time," says De Keersmaeker, sitting at the big kitchen table in the group's Antwerp headquarters, on the top floor of an old warehouse. It's the same table at which they discuss their work. "We may not be known for rehearsing the scene, but the long discussions we have around this table about the text, carefully comparing the original material and translations, are to us almost as important as the performance itself."

They had just finished a meeting. Coming back from Lisbon, where they staged Maxim Gorky's *Summerfolk* in French with Portuguese surtitles, it was the right moment – in between plays – to see how a group with no fixed structure works. De Keersmaeker could use some rest, she says. Meaning she needs to empty her head before starting to work on other productions.

"In January we performed a different

play every week. Now we have two weeks before we repeat *Nora*, a play in English." Soon she will also start preparing the third part of STAN's Thomas Bernhard trilogy with De Roo and De Schrijver, in Dutch.

But the choice of which of the Austrian playwright's texts it will be hasn't yet been made. "We like to decide about it as close as possible to the live dates," explains De Keersmaeker. "After working with a big group of actors, it's always nice to work with a smaller group again." At the same time, Vercruyssen will stay in France to create two new plays in French, based on two Ingmar Bergman stories with two guest actresses. "It has always been like this. We are a body that constantly changes form."

Human relationships

Languages adapt to the audiences STAN plays to. Right from the start, members didn't want to only perform in Dutch. They wanted to expand, first in French, towards Brussels and Wallonia. Then later, in English. "We were far too curious to limit ourselves. Last year I think I played more in French than in Dutch. It feels liberating when the barrier of language disappears."

Typically, STAN's plays focus on human relationships embedded in a certain society. *Nora*, which premiered in Lisbon last year, is not a black-and-white story. A middle-class woman, metaphorically living in a doll's house, comes to realise her marriage is nothing but a bubble. When first performed in 1879, *A Doll's House* was considered very emancipatory: A woman dared to walk out on her husband and three

children. "Did that make her strong, or maybe she was too spoiled?" muses De Keersmaeker. "We've chosen this play because it's a nice combination of intriguing personal relationships embedded in a society of consumerism, which makes it a very current play. In the beginning Nora yells: 'We have plenty of money! Aren't we fantastic?' But at the same time it's this capitalistic system that's blinding her and, in general, makes people forget about the basics of human relationships."

Strength in numbers

STAN's 25th birthday next year will include a revival of *JDX: A Public Enemy*, a reworking of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*. "In 1993, it was our reaction to the rise of the ultra-right-wing political party Vlaams Blok [now *Vlaams Belang*]," explains De Keersmaeker. "Basically, the play raises the question: 'Who's right: The masses or the lone wolf?' And how should we feel about the fact that a lot of people are starting to vote for this party? We're curious how the text, also written by Ibsen, measures our current political climate."

They not trying to moralise, she assures me. "Rather, we're trying to expose motives. Isn't that what all great repertory theatre does?"

JDX ends with the words: The world's strongest man is he who most often stands alone. "Again, you can interpret this on different levels. But being strong, standing up for your own opinion: Isn't that the start of everything?"

It surely was for STAN, whose consistency – perhaps call it stubbornness – has led to a long-term artistic vision, which eventually became a life's work.

IN THE WINGS AT STAN

Nora (in English)

Leuven, Stadsschouwburg, 20-21 February
Antwerp, Bourla, 22-23 February
Ghent, Minard, 28 February-2 March
Brussels, Kaaithater, 7-8 June

Bernhard 3 (working title, in Dutch)

Brussels, Kaaistudio's, 23-30 April
Antwerp, Monty, 2-4 May
Leuven, Schouwburg, 14-16 May

► www.stan.be



STAN's English-language production of *Nora*, based on Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, premieres in Leuven next week

WEEK IN ARTS & CULTURE

The Flemish culture ministry has earmarked €389,000 this year to support efforts to promote the **distribution of Flemish films abroad**. The fund will be administered through the Flanders Audiovisual Fund. A programme dedicated to promoting the release of films in cinemas will further spark interest in foreign markets, where Flemish films are already doing well at festivals.

► www.flandersimage.com

Boek.be, which promotes reading and supports booksellers across Flanders, awarded its annual **Gulden Boek (Golden Book)** to Peter Van den Eede, who programmes literature events at the Vooruit culture centre in Ghent. The award goes to someone who works outside the books industry yet has made an outstanding contribution to the promotion of literature. Van den Eede launched Vooruit's Uitgelezen (Read) 10 years ago. The event, at which two panellists and three guests discuss three books they've all read, has become one of the centre's most popular events.

► www.boek.be

The Flemish Television Academy has announced the **nominations for the best in TV** of 2012. The series *Clan* and *Quiz me quick* each pulled down the same three nominations: Best Actor (Dirk Roofthoof for *Clan* and Ben Segers for *Quiz*), Best Actress (Inge Paulussen for *Clan* and Tine Embrechts for *Quiz*) and Best Drama Series. Other nominations include *Astrid in Wonderland* and *Dr Livingstone* for Best Reality Programme and *Loslopen wild* and *Tegen de sterren op* for Best Comedy. The awards are handed out on 2 March.

► www.vlaamsetelevisiesterren.be

The iconic Groene Waterman bookshop in Antwerp has awarded its annual **prize to Australian author Matthew Condon's *Trout Opera***, a novel about the Sydney Olympic Committee's attempt to keep alive a 100-year-old man who they have appointed as a sort of Olympic mascot. "In rhythmic and sparkling prose, the author paints a picture of great landscapes ... and enchanting histories," the jury said of the book. The shop awards the prize to a new Dutch translation every year that it feels has been overlooked by critics and the public.

► www.groenewaterman.be

The renovations of the buildings of the **Red Star Line Museum** will be completed by next week and then the interior work can begin. The museum is set to open in September, with a new exhibition that will simulate the experience of taking a passenger ship from the port of Antwerp to the US, a trip the ships of the Red Star Line made hundreds of times in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

► www.redstarline.org

or 101 ways to idolise the Virgin Mary

Sins and Miracles

Ian Mundell

Among Catholics there is a tradition of leaving small tokens in churches to give thanks when disaster has passed. Flemish fishermen, for instance, would leave model boats after surviving a storm at sea. In Mexico the tradition is more elaborate, with ordinary people commissioning paintings as a sign of gratitude when cured of an illness or saved from some other misfortune.

While modestly produced, these *ex-voto* paintings have become collectable folk art, their naive style influencing Mexican artists such as Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. A free exhibition at Bozar brings together a selection of Mexican *ex-votos*, dating back to the mid-19th century, with variations on the theme by contemporary artists.

An *ex-voto* usually contains three elements: a scene from the crisis, from people lying ill in bed to dramatic accounts of attacks and robberies; a divine presence, usually the Virgin Mary; and a text explaining what happened and giving thanks.

Some are crude, like a child's drawing,



while others follow the conventions of more formal religious art. Where the skill of the artist falls short, sleight of hand may be used: Look closely at the anonymous "Gracias te doy madre..." (1953) and you can see that the face of the Virgin has been cut out of a printed picture and painted into the hood of her robe.

The more naive paintings tend to be the most interesting, presenting strange scenes and odd juxtapositions. In one, a tiny figure lies sick in bed, dominated by a vast expanse of curtain, while in another you can hardly make out a person tumbling down the side of a valley. Is this a lack of proportion or a sense of cosmic smallness?

The contemporary work respects the rules, up to a point. Some pieces are more secular, such as Dulce Pinzón's *ex-voto* giving thanks to revolutionary icon Emiliano Zapata. Dr Lakra goes further, producing a blasphemous *ex-voto* in which a nude cut from a vintage magazine is crucified in glory, while to one side Jesus copulates

with a donkey. If you can forgive the iconography, the black and gold image is one of the most striking in the show.

Other examples introduce new styles, from social realism to graphic design and comic book art. One of the most pleasing is by Germán Venegas, whose *ex-voto* commemorating a vision of the Virgin while falling-down drunk is like "Guernica" re-imagined by Charles Bukowski.

Finally, there is work by Enrique Ávila and Alfredo Vilchis, two painters still producing *ex-votos* to order for the faithful and thankful.

On your way into the exhibition, you pass another contemporary take on Mexican folk art: a Volkswagen Beetle decorated with intricate patterns of coloured glass beads, a traditional craft of the Huichol people. The effect is fascinating, creating a surface which seems smooth until you get very close and see the undulating colours. Step back again and motifs such as plants, lizards and birds start to emerge from the patterns.

Until 24 March (Huichol Beetle until 3 March) | Bozar, Brussels | www.bozar.be

VISUAL ARTS

Brussels in Shorts

The graphic short story competition Brussels in Shorts invited international comic strip authors and artists to submit their Brussels-inspired shorts. Participants immersed themselves in the city's various communities and produced stories centred on a common location, the Oude Graanmarkt. The 10 winning submissions were provided by artists from Belgium, the Netherlands, the UK, the Czech Republic, Spain, France and Germany, and they communicate a truly international perspective on a truly international city. The exhibition also demonstrates the versatility of the form. Shorts may be ... well ... short, but the stylistic and narrative possibilities are legion. The Brussels in Shorts winners are published for posterity in a dedicated collector's edition by Leuven's Oogachtend. They will be celebrated one last time at the next Passa Porta festival in Brussels. **Georgio Valentino**



Until 24 March | Belgian Comic Strip Center, Brussels

www.comicscenter.net

MORE VISUAL ARTS THIS WEEK

Brussels

Dany Danino – Bile Bleue: Drawings in ball-point pen by the Brussels artist
Until MAR 10 at Galerie Pierre Hallet, Ernest Allardstraat 33

www.danydanino.be

Female Genital Mutilation: My Way of Saying NO: Travelling exhibition featuring portraits of 32 men and women who have each stood up against female genital mutilation in their own way

Until FEB 20 at North Station

www.mafacondedirenon.be

Ghent

Delphine Lebon: Works by the Flemish photographer, featuring ordinary objects placed in surprising new contexts

Until MAR 3 at Zebrstraat Kunstenplatform, Zebrstraat 32

www.zebrstraat.be

FILM

Ciné Privé

Before you question why you would stage a film festival in the greenhouses of a botanical garden, consider the advantages: It's warm in there. It smells good. It puts you into a slightly exotic world. Anyone can wander into a cinema, but how many would think to go see a flick about boxing under the stars in Ghent's glass-covered Palmerium? At Ciné Privé, you choose a film, buy your ticket, show up at the meeting point and are taken to the right location in and around the garden.

The boxing movie is *Junior*, a Flemish documentary about the will of a young man from difficult circumstances to survive the boxing circuit. You'll also find Flemish director Nicholas Provost's *The Invader* on the bill, as well as the family film *La clé des Champs* (*The Field of Enchantment*). But it's the shorts that really take centre stage at Ciné Privé: Don't miss *Natasha* (pictured) or the award-winning *Oh Willy*, both by Flemish filmmakers. Other greenhouses on site host art installations, including one-minute movies. **Lisa Bradshaw**



21-23 February | Botanical Garden, Ghent | www.cineprive.be

MORE FILM THIS WEEK

Antwerp & Bruges

Youth Film Festival: The best in European cinema for the whole family at this 25th anniversary edition

Until FEB 17 across Bruges and Antwerp

www.jeugdiefilmfestival.be

Brussels

Anima: Festival of animated film, with features, shorts, special guests and exhibitions

Until FEB 17 across Brussels

www.animatv.be

Universal 100 Part 1: A retrospective of films produced by Hollywood's iconic Universal Studios from the 1920s to the 1950s

Until FEB 28 at Cinematek, Baron Hortastraat 9

www.cinematek.be

FESTIVAL

Tok Toc Knock

For the second time, the Royal Flemish Theatre KVS partners with local artists and organisations to celebrate one of the capital’s most underrated neighbourhoods, this time Sint-Joost. Described as Brussels’ smallest and most colourful borough, Sint-Joost is home to a diverse and creative community of artists as well several cultural venues, such as the Casquette company, Théâtre de la Vie and the Russian Cultural Centre. The Ateliers Mommen presents a multimedia exhibition around Antje Van Wichelen’s stop-motion short film *Lost and Found*. KVS co-produces Romain David’s contemporary performance *Ten-Hood Mon Royaume*. The Muzicien(ne)s assembles a diverse group of musicians – Turkish, Arab, Jewish and Western European – and launches them on unlikely improvisations. For those interested in a dialogue on social issues, scholars Eric Corijn and Andrea Rea conduct the roundtable discussion Superdiversity about the failure of current integration policies. **GV**



16 February to 3 March
Across Sint-Joost (Brussels)

► www.kvs.be

MORE FESTIVALS THIS WEEK

Bornem (Antwerp province)

PACTT Dance Festival: Featuring dance performances and workshops led by dancers and choreographers from Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain and Germany
FEB 23-24 at CC Ter Dilt, Sint-Amandsesteenweg
► www.danspunt.be

Hasselt

Krokusfestival: Festival for the whole family, featuring performance, interactive installations and workshops
Until FEB 14 across Hasselt
► www.krokusfestival.be

Leuven

Pepernoot: Music and dance festival with workshops and performances for the whole family
FEB 17 13.30 at 30CC, Diestestraat 49
► www.30cc.be

OPERA

Lucrezia Borgia

History hasn’t been kind to Lucrezia Borgia. For 500 years now, the Renaissance aristocrat has been described as treacherous, amoral and a nymphomaniac. But she also helped put Ferrara on the artistic map. Indeed, her patronage made the Italian city one of the cultural centres of Renaissance Europe. Gaetano Donizetti’s 19th-century opera favours a tragic Lucrezia over the *femme fatale*. This Lucrezia struggles to save her estranged, illegitimate son Gennaro from his incestuous infatuation. The De Munt production (staged at Koninklijk Circus) is something of a belated encore. *Lucrezia Borgia* first made its way to the Belgian national opera within a decade of its 1833 world premiere in Milan, and this is its first time back since. De Munt regulars Guy Joosten and Julian Reynolds are on board as director and conductor, respectively. Romanian Soprano Elena Moşuc stars as Lucrezia. **GV**

19 February to 8 March
Koninklijk Circus, Brussels

► www.cirque-royal.org



MORE OPERA THIS WEEK

Across Flanders

Opera in the Cinema - Rigoletti: Live via satellite from the Metropolitan Opera in New York to the big screen in Flanders. Features rising Italian conductor Michele Mariotti in a new production by American Michael Mayer, who transports the story from 16th-century Italy to 1960 Las Vegas (in English with English or French surtitles)

FEB 16 at Kinepolis cinemas

► www.kinepolis.be/nl/opera-in-de-cinema

Antwerp

Nabucco: An opera in four acts by Giuseppe Verdi based on the Biblical story of the plight of the Jews against the Babylonian king, staged by Daniel Slater (in the original Italian with Dutch surtitles)

Until FEB 21 at Vlaamse Opera, Frankrijklei 3

► www.vlaamseopera.be

CAFÉ SPOTLIGHT

Andy Furniere

La Bodeguita del Medio
Stationsstraat 9, Kortrijk

It’s not always easy to flee to the Caribbean during Flemish winters, but thankfully there are cafés like La Bodeguita del Medio – commonly known as “the Cuban” in Kortrijk. Actually, La B del M (another local abbreviation of the difficult name) offers a lot more than holiday cocktails and palm trees. At the entrance, you are greeted by a photo of the Cuban icon Ernesto “Che” Guevara. Other photos and paintings around the pub evoke a Cuban atmosphere. The music, think Buena Vista Social Club, adds to the cheerful vibe.

Ernest Hemingway is also dominantly present. The American wrote his famous novel *The Old Man and the Sea* during his stay in Cuba in the 1950s. When he was living in the capital Havana, he often frequented the original bar called La Bodeguita del Medio. A large marlin, or sailfish, hung on the wall. Hemingway’s favourite drink in the bar was the mojito, which is now one of many cocktails on the list in Kortrijk. The café even organises cocktail workshops. Stubborn beer drinkers – like myself – can however also choose from various specialiwt

beers. I never worry about finding a place: if not near the bar, you can sit among palm trees in a former patio or further away in a separate lounge, where a large table covers an empty swimming pool. La B del M also attracts aficionados of Cuban cigars, who can smoke at ease in a lounge upstairs. Once a year, a Cuban professional travels to West Flanders to teach those so inclined the tricks of making and smoking the cigars.

Fleming Bart Dehoorne established La B del M in 2001 after he visited the original pub in Cuba. For the last three years, Joven Deremaux and Anna Marie Sanchez run the café with family and a multicultural team. They tell me of a competition that offers clients the chance to win a holiday to Cuba. Not that the café doesn’t provide warmth enough, but I might try my luck.

► www.labodeguitadelmedio.be



BITE

Robyn Boyle

Mr Falafel ★★☆☆

Say you're running late to a gig in the centre of Brussels. You're hungry, but low on time (and, quite possibly, money). Before you run through all the fast food options in your head (greasy pitas, even greasier fries), just head to Mr Falafel. You might be inclined to walk right past: It's a hole in the wall – three metres wide to be precise – with just a few tables, a salad bar, a fridge with drinks and a counter where you order. Just like every other place that serves pitas and kebabs – but with a major exception. There's only one thing on the menu: falafel.

Mr Falafel, otherwise known as Shawkat, is a friendly Egyptian from Amsterdam who traded in the Dutch capital for the Flemish one when he noticed the latter's lack of falafel snack bars, which are commonplace in the Netherlands. Though not vegetarian himself (or French-speaking, for that matter), he opened the strictly veggie Mr Falafel in 2008, adorning his window with one word: *végétarien*.

Shawkat prepares the mixture for the falafel fresh daily using ground chickpeas, fava beans, onions, leeks and an array of aromatic herbs like coriander, parsley and dill. He fries the balls in oil until hot and crispy before plopping them inside the tender, chewy pita bread.

My friend, to whom I am now forever grateful for introducing me to this place, takes his pita to the salad bar and starts filling it up with vegetables and sauces. I follow suit, stuffing my pita with cabbage, beets, cucumbers, pickled pepper, iceberg lettuce, tomatoes, red onion and



Don't let the run-of-the-mill exterior put you off: Mr Falafel is the best in the capital

loads of garlic sauce, spicy sambal and tahini, an earthy sesame seed paste. We even get a small side dish to fill up with extra veggies.

While it's easy to find this traditional Middle Eastern dish across Brussels and Flanders, Mr Falafel's is the best I've ever eaten. What strikes me the most is that the falafels are so soft and moist on the inside – not a hint of dryness. And they are literally bursting with fresh herb flavour, especially coriander.

The dining experience itself is relaxed and no-frills. The owner's doll-like toddler peers at us curiously from around the corner while we eat. After the last delicious bite, we're full and satisfied and amazed to only owe €8 for the two falafels and side salads.

Hopefully we can believe the word on the street, which is that more Mr Falafel locations are set to open up this year – in Antwerp, Ghent, Bruges and the Horta Gallery in Brussels.

► www.hownottobeaskinnyvegan.blogspot.be

- 📍 Lemonnierlaan 53, Brussels
- 🕒 Daily, noon to midnight
- 💶 Mains: €4
- 📖 Brussels' tiniest, tastiest all-vegetarian falafel joint

TALKING DUTCH

Philip Ebels

Holiday reading

The chances are that when you're reading this, you're sitting in the sun somewhere high up in the mountains. That's assuming, of course, you'd bring your favourite newspaper with you on *skivakantie*, skiing holiday.

"Een recordaantal Belgen trekt de komende krokusvakantie naar de sneeuw," read a headline in *De Standaard* last week. A record number of Belgians will travel to the snow this coming crocus holiday.

Which holiday? The crocus holiday, the week-long school holiday in February named after the colourful little plant that begins to bloom around this time of year and has come to symbolise the advent of *de lente*, spring. (*Eindelijk!* Finally!)

And this year, apparently, the prices for a ski trip are down,

since the holiday in Belgium doesn't coincide with the same holiday in France, which is where people here traditionally go for *wintersport*.

"De oorzaak is de gunstige timing," read the newspaper. The cause is the favourable timing. Makes you wonder why they would ever do it otherwise.

Or if not in the sun up in the mountains, chances are that instead, you are in bed, hungover from learning the ways of the natives during *carnaval*, carnival, the madness that rages across much of the southern Lowlands before *Aswoensdag*, Ash Wednesday.

Like many holidays in Flanders, carnival is traditionally *katoliek*, Catholic. It precedes *de Vastentijd*, Lent, or fasting time, the 40 days of fasting leading up

to *Pasen*, Easter.

People dress up, drink and go crazy; at least that's my take on the whole thing. *Maar er is meer aan de hand, zo lijkt het.* But there seems to be more to it. They elect a prince who is temporarily given the reign of the city, which in the meantime has assumed a different name. They have massive parades and play a certain type of oompah-oompah music.

In any case, the celebrations in Aalst, East Flanders, which is said to be carnival city, have been included in the Unesco list of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. For those who did travel to the snow during carnival, you will have a second chance from 1 to 3 March in Ostend.

Alaaf! (What people say during carnival instead of hello.)

The last word...

World traveller

"Imagine if he'd managed to get to Africa or Asia. We might never have found him again."

Nayel, aged 12, from Brussels, managed to board a flight to Malaga at Zaventem without a ticket or passport

Snap judgement

"A good stew tastes better than it looks."

Top chef Stéphane Buyens of Le Fox in De Panne advises against the newest trend of customers posting photos of his dishes on social media

Love letters

"Knowing that I've brought hundreds of lovers together makes me happy."

Tineke Dierick from Holsbeek in Flemish Brabant answers letters written in Dutch sent to Shakespeare's Juliet in Verona

Young and restless

"We give these children a pill ... Yet there are more and more children with suicidal thoughts, more and more with ADHD. That approach is clearly not working."

Ghent psychotherapist Lut Celie has published a new book on dealing with the problems of children

NEXT WEEK
IN FLANDERS TODAY

News

What do you think when you hear the word "feminism"? Because that answer can be so varied, Brussels' Dutch-language culture house deBuren is hosting a series in the run-up to International Women's Day called "Who's Afraid of the F-Word?" We talk to the organisers about upcoming themes, like objectification, biological difference between the genders and how men can be advocates for women's rights.

Business

They are partying right now at the offices of Damhert Nutrition, thanks to the contract the Limburg company just signed to provide the natural sweetener tagatose to two manufacturing giants: PepsiCo and Yoplait. We talk to the company about how they got such lucrative contracts and what's so special about tagatose

Tourism

With another cold snap hitting us this week, it's the perfect time to plan that trip to the sauna. Not only is going to the sauna incredibly relaxing, it reminds you what it's like to feel really, really warm. We take a look at a fabulous new place in Flemish Brabant and a sprinkling of other new saunas across the region



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