

MARCH 20, 2013

FREE NEWSWEEKLY

WWW.FLANDERTODAY.EU

2 | news

5 | business

7 | science & education

9 | living

11 | arts

14 | agenda

#272

Erkennungsnummer P708816

Cultural blueprint

Joke Schauvliege announces Flemish cultural policy changes for the coming years

► 4

And the winner is...

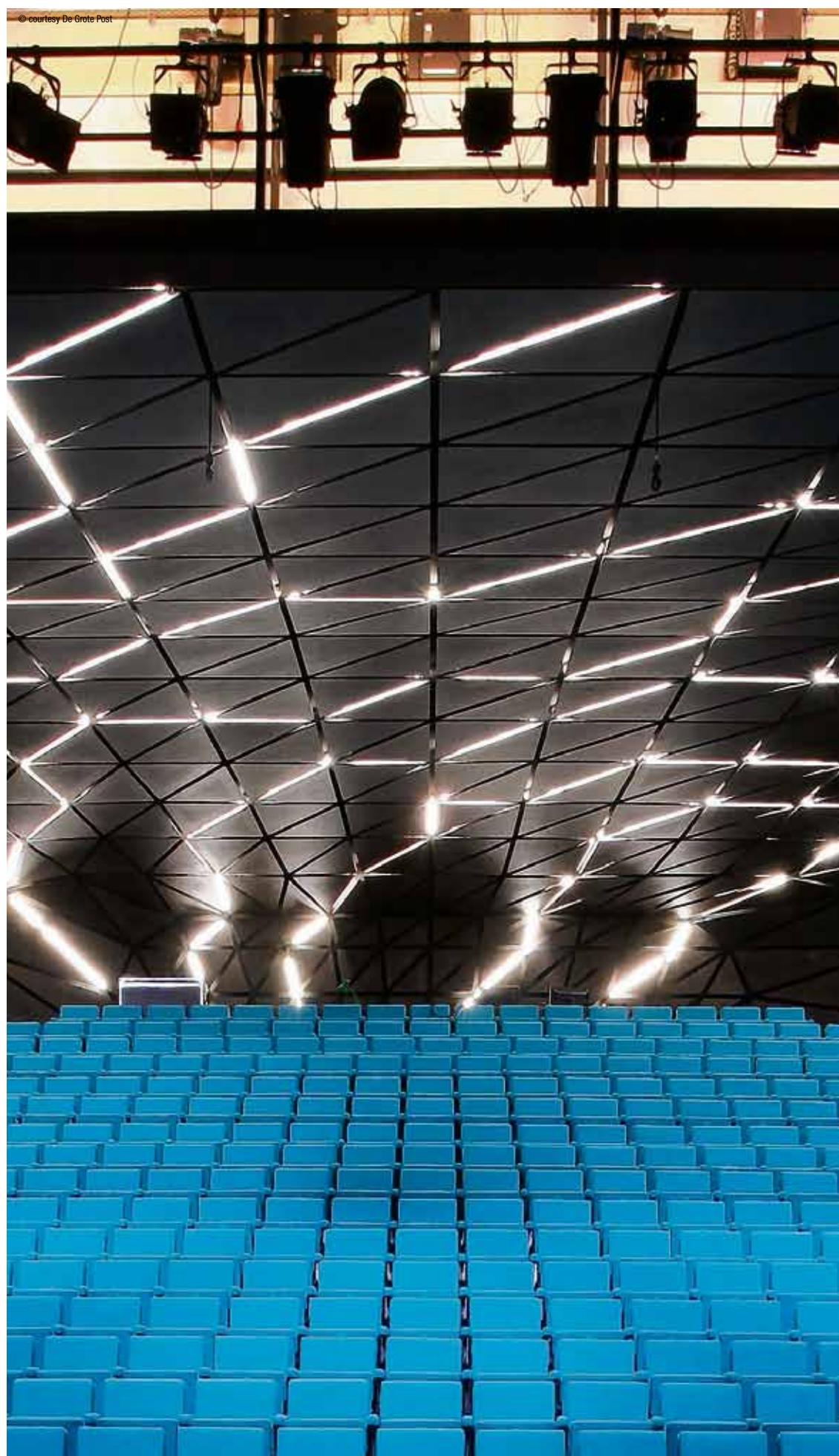
The best amateur brewer in the country will be chosen soon, and a lot can hang in the balance

► 9

Speaking in tongues

What better place than Brussels for an exhibition on the Tower of Babel?

► 14



When bigger is better

Ostend's new Grote Post is the culture boost the city has been waiting for

Lisa Bradshaw

Don't be fooled by the name: Ostend's De Grote Post is not a post office; it is a culture centre. But it used to be a post office, and the now-vast space, which began staging performances three months ago, has kept the atmosphere of the protected post-war building intact.

You would be forgiven for missing the opening of De Grote Post, Ostend's new culture centre. Though it's been in the press for a couple of years, mostly with an air of relief that the building, which has stood empty since 1999, would finally be put to good use, it began staging events quietly, with invitation-only performances by Tom Lanoye and Wouter Deprez last December.

This is because the new centre, which is as gigantic as it is stylish, isn't actually finished. The flurry of construction attests to this as I toured the building recently, admiring the retro feel of the entryway, enjoying a drink in the bathed-in-red ground-floor cafe, climbing the shallow steps of the "tubes".

People get lost, confides the young man tasked with showing me around. I can understand why. Between ascending in the glass tubes and heading down back stairs, I'm completely turned around within minutes. The centre seems to go on and on, tempting you along with its endless corridors and doorways, begging comparisons to Ghent's famous cultural centre Vooruit.

Though its atmosphere is very different from that early 20th-century socialist stronghold. De Grote Post is a mixture of new and old, of modern industrial and post-war functional. It is 10,800 square metres of theatres, concert halls, studios, reception areas and offices.

And this magnitude is ironic – because before this, Ostend had almost no performing arts spaces whatsoever.

Everything is possible

"I was here as a child," muses Stefan Tanghe nostalgically. "It was the post office that served Ostend and also the offices for the local branch of Belgacom." Tanghe has lived in Ostend his entire life, and now he's the director of the city's first performing arts centre.

In the year 2000, Tanghe started a small business called Eipiyt, which stood for Everything is Possible if You Try. Though the business no longer exists, he's certainly proven the title to be true.

For the entire decade of the 1990s, Tanghe worked for the investment group of Rock Torhout. He then founded Eipiyt, which acted as a business consultant for cultural centres and events. In 2003, he headed up the Literaal literary festival in Ostend, once part of the triennial Beaufort.

He continued to organise cultural bits and bobs in Ostend and, in 2006, was

► continued on page 3

FACE OF FLANDERS

Alan Hope

Dirk Bosschaert



Luckily, the title of this rubrique is not to be taken too literally, because this week's selection is someone whose face will never be seen. Veteran Flemish actor Dirk Bosschaert has been named as the new voice of Samson, the television talking dog loved by children across Flanders and the Netherlands.

Bosschaert is the third man to fill the role; the original, Danny Verbiest, sold his shares in Studio 100 and retired to follow his own interests, including animated films. His place was taken in 2005 by Peter Thyssen, previously known for playing the pig (named Big) in the Studio 100 show *Big & Betsy*.

But in truth the job was never to be the same: In 2005, Studio 100 stopped making new episodes of the long-running show featuring Gert Verhulst and his pet Samson, an Old English Sheepdog with a gruff voice and an unfortunate habit of malapropism.

Samson still exists in live shows, however, so Bosschaert will have regular employment in the touring winter production of *Samson en Gert*, as well during the summer

months the same show resident at Plopsaland in De Panne.

Bosschaert was born in Antwerp in 1958. He did some directing, then performed as a puppeteer for years before playing the gentle giant Jerome in the musical of *Suske en Wiske*, based on the comic strip by Willy Vandersteen. Bosschaert had several TV roles and continued directing until he joined forces with Studio 100 in 1999, as a tortoise in *Wizzy en Woppy*, then as the hungry ship's cook Berend Brokkenpap in *Piet Piraat* on TV and in films.

The role of Samson will be a return to his days acting with puppets, but since he's never actually seen, there will be less make-up than was required to transform him into a giant (he's not a small man) tortoise called Dongo. Not that the role is a walk in the park: Verbiest complained that the unnatural posture he had to adopt to stay hidden from the camera left him with pains in the arms, a ripped shoulder muscle and forced him last year, seven years after leaving Samson behind, to have surgery on his neck.

News in brief

The public sector union ACOD has made it clear there will be **no strike action on 21 March**, which had been widely reported. The union has given rail infrastructure company Infrabel notice of protest action by maintenance workers between 06.00 and 07.00. "It was never the intention to make 21 March a day of strike action," the union said in a statement.

Flemish minister-president Kris Peeters and Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte will no longer make a joint trade mission to South Africa in July, after their hosts were unable to organise dates which suited all parties. Instead the two leaders will **travel to Austin and Houston** in the US state of Texas, on a visit to oil, gas, petrochemical and logistics industries.

The **special clarion trumpet** returned to the Menin Gate in Ypres last week for the first time since it was played at the first ever Last Post ceremony in 1927. The clarion was played once and then returned to the UK, where it remained until last week, when it was brought over by the Wellington School of Drums, who played at last Friday's ceremony to mark their 100th anniversary.

The widow of one of the bus drivers who died in the school bus crash in Sierre, Switzerland, a year ago has described as "tasteless" a decision to **remove the names of the two drivers** from a commemorative plaque at the hotel where the two classes spent their skiing holiday. The original plaque with the names of all 28 fatalities was replaced by the non-profit that organises ski holidays for schools. A spokesperson said they had been asked for the change by several parents of the victims.

The **right of investigators to look at bank account** details is not a breach of privacy, the Constitutional Court has ruled. The question was brought to the court by the appeal court in Ghent as part of a case pitting EU Commissioner Karel De Gucht against the Special Tax Investigations Unit (BBI) of the federal finance ministry. The BBI had inspected the accounts of De Gucht and his wife while investigating the purchase of a holiday house in Italy and turned up undeclared income of €1.2 million.

Flemish ministers for urban policy and mobility have invited the authorities of the 12 largest Flemish cities to apply to take part in a feasibility study on **bicycle-hire systems** such as those operating in Antwerp and Brussels. Brussels' Villo was launched in 2009 and now has 27,000 members; the Velo system in Antwerp started in 2011 and already has 19,000 members and a waiting list.

The Royal Conservatory in Brussels has **reopened for concerts**, after being closed several days last week because of water damage. The hall was closed after water from melting snow leaked through the glass cupola on the roof. The roof has been repaired temporarily, but inspectors from the buildings agency said that the only long-term solution involves extensive renovation work.

The 11 members of the Field Liberation Movement who took part in a demonstration against genetically modified potatoes in Wetteren, East Flanders, in 2011 **will be retried in April**. The accused, who are charged with assault after clashes with police, left their first trial in January in

protest at the exclusion of evidence and were later given prison terms in absentia of up to eight months and fines of up to €25,000.

Antwerp mayor Bart De Wever has given provisional approval for a protest march on 1 May in the district of Borgerhout by the **extreme right-wing group New Solidarity Initiative**. A spokesperson for De Wever said that permission can be withdrawn at any time if the security situation deems it necessary. The group opposes the presence of the left-wing PVDA+ on the district council of Borgerhout.

One in four people in Flanders would **withhold insurance coverage** for people with illnesses or injuries they had brought about themselves, according to a poll of 1,210 people by the study department of the Flemish government. Half of those questioned also thought non-smokers should have priority access to heart operations, while the elderly should be made to wait if a younger patient is awaiting treatment. Paul Schotmans, professor of medical ethics at the University of Leuven, said he was "shocked" by the survey.

Ingrid Lieten, the Flemish minister in charge of poverty issues, has called for the federal government to **scrap the VAT payable** on the food that supermarkets give away to food banks. It makes such gifts expensive and is hampering efforts, Lieten said, to build up more co-operation between food retailers and those who feed the homeless and poor. "This has to be sorted out quickly, so as not to put at risk the many projects that are being planned all across Flanders," Lieten said.

FLANDERS TODAY

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OFFSIDE

Working it out

If you're reading this on 20 March and you're a woman, congratulations. After today you can stop working for nothing and start making a wage like men have been doing since 1 January.

The idea of equal pay for equal work has been around for some time, but while great strides have been made at eradicating discrimination at many levels, women in Belgium still earn 22% less than men. The figures come from *zij-kant*, the women's network of the socialist party SPA, and the socialist trade union ABVV, based on gross salaries in the private sector, including part-time jobs. That means that as a woman, you just worked the first two months and 20 days of the year for free, essentially. On the one hand, it's better than last year, when the gap was 0.18% larger. On the other, at that rate of improvement, it will take 555 years before equality is achieved.



Spot the top earner

The theme of Equal Pay Day this year is housekeeping: The study points out that 44% of women in the workforce work part time, compared to 9% of men. For about 23% of all working women, the choice to work part time isn't voluntary but based on family responsibilities such as caring for children or elderly relatives.

Zij-kant and ABVV are calling for extended parental leave for men,

from two weeks to four, and for improved information on part-time work. They are also calling on the government to implement measures agreed in 2012 on narrowing the pay gap. One problem remains on that front: How will the government reduce the wage gap when it has already decided to freeze wages for two years?

www.tinyurl.com/loonkloof

When bigger is better

B Architecten pulled down buildings and put up new ones but left the original intact

► continued from page 1

asked to take over the financially strapped performance festival Theater aan Zee. He got the finances in order and turned it into the popular multi-disciplinary festival with the ever-hip curators (Arno, Josse De Pauw, Stef Kamil Carlens...) that it is now.

For good measure, he went ahead and founded Vrijstaat O, which, until De Grote Post, was the best thing to happen to Ostend's cultural scene in two decades. Though it has no performance space, Vrijstaat O is a cultural centre that helps artists develop work and hosts now high-profile festivals – such as Dansand and Freestate – that have (finally) drawn people away from their familiar city centre arts havens and to the coast.

So it would be hard to imagine any other choice than Tanghe to head up De Grote Post. He talks about Ostend's long journey to becoming an arts capital of the coast. He's at the centre of it but modestly gives credit to the local government installed in the 2006 elections. It was the priorities of mayor Jean Vandecasteele and the city council, he says, that allowed him to accomplish the work he has done. He also speaks highly of Ostend's culture alderwoman Hilde Veulemans and Johan Vande Lanotte, the federal minister in charge of North Sea concerns, who lives in Ostend. "He has been very active in the well-being of this town," says Tanghe. "Between 1996 and 2006, Ostend went through a lot of public works and urban improvements. By 2006, they knew very well that it was time to work on its cultural side. It's very ambitious, the proposals that they have made for this little city. It's been a great period of Renaissance."

Tanghe is speaking to me from the cafe of De Grote Post, against a backdrop of heavy drilling and a meeting taking place on the other side of the room with the building's architectural team. At the same time, the centre is already hosting performances. "The works started in 2010, and we had our first performance in 2012," says Tanghe, "which is very, very fast."

He's also still working out budgets, infrastructure and how the centre will co-operate with the Casino (previously the only other performing arts space in the city), Vrijstaat O and other organisations. "It's a new motor, and we're starting the engine."

Eysselinck's masterpiece

The building now known as De Grote Post was designed by modern architect Gaston Eysselinck. He designed mostly homes, and this functional post office was his only public building. Also a furniture designer, he outfitted its interiors furnishings as well and worked with artist Joe Maes to create intricate etched glasswork and ceramic reliefs, which remain.

Built in the early 1950s, the building garnered little attention. But by the 1970s, it was referred to as the Flemish architect's masterpiece, a successful marriage of form and function, with an innovative use of natural light. The sculpture that graces the lower tier at the front of the building is by Jozef Cantré, a friend of Eysselinck's. The architect in fact had to fight with the city to get it placed, and it arrived only in 1963. It's lucky for De Grote Post that it did, as it suggests arts and culture to arriving guests in a way that the rest of the exterior cannot.

The building became a protected monument in 1981. The post moved out of the building in 1999, and it stood empty, the subject of much debate about what should be done with it. The city finally bought it in 2007, and construction started three years later. The project cost just over €35 million, with €7 million coming from the government of Flanders, €2 million from the province of West Flanders and €26 million from the city of Ostend.

Renovating a monument

Antwerp's B Architecten beat out the seven other Belgian firms that made it through to the final selection to design De Grote Post. Their previous experience in the cultural sector, including the design of exhibition spaces and the renovation of Brussels' Beursschouwburg, gave them an edge in coming up with creative solutions for specific challenges.

"We desperately wanted this project," smiles Dirk Engelen of B Architecten. "Working in theatre is one thing, but they needed someone who could handle the complete redesign of a huge infrastructure and the specific situation relating to a monument – altering it as little as possible."

One of B Architecten's defining decisions was to demolish sections that had been added on to Eysselinck's original building in later

decades, rather than trying to use them. "The quality of these additions was not the same as Eysselinck's," explains Engelen. "By taking them away, you see more the quality of the monument, which had become a little hidden."

B Architecten put an outdoor amphitheatre behind the building, and added new buildings behind that. Then they came up with their crowning achievement. They connected the old and new buildings with stairwells encased in glass and steel. "It was the key solution and the starting point to making what was up until recently just an office building into a public space."

It's also beautiful, the sort of design that defines a building and makes it instantly recognisable. Psychologically, the structures offer the impression of connecting the best of the past with the progress of the present, literally bridging our trespass between the two.

Room for a pony

De Grote Post houses six performances spaces, with several more studio and reception areas that have multiple-use possibilities. Some are perfect for headbanging rock concerts, others for more intimate acoustic performances and others for dance and theatre. In order to maintain the integrity of the monument, B Architecten sunk the largest hall, with 430 seats, below the ground (pictured on cover).

Stages can be lowered into the ground and acoustical walls erected or removed. The staff are still considering how to use some of the spaces: One gorgeous little lecture hall in the original building, with wooden seats and colourful murals, can be used for talks or even a comedy show.

A behind-the-scenes tour of such a project – and we can no doubt expect those during Heritage Day or Open Monument Day – drives home the successful and total fusion of old and new in De Grote Post. Just when I thought I was in one of the new buildings, a lengthy coat rack, attached to the tiled floor, jarred me into realising I was in Eysselinck's design. Every golden coat hook has a round ball at the top of it. In the 1950s, of course, everyone wore a hat.

► www.degrotepost.be



© courtesy B Architecten



© Edwin Fontaine



© courtesy De Grote Post



© Beeldbank Oostende

From top: B Architecten bridged the original post building (on the left) and the new buildings with stairwells encased in glass; De Grote Post director Stefan Tanghe shows residents around the building; the original ceiling, doors and glass etchings surround the new furnishings of De Grote Post's café; the exterior of the building, a prime example of post-war architecture, is unchanged today

WHAT'S ON AT DE GROTE POST

Instant Karma

29-30 March

The two-day music festival moves out of Ostend's Casino and into De Grote Post. Its 20 bands and DJs, including Dutch roots rocker Blaudzun, Flanders' synth-pop band Maya's Moving Castle and dance beats from Brussels' Montevideo, are also scattered around other bars and clubs in the city.

► www.karmahotel.be

Wouter Deprez

2 April, 20.30

The Flemish comedian brings *De avond van de luistervink* (The Evening of the Eavesdropper) to Ostend. The one-man-show revolves around the sounds of daily life and how feelings of nostalgia are more closely related to hearing than to any other sense.

► www.wouterdeprez.be

Claudio Stellato

10 April, 15.00 & 20.30

A performance for all ages, *l'Autre* shows off the talents of the Brussels-based artist, whose ability to manipulate his body into, out of and around various objects will make you question the laws of physics.

► www.l-autre.be

Check De Grote Post's website for a full programme

Cultural blueprint for Flanders

Joke Schauvliege announces changes to cultural policy for the coming years

Alan Hope

Flemish culture minister Joke Schauvliege (pictured) last week revealed her blueprint for the future of the region's culture policy, with proposals on multi-year financing, a new approach to funding for major institutions and changes to the composition of the committees that advise on subsidies. Schauvliege's "concept note" is a sort of white paper on the evolution of cultural policy in the coming years and will eventually be translated into a new Culture Decree. One of the main goals of the paper is to increase the pool of members of the various committees that advise



the minister on the subsidies to be granted to groups and organisations, in order to make it easier to avoid

conflicts of interest. The paper also extends the so-called "culture canon" of major institutions that receive international funding, which they are then free to spend according to management agreements reached with the culture ministry. At present there are six: deSingel, the Flemish Opera, the Royal Ballet of Flanders, orchestras deFilharmonie and Brussels Philharmonic and the Ancienne Belgique. To these might be added other multi-disciplinary centres like Bozar, Flagey and deBuren. Schauvliege will also work to

remove some of the firewalls that separate different disciplines when considering requests for funding, to give preference to more cross-discipline projects. Individual artists would also be able to receive multi-year funding. One of the minister's pet projects has, however, found insufficient support to make it into the final white paper: the extension of the principle of handing funding over to sectoral agencies, such as already takes place for film and television (Flanders Audiovisual Fund) and literature (the Flemish Fund for Letters).

Snow leads to travel chaos

An unusually late snowfall last week led to unprecedented chaos on roads across the region. The morning rush hour saw a record 1,600 kilometres of tailbacks across the country and delays reported of up to three hours on main motorways. Despite numerous accidents, there was only one fatality, near De Haan.

The services of the Flemish public transport authority De Lijn were disrupted across Flanders, with delays of 15 to 30 minutes. In Brussels, trams and metros were running normally, while some bus routes were cancelled and others experienced delays.

According to the Roads and Traffic Agency, gritting ahead of time would have served no purpose, as temperatures at the critical time were above zero, and any salt would

© Sander de Wilde / CORBIS



have been washed away by the first melting snow. Once the ground layer froze, spokesperson Ilse

Luypaerts said, it was too late. Both the Thalys and Eurostar services were disrupted, with

several trains blocked between Brussels and Paris. Brussels Airport, on the other hand, was functioning normally after crews worked through the night to clear runways.

Getting to the airport on the train, however, was a stressful situation for many travellers. The rail authority NMBS came in for strong criticism, as hundreds of commuters were stranded at stations without any information on when – or if – trains would arrive. "Leaving customers to their own devices is simply not acceptable," said Jean-Pascal Labille, federal minister for government enterprises. "I intend to make sure the necessary lessons are learned from this and that the necessary improvements are made."

De Gelder trial draws to a close

The trial of Kim De Gelder entered its final days this week with a dispute over whether the 24-year-old is responsible for his actions. De Gelder has confessed to attacking children and care workers in a Dendermonde crèche in 2009, killing one adult and two babies. Days earlier, he murdered an elderly woman in her home in Vrasene, also in East Flanders.

The question of De Gelder's sanity was considered by a panel of five court-appointed psychiatrists, who all agreed that De Gelder is mentally ill but that he is also responsible for his actions. This

means that De Gelder would face a life sentence in prison, rather than being committed to a mental institution. Two psychologists called by the defence, however, argued that De Gelder suffers from paranoid schizophrenia and should therefore be committed. The question will ultimately be decided by the jury. The trial is expected to end this week with closing arguments, after which the jury will retire to consider the question of guilt, later to be joined by the judge to consider, in the event of a guilty verdict, the sentence to be handed down.

Classes for legal residents only, rules court

Only legal residents in Belgium may sign up for basic education or adult classes, the Constitutional Court ruled last week. The case against the Flemish government's registration conditions was brought by the Brussels' non-profit League for Human Rights and the trade union LBC.

The government defends the condition, which came into force in the academic year 2011-2012, on the grounds that federal asylum policy would otherwise

be undermined. Education minister Pascal Smet pointed out that the term "legally resident" is broadly defined: asylum seekers whose case is still being considered, for instance, are able to sign up for classes.

Opposition party Groen, however, said the scrapping of Dutch classes for people without papers would simply push them further to the margins of society, "which is bad for them and bad for society," said Elisabeth Meuleman.

THE WEEK IN FIGURES

5,864

used syringes picked up by a special patrol in Antwerp in 2012, 20% more than in 2011. Another 12,000 were deposited in special containers

2,000

civil servants the Flemish government plans to move into one building in Brussels by 2016. The government is still in search of the right location

23

March is the opening of registrations for the Brussels 20km, which takes place on 26 May. Forms can be printed from the website www.20kmdoorbrussel.be

7.4 million

illegal files removed from the internet in 2012 by the Belgian Anti-Piracy Federation, an increase of almost 50%. The film *Rundskop* (*Bullhead*) was the most popular single file

€300,000

annual pension for former Dexia CEO Pierre Richard, after the financial group nearly halved its previous offer of €583,000. Richard is considered largely responsible for the former bank's collapse

FIFTH COLUMN

Anja Otte

No more mister nice guy

Since his spectacular and much-publicised diet, Bart De Wever (N-VA), mayor of Antwerp, is big on running. He even considered challenging Kris Peeters, minister-president of the Flemish government, in the famous Antwerp Ten Miles. In the end, though, he decided against it, Peeters being the better trained runner. But for next year, the challenge is on. "No more minister nice guy," De Wever said (in English).

No more mister nice guy is probably also what Geert Bourgeois (N-VA) was thinking when he was interviewed in *De Standaard* last week. Bourgeois is the Flemish vice minister-president and minister for the interior, administration, integration, tourism and the *Vlaamse rand*, or Flemish periphery around Brussels.

And, as it turns out, he is also a candidate for succeeding Kris Peeters as minister-president. The interview caused a stir for more than one reason. First, Bourgeois focussed on what is at stake for N-VA in the 2014 elections. In opinion polls, the Flemish nationalists take up to 38% of the vote. With 40% at the elections, N-VA would become *incontournable* – political lingo for "cannot be ignored or left aside". In that case, he said, it will demand "total autonomy" for Flanders, making it responsible for taxation, work and social security, now all jurisdictions of the federal government.

To achieve this, N-VA would not opt for a traditional "state reform" – negotiations with the French speakers that can take months and often result in compromises that please no-one. Bourgeois: "If N-VA becomes *incontournable*, then the French speakers will just have to follow. If in a marriage one partner says 'I want this', and the other says 'no', then it's finished."

Also, Bourgeois says, Flanders will hang on to Brussels if Belgium should break up. As usual, the French speakers reacted strongly to these words. N-VA's Flemish adversaries, too, spoke of "masks that are falling down". Bourgeois' views should come as no surprise, though. He is after all the founding father of his party N-VA, which has Flemish independence as its main goal.

Some commentators feel that Bourgeois has weakened his party by putting an exact percentage on an electoral victory. Any lower result will take some of the shine off the expected success. Moreover, the party had not decided on just who will be candidate for the minister-presidency. But at least minister-president Peeters now knows who he is in government with. No more mister nice guy.

Apps for everyone

Industry federation supports app development's coming-of-age

Andy Furniere

Currently, the most popular apps on smartphones and tablets involve shooting cartoon birds and sharing artistically altered photos. But aside from gimmicks such as Angry Birds and Instagram, the app sector is producing ever-more serious tools we can use in both our professional and private lives. To further professionalise the development of mobile applications, Belgian technology industry federation Agoria is uniting specialised companies in the App Alliance.

Agoria launched the App Alliance at the recent Mobile World Congress in Barcelona, the annual event for the international mobile sector. According to Tanguy De Lestré, business development manager at Agoria, there are about 400 specialists and 60 companies creating apps in Belgium – most of them in Flanders.

And De Lestré has noticed an increasing professionalism. "More and more freelance developers are establishing an enterprise," he says. "The apps are not just quirky features for entertainment or marketing purposes anymore, but complicated systems useful in the business world, industry and the care sector."

As large ICT companies are increasingly interested in app developers' expertise, the alliance is providing a forum to start-up collaborations. Agoria not only organises meetings, trainings and networking events but will soon bring out a mobile business guide with profiles of app enterprises. This mobile brochure will list developers' specific skills so businesses can quickly find the right specialist for the job. "This way, we are reducing

the possibility that they will search for partners abroad," says De Lestré.

Pay with your phone

The App Alliance mainly targets developers who create serious apps, not those meant for entertainment. "There is a large demand for mobile applications to improve internal communication in offices," explains De Lestré. "The planning of holidays for employees could, for example, be organised more easily via apps."

He also points to industrial applications, where apps could be used to help operate machines from a distance. "There is also much activity around e-health solutions, such as apps to monitor blood pressure," adds De Lestré. One particular priority of the App Alliance is the search for solutions for mobile payments, which would turn phones or tablets into electronic wallets.

To protect the sector's reputation, the alliance is working on an ethical charter that will set out working methods and practices. Enterprises that live up to these standards will receive a quality label, which will in turn help attract customers. Because many developers have questions about privacy issues, the App Alliance will collect and distribute information on the current legal framework, which is not fully adapted to this area of technology yet.

In the Pocket

At present, the largest app developer in Flanders is In the Pocket, which started in Ghent but recently opened a branch in London. In three years, In the Pocket has created about 200 applications for the media and business world, including for the



Flanders' finest apps were on show at the recent Mobile World Congress in Barcelona

Flemish public broadcaster VRT and the Kinepolis group, Flanders' largest cinema chain.

Specifically to make the lives of salespeople easier, the developer brought out Showpad, a "mobile briefcase" with up-to-date information about a vendor's products. The success of the technology led to the establishment of a separate office in Ghent, concentrating only on the evolution of Showpad.

"Through an online platform, users can easily manage their personal

sales and presentation app," says Jan Deruyck, in charge of business development at In the Pocket. Companies can upload their catalogues, complementing them with pictures and videos. The user-friendliness of the technology is also attracting interest in the United States.

As a member, In the Pocket is co-operating actively in the set-up of the App Alliance. "When we started in 2010, we were one of the only app developers in the country," says Deruyck, "but now there is a real

need for an umbrella organisation that supports this booming business."

Deruyck says that the App Alliance is especially important in voicing the concerns of the sector to governmental organisations, functioning as a lobby group. "The App Alliance can, for instance, help us to fill the gaps in legislation on privacy issues concerning personal data that is saved when users log in on a mobile platform," he says.

► www.agoria.be

EU approval for Jetrea

The treatment for the eye disease known as VMT is the first ever developed

Alan Hope

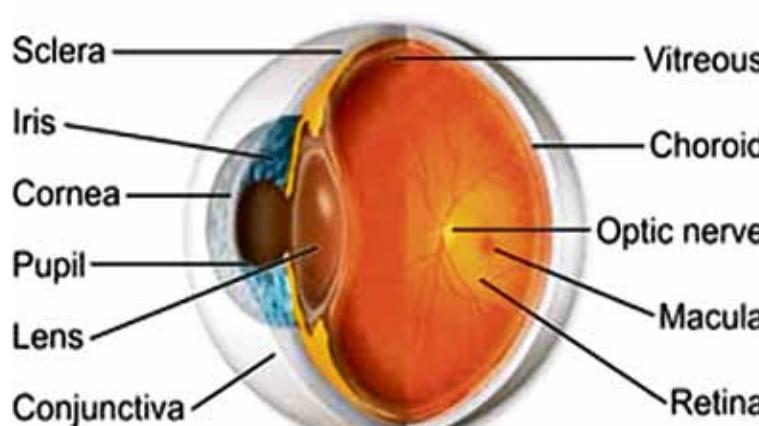
"It's all a little bit too much in one week," commented Patrik De Haes, CEO of Thrombogenics, the Leuven-based biotech company.

But De Haes was not complaining. Last week he found out that his company had gained the approval of EU drug safety authorities for the introduction of its drug ocriplasmin, sold under the name Jetrea. The very next day, the company learned it will now be listed on the Bel20 stock market index.

Jetrea is a new treatment for an eye condition known as vitreomacular traction (VMT), in which the liquid inside the eyeball tends, over time, to adhere to and distort the macula,

the central area of the retina. The condition has an effect on eyesight. By the injection of only half of one millilitre of Jetrea into the eye, the liquid becomes thinner, stops adhering to the macula, and the distortion goes away. The ailment affects more than 250,000 people every year in Europe, and about the same number in the US.

According to professor Bart Leroy of the Ghent University Hospital, the arrival of Jetrea is eagerly awaited. At present, the only effective treatment for VMT is costly and painful surgery. Critics have pointed out, however, that Jetrea is effective in only about 30% of cases. In patients for whom it does work, it is extremely effective, although there is always the chance



of developing VMT in the other eye. Jetrea has been approved by the US drug safety authorities and is already on sale there. With the EU's approval

specialised in treatments for eye disorders. Alcon's plan is to start marketing Jetrea within a few weeks in Germany and the UK, with the rest of the continent following later. In the beginning, the use of the new drug will be limited, explains Professor Leroy, largely because it is so expensive – currently almost \$4,000 in the US.

The approval of the EU brought Thrombogenics an immediate income of €45 million from Alcon, on top of the €75 million paid last year when the distribution agreement was signed. As soon as Jetrea is brought to market, Alcon will pay another €45 million – and all before a single patient has been treated.

THE WEEK
IN BUSINESS

Autos ▶ Audi

German car manufacturer Audi will invest €200 million over the next two years in its A1 model production unit in Brussels. The plant, the company's only one dedicated to the best-selling A1, will get a new paint shop and various updates to further increase capacity.

Banking ▶ BIL

Banque Internationale of Luxembourg (BIL) is opening a branch in Brussels as part of its development in the wake of its acquisition by the Qatari sovereign fund.

Banking ▶ KBC

Flanders' largest financial institution has finalised the sale of its remaining 22% stake in Slovenian Nova Ljubljanska Banka, with a book loss of some €100 million. The move is part of the conditions imposed by the European Commission for approving KBC's rescue in 2008.

Chemicals ▶ BASF

German chemical group BASF is spending €200 million this year to build a new butane derivatives production unit in its Antwerp plant and increase industrial flexibility of its gas power station in the Antwerp district of Zandvliet. It is the company's largest investment in Antwerp since 2008.

Hotels ▶ Moxy

Swedish retailer Ikea and the US Marriott hotel group have plans to build a jointly-owned chain of three-star hotels in up to 10 European countries over the next five years, including in Brussels.

Ports ▶ Zeebrugge

The Port of Zeebrugge's APM container terminal is almost half owned by Chinese interests, following the decision of Denmark's Maersk group to sell its 24% stake to China Shipping Terminal. The Shanghai Port Authority also has a 25% stake.

State aid ▶ GM

The government of Flanders is claiming the reimbursement of €17.4 million in subsidies from General Motors following the closure of the Antwerp plant in 2010. The aid had been paid to GM on the condition that the company maintain employment on the site.

Supermarkets
▶ Delhaize

Delhaize plans to open at least 25 new supermarkets in Belgium this year, in response to customer demands to shop close to home. The new outlets will mostly be the group's medium-sized supermarkets.

Plans announced for port of Antwerp

Opposition from locals and farmers over loss of villages and agricultural land

Alan Hope

Last week, the government of Flanders released its final development plans for the port of Antwerp. According to Flemish ministers present, the regional planning programme (Grup) combines growth potential and concern for the environment. The plan foresees an increase in the port area of nearly 1,800 hectares. The Verrebroek dock on the left bank will be lengthened, and a new lock built on the Deurganck dock. The plan also leaves the door open for a new Saeftinghe dock at some point in the future. The land required for that dock has already led the town of Doel to be mostly abandoned; it is currently occupied by activists fighting the issue in the courts. The latest plan reserves the same fate for two tiny hamlets, Ouden Doel and Rapenburg, which will become



The left bank of the Scheldt river, looking towards Doel

part of a new flood area. According to the plan, the infrastructure that would be required for them to remain is too expensive.

The Grup plan will mean a loss of land for up to 250 farmers, a

hectares going to industry and 938 to nature conservancy, to serve as breeding grounds for waterfowl in compensation for the increase in industrial activity in the area. According to the union, some 250 families will lose land, some of them their entire farms.

Opposition party Groen, meanwhile, criticised the plan for a future Saeftinghe dock. "This is an unnecessary and inefficient investment," commented Björn Rzoska, a member of the Flemish parliament. "A second tidal dock is absolutely not required, since the Deurganck dock is currently underused."

The plan will now be submitted to the Council of State for an opinion on its legality, before it continues on the path towards becoming law.

No enquiry into ACW deal with Belfius

There will not after all be a parliamentary investigation into the links between Belfius bank and the Christian workers' movement ACW, after representatives of different political parties last week were allowed to consult the contracts drawn up for the deal.

The calls for parliamentary hearings came from the opposition benches, principally N-VA and Groen. The possibility of a commission was ruled out, however, by Open VLD president Gwendolyn Rutten, without whose support the opposition plan could not be realised. For her party, Luc Van Biesen had consulted the documents and had "in honour and conscience" decided there was no illegal activity – an evaluation shared by Jean-Marie Dedecker of LDD and Meyrem Almaci of Groen. Meanwhile, Belfius was reported to be preparing a "Plan B" for the 800,000 shareholders of Arco, the

financial wing of the ACW. Last week it was announced that the Council of State will soon rule on the question of whether holders of the special shares accorded to Arco should be treated as savers. In that case, their money is protected by a government guarantee. If they are, however, considered shareholders in the former Dexia bank, they will lose a fortune. Arco co-operants, as they are called, were given a special status by the government to protect their investment, but the Council is being asked to rule on the legality of that move.

If the ruling goes against Arco shareholders, they will lose a substantial part of the €1.5 billion invested in Belfius and could easily decide to withdraw the rest, leaving the bank with a serious liquidity problem.

Peeters takes Reynders to court

Flemish minister-president Kris Peeters is preparing a complaint to the Council of State over the legality of a plan by federal foreign affairs minister Didier Reynders to introduce a layer of "economic diplomats" into the foreign service. According to Peeters, the plan infringes on the powers of the regional governments.

The economic diplomats, said Reynders, would be business leaders called in on an ad hoc basis to advise his ministry on questions of economic relations with other countries. According to Peeters, speaking on the VRT programme *Villa Politica*, his legal service has inspected the decree intended to introduce the measure, and its opinion confirms an earlier view expressed by Peeters together with the Walloon and Brussels economy



Flemish minister president Kris Peeters (left) and federal minister of foreign affairs Didier Reynders

ministers in a letter: that Reynders is trespassing on the powers afforded by the law to the regions.

Both politicians are part of a trade mission this week to Thailand, led by Prince Filip. Peeters is travelling there from Myanmar, where he is due to meet pro-democracy activist and Nobel Prize-winner Aung San Suu Kyi, who met with Reynders several days previously.

Flanders funds practice centres

Kris Peeters announced funding last week of €2.1 million for 12 agricultural and horticultural practice centres to help develop new and innovative techniques for the industry. The centres are, the minister-president said, of crucial importance in providing a bridge between research and practice. Aside from government subsidy, they have to raise 75% of their operating costs from within the farming and growing sectors – an obligation that ensures their research is geared towards the practical needs of industry. "With this support for the practice centres, the Flemish government continues to invest in practical



research and innovation," Peeters said. "Our support will ensure that Flemish farmers and growers hold on to their leading position in Europe on productivity and added value – or even improve on it."

EU agriculture proposals "could go further"

Europe's agriculture ministers are meeting in Brussels this week to consider plans to carry out a wide-ranging reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), following a vote in the European Parliament last week on the broad lines of the policy, described by both the Flemish government and the Farmers' Union Boerenbond as "a step in the right direction". The meeting was beginning as *Flanders Today* went to press.

Both sides also agree that the proposed reforms fail to take account of the specific problems facing different member states, and even different regions within member states. For Peeters, "the Commission proposals don't offer enough flexibility to allow

member states to work according to the problem areas in their own sectors, with an eye to improving sustainability. They could have gone a lot further."

The Commission's proposals on the direct payments made to farmers lay down three rules covering all farmers in the EU. "This completely overlooks the diversity of European farming," Boerenbond president Piet Vanthemsche said. "Flemish farming is being left with regulations that are completely unsuited to our situation, that will not have the desired effect and that will bring about extra costs and a loss of productivity."

This week's meeting of agriculture ministers is not expected to reach a final decision on the reforms.

Do you see what I see?

A new book by a Flemish ophthalmologist reveals the eye-opening history of vision

Marc Maes

Light travels one million times faster than sound, and our eyes account for 75% of the information we process." That's how doctor Frank Joseph Goes, prominent eye surgeon and founder of the Goes Eye Centre in Antwerp, describes the importance of the function of the eye. With his new book in English, *The Eye in History*, he takes ophthalmology beyond pure science to offer an appealing survey of optics and vision through the ages.

"It's probably the first time that the different aspects of the eye have been gathered in one single publication," says Goes (pictured).



"The idea was to open up the history of ophthalmology to a broad readership. And ophthalmologists interested in the historical evolution of surgical techniques will also find many interesting topics in the book." *The Eye in History* is the comprehensive and fascinating result of a career in ocular surgery combined with thorough medical and historical research on anatomy, the nature of light, the functions (and disorders) of the eye and – interestingly – the importance of the eye in the art of painting.

"It's astonishing to see how painters

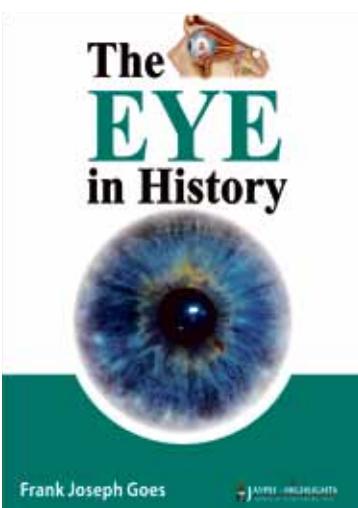
changed their style when their vision began to fade," says Goes. "Take, for example, French Impressionist Edgar Degas. At the age of 40, his vision was reduced to 10%, and that's when he painted his finest works of art."

The book includes an extensive section on the impact of ocular problems on the creative work of many artists, including Monet, Pissarro, Modigliani, El Greco, Georgia O'Keeffe and Rembrandt. In fact, a substantial part of *The Eye in History* focuses on famous ophthalmologic patients, with plenty of interesting anecdotes. "When, for instance, Lord Nelson was facing the Danish fleet during the battle of Copenhagen, his commander-at-sea Sir Hyde Parker at some point gave the withdrawal signal," says Goes. "Lord Nelson deliberately held his telescope to his blind eye, saying 'I do not see the signal!', leading to his hardest-fought victory. The expression 'to turn a blind eye' is attributed to this event."

Famous people, famous spectacles

In addition to additional chapters dealing with the eyes of animals, the history of surgical techniques and the psychology of how we see – for example, do women see differently from men? – Goes and his team of co-authors paid particular attention to the history of visual aids, like the first glass spectacles in the 13th century, microscopes, contact lenses and laser treatment.

"Did you know it was French artillery officer Charles Barber who inspired Braille?" asks Goes. "He developed a form of 'night writing' in response to Napoleon's demand for a code that soldiers could use to communicate silently and without the use of a



lantern. In 1825, Louis Braille, who had gone blind at the age of seven, improved and simplified the 'finger scan' code, using only six embossed points. That Braille script remains unchanged to today."

Traveling through time, *The Eye in*

"It's astonishing to see how painters changed their style when their vision began to fade"

History also goes into remarkable detail of the eye diseases of famous patients such as Alexander the Great and Hannibal. Another section is on spectacles that themselves became famous, such as those of Henry Kissinger, Franklin Roosevelt, Elton John, Dame Edna and John Lennon.

300 million with eye problems

"More than 300 million people worldwide are severely visually impaired – 45 million of those

are blind, most of them living in developing countries," continues Goes. "We have to remember that 80% of the world's blindness is avoidable, preventable or treatable using cost-effective methods."

His book, then, also addresses the problem of blindness in both ancient and modern times. "Prevention campaigns, like the World Health Organisation's Vision 2020: The Right to Sight aim to eliminate avoidable blindness by the year 2020." Goes holds the American Academy of Ophthalmology's 2009 Lifetime Achievement award, is a Maharashtra Gold Medal recipient and a lecturer at the universities of Leuven and Tilburg. He has presented his work at more than 200 international meetings and published five books; he is also a speaker at congresses and master classes. "In the future, I'm confident that we will follow paths like the 'bionic' eye and stem cell or gene therapy as treatment for a wide

range of ophthalmic diseases."

The Eye in History is a unique publication, illustrated with more than 500 photographs and numerous diagrams. "A lot of work and research has gone into *The Eye in History*," Goes says. "But I've found really enjoyed the process. Rather than aiming for commercial success, this book is a perfect complement to the lectures I give."

The Eye in History is published by Jaypee - Highlights Medical Publishers

THE WEEK IN SCI & ED

University of Leuven cardiologist Frans Van de Werf co-ordinated the international Stream study, which concludes that blood clot medication is a viable **first aid treatment for victims of heart attacks**. Immediately after the attack, patients should be treated at a hospital's catheterisation lab to open the blocked artery. Clot-dissolving medication can buy patients essential time before they reach a hospital with such a lab. A total of 1,892 patients from 15 countries participated in the study.

In the next academic year, Ghent University will be the **first Flemish university with an honours programme**, for which 50 students from all faculties will be selected. Students have to pass their first year, write a motivation letter and attend an interview to be accepted in the programme, which consists of an extra course during the remaining four semesters of their Bachelor degree. Every week, students will receive interactive lectures from specialists in various disciplines – from genetic manipulation to the financial crisis.

The University Hospital Brussels is the first in the country to establish a **clinic for people with Klinefelter syndrome**, which affects only men. About one in 500 men have the condition that sees them born with at least one extra X chromosome and reproductive organs that don't develop normally. The symptoms are diverse, from learning disabilities to limited muscle development, and the condition can lead to diabetes and thyroid problems. On 23 March, UZ Brussels is holding a symposium on the syndrome.

Archaeologists have found a **crypt containing two coffins** in Mechelen's Sint-Rombout cathedral. According to dates recorded on the walls, the people buried there died in 1621. History studies suggest that only very rich families were buried at cathedrals.

Secondary schools are **overloading students with homework**, according to Lyle Muns, chairman of the Flemish secondary school students organisation. Muns feels excessive homework assignments are obliging many students to stay home too much, with too little time to develop essential social skills. Figures from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development show that Flemish 15-year-olds spend an average just over six hours a week on homework; their Finnish counterparts, for instance, spend 3.7 hours a week on assignments but achieve better results. **AF**



Apart from sustainability, what are the main concerns about food packaging?

Companies are looking to limit the decay of food through more efficient

Q&A

Professor Peter Ragaert of Ghent University is a technological advisor at Pack4Food, a non-profit that encourages innovation in food packaging

How is Pack4Food improving the quality of food packaging?

We unite 65 companies and 10 research centres, mainly from Flanders. One of our principal tasks is to improve communication between all participants in the value chain: food producers, packaging developers and factories filling the packages with food. We organise networking activities, set up training programmes and provide advice on best practice and innovations. But we are also increasingly initiating research projects. Our work is mostly financed with subsidies from the Flemish Agency for Innovation through Science and Technology.

Can you explain your recent research project on bioplastics?

Because of the importance of sustainability, we examined the possibilities of developing plastics with renewable resources. Some bioplastics are also compostable, further reducing their ecological footprint. Using, for example, corn instead of petroleum to make plastics could be more eco-friendly, but what is better is to create plastics from waste – such as the starch that remains in the water in which companies cut potatoes to make chips. We have noticed a lot of interest among companies in the food packaging business and other sectors, such as car manufacturers. Unfortunately, bioplastics are still more costly than ordinary plastics, which explains why their introduction takes time.

packaging because consumers are increasingly suspicious of additives, which help to preserve the food. Another goal is to make packaging more user-friendly, especially for the aging population, but also for busy people who want a microwave meal in packaging that makes the preparation as easy as possible. A third trend is smart packaging, which provides more information on the remaining shelf life, for instance. One innovation is a label that changes colour in case of a temperature rise and thus a reduction of the shelf life. Because of the high cost, this technology is not yet used for consumer products but only during large transports of food. **Interview by Andy Furniere**

► www.pack4food.be

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Hopping to victory

Flanders' home brewers are honing their skills to be named Best Amateur Brewer

Alan Hope

Up and down Flanders, groups of (mainly) men will be getting together in each other's garden sheds and garages over the coming weeks, carefully tasting beer and making appreciative noises. Each one has the hope of becoming the best amateur brewer of the Low Countries. The winner will be announced in May, and I would be remiss in not being on hand to report to the readers of *Flanders Today* on the taste qualities of the winning beer.

The contest is organised by Brouwland, a company that specialises in the provision of equipment and materials for the brewing, winemaking and liqueur industries, as well as offering kits for home brewers.

"We're going in search of the best brewer who does it as a hobby. Professional brewers are not allowed to enter," explains Stijn Michiels, marketing manager at Brouwland. "The winning team gets 500 litres of their own beer, brewed by a professional brewery. That's a way of saying thanks to everyone who helped them along the way with a party."

Started in Flanders four years ago, the Best Amateur Beer in the Low Countries was won last year by a group calling itself De Hippe Hoppers from Bruges, which made a blond tripel called Bryggja. The teams only bring enough beer for the panel of judges and the representatives of their opponents to taste, but I was fortunate enough to score a bottle and found it heady with the fragrance of hops, as is only appropriate for a beer from West Flanders, a major grower of the flower.



Andy Dewilde pours his Préaris quadruple, the winner of 2011's brewing competition, which is now being exported to the United States

From amateur to export

Though they were amateurs, De Hippe Hoppers' beer is now being sold commercially, and they'll be hoping to emulate the success of Andy Dewilde, the winner in 2011. His Préaris takes two forms: a blond at 6% alcohol and a dark quadruple at 10%. He returned to the final in Brussels last August as a guest and brought his dark beer with him: a rich and malty brew with a dark, complex package of flavours, among them toffee, leather, toast and even hints of red wine. Dewilde's quadruple, made by Vliegende Paard brewers in Beernem, West Flanders, will now be imported to the US by

Christine Celis. She's the daughter of the late master brewer Pierre Celis, who reinvented the recipe for Hoegaarden for what was then Interbrew, before moving to Texas, where he opened his own brewery. Pierre died in 2011, and Christine has now re-opened the brewery. "It has been my personal dream to carry on my father's legacy," she said in a statement announcing the return. "And re-acquiring the family name was the one thing we really needed to begin moving forward. Now that we have the right to brew my dad's famous recipes under our own name once again, nothing can stop me from making that a reality." Dewilde met Christine at a beer festival in Leuven, and his beer struck the right note with her. She

took some bottles back to Texas to show them around. "Barely a week later, she called me with the good news that a major Texan importer was prepared to import my beer," Dewilde says.

December saw the first shipment of 7,000 litres, followed in January by another 3,000. For an independent beer starting out on the American market, says Dewilde, "those are huge quantities. Americans are crazy about dark beers. Success looks like it's guaranteed."

The race is on

All over Belgium and the Netherlands, contestants are busy practising their skills in the hope of becoming one of the five finalists in each category, who will then go on

to compete in the final in Brussels. Each team has to deliver at least 24 bottles of its beer for judging, a detailed recipe and a list of ingredients, so that the professional brewers will be able to recreate the best possible version of the winning beer. This year also introduces a new category: best student beer.

The teams that have been selected to go into the finals have all had a free course in brewing theory from Brouwland. There is also a series of short videos on YouTube that cover the participant's brewing knowledge and in which TV personality Peter Van Asbroeck goes over the basics of how to make beer at home.

► www.mijnbier.be

Net gains

Fishing charter aims to bring new and unusual tastes to the market

Alan Hope

Flemish minister-president Kris Peeters, whose portfolio also includes fisheries policy, last week put his name to a new initiative called Charter NorthSeaChefs & Vissers, a strange linguistic hybrid with one simple aim: to support the local fishing industry by engaging chefs in the development of new dishes using unfamiliar species of fish. As well as his signature, Peeters also brought €159,000 in subsidy to the table.

The reasons for the charter, supported by such star chefs as Filip Claeys, Kobe Desramauts and Olly Ceulenaere, are twofold. The quotas allocated to EU fishing fleets are always being revised downwards, making it increasingly important to explore alternatives; and in aggravation of that trend, new rules under the Common Fisheries Policy now make it illegal for boats to return unwanted fish to the sea.



Filip Claeys of De Jonckman puts the finishing touches on his starter of North Sea shrimp, served inside half a wine bottle

The result is that boats are forced to bring fish to land for which there's no market. The rules are not going to change, so the only alternative is to try to change the market. That's the job of chefs like Claeys, grandson of a fisherman and chef of the two-Michelin-starred De Jonckman in Bruges, who is renowned for his fish dishes. "The North Sea is like a giant toy store," he says. "The more variety, the more fun we can have. I want to create a new hype around North Sea fish." Since 2008, his restaurant has served only North Sea fish and he, like the charter, has rejected the products of fish farming or aquaculture – ironically, the other avenue aside from diversity open to the fishing industry in critical times. How successful that attempt will be depends a great deal on what you mean by "fish". One of Claeys' most exciting new discoveries are

zeedruiven, or sea grapes, a round, jellyfish-like creature known in English as a sea gooseberry. Not particularly attractive at first sight, Claeys admits, but delicious when cooked in unsalted water.

Also on the menu of the NorthSeaChefs are species like steenbolk (bib or pouting), schar (common dab), hondshaai (catshark) and pitvis (common dragonet), none of which looks, frankly, in any way appetising. But we are assured they can all be turned into delicious culinary creations. The chefs promise recipes soon: There are currently two on the website, using horse mackerel and skate wing.

"We have to go looking proactively for ways to give a future to the fishing industry," Peeters says. "These non-classic types of fish are all too often thrown away, despite the fact that they can be real delicacies."

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The image, and nothing but the image

Photographer Dirk Braeckman intervenes in Bozar's Watteau exhibition

Christophe Verbiest

Wandering through the exhibition of 18th-century painter Antoine Watteau (see sidebar) at Bozar in Brussels, you're suddenly confronted with what looks like dark holes in the wall. They look as out of place – and as looming – as the monolith in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

But they aren't, of course, they are black-and-white photos, "interventions" by Dirk Braeckman. The Flemish photographer doesn't often accept commissions. It was Bozar director Paul Dujardin who convinced the photographer to show there, after seeing an overview of the artist's work at Museum M in 2011.

"He told me that he wanted me to do something in Bozar and suggested Horta Hall," says Braeckman. "Architecturally, it's a beautiful room; but it's also a very difficult spot. I agreed, on the condition that I could invade one of the exhibitions." Braeckman took a look at the season's programme and chose Antoine Watteau.

"Everyone was surprised by that choice because they said that it had no link with my work. It's true, Watteau lies far from my world, though I love painting, also the old masters. But I didn't want to go for too obvious a choice, like say, Francis Bacon, with whom I have a greater affinity. I thought it was important to work with an artist who lived in a time when photography didn't yet exist. That way, you don't just have a confrontation of two artists, but also of two mediums."



"A confrontation of two mediums": Dirk Braeckman



One must look closely to find the Antoine Watteau painting in the photo of Dirk Braeckman

Replacing what is missing

Choosing the artist didn't mean that Braeckman knew what he was going to do. He found his angle when he heard that some of the paintings the curators wanted could not travel to Brussels. "Absence is a theme that's highly present in my work."

So Braeckman travelled to the Gemäldegalerie and Schloss Charlottenburg in Berlin, and the Dulwich Picture Gallery and National Gallery in London in search of the paintings you won't see at the Watteau exhibition in Bozar.

"I photographed details of the different paintings, and together they form the huge work in the Horta Hall," he explains. "It is the first time that I have actively altered the composition of a photographic image."

The work measures 3.5 x 10 metres and is called "U.A.F.-T.T.W #12-13". Besides this monumental work, three photos hang in between Watteau's paintings. Those works show the absent paintings on the walls of their respective museums. Though, in a sense they don't. Braeckman, as almost always, worked in black and white. Moreover, the prints are very dark, so you have to peer very closely to discover the paintings. The photographs don't have a

documentary value but are rather artworks in themselves.

Two of those works will even get darker over the next couple of months. Braeckman: "Watteau often used inferior materials, so much of his work has perished. To parallel that, I decided to use too little fixer for the two analogue prints in the exhibition. In time, they'll become completely dark. They're transient images."

Staying a negative for years first

Not trying to document reality is a characteristic of Braeckman's work. In general, his photos often contain elements from daily life, but the way they're developed and printed makes them anti-naturalistic. "Photography often deals with an event, a specific moment or place," he explains, "but that doesn't interest me. I'm interested in a photo as an image."

His work seems to be more related to paintings than to photography. It's no coincidence: He's always been interested in painting. "I had even planned to study painting at the academy in Ghent," he says. "It was a period – the end of the 1970s – when painters often worked from photos. Someone suggested that I first study one year of photography." Laughing, he adds: "In the end, I followed the four years and never studied painting."

In the beginning of his career, Braeckman was less interested in what he photographed than in how he treated and developed them. "That has changed," he notes. "Taking the picture became as important as developing it. You can't make a good photo from a bad negative."

Generally, he works with negatives he shot years before. "It's my way of detaching myself from the anecdote behind the image."

The titles of his photos are completely devoid of any reference to reality. At least to us. "It's not even a title. It's code, part of a classification system," he explains. "The figure refers to the year I made the print. *Not* when I took the picture. A very important nuance! The letters are initials: It can be the person I was with or the city where I took the picture. It might be linked, also, with an emotion or an important event, but I will never clarify that. I get asked a lot where a picture was taken, at what moment and in which circumstances. I will never answer those questions. Because the moment I do, the image vaporises and only the anecdote remains."

UNTIL 12 MAY

Antoine Watteau: The Music Lesson

Bozar, Ravensteinstraat 23, Brussels

► www.bozar.be



© Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco

Of the 100 paintings by Watteau that survive, only 15 are here. Still, they give an interesting image of a painter that looks like the hyphen between North European and Venetian art. Moreover, and this

saves the exhibition from being a disappointment, Watteau is revealed as a fascinating sketch artist – the sketches here are often studies for paintings that haven't survived. He had a restless hand, yet he characterises his subjects with great accuracy.

Antoine Watteau: The Music Lesson might not be the most overwhelming exhibition you'll ever visit, but the combination of the artist's work, the photographic interventions by Dirk Braeckman and the evocation of the period in which Watteau worked makes it worth a visit.

WEEK IN ARTS & CULTURE

The Broken Circle Breakdown Bluegrass Band will tour again this year after the great success of last year's performances. The band, which was formed for the Flemish stage production of *The Broken Circle Breakdown* and became internationally known when the film was released last year, includes singers/actors Veerle Baetens and Johan Heldenbergh. The tour kicks off in Brussels on 26 March and ends on 7 June in Antwerp. Dates in between won't be released until 1 May.

► www.thebrokencirclebreakdown.be

The BE Café Marché Jourdan in Brussels is launching the **BE European Cooking Contest** specifically for expats. The restaurant, which specialises in local produce bought from suppliers to the Sunday market on Jourdanplein in the EU quarter, wants to introduce seasonal products to foreigners living in Brussels and beyond. "Belgium has an amazing range of top class food products: Brussels sprouts and endives are commonly known, and Belgian waffles, chocolates and beer have a worldwide reputation," says chef Marc Pâquet. "But knowledge of Belgium's seasonal products often ends there." Anyone interested should register as soon as possible for the opening event, which is on 24 March. A jury will pick the winner at the end of April.

► www.bebrussels.be/cooking-contest

If you'd like to learn how to manoeuvre your way to work through the streets of Brussels on a bicycle, sign up for **this spring's edition of Bike Experience** by 31 March. Bike Experience, which will run from 2 to 17 May, provides coaching for those nervous about switching from their cars or public transport to their bicycles for their daily commute. You'll be given practical advice and taken on the quickest (or safest) routes from your home to your workplace over three days of coaching. If you don't have a bike, you can borrow one for the course. Bike Experience hopes this will encourage even those without wheels to invest in them and get pedalling to work.

► www.bikeexperience.be

New in Brussels or Flanders and looking for someone to hang out with for a movie, museum visit or golf game? The **new online platform Joining** lets you post the activity you want to do and then lets others sign up to join you. Or vice versa: You can join in an activity that someone else has posted. Joining launched six months ago in the Netherlands and was so popular, owners decided to provide a site in Belgium, home to the capital of Europe and the mother lode of newcomers.

► www.joining.com

FRIVOLOUS MELANCHOLY

There's a lot of courting going on in the paintings Antoine Watteau, but almost no physical contact. He favoured the moment just before, or maybe just after, and was less interested in *le moment suprême*. It lends the paintings a touch of melancholy that counterbalances the frivolity that Watteau, at first glance, seems to capture.

The French rococo master, who died in 1721 at only 36, was very interested in people in love and often surrounded them with music, dance or theatre. As the title *Antoine Watteau: The Music Lesson* suggests, this exhibition at Bozar

focuses on Watteau's works in which music plays an important role. Curating an exhibition of Watteau poses two problems. Loads of his works have disappeared, and the ones that remain aren't always fit to travel. "The Music Lesson", the piece that gives the exhibition its name, isn't even here; it stayed in London. Still, we have a good idea of Watteau's output because in the 18th century many etchings were made of his paintings. Often when the original work has disappeared, an etching of it survived. Consequently, many of the works present in Bozar are not by Watteau.



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A comforting glow

Antwerp fivesome Few Bits are a promising new name on the Flemish music scene

Christophe Verbiest

With their eponymous debut album, the Antwerp fivesome Few Bits reveal themselves as a promising new band. The mysterious songs have a dark side without being depressing, and the phrasing of singer Karolien Van Ransbeeck evokes the languorous musings of "sadcore" chanteuse Hope Sandoval (see: *Mazzy Star*).

Still, Few Bits' melancholy songs are comforting not least because the lyrics, in which the frontwoman regularly expresses a longing for protection, counterbalance the saturnine music. "As a listener, I don't like to be distressed by songs," Van Ransbeeck assures me in *Coffee & Vinyl*, a coffee shop-cum-vinyl store-cum-art gallery in Antwerp. "It seems natural I'll take the same attitude as a songwriter. There's nothing wrong with comforting lyrics. On the contrary."

A friend of Van Ransbeeck recently told her that he finds the song "Come on Home" very comforting. "I wrote that about a female friend who had been cheated on. This male friend has experienced that, too. He doesn't know anything about the backstory of 'Come on Home', but it still resonated deeply in him. Mission accomplished, I'd say."

She confirms that all her songs are rooted in real life. "Though they're not necessarily about something that happened to me, personally. Sometimes I get inspiration from the lives of people around me."

We are five

There has been some misunderstanding about the nature of Few Bits. Is it Van Ransbeeck's project or are they a band? As she brought guitarist Tim Coenen along to the interview, the question is pretty much answered. But to shatter any lingering doubt, she states loud and clear: "Few Bits is a band. I'm just one of the five musicians. But I do write the songs." She does so on guitar, mostly acoustic. "Then I bring them to



Few Bits celebrate their first album with a concert at Brussels' Beursschouwburg on 27 March

the band. During the rehearsals, the five of us come up with the arrangements, and I think we have created our own sound." Coenen, who has an impressive track record on the Antwerp music scene, chips in: "In the end, Karolien has the

never went to music school, but I got a guitar when I was 10 or 12. I immediately started playing tunes I liked from the radio, and soon after I tried to construct my own songs. I quickly realised that this was what I wanted to do with my life."

Van Ransbeeck's first band,

enthusiastically about Few Bits' first demo recording. Still, it took three more years before the album was released. "Recording the album took longer than we had initially planned," says Van Ransbeeck, "which was OK. We didn't feel any pressure. Only after completing the album did we go looking for a label."

Soul music

They ended up at *Zeal Records*, a small independent from Leuven, with Isbells as the most famous name on its roster. "I love all the music *Zeal* releases," Van Ransbeeck says. "Plus, they give you loads of freedom and don't force anything on you." That the name *Zeal*, besides its English meaning, is a play on the Dutch word for soul (*ziel*) was a nice bonus.

Few Bits did have contact with a

major label, but it didn't really click. Choosing a smaller one might limit their orbit, but that's no problem, Coenen says. "We're a relatively new band that has just released their first album. For the moment we'll try to play as much as we can in Belgium and maybe the Netherlands. After that, we'll see what the future has in store."

One last thing: Isn't Few Bits getting bored of being compared all the time to Hope Sandoval? "No, she's someone I like a lot, so I consider it a compliment," says Van Ransbeeck. "To a certain degree, I can even understand it. She also sings quite gently and serenely, with stretched-out notes. I think that expresses who she is. My singing certainly expresses who I am."

▶ www.fewbits.be

NEW MUSIC REVIEWS

Pauwel de Meyer

Hideaway • Rough Trade

Hideaway, the second album from Sint-Niklaas singer-songwriter Pauwel de Meyers, lasts scarcely 23 minutes, yet it's a full-blown masterpiece. The eight songs reveal a vulnerable yet strong personality: All unnecessary scrolls and flourishes have been cut away, with raw emotions lying naked. It results in folky songs with not much more than an acoustic guitar, like "I Don't Think So". But even the more arranged numbers (cello, piano) have an austere quality. References are the sober early work of Bright Eyes and the intense folk pop of Perfume Genius. But the young musician has already found his own voice. Flemish press and radio haven't really picked this up yet, and that's

a shame, because long after the last note of *Hideaway* has died away, this album still warms your heart.

▶ www.vi.be/pauweldemeyer

Flat Earth Society

13 • Iglo

Only Flanders' boldest big band calls a 13th birthday a jubilee. As for me, any reason for a new album by this bunch of musical mutineers is a good one. *13* shows FES as adventurous as ever: A jazz ensemble that sometimes plays with the power of a rock group without ever venturing – the horror – into jazz rock. This band based around composer and clarinettist Peter Vermeersch doesn't shy away from some psychedelic touches, either. *13* is a fascinating trip to the

other side of the rainbow. I look forward to the next jubilee, at 17, 19 or maybe 26.

▶ www.fes.be

Trixie Whitley

Fourth Corner • Unday

Fourth Corner is by far the most anticipated album of the year in Flanders. And this frequently deferred debut by Trixie Whitley, the daughter of a Flemish mother and an American father – the untimely deceased bluesman Chris Whitley – doesn't disappoint. Her guitar playing is edgy, the mix of acoustic drums and programming lends the songs a strong footing, and the piano and keyboards are much more than just ornament. But at the heart of this contemporary take on soul lies Whitley's amazing voice, which lifts her

above her contemporaries and is her best bet for a long and fruitful musical career.

▶ www.trixiewhitley.com



A biblical story reclaimed **Babel**

Ian Mundell

Where better than Brussels to put on an exhibition about the Tower of Babel? All those languages! All that confusion! And at Botanique as well, in the shadow of the Finance Tower. Perfect!

But I'm getting carried away with the old version of the Babel story as it appears in the Book of Genesis. This goes as follows: After the Flood, the survivors decided to build a city with a tower high enough to reach the heavens. They spoke a single language and worked effectively together, so God punished their presumption by mixing up their languages and scattering them across the face of the Earth.

But interpretations change, and Babel has been reclaimed by people keen to promote multilingualism and cross-cultural understanding. The trophy for the European Parliament's Lux cinema prize, for example, is a Tower of Babel fashioned from film stock. And at a cultural summit last year, European commissioner Androulla Vassiliou proclaimed that "the Tower of Babel is still standing, tall and proud". So far she has not been scattered across the face of the Earth.

Old and new versions of Babel sit side by side in the Botanique exhibition, originally put together for the Lille Museum of Fine Arts. It features 38 artists from around the world, most represented by work produced in the last decade.

Typical of the old school is Du Zhenjun of China, who uses photomontage to create massive towers from fragments of skyscraper, cathedral and other monumental buildings, filling the foreground with images of natural disaster and civil unrest (pictured). The new Babel school is led by German artist Jakob Gautel, whose tower is constructed from 15,000 books spiralling up in the centre of the gallery, a weight of words that shows no sign of falling down.

The spiral form of tower that appears throughout the exhibition is a reference to Pieter Bruegel the Elder. His two surviving paintings of the Tower both feature colonnades modelled on the Colosseum, winding up unsteadily to a summit still under construction.

New York-based Vik Muniz plays directly with Bruegel, photographing a jigsaw based on one of his Babel

paintings, while British artist John Isaacs merges Bruegel's tower with a termite mound in the sculpture "Architecture of Aspiration".

Closer to home, Belgian photographer Eric de Ville has made a series of towers by photomontaging typical Brussels facades into the shape of Bruegel's original.

Other works in the show are less closely connected to the Babel story but extend the idea of creating buildings or cityscapes from other architectural elements. Jean-François Rauzier, for example, multiplies parts of the palace of Versailles or Montjuic cemetery into infinite cities, while Yang Yongliang uses tower blocks to build facsimiles of the jagged mountain landscapes of southern China. His minutely animated video loops are mesmerising.

But eeriest of all is Hilary Berseth's "Programmed Hive 9", in which bees have been persuaded to build their honeycomb in the shape of a dome. There is no direct reference to Babel, but it contributes perfectly to the exhibition's meditation on structure, collaboration and abandonment.



Until 21 April | Botanique, Koningsstraat 236, Brussels | ► www.botanique.be

DANCE

Macarena Ramirez

Breakout flamenco artist Macarena Ramirez was destined to dance. The Cadiz native learned the art of flamenco at age four and became a national sensation after winning the television talent show *Veo Veo* at the ripe age of eight. In the 12 years since, she has appeared in films and toured Spain regularly and is now honing her skills even further at the prestigious Centro Andaluz de Danza in Seville. She's also venturing beyond Spanish borders for the first time. Brussels' large international audience makes our cosmopolitan capital a natural destination. Indeed, flamenco is a particularly popular style among musicians and dancers here. Ramirez is accompanied by guitarist Pascual de Lorca, percussionist Diego Montoya and singers El Londro and David Carpio. **Georgio Valentino**



22 March, 20.30 | Espace Senghor, Brussels | ► www.senghor.be

MORE FLAMENCO THIS WEEK

Antwerp

Camino Flamenco: Jovial flamenco dance from this new group on the scene
MAR 23 21.30 at Peña Al Andalus, Vorstermanstraat 1

► www.alandalus.be

Brussels

D'Callao - Flamenconnections: Contemporary "rock flamenco" and dance from Barcelona
MAR 21 20.00 at La Tentation, Lakensestraat 28

► www.latentation.be

CONCERT

Fleetwood Mac

Few rock groups have enjoyed more success than Fleetwood Mac. Founded in 1960s London as a blues-rock outfit, the band - whose only constant member has been eponymous drummer Mick Fleetwood - would evolve over the course of a decade to become the chart-topping, Anglo-American hybrid of their Grammy-winning 1977 album *Rumours*. The landmark disc dominated the charts for 31 weeks and featured four top-10 singles, including "Don't Stop" and "Dreams". Rhino Records has this year reissued *Rumours* in deluxe format for its 35th birthday, and Fleetwood Mac are hitting the road to celebrate. The line-up for the world tour features Fleetwood and fellow founding member John McVie as well as American singer Stevie Nicks and guitarist Lindsey Buckingham, both of whom joined the band just in time for *Rumours*. Get your tickets early as Fleetwood Mac's 2009 Unleashed tour was a sold-out affair. **GV**

9 October, 20.30 | Sportpaleis, Antwerp | ► www.sportpaleis.be

MORE CONCERTS TO BOOK NOW

Brussels

Lana Del Rey: VIP tickets are still left for this American singer-songwriter with the cinematic sound who crosses genres from chamber pop to hip-hop
MAY 31 20.00 at Vorst Nationaal, Victor Rousseaulaan 208

► www.vorstnationaal.be

Tegan and Sara: The Canadian sisters play everything catchy and danceable, from folk-rock to synth-pop
JUN 27 20.00 at Ancienne Belgique, Anspachlaan 110

► www.abconcerts.be

Tindersticks: The English indie rock band are on tour to celebrate the 20th anniversary of their legendary debut album
OCT 22 19.00 at Botanique, Koningsstraat 236

► www.botanique.be

VISUAL ARTS

Wilder Mann

French photographer Charles Fréger made his name by taking an anthropological approach to contemporary Western culture. His explorations of distinct social groups such as athletic teams, school cohorts and military units are inspired by 20th-century social scientists' photographic catalogues of tribal cultures. With *Wilder Mann*, Fréger goes native and finds another way to subvert the Euro-centric bias of such science: parody. Subjects are decked out in outlandish costumes and photographed in savage nature. Fréger uses everything but the kitchen sink: animal skins, furs, feathers, horns, straw skirts, woven hemp, even what seem to be floor rugs. Elements of modern attire are studiously exposed underneath and around the "primitive" elements. It's a surreal vision and, in contrast to Fréger's other work, the irony is unmistakable. **gv**



Until 9 June | FotoMuseum, Antwerp

► www.fotomuseum.be

MORE VISUAL ARTS THIS WEEK

Aalst

Expeditie Sterkendries: Lively, colourful works of the Amazon rainforest and its people by Flemish nature photographer Guido Sterkendries

Until JUN 16 at CC De Werf, Molenstraat 51

► www.ccdewerf.be

Ghent

Modernism: Belgian Abstract Art and Europe (1912-1930): The first major overview of local 1920s-era modernism in 20 years

Until JUNE 3 at Fine Arts Museum, Citadelpark

► www.mskgent.be

Leuven

SeeMyLeuven: Highlights from a photo competition for the best Instagram shots of Leuven, out of 4,000 entries sent in by locals and tourists

Until MAR 31 at M Museum, Vanderkelenstraat 28

► www.mleuven.be

SPECIAL EVENT

Gala Nocturna

When they began planning this year's edition, organisers of the annual neo-romantic Gala Nocturna couldn't have imagined just how topical their fantasy ball would turn out. They selected a theme right out of a Renaissance history book: The Pope's Daughter. After all, nothing could be more yesterday than the Vatican. Then Pope Benedict XVI announced his retirement and all of a sudden, Vatican intrigue was alive and well in the 21st century. Coincidences aside, Gala Nocturna has nothing to do with the Church, although it is held in a church (a beautiful baroque one). It's a Renaissance costume ball with period music and dance, fantasy art and a strict dress code. No black ties, please, just medieval garb, Renaissance vestments or, for the bold, Papal robes. If you wear them well, they might have a job for you over at the Vatican. **gv**



30 March, from 20.30 | Augustinus Church, Antwerp | ► www.gala-nocturna.com

MORE SPECIAL EVENTS THIS WEEK

Antwerp

Pop up cinema: London-based Future Shorts presents a line-up of international short films from Kenya, UK, US, Czech Republic and Sweden (with English subtitles), plus drinks, popcorn and live music

MAR 26 19.30 at Gallery Louiza, Louizalastraat 13

► www.futureshorts.com

Brussels

Burning Ice Festival: The sixth edition of the multi-disciplinary festival is themed "interspecies communication" and features film music, theatre, dance and works of art on the subject

MAR 25-29 at Kaaitheater's and RITS

► www.kaaitheater.be

Ghent

Chika Unigwe: Public reading and interview in English with the Turnhout-based author

MAR 26 19.30 at UGent, Auditorium D, Blandijnberg 2

► www.tinyurl.com/unigwe

DUSK TIL DAWN

Katrien Lindemans

Back to the '90s

30 March, 21.15-6.00, Sportpaleis, Antwerp

Ray and Anita. If these two names put a smile on your face, then you must be a fan of 1990s dance music. The 2 Unlimited duo from the Netherlands scored one hit after the other, with chart toppers such as "No Limit", "Get Ready for This" and "Twilight Zone".

Apart from the odd guest performance at retro parties, 2 Unlimited (*pictured*) never really got together for a concert after the buzz of the '90s. But ... on 30 March, they'll be at Antwerp's Sportpaleis for a full concert with a live band.

Ray and Anita's performance is part of radio station MNM's Back to the '90s event. So don't think the night is over after 2 Unlimited's 80 minutes. There will be a lot more retro tunes blasting through the speakers, starting with a performance by Reel 2 Real (US), the band most famous for their hit "I Like to Move it", which, even if you have never been to a club before, you'll recognise from its various incarnations from the *Madagascar* films, the British gum commercial ("I like to chew it, chew it") or the Durex condoms ad campaign ("I like to do it, do it").

The evening also features local acts, naturally. During the 1990s, the Flemish club scene produced a couple of tracks that made it all over the world. By DJ Pat Krimson for instance, who successfully launched Atmoz clubs in Hasselt and Vosselaar, both packed on weekends. Pat will bring a two-hour retro club set to the event, with his fellow Atmoz DJs.

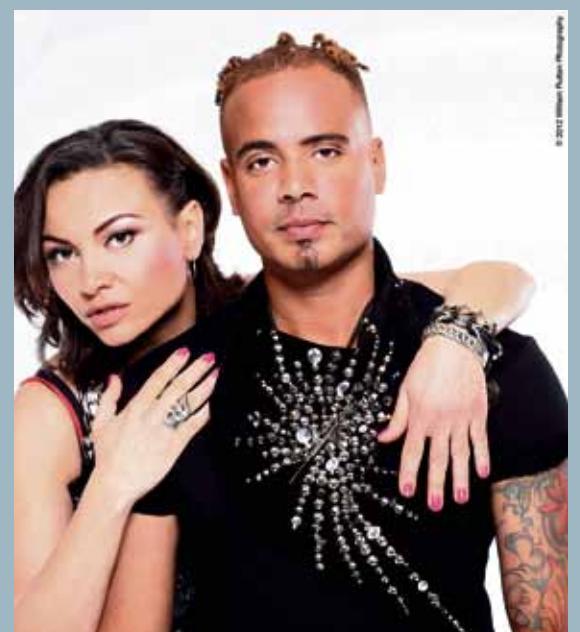
More tunes from the time are provided by the Poco Loco Gang, from the club of the same name in Ninove (East Flanders). Their songs "Let's go to the Party" and "Tropical Paradise" topped the European charts

for weeks on end. The entire gang will be on stage at Sportpaleis for a one-off performance.

And, last but not least, Flanders' boy band Get Ready! will make an appearance, too. Cheesy lyrics (in Dutch) to a tacky dance choreography, just like they did in the '90s.

Tickets for this trip back in time cost €35.

► www.the90s.be



© 2012 Miriam Putter Photography

BITE

Vrijmoed ★★★★

Seldom has the opening of a new restaurant garnered so much attention. Peter Goossens may have shed tears at the departure of his right-hand man Michaël Vrijmoed in December, but eight years in the three-Michelin-starred Hof van Cleve was preparation enough for the ambitious young chef, who opened his own business on the first of this month and named it after himself.

The concept, much like the name, is uncomplicated yet elegant. Belgian-French cuisine with a contemporary twist is served here, in a stately townhouse in the heart of Ghent. Our party of eight is greeted with such smooth professionalism, you'd never guess it is just the second day after opening.

From ordering the aperitifs (mostly gin and tonics in tall-stemmed bowl glasses) to deciding on the five-course menu (€69) with paired wines (€30), we are guided by sommelier Benjamin De Buck. The former sommelier at the three-star Oud Sluis in the Netherlands educates our table on the finer points of wine and food pairing. Each of the five courses comes with a wine that lends itself perfectly to the flavours in the dish.

Throughout the evening, there's not a single moment we go without, well, anything. There are even three *amuse-bouches* and surprise appetisers between the courses. The first is a round slice of marinated Jerusalem artichoke, an earthy tuber, topped with green lentils and a paper-thin slice of rich Mangalica ham. Next up is a beautifully presented white radish cannelloni filled with minutely diced apple and celery, with cream of tuna. Then there are two miniature or spring rolls, stuffed with pulled pork and seasoned with *ras*



el hanout (a Moroccan spice blend) and a BBQ dipping sauce. With the pouring of the first glasses of white wine, we realise we've yet to start on the first course. The tempered menu lists only three ingredients for each dish, in this case mackerel, pickles and avocado. The mackerel is top bill. The soft marinated fillets come with sliced red beets, red beet cream and greens, avocado, cucumber and crunchy bits of cashew. Fresh and delicious, it's a successful marriage of earth and sea.

The next dish contains a tender chunk of cuttlefish in dashi, a savoury Japanese broth. Its flavours are subtle and pleasantly acidic. By contrast, the third course is bursting with flavour. The long, fleshy fillet of gurnard, yet another North Sea fish, is surrounded by a powerful garlic *rouille*, fennel and cockles. I'm impressed by several things at this point, not least of

which is Vrijmoed's clear preference for local products. He also makes a point of working with the seasons, as evidenced by the main course: lamb with root vegetables and sage. Neck and shoulder meat were slow-cooked, pressed together, lacquered and braised. Earthy veg proves to be the right match for the hearty lamb. The same can be said for the bold red wine served with it.

Before dessert, De Buck comes around with what looks like a large lemon but is actually a citron. He lets each of us smell it to get an idea of how fragrant this citrus fruit is. Our dessert features thin strips of citron – which Vrijmoed let marinate for a few months in sugar and salt – with apple, cucumber and white chocolate.

Not surprisingly, there's a dessert after the dessert: crunchy cookie crumble and ice cream. Now we're really done ... right after a round of coffee, Irish or otherwise.

► www.vrijmoed.be

→ Vlaanderenstraat 22, Ghent; 09.279.99.77

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TALKING SPORTS

The Alexandrian double-header

While it might not be on the same scale as Alexander the Great's empire building, fans – never ones to underplay their melodrama – are likely to suggest otherwise when Belgium meet the diminutive conqueror's descendants on the football field.

In a double-header marking the mid-point of the World Cup 2014 qualifiers, the Red Devils play Macedonia at the Philip II Arena (named after Alexander's father) in Skopje on Friday, before hosting the Red Lions in Brussels the following Tuesday. It may seem like a formality for a resurgent Belgium to overwhelm Macedonia, which has been independent since 1991 and has never qualified for a major tournament. But there are reasons to be wary.

Indeed, caution would be especially advisable if any of the scorers in those games hails from Club Brugge or Zulte Waregem. Macedonia's strike force includes two Flanders-based players – Ivan Trčkovski at Club Brugge and Aleksandar Trajkovski at Zulte Waregem – who will be burning for a chance to make their paymasters notice them a little more.

There is a curious political element to the game, as well. The formal name for Belgium's opponents is still the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), a clumsy formula that reflects a lack of resolution two decades after the Balkan haemorrhage. At the same time, two other former Yugoslav fragments in the same qualifying group – Serbia and Croatia – will play each other for the first time amid tight security. Meanwhile, Wales and Scotland – independent in football for obscure historical reasons – also



Macedonia's Ivan Trčkovski of Club Brugge (right) in action against Slovakia

face off in the same group. So incredibly, given Belgium's own perennial identity crisis, the Red Devils may represent the most well-founded nationality in the group.

But back to the football. On paper, this should be procedural. Macedonia has no one with the star power of, say, captain Vincent Kompany, defenders Thomas Vermaelen and Jan Vertonghen, midfielders Marouane Fellaini, Axel Witsel and Moussa Dembélé or strikers Eden Hazard and Christian Benteke. Yet captain Goran Pandev, who plays for

Napoli, has scored an impressive 26 times in his 69 games for Macedonia and will be the most dangerous man facing the Red Devils. Others, like veteran Mainz defender Nikolče Noveski and FC Thun's Muhammed Demiri, will also be threats.

Macedonia are currently fourth in the qualifying group, which is probably right. But they can spring surprises – two memorable draws with England in recent years, for example. It might not be an Alexandrian conquest, but the Red Devils can take nothing for granted.

The last word...

Translation, please

"DetSsaaazqjhjtuuhyyuuuôiiâ" A mysterious tweet on the account of prime minister Elio Di Rupo, apparently sent by accident by his webmaster

Bowing out

"At the end of 2014, my political career will be over. But anyone who wants to vote for a Van Rompuy will have plenty of opportunities." European council president Herman Van Rompuy will not return to local politics, but his brother, son and sister are all on the scene

Popular pontiff

"Did I vote for Bergoglio? I'm not allowed to say. But I'd be lying if I told you I'm not happy with him as Pope. That should be enough to give you an idea, no?"

Flemish cardinal Godfried Danneels gives a warm welcome to his new boss

First and foremost

"The commemorations risk turning into a Flemish carnival for the good of the praline sellers." Flanders' minister-president Kris Peeters takes to task the coordinator of the region's First World War commemorations

NEXT WEEK
IN FLANDERS TODAY

Cover story

Everyone knows that the VDAB is Flanders' job-hunting and training agency, but the massive organisation has a number of little-known programmes, too. We talk to organisers and workers involved in a programme that assists those who've suffered from mental illness to get back into the workforce

Science

Flanders has been called, and it's responding. The musicology department of the University of Leuven is working with the Italian Alamire Foundation to digitise medieval manuscripts held in the library of the Vatican. Among them are the works of the foundation's namesake, Flemish composer Petrus Alamire

Arts

Flemish journalist Griet Op de Beeck has just published her debut novel in which five related characters each speak in the first person to tell their observations and feelings about that all-encompassing but sometimes much-too-fleeting emotion: love. We interview the author about what took her from culture journalism to her first novel