

Freight train explodes

A dramatic explosion near Wetteren sends plumes of toxic smoke into the air

► 4



Master expats

A cooking contest just for foreigners found a fusion of Belgian and international dishes

► 9



Silence is golden

Bessst is promoting the art of silence in Brussels, while the Ancienne Belgique is applying it

Christophe Verbiest

It's no contradiction anymore to go looking for silence in a bustling city like Brussels, though silence for many is more than just the absence of noise. It's a way of life. A new project called bessst helps people discover silence in the city; music venue Ancienne Belgique is one of its partners and presses home the message with the concert series Silence is Sexy.

The rector of Saint Peter's parish in East Blatchington, a coastal village in England, must have been surprised earlier this year when he heard that the first release of the CD *The Sound of Silence* had quickly sold out. After a short introduction, the album is filled with 30 minutes of ambient sounds, recorded in the 12th-century church.

Recording silence might seem like the equivalent of bottling fresh air, but silence is hot. Seven years ago, Thom Breukel wrote a silent guide to Amsterdam, several cities now offer "silence walks" and, closer to home, there's Waerbeke, a socio-cultural organisation promoting silence and quality of life in Flanders and Brussels. Together with Brussels secretary of state Bruno De Lille, it created bessst, which stands for: *Brussel, erfgoed en stilte* (Brussels, heritage and silence). "Waerbeke has been operating mostly in the Flemish rural areas, but thanks to bessst, we can develop initiatives in the capital," explains bessst project leader Christel Dusoleil. "The countryside looks like the natural environment to work on silence and quietness. Implementing the same in a bustling city like Brussels is a whole different challenge. On the other hand, the need for tranquillity might be more urgent there. Academic studies confirm that quiet is highly important for people's well-being."

Attitude shift

Traffic, construction sites, blasting music and people shouting: For some it might be difficult to see Brussels as a place of silence. Dusoleil doesn't agree: "I live in the city, and I've discovered loads of spaces where it's really quiet. I agree you have to take some detours to discover them, they're probably not on your usual route, but it's worthwhile looking for them."

Bessst helps find them. With two partners – Brukselbinnenstebuiten, which offers alternative guided tours of Brussels, and Trage Wegen, which protects and maintains footpaths – it has mapped out some routes that allow you to discover quiet spots: Through small, almost unnoticeable, alleyways via squares where the only sound is a flag flapping in the wind, to oases of green where you can still enjoy the singing of the birds. Dusoleil: "At some places it's as quiet as in the country."



FACE OF FLANDERS

Alan Hope

Stan Lee Cole



Flemish musicians on the international stage are few and far between, which makes Stan Lee Cole's achievement on 30 April, when he won Best Performance in the International Songwriting Competition (ISC), all the more remarkable. He's the second Belgian to have ever done it; the first was Gotye, who was born in Bruges but grew up in Australia. Performing artists take the ISC, in the US city of Nashville, very seriously: The judges for the latest edition include no less than Tom Waits – the songwriter's songwriter – Simon Le Bon and Roger Taylor of Duran Duran, Jeff Beck, NAS, Robert Smith, Bernie Taupin, Suzanne Vega, John Mayall and Janelle Monae. Antwerp-born Stan Lee Cole (real name Stijn Cole) won for the performance of his song "Separated" from the album *Devil's Ringtone*. It's his first solo album following the 2010 release of a CD by his band Off the Record. *Devil's Ringtone* is a solo album in the strictest sense: It consists of only (human) beatbox, Moog bass, piano and vocal, and Cole is responsible for all of them. He also produced and mixed the album.

His multiple talents can be seen on the VIER programme *Scheire en de schepping*, where he serves as resident one-man orchestra. The result is a spare, intimate sound – sometimes painfully so. While Cole sings in English with an unnatural American accent, there's no doubting his songwriting skill. The winning track is lyrically clever and at the same time emotionally exposed and vulnerable, slightly reminiscent of Canadian singer-songwriter Ron Sexsmith. In an exception to the one-man rule, Cole is accompanied on vocals by his daughter Mira, aged nine at the time. The CD failed, however, to attract the attention of record labels, so Cole placed it online for a free download. That's the way it's going to stay now, international success or not. "It would be a bit stupid to change it now just because I won a prize" he told *De Morgen*. The album will appear on iTunes later this month. "So people can decide for themselves if they want to give some financial support or not."

► www.stan-lee-cole.com

News in brief

The hotly contested **Sinksenfoor fair in Antwerp** will take place after all at its original location on the Gedempte Zuiderdokken, the city council has announced, after local residents agreed to withdraw their objections in return for a promise that it will be given a new location in future. Six locals had obtained an interim interdict from an Antwerp court, which forced the city to move the fair, which begins later this month and runs for seven weeks. However, an attempt to relocate the fair to the avenues along the riverbank met with protests from residents there.

The **new minister-president of the Brussels-Capital Region** is Rudi Vervoort, former mayor of the Evere commune and until recently chairman of the Brussels section of the French-speaking socialist party PS. Vervoort, 54, is the son of a French-speaking mother and a Dutch-speaking father and replaces Charles Picqué, who returns to his post as mayor of Sint-Gillis.

Works on a new **traffic-free Beursplein in Brussels** should begin in 2015, after the completion of an impact and mobility study, city mayor Freddy Thielemans said. Cars will be diverted through nearby streets, leaving a pedestrian zone between the Steenstraat and De Brockereplein. Another action by Picnic the Street activists will take place in support of the proposal on 9 June – exactly one year after the first such action attracted more than 2,000 supporters.

The justice system in Belgium **does not make investigation of rape a priority**, with barely four cases in 100 resulting in a conviction, according to Liesbet Stevens, professor of criminal law at the University of Leuven. According to a recent report on the TV news magazine *Koppen*, 75% of DNA material connected to rape cases is never investigated, while

other cases are allowed to drag on for years. At the same time, the number of rapes is increasing steadily to 50 a week on average, Stevens said.

The government of Flanders should establish a guarantee system to allow savers to **invest in the economic relaunch of Limburg province**, the local chamber of commerce Voka has proposed. The deposits in savings accounts in Flanders continue to grow, even while the returns dwindle, Voka chair Paul Kumpen said. "If the government can offer a financial guarantee, there is nothing standing in the way of the ordinary citizen investing in a co-operative. The return would always be higher than that offered by a savings account."

The Kazerne Dossin Museum on the Holocaust and Human Rights in Mechelen is in **urgent need of more staff and funding** from the Flemish government, according to conservator Herman Van Goethem. The museum, on the site of a former barracks from where more than 25,000 people were deported to the death camps during the occupation, opened last September. "The flood of schools and visitors from home and abroad is so huge that we desperately need extra money and people," Van Goethem said. "I fear we may have to go on our knees to Brussels to beg for more money because we can't go on like this."

The special support unit of the Antwerp police has filed a legal complaint calling for an **investigation into how video footage** of the last hours of a man who died in custody came into the hands of the VRT. In February, the *Panorama* programme showed footage of the beating of Jonathan Jacob, who died in the cell afterwards. The officers involved now face charges, but their counsel fears a fair trial is no longer possible because of the partial version of events shown in

the CCTV video.

German chancellor **Angela Merkel will be in Brussels** on 22 May to receive the second annual Jakobovits Prize, Brussels' chief rabbi Albert Guigui announced. Merkel was nominated for her "positive approach" towards the Jewish community in Germany. "She has always taken up a position against every form of racism," said the rabbi.

Belgians ate just over **30kg of meat on average** in 2012, a decrease of 3.6% on the year before, according to a study carried out for the Flemish centre for agricultural and fisheries (Vlam). The most popular meat was pork, followed by chicken and beef, while lamb and mutton saw the fastest-growing levels of consumption. The consumption of animal protein eaten in the country is made up of 87.7% meat and only 12.3% fish, Vlam said.

Residents in the Brussels municipalities of Koekelberg, Ganshoren and parts of Molenbeek are now able to **connect to the internet via the faster 4G network**, despite the stricter radiation limits in Brussels that have so far prevented operators from introducing the service in the capital. The reason: Flemish municipalities on the periphery of Brussels operate under more relaxed limits, and their signals are able to reach users living on the edge of the city.

Nine people died and four were seriously injured in **accidents on railway crossings** in 2012, according to the federal minister for government enterprises. In total, 56 accidents took place, of which 17 involved a truck, almost exclusively in the Antwerp port area. Four accidents involved a cyclist, three pedestrians and 43 a car. The rail network has 1,857 crossings.

FLANDERS TODAY

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OFFSIDE

Alan Hope

Blowin' in the wind

The government should be growing marijuana and making it available on a tightly controlled market, according to Professor Jan Tytgat, a toxicologist at the University of Leuven.

His reasoning is simple: Coffee houses in the Netherlands are no longer allowed to sell their wares to non-residents, forcing Belgian users to rely on home-grown sources, with the result that hardly a week goes by without some new massive plantation being discovered by police.

The benefits of legalising marijuana "are that the concentration of the active ingredient is known, that there are no pesticides or other rubbish present and that users are able to obtain their dose in a completely legal manner," Tytgat told the VRT.

In addition, the enterprise would bring in money for the government in the form of excise duties such as those levied on cigarettes and alcohol – both of which are, according to supporters of legalisation, far more dangerous both to the user and to society than is cannabis.

The Dutch are the only Europeans to have decriminalised cannabis (under ever stricter conditions). Belgian law still technically forbids the possession and use of it, although a 2005 circular from



then-justice minister Laurette Onkelinx made it clear that police and magistrates were to give the lowest priority to the prosecution of cases of possession for personal use by adults.

Since the production and sale, however, are still illegal, adult users still have to come into contact with criminals at some point – a risk more dangerous, many say, than the effects of the drug.

Onkelinx, now public health minister, declined to rule the idea out. "We need to consider this carefully with experts," she said. "But there is certainly something going wrong with our policy, with potentially dangerous consequences."

Silence is golden

Brussels organisation suggests taking active measures to limit the input in our lives

► continued from page 1

Sure, absolute silence is a fantasy (and maybe even a curse), but besst is looking for more than just acoustic silence, Dusoleil explains. “Our project is about tranquillity, too: silence as an attitude. It’s a philosophical question. That’s why we also stress the poetry or the beauty of silence.”

Quitting life in the fast lane, albeit only temporarily, is also a form of silence. “It can be about simple things. Why not try walking instead of using your car when you move through the city?”

Besst doesn’t have the financial means to set up new projects, though they hope that in the future it will be possible. But it’s not a handicap, since they are collaborating with a number of organisations. “We’re linking up organisations or even individual artists, and we’re giving them a platform,” explains Dusoleil. “It might help them to reach a wider audience or even make their projects stronger. For instance, for the besst routes, we worked with Brukselbinnenstebuiten and Trage Wegen, two organisations that probably wouldn’t otherwise work together. We’re the hyphen.”

Joyful silence

Besst is clearly promoting a positive view of silence. And that might be necessary, since silence is still too often conceived as something negative. How often has a silence been described as painful? A quick internet search for “painful silence” and “joyful silence” shows that the former has 20 times more links than the latter.

Dusoleil, after a moment of silence (really): “Of course, painful silences exist – after an argument, for instance. That doesn’t take anything away from silence also being joyful or touching. A minute of silence to commemorate an event or someone’s passing can be very connecting. But it’s true, we’re so used to having a continuous input of sounds and impulses in our daily lives that we don’t realise it anymore. So it takes an active decision to shut it down and search for silence.”

I don’t want to sound cynical, but if besst becomes a success it might undermine its own goals. If suddenly a whole mass of people

start looking for silent spots in the city, the silence might be drowned in sound. “We have thought of that,” smiles Dusoleil. “But we’re still a young project, and it’s one of our challenges to not let that happen. I think it must be possible to keep quiet places quiet, regardless of the number of people visiting them. And I don’t think we have to be afraid of noise; it’s inherent to a city.”

Whispering, she adds: “It’s not like we can’t raise our voices anymore. What we want is to influence people’s attitudes.”

Silence is Sexy

One of besst’s partners is the Brussels concert hall Ancienne Belgique (AB). Two years ago, it launched the concert series Silence Is Sexy, which focuses on musicians who blur the borders between pop, electronic and contemporary classical music. “From the start, Silence Is Sexy was successful, with 500 to 700 people per show,” says Kurt Overbergh, the AB’s artistic director.

How does he explain silence at a largely rock concert hall being so successful? “I always find it difficult to answer those questions, but I see one element that certainly plays a role. In this day and age, you constantly need to be online: Twittering, Instagramming, Facebooking. And I’m guilty as charged, too. But this has led to a desire for tranquillity, and the success of Silence Is Sexy is a reaction against that continuous stream of impulses.”

At the moment, the collaboration with besst is small scale, but they have a bigger plan for the autumn. Overbergh: “The last weekend of October, we move the clock backwards an hour for daylight savings: 3.00 becomes 2.00. During that dead, non-existing hour we want to put on a project about silence. It’s not 100% sure yet what it’ll be, but we’ll do something in the AB during that hour. It’s an idea from besst that I immediately dove into.”

Continuous music

But first, there is Silence Is Sexy, featuring as its most famous performer the German Nils Frahm.



Artists from Brussels Project Bosch have set up installations along the besst routes made from old wood and other refuse, including “quiet cabins”, benches on which to rest and this tree at the Justice Palace

“He’s a pianist and composer who plays very emotional music,” says Overbergh. “He also has an important recording studio. I think in a few years we will really realise how important he is for the music of this decade.”

But Silence is Sexy is also an opportunity to discover new names, like Lubomyr Melnyk. Never heard of him? You’re not alone. “Until a few months ago, I didn’t know the guy either,” smiles Overbergh. “He’s a Ukrainian piano player aged 65 who, in the 1970s, wrote a manifesto about continuous piano music: He keeps on playing and doesn’t want silence between the notes. I know, this seems to contradict our silence is sexy idea, but believe me, it doesn’t. His work is very relaxing.”

Another recent discovery for Overbergh is the German Denovali label. “I’m very impressed by their

releases: I received a whole pile of CDs and literally all of them were interesting and inspiring. So we attributed two nights of Silence Is Sexy to them.”

To end, a personal question: How does the artistic director of the AB himself deal with his desire for silence? “I don’t walk through the city anymore with earphones: I want to hear the sound of the city. I commute from Antwerp, and the

train ride is the only moment of the day when I can peacefully listen to music, since my days are filled with meetings, answering emails and so on. At home, I have the time to listen to music, too, but the bedroom is a no-go zone for music, and I’ll never take music with me when I go on holiday.”

► www.besst.be
► www.abconcerts.be



Composers Lubomyr Melnyk, Nils Frahm and Poppy Ackroyd all play as part of the Silence is Sexy series at AB



The Sonian Forest is one of the best places in Brussels to find a little peace and quiet

Toxic freight explodes in East Flanders

One man dies and 33 are hospitalised after weekend derailment

Alan Hope

An elderly man died, 33 people were taken to hospital and a 550-metre perimeter was evacuated when a freight train carrying toxic substances derailed near Wetteren in East Flanders at the weekend. The train exploded and caught fire, sending clouds of toxic vapour into the atmosphere.

Two people were still in intensive care as *Flanders Today* went to press due to the accident.

A 550-metre area surrounding Wetteren, Serskamp and Schellebelle was evacuated, and people living within a one-kilometre radius were advised to keep doors and windows closed. More homes were later evacuated when it was reported that toxic substances had been washed by fire service hoses into the sewers, from where the vapours could enter houses.

The derailment took place in the early hours of Saturday morning, and the first images show a firestorm against the night sky. The cause of the accident has yet to be determined. "Something went wrong with one of the points," said Infrabel spokesman Frederic Petit, "but exactly what it was will have to be investigated."

Petit also said that there was "clear evidence" that the Dutch driver of the German goods train had not committed any error.

The train was on its way from the Netherlands to the port of Ghent. Investigators have recovered the train's "black box", which they hope will help determine the cause of the accident.

Toxic compound

The train was carrying tanks of acrylonitrile, a highly flammable and toxic compound used in the manufacture of plastics, and butadiene, a carcinogenic chemical used to make synthetic rubber. The wagons containing acrylonitrile caught fire, but those containing butadiene did not.

Acrylonitrile gives off hydrogen cyanide fumes when it combusts. Emergency services were alert for leaks which could allow the butadiene gas to escape. The gas causes irritation to the respiratory passages if breathed in.

The fire service from Beveren allowed the chemicals in the tanks to burn



The explosion in the early morning hours of Saturday causes spectacular flames and plumes of toxic smoke near Wetteren

off in a controlled fire, so that further vapours would not be created. The last of the fire was extinguished around 18.00 on Saturday, but fire fighters continued to apply layers of foam to speed up cooling of the metal tanks.

Meanwhile, police closed off the centre of Wetteren, and the civil protection service installed a high-pressure water line from the Scheldt through the centre of town to the site of the accident. Provincial governor Jan Briers put the provincial action plan into operation.

Sewer contamination

Despite precautions, some of the toxic material contaminated the surrounding area. Initial readings for the presence of chemicals were attributed to hose water having washed some contaminants into the sewers. The water pumping station was closed down and the sewer lines thoroughly sluiced out.

Further readings on the surface showed that the contamination was coming from another source than the sewers. Measurements later showed lower readings, but the full extent of the contamination is still under investigation.

Flemish minister-president Kris Peeters issued a statement praising the emergency services. "My thoughts also go out to all those who live in the area who were evacuated and are now safe with friends and family or in temporary shelter," he said.

The last of the evacuees were allowed to go home on Monday, more than

48 hours after the accident. "We prefer not to take any risks," said Briers. "Everyone has to be personally accompanied back to their home, and there have to be new readings taken inside the houses," he said.

Briers also warned that further evacuations could take place on Wednesday or Thursday this week when the train wreck is removed from the scene. "We'll take account of people living nearby and carry it out when most people are not at home, between 9.00 and 17.00."

A second autopsy is being carried out on the man who died, who has not yet been named. He was found in his home with his dog, which had also died. The first autopsy confirmed he had inhaled a toxic substance.

Finally, Flemish environment minister Joke Schauvliege held a meeting on Monday of the government's range of environmental services for an initial evaluation of the situation in Wetteren. The meeting includes

the crisis manager, experts from the Flemish Environment Agency (VMM), the public waste materials agency OVAM and the water purification agency Aquafin.

"Our services were placed this weekend at the disposal of the interior ministry, which is ultimately responsible," Schauvliege said. "We will be discussing the consequences for people and for biodiversity, though I am not expecting an immediate answer to any questions that may arise."

NMBS railway services will continue to be disrupted at least until the weekend, particularly for stop trains travelling between Ghent and Dendermonde and between Brussels and Ghent. Passengers can check www.railtime.be or call a special number designated for questions: 02 528 28 28.

An information number has also been set up for residents of the area affected by the crash: 052 432 443.

DAMAGED POINTS SYSTEM

David Geerts, chairman of the special committee on rail safety, called on Infrabel to report on its conclusions on the causes of the accident as soon as possible. Allegations have emerged that a damaged points system, or junction where trains switch tracks, had been repeatedly reported to the company without action being taken.

"Among other things, I want to know if there have been problems with the points in the past and at what speed the train was travelling," said Geerts. "Were all safety precautions being respected in this transport?" He also called for a report on safety precautions taken for rail workers who were sent to the scene of the accident.

FIFTH COLUMN

Anja Otte

Enough being woolly

Christian-democrats have a reputation for being woolly. As a people's party, almost always in power, CD&V's views are often a compromise, with plenty of nuance. Its leaders are often mocked for this, especially when they use phrases such as "on the one hand, on the other hand".

In the past, this lack of a definitive view made the Christian-democrats a party with which many could agree. These days, however, voters prefer decisive stands. N-VA is particularly good at this, but CD&V had yet to come to terms with this new reality. In the words of its president, Wouter Beke, his party "lacked a story". When he set out to "renew" the party – a process every Flemish party goes through every so many years – Beke chose not to stick to general principles, which in CD&V's case would inevitably be woolly again, as the "personalism" in which Christian-democrats believe cannot be explained in one or two simple phrases.

Instead, with the renewal operation named Innesto, CD&V is moving away from anything too hazy. A group of "high potentials" has come up with a list of concrete proposals, often touching upon long-standing taboos.

One is to do away with the housing bonus, a system by which homeowners can deduct from their taxes the costs related to home buying or building. Flemings are notorious for having "a brick in the belly", homeownership being the ambition of almost all families. The housing bonus has made this ambition within the reach of a large part of the population. As the system has become too expensive, scrapping it may be inevitable. But popular it will never be.

Another taboo is the appointment of *ambtenaren*, or tenured civil servants, a system that guarantees them lifelong employment and generous pensions. While most agree that this is outdated, abolishing it, as CD&V proposes, is easier said than done. The same thing goes for reducing the two month school holiday to just six weeks off in summer. Many people believe this is a good idea, but nothing will probably come of it, with the tourism sector, teachers' unions and some parents disagreeing.

So far, the reactions to CD&V's proposals have been mostly negative – one disadvantage of being concrete. Whether the renewal will also renew CD&V's electoral success remains to be seen. But for now, Wouter Beke deserves credit for the clarity with which he speaks, something entirely new to his party.

THE WEEK IN FIGURES

25.8mm

of rain in April, compared to an annual average of 53mm. There were nine days of rain, compared to an average of 17 days

€300 million

subsidy that will be paid each year to bpost until 2015 by the federal government, with the approval of the European Commission given last week

754

non EU-citizens were fined in 2012 for refusing to follow an integration course required by the government of Flanders. The average fine amounted to €91.96

€19.6 million

saved on energy bills in the coming 2.5 years by the province of Limburg, the towns in the province, churches and police zones, thanks to a collective purchase of gas and electricity

83.9%

of small businesses that applied for loans in 2012 were able to obtain them, according to a study by the University of Antwerp, contradicting a common complaint from the business world

University challenge

Meet the candidates hoping to be voted in as KU Leuven's new rector

Alan Hope

Next week is the election that will determine who will succeed Mark Waer as the new rector of the University of Leuven (KUL). There are four candidates, three of them are already vice-rectors. All are KUL graduates.

Rik Torfs, head of the canon law faculty, is far and away the most recognisable of the four; he's known to the public as a regular columnist in both *De Standaard* and *Le Soir* and was a judge on early series of the quiz show *De slimste mens ter wereld*.

"The rector needs to be able to steer the university in various ways," Torfs writes on his campaign website. "In some instances, he can skilfully go with the flow to achieve his goals. In other situations, he needs courage and determination to row against the current."

The 56-year-old lists six key points that he says characterise the profile of a rector: being a team leader, an internal facilitator, an external defender and a communicator, as well as someone with vision and broad cultural interests.

Torfs teaches canon, or church, law at Leuven and elsewhere. He was elected to the Senate for CD&V in 2010, a post from which he recently resigned to focus on the rector elections.

► www.riktorfs.be



KUL candidates for rector from left: Karen Maex, Bart De Moor, Tine Baelmans and Rik Torfs

Karen Maex, vice-rector of the science and technology faculty, came out in support of a university without internal barriers, with closer co-operation between the three main science groups. "Innovation is necessary to stimulate a university that positions itself strongly in a dynamic environment, where new perspectives and priorities are brought to the fore," she writes on her website. "From its earliest days, our university has had a strong relationship with all aspects of society, and this is still the case today."

Maex, 53, grew up in Mechelen. She graduated in civil engineering

and worked in micro-electronics in Grenoble and at the University of Maryland in the US. Since 1985, she's been part of the research centre imec in Leuven.

► www.karenmaex.be

Tine Baelmans is vice-rector in charge of diversity and student policy, and that experience informs her platform. "The strength of a university is rooted in its people," she writes. "A university ... attaches great importance to a well-chosen balance between education, research and service to society. I am convinced that by focusing on unity through

diversity, we ... can be a catalyst for a sustainable and prosperous society." Baelmans, 48, was born in Antwerp and graduated as an engineer in applied mechanics. Apart from a short period in the 1990s, she has worked at the university since graduating in 1987.

► www.tinebaelmans.be

Bart De Moor is vice-rector in charge of international policy, a crucial area for the university's income. During a recent debate involving all four candidates, he called for a strengthening of human resources policy and a more professional approach to personnel matters. He also expressed support for a quota of one-third women in the institution's management.

"Let's deepen the quality of teaching, research and service to society, but de-emphasise quantity," he writes. "In the triangle formed by our core missions, research provides focus and depth, teaching provides aspiration and assessment, awareness and impact are delivered by service to society."

De Moor, 52, was born in Halle and studied engineering before spending two years as a research associate at Stanford University in the US. He's also the "godfather" of the Flemish Technology Olympiad and Youth Technology Olympiad.

► www.bartdemoor.be

The first round of voting for the new rector is on 13 May. The winner must receive more than 50% of votes, and if that is not the case, further rounds will take place on 17 and 23 May. The votes of teaching staff account for 70% of the electorate, other academic staff 10%, technical and administrative staff 10% and students via their representatives the remaining 10%.

Because of a moratorium on public statements in the week leading up to the election, KUL candidates for rector did not respond to interview requests from Flanders Today

ALSO NEW GHENT RECTOR

Meanwhile at UGent, there are five candidates for the post of rector: medical geneticist Anne De Paepe; professor of philosophy Freddy Mortier, who specialises in bio-ethics; Luc Taerwe, a specialist in concrete construction research; agricultural economist Guido Van Huylenbroek; and textile scientist Lieva Van Langenhove. Elections are on 6 and 7 May.

"We are the change"

Kris Peeters counters criticism of ViA with his vision of a future Flanders

Alan Hope

The Flemish government's Flanders in Action (ViA) programme is heading for success, minister-president Kris Peeters (*pictured right*) last week assured representatives of business, the academic world, social partners and others, gathered in Brussels for the programme's Future Forum.

ViA is the government's working plan of the Pact 2020, which sets out goals in every sector of the region's economic and social life, with the ultimate goal of placing Flanders in the top ranks of regions in Europe.

However, ViA has been criticised in recent weeks for having no clear aim, little concrete structure and nothing to inspire people. The complex changes taking place in the world, said Peeters, call for a co-ordinated response, which is just as complex. "That cannot be summed up in 140 characters on Twitter or 250 words in a press release," he said. "That can only be



contained in the 13 transitions that make up Flanders in Action."

In response to press reports of divisions within his government, Peeters was keen to stress that the whole government is behind the programme, with each minister's portfolio dependent on those of

his or her colleagues. Industrial transformation can only succeed, he said, with the help of a targeted innovation policy, where talents are at work in the right place. Sustainable buildings and homes are impossible without renewable energy, and the fight against child poverty goes hand-in-hand with innovations in health care.

"Flanders in Action can't be measured merely in the here and now," Peeters continued. "Our action is a marathon; it requires a goal, a plan and the perseverance to realise that plan. It must not be a victim of the mood of the day. We are not thinking in terms of quotes in tomorrow's papers, but in terms of headlines in 2020. And I have faith that the headline in 2020 will read 'Flanders at the top in Europe'. Then we will see what our perseverance was for: for a Flanders where it is good to live, to do business and to invest, to work and to study, to care and to be cared

for."

Peeters ended with an appeal to those present to be inspired and to become an inspiration, quoting the words of US president Barack Obama in a speech to supporters in 2008: "Change will not come if we wait for some other person or if we wait for some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek."

New face at the top

The government also announced the appointment of a new chair of ViA to replace Koen Geens, who is now federal finance minister. Koenraad Debackere (*pictured right*) is professor of technology and innovation management at the University of Leuven and managing director of the university's administration and central services. He will, with the so-called Council of the Wise, oversee the practical management of ViA and Pact 2020 programmes until the



end of the legislature next May. "Koenraad – like me, like the whole Flemish government and like all the signatories of the Pact 2020 – is convinced that we are on the right track and that together we will reach our goal," said Peeters. Debackere, he said, "is the man who will take ViA from the meeting room to the work floor".

► www.vlaandereninactie.be

THE WEEK
IN BUSINESS**Banks ▶ KBC**

Flanders largest financial institution has sold the 58 branches of its Serbian affiliate to the Serbia-based subsidiaries of France's Societe Generale and Norwegian Telenor. The move is part of the deal with European authorities that allowed KBC's €7 billion rescue by Belgian authorities in early 2009.

Banks ▶ Royal Park Investments

Royal Park Investments (RPI), created in 2009 to receive all the structured loans and very low quality assets that led to the collapse of Fortis Bank before its rescue by authorities, has been sold to Credit Suisse and the Dallas-based Lone Star capital fund for €6.7 billion. The move allows the Belgian state to register a repayment of €1 billion, including a book profit of some €260 million for its stake. The other RPI shareholders, insurance company Ageas and the French BNP Paribas Fortis, also benefit from the sale.

Oil ▶ Total

The French oil and chemical products group is investing up to €1 billion in its Antwerp refining and petrochemical activities to streamline production and adapt output to market requirements. The move is not expected to create new jobs as the company will close some of its older production lines and reassign manpower to the new projects.

Pharmaceuticals ▶ Arseus

The supplier of over-the-counter pharmaceuticals has acquired the Freedom Pharmaceuticals, headquartered in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The move strengthens Arseus' position in the American midwest.

Ports ▶ Antwerp

The government of Flanders has approved plans to increase the Port of Antwerp's installations by up to 1,000 hectares on the Scheldt's left bank. The move allows the construction of extra docks and storage.

Printing ▶ Ricoh

Japan-based Ricoh has acquired the Click & Post printing and mailing activities of national post office bpost.

Retail ▶ Tom & Co

The pet food and products retailer, an affiliate of the Delhaize group, has plans to develop its activities in France with the opening of a second store in the country this year before rolling out up to 10 new outlets in 2014. The company already operates 135 stores in Belgium.

Drug campaign for sick child was PR stunt

Alexion stoked public outrage to force the government to pay for treatment

Alan Hope

The head of pharma.be, the Association of the Pharmaceutical Industry, has criticised a drug manufacturer that employed a PR company to stoke up public controversy over a seven-year-old boy with a rare disease. The action was an effort to force the federal government to pay out millions of euros every year for experimental treatments. Leo Neels, director-general of pharma.be, said the company's approach was "unacceptable".

Viktor, from Erembodegem, East Flanders, suffers from atypical haemolytic-uraemic syndrome, an immune system disorder caused by an E coli infection. The body destroys its own red blood cells, which can lead to kidney failure. The disease affects mainly children, of whom there are only about a dozen in Belgium.

Treatment involves infusions every two weeks with Soliris, an experimental drug developed by the US company Alexion. Each infusion costs €9,000, but the drug is not reimbursed in Belgium by health

insurers for Viktor's condition – though it is for a different complaint. Soliris is reimbursed in the Netherlands and France. For the time being, the university hospital of the Free University of Brussels (VUB) is footing the bill for Viktor's treatment.

Media coverage of Viktor's case led to a petition and calls for federal health minister Laurette Onkelinx to overturn the negative advice of the committee that considers requests for drugs reimbursement. Supporters want the drug to be reimbursed for Viktor and the 12 other children in Belgium undergoing the experimental treatment.

Ends justify means?

Then it was discovered that Alexion itself had been behind the sudden rise in media coverage, through the Brussels PR consultants g+ europe. The agency had been asked to set up patients' organisations in the Netherlands and Belgium for the sole purpose of provoking public controversy and putting pressure



Leo Neels, director-general of Pharma.be

on governments to reimburse the high cost of Soliris – with success in the case of the Netherlands. The first contact with Viktor's family had come from a member of the patients' organisation in the Netherlands, a woman who is paid directly by Alexion. A Brussels lobbyist, also paid by Alexion, later helped the family gain the attention

of the French-speaking media. He confirmed the existence of a concerted campaign. "In the end, the patients and the company have the same goal: getting the minister to come to an agreement with Alexion," he told *De Standaard*.

Alexion is in talks with Onkelinx's department, in an effort to reach an agreement over the price. "We feel like a football being kicked back and forward between the company that makes the drug on one side and the government on the other," Viktor's parents told VTM news. "We would ask both sides, talk to each other and come to some agreement. There are human lives at stake here."

Neels previously defended the high cost of Soliris as a means of recompensing companies for research into treatments for rare diseases. "If Alexion indeed attempted to manipulate the parents, following its initial refusal to negotiate with the government, that is in breach of our ethics and our values," he said. "We've never had to suspend a member yet, but it's a sanction I wouldn't rule out."

Peeters welcomes ban on pesticides

Flemish minister-president Kris Peeters has welcomed a temporary ban by the EU on three contested pesticides implicated in the massive deaths of bee colonies. The so-called neonicotinoid pesticides will not be used for a period of two years while the situation is evaluated. The compounds, which are marketed under various brand names, like Bayer and Syngenta, may not be used on flowering crops that form part of the bees' habitat.

Peeters, whose portfolio also includes agriculture, repeated his government's commitment to sustainable farming, and recalled measures already taken for the benefit of beekeepers, including €50,000 for demonstration projects as well as a free guide to good beekeeping.

The farmers' union Boerenbond said that the ban would affect mainly small-scale crops such as peas and flax for which there is currently no alternative to the neonicotinoids.



Mayors ask for help paying pensions

The mayors of Flanders' major cities will ask the government of Flanders for help in paying the pensions of their functionaries, after a meeting last week that also decided to present the government with a debt-sharing proposal.

A delegation made up of mayors Daniel Termont (Ghent), Bart De Wever (Antwerp) and Vincent Van Quickenborne (Kortrijk), as well as Luc Martens, chairman of the Flemish association of cities and municipalities (VVSG), has been given the job of negotiating with the government.

According to Van Quickenborne, the municipalities have to carry the full burden of their own civil servants' pensions. According to the federal pensions ministry, the

pensions of Flemish civil servants last year cost €3.3 billion, of which €2.9 billion was paid by the federal government and €408 million by a contribution from civil servants still in work.

In city halls, as elsewhere, the ageing population means the pension burden is constantly increasing, with no sign in the near future of a downward turn.

The delegation will also ask the Flemish government to take on some of the cities' debt burden, in order to allow them to use funds to make investments to help stimulate the local economies.

The Flemish government has not yet reacted to the mayors' proposals.

Record year for money laundering busts

The federal government's unit investigating money laundering last year uncovered a record €2.25 billion in criminal funds, and turned 1,506 cases of suspected money laundering over to the courts.

The 2012 total was not only a record, but more than three times the €617 million uncovered in 2011, federal anti-fraud minister John Crombez said, thanks to better organisation. The unit received more than 21,000 tips of suspected illegal transactions from professionals and institutions that are bound by law to notify in case of doubt – such as banks and notaries.

About €1 billion of the total was related to the gold trade. Organised tax evasion accounted for €190 million, while 15 cases of foreign politicians or officials laundering bribes were good for €84 million.

Database to reduce traffic delays

Less disruption to traffic, fewer delays and a better use of public space are three of the goals of a new database announced last week by Flemish public works minister Hilde Crevits. The database would gather information on all road works, works being carried out by utilities, demonstrations and events in public places, in order to allow better co-ordination of services.

Every year about 10,000 events in Flanders, including infrastructure works, require diversion of traffic. "Often the organisers, for example of a cycle race, panic because they don't know if there's infrastructure or utility works planned for the location where their event will take place," Crevits said. Demonstrations and local markets, in addition, can lead to problems when, for example, transport authority De Lijn is not aware of



them.

The government is now working on a decree that would require event organisers to provide relevant information for the database, known as GIPOD. By the end of the year, visitors to the database will be able to make an itinerary that takes account of all potential sources of delay.

▶ www.wegenwerken.be

Sci-fi furniture

Heat, cool, relax: A Flemish designer has invented self-assembling chairs and sofas

Alan Hope

We've all been there: You spend an afternoon at Ikea, come home with a flat-pack and then spend the rest of the night trying to follow the cryptic instructions using only a tiny Allen key to create a new piece of furniture. What if instead you could bring home a package the size of a box of cornflakes, plug it into a socket and wait 15 minutes while it transforms itself into an armchair?

“It’s a working space and living space, and also a sort of lab,” says Carl De Smet, as he puts the finishing touches to a pre-prototype of his expanding furniture in his Brussels studio home. De Smet recently made headlines around the world when he released a video on YouTube of his expanding furniture. He’s currently in talks to find an industrial-scale manufacturer and backers who will bring the product to market. The video explains the process very clearly: A piece of furniture – the video shows a chair, so we’ll stick to that as an example – is constructed from shape-memory polymer (SMP) foam, either by milling a solid block or by injection moulding. The chair is then heated in a large press, which crushes it into a solid block or cylinder of dense foam. This is the packaged shape, the form in which the product is sold. When it’s bought, the process is reversed: when 70-degree heat is applied, the chair returns to its original shape. Once it’s cooled again, it’s permanent.

Hot topic

How the process works is complex but comes down to the form of polymers. “If you look at polymers under a microscope, they have a kind of spaghetti structure, and inside the spaghetti are cross-links,” De Smet explains. The process involves creating cross-links chemically to fix the form and the triggering mechanism. “So when you squeeze it down, it loses its shape. But it always *wants* to come back to its original shape. Every time you compress or stretch it, it remembers the connection points and cross-links.” The choice of 70°C, he says, is to prevent accidents during transport. A lorry filled with packaged furniture might be stuck in traffic on a warm day, say, only to find the packages start to spring apart like popcorn. The choice of the high temperature, however, is problematic. At the moment, the process of applying heat to transform the temporary shape – the slab, De Smet calls it – requires a home sauna. De Smet is experimenting, however, with the use of electricity as the trigger for the metamorphosis. That would mean that the consumer would just plug the product into a wall outlet. In theory, even larger

pieces such as sofas or even guest beds could be transformed and reverse-transformed to suit the owner’s needs.

Public introduction

It all sounds like something a scientist might stumble upon by accident, but in fact SMPs have been around for about 20 years, De Smet says. “This is part of a research project we’ve been working on for seven years, and now we are finally almost ready for prototypes.” A decade ago, De Smet was doing research with shape memory alloys, “which also have a memory effect, and we were looking for applications that could be mass-produced. But the wires are so expensive we turned our attention to polymers.” There was just one problem: The polymers were not as strong as the metals, “so we had to move to a kind of lightweight material, and that’s how we came up with the foam. Foam is really a flexible material, but at room temperature this material becomes strong and rigid.” Last month, De Smet and design consultancy Noumenon took the furniture to an exhibition in Milan, and the attention they received there – not least because of a short TV spot on the BBC – sparked major interest.

Substance over style

De Smet studied experimental art in Brussels, but he’s less interested in the art of design than the science. “The whole time I was studying, I was moving back and forward between art and materials science, so for me, when I think about design, it’s always in the context of material properties. I’m less interested in the aesthetics than the multifunctionality. These materials have quite a lot of functional approaches



Designer Carl De Smet in his home studio in Brussels

because they have a memory. If you can remember shapes you can do all kinds of things.” For the time being, that involves bringing the designs to market. “Right now we are dealing with a manufacturer, so we have to make a deal. We had some really good feedback from Milan, so now we’re following up on those contacts to

see who our partners might be in the future.” And does he have any other bright ideas on the horizon? “Well, yes, we have a number of different ideas. But we’re not talking about that for the moment.”

► www.noumenon.eu



Special polymers allow a packaged chair to pop up in hours

THE WEEK IN SCI & ED

The University of Antwerp is the first university in Belgium to launch a **Master’s degree in epidemiology**, though the profession is not yet officially recognised in the country. Epidemiologists investigate the patterns, causes and effects of diseases and other public health issues to prevent them from spreading. The two-year degree is mainly meant for students with a Bachelor’s in medical or biomedical sciences. Graduates should be able to improve the policy of the health-care sector.

During Ghent University’s field expeditions in southern Congo and northwest Zambia, Flemish biologist Paul Van Daele **discovered a new type of mole rat**: Caroline’s mole rat or *Fukomys vandewoestijneae*. Van Daele named the species of rodent after his late wife, biologist Caroline Van De Woestijne, who helped in the research project but died of malaria in Zambia. A discovery of a new kind of mammal is very rare.

In response to the government of Flanders’ new requirement of an attestation for professors who teach in a language that is not their mother tongue, the University of Leuven will **test the language skills of some 900 lecturers**. Dutch speakers who teach in English and non-native Dutch speakers who give lessons in Dutch will have to provide a video of a short presentation to prove their fluency in the teaching language. The University of Ghent will evaluate the English of around 700 lecturers through exams.

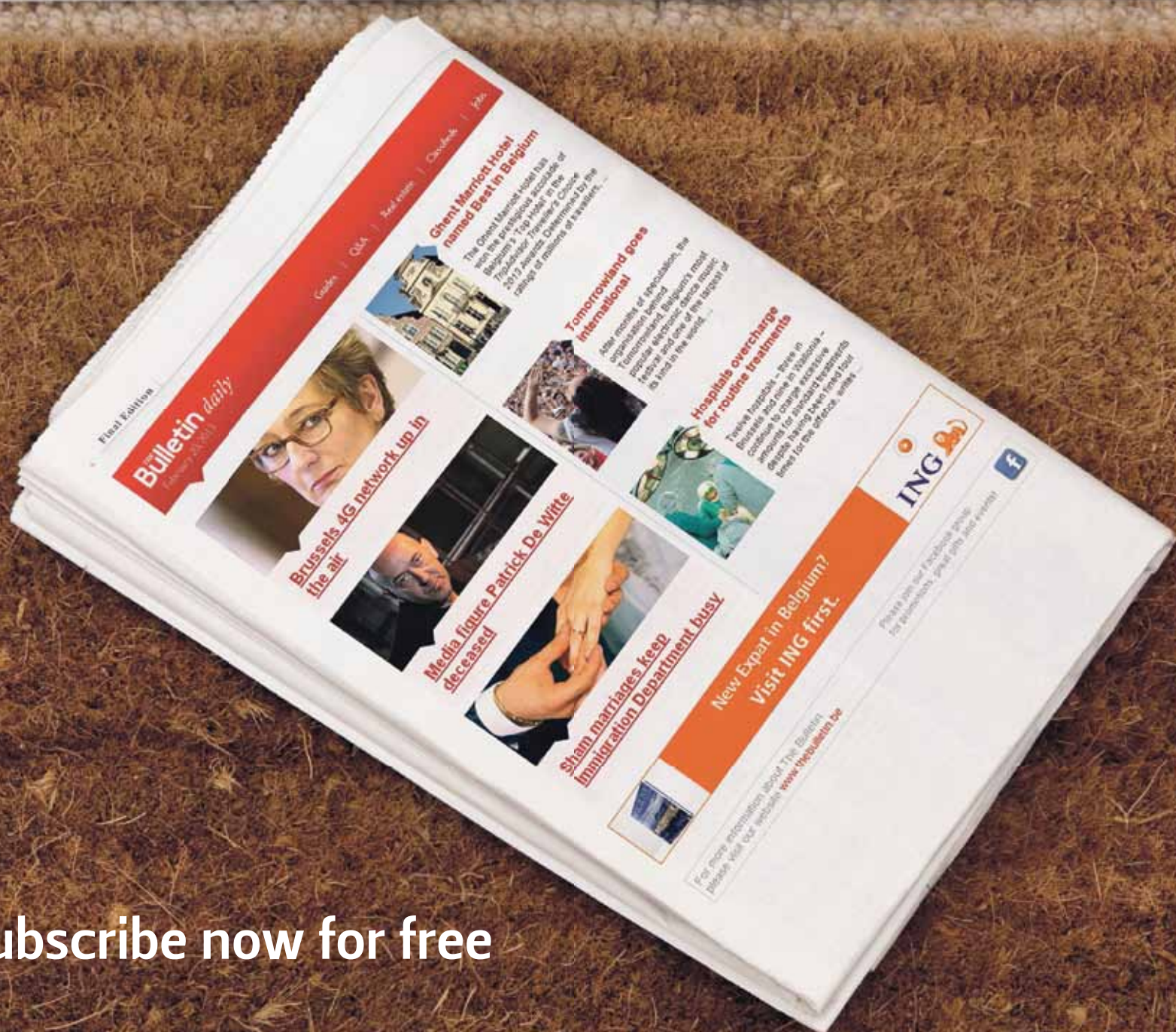
The University of Antwerp’s annual **honorary doctorates for General Merits** have been awarded to the rectors of the four other Flemish universities. The gesture illustrates that the universities have been co-operating more often and more intensively in recent years, improving the worldwide reputation of Flemish research through, among other things, the increasing number of publications in scientific journals.

More than seven in 10 teachers (73%) oppose Flemish education minister Pascal Smet’s preliminary **proposal to reform the educational system**. That is the conclusion of a survey by a team headed by professor Wim Van den Broeck of the Free University of Brussels (VUB). Van den Broeck asked the opinion of about 1,000 teachers from all areas of secondary school education in Flanders. Only 7% are in favour of the proposed reform. Other researchers question the methodology of the survey.

Andy Furniere

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What's cooking?

BE Café Marché Jourdan's expat contest turns up the heat and shows off local food and drink

words: Tamara Gausi • photos: Natalie Hill

If you've ever been to the market, picked up a *witloof* and then put it back down because you didn't know what to do with it, you should have been at BE Café Marché Jourdan last week. On 28 April, the finals of the first BE European Cooking Contest took place at the Sofitel Brussels Europe hotel on Jourdanplein in the EU quarter.

The concept, cooked up by Patrick De Bleser and Sonja Van Caneghem of 5T Communication, is pretty simple: Many expats aren't familiar with Belgian food outside the usual suspects, so why not invite a group of amateur expat cooks to transform Belgian *terroir* – local, seasonal ingredients – into something new and original, inspired by their own cultural background?

"We have a lot of wonderful food here, but sometimes people don't know about it," says De Bleser, a lawyer rather than a chef by training, who formerly worked in the European institutions. "Of course, everybody knows about waffles, *frietjes* and beer, but what about Belgian wines, for example?"

Culture fusion

To introduce some of these lesser-known ingredients, contestants were asked to create a dish using at least three products from a pre-decided list, most of which were supplied by stallholders at the market on Jourdanplein. The winner would be offered a European weekend break at a Sofitel of their choice.

An initial list of 20 candidates was whittled down to a cosmopolitan quintet of finalists: Eva Prestigiacomo, 33, from Italy; Souad Bahri, 27, and 26-year-old Rémi Praud, both from France; 27-year-old Brit Sakib Ershad; and Pál Milkovics, 33, from Hungary.

Prestigiacomo, who runs *Homme Sweet Homme*, a blog about food and men dedicated to all the men in her life who "deserved a cake in their face", proposed sweet Brussels sprout cake pops made with *pèkèt de Liège* liqueur, *speculoos* and dark

chocolate. Sticking with desserts, Bahri opted for an elegant lemon *pain à grecque millefeuille* served with marzipan ice cream.

The men all chose meaty mains. Ershad's was a gourmet cheeseburger melt made with *speculoos* and sweet red cabbage relish, served with homemade fries; Praud went for a rustic quail dish served with *witloof* purée, potato croquettes made from shortcrust pastry and a chestnut liqueur sauce; Milkovics' dish was a fusion of a Hungarian beef goulash and a Belgian *stoverij*.

The five finalists had to make their dish in the BE Café kitchen from scratch before presenting it to a panel of four judges, including Brussels food journalist Hughes Belin, BE Café Marché Jourdan head chef Marc Pâquet and Alain Troubat, chef and owner of Brussels restaurant Stirwen.

The fourth judge was Catherine Piette. She is the former owner of the popular organic restaurant Trop Bon in Brussels and is currently managing director of slow food organisation Karikol. For her, the contest is much more than a way to introduce expats to local ingredients. "Food is the most basic form of sharing, and it is important because it is about culture," she told me. "And this is a great initiative because it brings together people from different cultures. That's the Brussels spirit, I think."

Perfect pairings

This was definitely an event with a lot of spirit, Brussels or otherwise. Something like a cross between *Master Chef* and a music-free Eurovision Song Contest, the proceedings were helped along by the droll, Terry Wogan-style commentary of Sofitel Brussels Europe assistant general manager Denis De Schrevel.

If it all sounds easy and pleasant enough, don't be fooled. Although the atmosphere in the kitchen before the tasting was one of convivial calm, some of the finalists



The finalists of the first-ever BE European Cooking Contest, from left: Sakib Ershad, Eva Prestigiacomo, Pál Milkovics, Souad Bahri and Rémi Praud

had been in the kitchen since 7.30 that morning (the event didn't start until 12.30). And that's not to mention the pre-competition preparation; Milkovics admitted to me that he had completed 20 test runs of his dish in the weeks prior to the competition.

And as for the judging, considering all the audience did was watch a group of people eat food we could smell but not taste, it was surprisingly entertaining. A retinue of wait staff brought out a plate of each dish for each judge – "like something from the court of Louis XIV," De Schrevel joked – with an accompanying wine or beer, chosen by Sofitel food and drink manager Thibaud Dierickx.

Among them was a Belgian red – a Chateau Bon Baron Divo Nanto 2010 that was paired with the burger and the goulash. Other drinks served included a gueuze (served with the quail) and Filliers

jenever (served with the cake pops).

One by one the chefs – by this stage all sweaty brows, wide eyes and dirty aprons – came out to provide a brief explanation of their dishes.

Ershad provided a master class in British self-deprecation when it was his turn: "The bun's a little bit hard as I left it under the hotplate too long. The burger should be good. The fries are OK..." I don't think I'm spoiling the ending if I tell you that Ershad didn't go on to win.

Hotplate disasters aside, all the dishes were beautifully presented – restaurant quality, in fact, which is a good thing since some of the dishes will find their way on to the BE Café Marché Jourdan menu in the near future.

After nearly an hour of eating and a 20-minute private deliberation, the judges returned with the verdict. Belin congratulated all contestants for their "great level of achievement

and dedication", but in the end there could only be one winner – and that was Milkovics and his goulash-*stoverij* alliance.

There were a few early pointers that the Hungarian might walk away with first place: The orgasmic noises of pleasure made by one of the male judges as he mopped up the lambic beer goulash sauce was telling, as was the fact that everybody's plate was literally scraped clean – or "terminated" as Belin put it in the post-judging feedback.

Milkovics was delighted but said he was surprised: "I really love cooking, so this win is very special to me."

The first BE European Cooking Contest was a resounding success, and, judging by the enthusiasm with which it was received, it won't be the last one. If you fancy taking part next year, keep an eye on the Café Marché Jourdan Facebook page and website.

► www.bebrussels.be



Pál Milkovics readies his combination of Hungarian goulash and Belgian *stoverij*



Judges take a hard look at Sakib Ershad's cheeseburger with *speculoos* and sweet cabbage relish before digging in



Eva Prestigiacomo's colourful Brussels sprout cake pops

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To the rescue

The Old Horses Lodge is taking in an ever-growing number of neglected animals

Sabine Clappaert

The foal looking out over the barn door is just recovering from the last visible scars of severe neglect. The abscess above his right eye is receding, the bare patches on his flanks sprout new hair, and he stands sturdy on his young legs.

But things were very different for Kito when staff from The Old Horses Lodge found him three months ago. "He was too weak to stand," says Wim Desnyder. "He reeked of urine, had sores all over his body and was so emaciated that we estimated him to be six months old. Imagine our surprise when the vet told us he was nine months."

Desnyder is one of two full-time staff members who care for the animals who have found their way to The Old Horses Lodge (Tohl), a shelter for abandoned and neglected horses in Laarne, near Ghent.

Kito was one of a group of five young horses found just outside Sint-Katelijne-Waver this winter. At first his condition was so precarious that he had to spend two months recuperating under the 24/7 care of veterinary experts at the University of Ghent's animal hospital. Tohl paid for his treatment: €2,300 – a reduced rate the hospital gave the non-profit organisation.

Too many horses

"People underestimate the cost of keeping a horse," says Marina Tondeleir, who runs Tohl. "We estimate it costs €300 per month for food, maintenance, veterinary care and paddock costs; it adds up very quickly. For us, it's even more expensive when you consider that many of the horses here need extra medical care because of the sorry



The Old Horses Lodge offers care and finds new homes for neglected and abused horses

condition they're in."

Underestimating the costs is one of the main reasons for neglect, according to the organisation. Add in that there is no law in Flanders or Belgium regulating domestic breeding, which leads to an over-supply of horses that are then sold for as little as €300, and the extent

says Tondeleir.

The federal Animal Welfare Department, which is responsible for investigating charges of animal neglect, has only 10 inspectors for Flanders and is overwhelmed by the task. Severely neglected animals are confiscated and sent to rescue centres across the region,

by 2006, that number had risen to 12. Last year 60 horses were taken in. This year, 36 horses have already arrived. Today, it is providing care for 70 horses, its maximum capacity.

"We have to evaluate every case very carefully," says Desnyder, as we walk past a paddock in which a herd of boisterous young horses frolic, kicking and nipping at each other. "We're at the stage where we can only take in the worst cases, simply because we do not have the resources to deal with more."

And those resources aren't small. The centre has six hectares of paddock, 22 stables and four open shelters. Surrounding farmers have put another two hectares of grazing land at their disposal. With Tondeleir at the helm – unpaid – Tohl also has two full-time employees and 10 regular

volunteers. People can support the centre by sponsoring one of the horses. Or by adopting one.

Adopt a horse

"What we need most right now is people who can adopt one of our horses," says Tondeleir. "People who know what's involved in keeping a horse and who understand they are not adopting a perfect riding horse but giving a neglected animal a loving new home."

She is adamant that a large part of the solution lies in education. "Never buy a horse for a child; it's the worst thing you can do. Horses cost money, demand constant attention and live for up to 40 years. Your daughter may love her pony when she's 11, but what are you going to do with it when she turns 18 and goes off to college?"

Heading back toward the farmhouse, we walk past a stable in which a dark, skinny mare shields a gangly three-month-old foal from sight. "These two were confiscated outside Torhout," explains Tondeleir. "The foal was born at the height of winter; their owner left them to their own devices out in the paddock. They're both still recovering."

Desnyder runs a calming hand gently along the mare's flank. "The owner has demanded her return. The Animal Welfare Department has decided she can be returned, so we'll have to give her back once she's strong enough. The owner has told us to keep the foal, so it will stay until we find a suitable home. All we can do is hope he won't neglect his mare a second time."

► www.tohl.be

"What we need most right now is people who can adopt one of our horses"

of the problem becomes clear.

There are currently 250,000 registered horses in Belgium. While chipping and registration are mandatory, a vast number of animals remain unchipped and thus unaccounted for. "There are simply too many horses in Belgium,"

while in some cases, the animals are left with their owner under strict guidelines for improved care, which are followed up by the department or the police.

But every year the number of horses arriving at Tohl increases. In 2004, the centre confiscated four horses;

Belgium on a plate

A new book unleashes the country's best-kept secret: its food

Katy Desmond

"I never thought it was so special," said my Flemish partner as she leafed through a hot-off-the-press copy of *What's Cooking in Belgium: Recipes and Stories from a Food-Loving Nation*.

We were talking about the tradition described in the book of fishermen in Oostduinkerke still going out on horseback rather than boats to catch those famed tiny grey shrimp that fill up tomatoes on summer terraces. She had never considered that that fact might be appealing to anyone.

Her modest reaction, in my experience, was fairly typical. When it comes to food, Flemings tend to take certain things for granted: Fresh bread is always just around the corner, the meats and cheeses are good



enough to eat raw – and often are – and for €3 or less one can enjoy a sampling of the world's finest beer in any given cafe.

In the outside world, this modesty often results in Belgian cuisine being reduced to chocolate, beer and Brussels sprouts. The new English-language *What's Cooking*, devoted to the life and times of local cuisine, was written by Brussels-based British expats Anna Jenkinson and Neil Evans, who attempt to remedy this situation by painting a portrait of the history and culture of Belgium through its food.

"Belgian food really is like a well-kept secret," says Jenkinson. "Hopefully we can help take it beyond the borders."

What's Cooking is not an exhaustive anthology but rather a carefully assembled collection of common Belgian delights, from *stoofvlees* to *speculoos*. "It could be a cookbook, it could live in the kitchen," Jenkinson says, "but it could be a coffee table book and live in the living room."

Accompanying the mouth-watering recipes are well-researched vignettes that place the dishes in their modern and historical context. Whether it's a description of the annual Golden Throwing of the Chicken Leg from the windows of Londerzeel's town hall or the fact that the average Belgian consumes 6.5kg of *witloof* each year, the book is filled with fascinating facts that round out the story of

local food.

In hopes that their book will travel far and wide, the authors went to some lengths to make sure the recipes are feasible for those living outside the country. Where potentially hard-to-find ingredients are used, like Sirop de Liège, they provide suggestions for suitable alternatives.

And while Belgian cuisine is by no means a vegetarian's paradise, Evans, the chef of the duo, has given a few useful tips on how to change some classic dishes into veggie-friendly meals.

What's Cooking in Belgium is €35 from Waterstones in Brussels or online

► www.lusterweb.com

“

My time at BSB was great preparation for life and study at Harvard. I really enjoyed the challenging IB Diploma curriculum alongside wider opportunities, including musical performance, public service and debating, all underpinned with a global perspective.”

Kaat de Corte (BSB alumna, Harvard College Class of 2014)

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The forgotten generation

An exhibition in Ghent revisits overlooked figures in local modern art history

Christophe Verbiest

Shedding new light on the Belgian art scene from around 1920 – that's the ambitious goal of *Modernism: Belgian Abstract Art and Europe* at the Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent. And we can safely say: Mission accomplished.

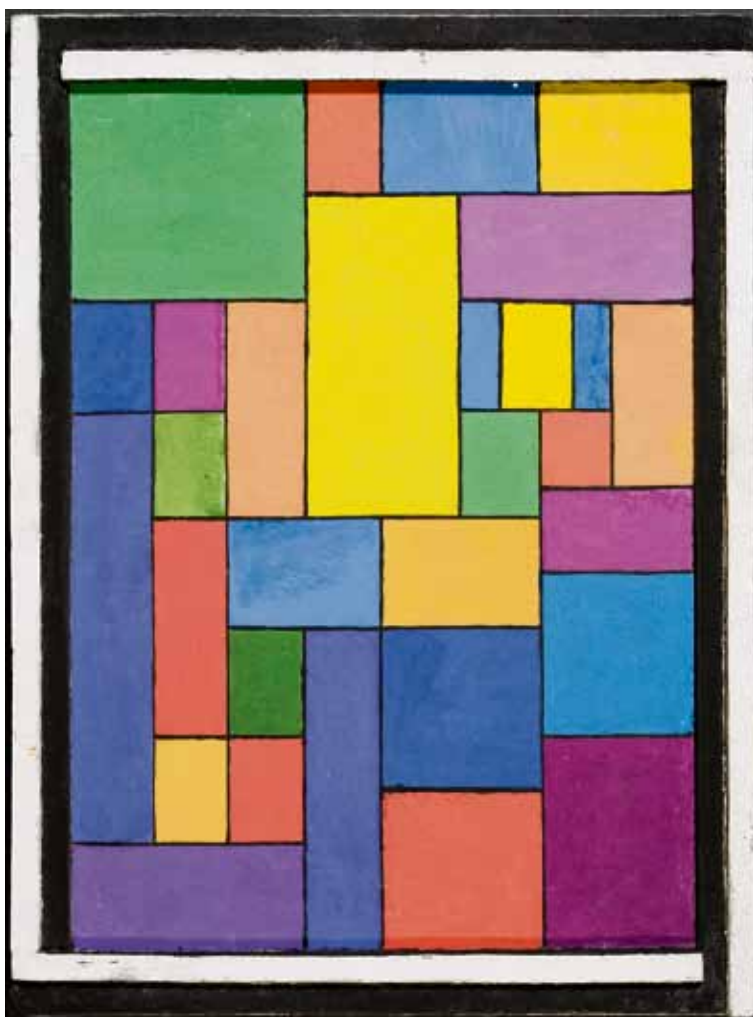
When speaking about Belgian art at the beginning of the 20th century, the focus often lies on the Flemish expressionists (Constant Permeke, Gustave De Smet), a symbolist like Valerius De Saedeleer or fauvist Rik Wouters. They all worked within the figurative tradition, but the national *avant-garde* art of the time also fostered a bunch of abstract painters. Unlike their figurative colleagues, they were not cherished at the time. And with a few exceptions, there has been no real revaluation since. Until now. *Modernism* gathers 300 works by 100 artists, and isn't only interesting as a correction to art history. There are loads of great works on display that make this show a must, even without thinking about the theoretical underpinnings. The exhibition opens with three major figures of the Belgian abstract art scene who made their careers abroad. Jules Schmalzigaug went to live in Italy to be close to the futurists, whose work he loved. He absorbed their influence and moulded it into his own visual language, which was aimed at capturing movement, a characteristic of futurism. The exhibition hosts amazing paintings by Schmalzigaug, but it's the charcoal "Dynamische uitdrukking van de beweging van een danseres" ("Dynamic Expression of the Movement of a Dancer") that impresses the most.

Driven to abstraction

With two major exhibitions in Flanders in the past 20 years, Georges Vantongerloo has finally received his due. A century ago, though, he had to move to the Netherlands, where he associated himself with De Stijl, a group of artists that saw geometrical abstract art as their ideal. Although the influence of Mondrian is sometimes very palpable, Vantongerloo found his own, more colourful niche within geometric abstraction. It's no coincidence that his "Studie nr III" has made it to the poster of the exhibition. The year Vantongerloo arrived in The Hague, 1917, Marthe Donas settled in France. The artist, who signed her work as Tour Donas, collaborated with another *émigré*, Ukrainian Alexander Archipenko. The comparison of their work shows that Donas' has better withstood the test of time. Her cubistic paintings, like the amazing "Vrouwenbuste" ("Female Bust"), are playful and original. Her cubism at times tries to bridge the gap with geometric abstraction, as "Stilleven" ("Still Life") shows. After this breath-taking opening



Marthe Donas' "Female Bust"



"Study nr III" by George Vantongerloo

salvo, the rest of the exhibition is organised thematically. The sections Figuratie defiguratie (Figuration Defiguration) and Menselijk figuur, landschap en stad (Human Figure, Landscape and City) track the evolution towards abstraction. In "De siren" ("The Siren") by Paul

Joostens, the seductive woman is still recognisable, albeit partially, whereas you really have to fix on the "De naaister" ("The Seamstress") by Prosper De Troyer to spot some parts of the woman's body. Others, like Jan Cockx and Jos Léonard, base their abstractions on landscapes

and cityscapes.

A striking painting in the later section is the delirious "Haven" ("Port") by Floris Jaspers, though the wild brushstrokes he used are exceptional. In his other work he prefers, as do the vast majority of the painters present, a more restrained approach, as is clearly shown in the two rooms devoted to Rigide abstractie (Rigid Abstraction). Then there's Oscar Servranckx, whose abstractions evolve from frivolous to austere, and Felix De Boeck. The latter, who died in 1995 aged 97, is mostly known for the religiously and spiritually inspired paintings he made most of his life. But the geometric abstractions he painted round 1920 are as interesting and riveting as Vantongerloo's. His "Compositie met kruisende lijnen" ("Composition with Crossing Lines") and "Abstracte compositie met kubus" ("Abstract Composition with Cube") are among the highlights of the exhibition.

Though Paul Joostens started out as a cubist, he soon moved to Dadaist collages. He gets a small room all to himself, which acts as a segue between the first- and second-floor spaces. It's not surprising, since Joostens was an outsider in the avant-garde of his time. His works are presented next to international Dadaists Kurt Schwitters and Francis Picabia, a comparison that places Joostens on the same level.

Branching out

Modernism doesn't confine itself to paintings and sculpture: Literature and theatre are represented, too. You'll find publications of the time, as well as a (semi-)dark room where films by Charles Deukeleire and Henri Storck are projected (though the circumstances in which you're watching them are not ideal). On the second floor, there's ample room for modernism in photography, architecture and design. Photographer Willy Kessels impresses, as he always does. It's interesting to see that some of the artists whose paintings you've seen earlier (Vantongerloo, Jozef Peeters) also designed tableware, furniture, vases and tapestry. Vantongerloo even drafted a "Project for a bridge". And the world-famous French architect Le Corbusier developed a new city for Antwerp's left bank, a project that never was realised. *Modernism* is a fascinating exhibition that alters the perspective of Belgium's art scene of a century ago. It's an extensive exhibition that asks a few hours of the visitor's time, leaving you tired but satisfied.

UNTIL 28 JUNE

Museum of Fine Arts

Citadelpark, Ghent

► www.mskgent.be

WEEK IN ARTS & CULTURE

Chef Peter Goossens' Hof van Cleve restaurant in Kruishoutem, East Flanders, has made a comeback on *Restaurant* magazine's hugely influential list of **The World's 50 Best Restaurants**, announced last week. After tumbling 27 places to number 42 last year, it's back up to number 25, the biggest gain of any restaurant on the list. Hof van Cleve is the only Belgian restaurant in the top 50, though two more made it into the top 100: Kobe Desramaults' In De Wulf climbed from 92 to 72, while Gert De Mangeleer's Hertog Jan made the list for the first time, at number 78.

► www.theworlds50best.com

A **baby penguin was born** at the Sea Life Centre in Blankenberge last week, a first for the marine life aquarium and sanctuary. It brings the total number of Humboldt penguins at the centre to 11, but seven more are expected to hatch in the coming weeks. Two sets of penguin parents can be seen via a live webcam. The baby penguins have to remain inside for several weeks but visitors should be able to catch a glimpse by mid-June. Humboldt penguins, native to Peru and Chile, are one of the most endangered species in the world.

► www.tinyurl.com/sealifewebcam

Wouter Bouvijn's *Tweesprong* (*Crossroads*) has been nominated for a **Student Academy Award** in the category Best Foreign Film. A graduate of the RITS film school in Brussels, his half-hour, live-action short is the story of a young man who struggles with the decision to take the test that will determine if he has the same genetic disease from which his father has died. Brussels-based director Jaco Van Dormael won the very first foreign award when it was launched in 1981. This year's winners are announced on 8 June.

► www.oscars.org/awards/saa

Singer and TV actress Andrea Croonenberghs is releasing a CD this week with **songs specially devised for those learning Dutch**. The songs from *Wie ben jij?* (Who Are You?) come from her one-woman show that she tours with the theatre group Fast Forward, specialised in stage productions for Dutch language learners. The CD, meant for all ages, also comes with a book of word puzzles.

► www.fast-forward.be

It's opera, but not as you know it

Opera XXI

Ian Mundell

Towards the end of last year, a group of musicians gathered in the bicycle tunnel that runs under the river Scheldt in Antwerp. It included a violinist, a harpist, a guitarist and someone playing a long Tibetan trumpet. There were also a large number of mechanical birds in cages. Was it some sort of art happening? Were they *avant-garde* buskers? In fact, it was the beginning of an opera. *Hold Your Horses* by Flemish composer and performer Serge Verstockt is all about breaking boundaries. It starts long before the doors open for the performance in the conventional sense, and there is a hint that the audience may be forced to leave before it is over. It unfolds in real life and online, combining flesh-and-blood performers with digital artists, or “divas and avatars” as the opera’s manifesto neatly puts it. The starting point for all of this transgression is French grand opera, a form so rigid that moving elements, like a ballet, from one act to another was enough to cause a scandal in Parisian society in the 19th century. Yet it was also a grand opera, Daniel Auber’s *La Muette de Portici*, which inspired the riots that

lead to the Belgian revolution of 1825. In designing his “trash grand opera in 27 acts” Verstockt has not only questioned the form but looked for the sort of protests an opera might inspire today. With a libretto based on Gene Sharp’s *198 Methods of Nonviolent Action*, the result is an exploration of civil disobedience and revolt that ranges from the Arab Spring to the Occupy movement. *Hold Your Horses* (pictured) is one of four world premieres taking place during the Vlaamse Opera’s Opera XXI festival, and perhaps the most experimental. The others are less radical in form, but equally happy to explore new ways of combining contemporary music and theatrical performance. *Escorial* is a tragic farce about power, violence and indifference, set in the court of a king who has murdered his queen. Noted Flemish actor Josse De Pauw plays the lead and is also responsible for devising and directing the piece, based on a 1927 play by the Brussels author Michel de Ghelderode. Dirk Roofthoof plays the jester who mourns the queen, while Sam Louwyck appears as the executioner. *Tragedy of a Friendship*, meanwhile, is

an exploration of the tense relationship between Richard Wagner and Friedrich Nietzsche, devised by artist Jan Fabre, writer Stefan Hertmans and the young German composer Moritz Eggert. Finally, *The Solitude of the Hedgehog* is a performance for children based on the work of Dutch author Toon Tellegen. The festival also offers another chance to see *Lilith*, in which Adam and his first wife talk about their failed relationship. Lilith is played by American soprano Claron McFadden, who devised the piece, which combines classical music, jazz, sampling, theatre, film and poetry. Jeroen Willems plays Adam, in a video performance recorded before the Dutch actor died in December last year. *Have you ever wanted to sing along with your favourite aria? De Munt in Brussels gives you the chance on 12 May in celebration of European Opera Days. A group sing-along will take place on Muntplein, while inside the opera house is a concert of music by Wagner and Verdi and video clips from famous performances. All activities are free. Visit www.demunt.be for details*



14-25 May | Vlaamse Opera Antwerp & Ghent, de Singel Antwerp | www.operaxxi.be

FOOD & DRINK

Taste of Antwerp

They couldn't have chosen a better location for the seventh edition of Taste of Antwerp: Waagnatie is an impressive outdoor site boasting historical cranes from the port of Antwerp, the trendy Bocadero Beach and a priceless view of the Scheldt river. Thirty top local restaurants, bistros and chefs are catering this culinary festival with plenty of gorgeous appetisers. Guest of honour is the Dutch chef Sergio Herman of the three-Michelin-starred Oud Sluis, who is offering a sneak preview of his new Antwerp restaurant La Chapelle. Two-star chef Viki Geunes of Restaurant 't Zilte will be there, as well as Flemish TV star Nathalie Meskens representing her new restaurant Yam Thai. National pride Pierre Marcolini has got chocolate covered. All you need to do is show up and start eating. **Robyn Boyle**



9-12 MAY | Waagnatie, Rijnkaai | www.antwerpenproeft.be

MORE FOOD & DRINK THIS WEEK

Beveren (East Flanders)

Aardbeifeesten: Annual strawberry festival featuring a petanque tournament, old-timer cars, sing-alongs, bike rides, DJs and a “strawberry princess” pageant
MAY 8-12 in the Meisele district
www.aardbeifeesten.be

Ghent

Gent Smaakt: The third edition of the culinary event takes place under Ghent's new Stadshal and features a giant food court and open kitchens serving up local as well as world cuisine, plus concerts and cooking demonstrations
MAY 8-12 at Stadshal, Emile Braunplein 1
www.gentsmaakt.be

VISUAL ARTS

Raoul Wallenberg

The Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg spared 100,000 Jews from deportation during the Second World War. The son of an influential family, he was sent to Budapest in 1944, where he proceeded to produce some 100,000 false Swedish passports. Because Sweden was officially neutral during the war, Jews with a Swedish passport could not be deported. “To me, there is no other choice,” were Wallenberg’s famous words. This exhibition about him was previously shown in New York, Washington, Moscow, Tel Aviv, Berlin and Toronto and now takes up temporary residence in Mechelen’s Kazerne Dossin, the museum and documentation centre housed in the barracks used by the Nazis to organise deportations in Belgium. **RB**



Until 15 June | Kazerne Dossin, Mechelen | www.kazernedossin.eu

MORE VISUAL ARTS THIS WEEK

Bruges

Peter De Bruyne - On Location: Works by the Flemish photographer based on scenes from American films
Until JUN 2 at 44 Gallery, Genthof 44
www.44gallery.com

Brussels

Changing States - Contemporary Irish Art & Francis Bacon's Studio: A collection of material from Francis Bacon's studio and works by 20 contemporary Irish artists who explore the relationship between local experiences and global perspectives, in celebration of Ireland's presidency of the EU
Until MAY 19 at Bozar, Ravensteinstraat 23
www.bozar.be

Ghent

Koen Theys - Home-made Victories: The first major retrospective of the Brussels artist, one of the founding fathers of local video art
Until AUG 18 at SMAK, Citadelpark
www.smak.be

CONCERT

Ian McCulloch

Liverpool post-punk band Echo & The Bunnymen's frontman Ian McCulloch may have led one of the most important bands of the 1980s, but he was known as much for his messy hairdo, pouty lips and loud mouth as for his musical talent. But then he launched a solo career at the end of the '80s and proved with his first album *Candleland* that he could be a success story without the band. His albums have not come quickly, but this fourth one makes up for it: a double CD, which includes the new album, *Pro Patria Mori*. "I felt the same magic in the air as I felt when recording [Bunnymen classics] 'The Killing Moon' and 'Nothing Lasts Forever'," McCulloch said. It's paired with his new live album, *Holy Ghosts*. Expect both old and new at this concert, too. **RB**



17 May from 19.30 | Vooruit, Ghent | www.vooruit.be

MORE CONCERTS THIS WEEK

Brussels

Puggy: There are still a few tickets left for these rescheduled shows of the popular Brussels acoustic rock band, but order them up the moment you read this

MAY 12-13 20.00 at Ancienne Belgique, Anspachlaan 110

► www.abconcerts.be

Hasselt

Parker: The newest addition to Flanders' post hardcore landscape, made up of musicians risen from the ashes of bands Campus, When Hope Escapes and Her Concept, present their debut album

MAY 10 20.00 at Muziekodroom, Bootstraat 9

► www.muziekodroom.be

Ostend

Will Tura: The Flemish crooner takes you on a trip through time, from his well-known classics to more recent songs

MAY 17 20.00 at Kursaal Ostend

► www.kursaalostende.be

FILM

Are You Series?

A brand new festival of television series from Belgium and across the globe. Conferences and screenings explore every aspect of fictional TV genres, from a pure production point of view to a sociological perspective, with all the cultural and literary implications that go with it. The conferences range from a round-table discussion by experts on the different issues and *modus operandi* of producing a television series in, say, Belgium as opposed to Israel, to insightful talks about the collaboration between producer and screenwriter. Don't miss the talk by Dr Sam Friedman, who will explore key differences in British comedy tastes and explain how humour increasingly functions as a powerful tool of cultural distinction. Of course you'll see award-winning series, too, including British series *Karaoke* and *Cold Lazarus*, Australian TV series *The Slap* and Flemish series *Clan* (pictured). **RB**



10-12 May | Bozar, Brussels | www.bozar.be

MORE FILM THIS WEEK

Antwerp

Nagisa Oshima series: Friday and Sunday evening screenings of films by the Japanese director best known for his 1960s art-house films with plenty of crime, sex and violence

MAY 10-JUN 30 at Cinema Zuid, Lakenstraat 14

► www.cinemazuid.be

Brussels

Michael Haneke: An onstage interview with the master Austrian director of such films as *The White Ribbon* and *Amour*, who will talk about his relationship with music and cinema (in French), followed by a screening of *Caché* (in French with Dutch subtitles)

MAY 9 20.00 at Bozar, Ravensteinstraat 23

► www.bozar.be

Leuven

Docville: Annual international Documentary Film Festival, the largest of its kind in Belgium

Until MAY 11 across Leuven

► www.docville.be

CAFÉ SPOTLIGHT

D'Hanekeef Keizerstraat 8, Mechelen

D'Hanekeef is bursting with roosters and hens. The bar's walls, from ceiling to floor, are plastered with cockerel posters, while chicken statues adorn every ledge. So much so that an innocent visitor might think that this hearty pub in the centre of Mechelen was a den of Walloon sympathies, given that the cockerel is the symbol of Flanders' francophone neighbours.

But, says co-owner Thomas Van Humbeeck, the bar's chicken connection has far more to do with Mechelen's history than regionalist identities. One hundred years ago,

Mechelen was replete with outdoor markets, some of which have given their names to squares and streets in this historic trading town. D'Hanekeef, which first opened in 1879 and is one of the town's oldest bars, was the drinking site of choice for the chicken farmers, whose market was adjacent on Keizerstraat, or King's Street. They would leave their empty chicken baskets stacked outside while seeking refreshment inside – hence the name D'Hanekeef, or the Chicken Coop.

Indeed, D'Hanekeef has retained

much market town charm, with its dark oak and chequered tiles. A genuine cross-section of Mechelen society frequents this watering hole. "Kids from the local schools pop in for hot chocolate, lawyers and judges from the nearby courts, doctors and policemen and students from the local polytechnic," says Van Humbeeck.

They can be seen digesting a Gouden Carolus, the local beer named in honour of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, while reading about Racing Mechelen or Racing KV's latest footballing exploits.

All the while the imperious baroque church of Sint-Pieter-en-Paul across the street looms over the 1789 townhouse wherein D'Hanekeef is located. Built in 1670 by the Jesuits, the church took over the former royal palace where such historical figures as Charles V, Philip II of Spain and Mary of Hungary lived and where the Jesuit Saint John Berchmans studied.

A poignant reminder that, for all the easy joviality of D'Hanekeef, Mechelen remains home to the Belgian Archdiocese and is a town of much historical importance.



Nicholas Hirst

© Nicholas Hirst

BITE

Robyn Boyle

Aksum Coffee House ★★☆☆

Finns Jarmo and Staffan are passionate about the African continent. They've spent most of their adult lives studying its cultures, arts and – you guessed it – coffees. They started Aksum as a way of promoting these African riches in the European capital.

For the best beans, they go to the mother country of all coffee: Ethiopia. Aksum roasts the beans daily on site, and you can even take a few bags of it home with you.

Aksum is not exclusively Ethiopian, however, even if one of the baristas is from there. You can also order an *attaya*, sweet Senegalese tea, *café touba*, Senegalese coffee with jar pepper or amarula coffee, made with espresso and marula cream from South Africa.

The exposed red brick walls are used to exhibit works of alternating African artists, and there's even a small shop at the back with African-made jewellery and other design objects.

The warm, jovial space and its location on Hoogstraat in the middle of the hip Marollen district have served Aksum well for the past two-and-a-half years; it's always crowded when I visit. So I'm surprised to hear they are moving to a new location this month, closer to the Grote Markt.

The Aksum team has turned another gem of an old building into a cosy, aromatic coffee house which, while smaller than the previous one, boasts a large and sunny terrace – a rarity for a coffee house. They'll open at the space on 11 May.

Meanwhile, back on Hoogstraat, I make use of the free



wi-fi while waiting for friends to arrive. When they do, we order a round of coffees: one latte, one cappuccino and two americanos (espresso weakened slightly with hot water). The drinks come in round glasses, allowing you to compare the lovely earth tones. Our latte and cappuccino are perfectly pulled, right down to the heart shape drawn into the foam. All the coffee is full-bodied and full of flavour.

What could be better with coffee than a little something sweet? We take one slice of chocolate pie to share, and... "Which one do you recommend?" I ask one of the friendly

baristas, unable to decide between the passion fruit, cherry and lime pies. "Passion fruit cream and almond," he replies without hesitating.

And he's right. The crust is a light and airy *dacquoise*, while the whipped butter cream filling has a nice tartness from the fruit. We like it even more than the 70%-cacao chocolate pie, which is also dreamy – dark chocolatey, gooey and brownie-like without being overly sweet.

The pie (and quiche) on offer at Aksum come from local bakery Secret Gourmand, which specialises in all kinds of sweet and savoury pies.

All in all, not a bad way to spend a Sunday afternoon, and that for less than €5 per person.

► www.aksumcoffeehouse.com

- 📍 Spoormakersstraat 60, Brussels; 0484.07.76.95
- 🕒 From 11 May: Wed-Fri 14.00-19.00; Sat-Sun 10.00-19.00
- € Cake and coffee: €5-€7
- 📖 Ethiopian coffee house and roaster with strong coffees and delicious quiches and pies

TALKING DUTCH

Philip Ebels

Language fit for a queen

Every now and then, something happens over the northern border of which you can't help taking note. Like last week's *troonwisseling*, change of the throne, or abdication, if only for all the glitter and glamour and the opportunity it gives us to talk a little bit about the language of royalty.

Guest of honour, of course, was Willem-Alexander, *de nieuwe koning der Nederlanden*, the new king of the Netherlands (*der* is an old-fashioned way of saying *van de*, of the). He used to be *een prins*, a prince. In fact, he used to be *de troonopvolger*, the heir to the throne (*volgen* is to follow; *opvolgen* is to succeed), a title that now belongs to his 10-year-old daughter, Amalia, who, according to a satirical news website last week, had her first formal meeting

with her British counterpart, Prince Charles.

Much attention also went to Beatrix, who had been *koningin* (with emphasis on the last syllable) for the past 33 years. She returns to the rank of *prinses* (also with emphasis on the last syllable). "*Ik ben gelukkig en dankbaar u voor te stellen aan uw nieuwe koning*," she told a teeming mass of orange-clad subjects from atop the balcony of *het koninklijk paleis*, the royal palace, in Amsterdam. I am happy and thankful to present to you your new king.

And then there was Maxima, *de nieuwe koningin*, who is as beautiful as her name and should serve as an example to anyone who wishes to learn Dutch. An Argentinian citizen when she met her future husband, she had to be able to speak Dutch

on live television not long after. Which she did amazingly well, famously calling the future king of the Netherlands "*een beetje dom*", a little stupid, for something he had done.

Dutch language magazine *OnzeTaal*, Our Language, gave her a nine out of 10. She herself said about her command of the Dutch language: "*Prima tot nu toe, maar ik moet het verbeteren, natuurlijk*." Fine until now, but I need to improve it, of course.

Sure, for several months she did little else but learn Dutch from the best teachers money can buy. She does seem to have a particular knack for languages, but it also proves what a little determination can achieve. Maybe Maxima could give some pointers to the Belgian royals.

The last word...

Down to earth

"We should be proud of what we have. A good pack of fries with mayonnaise, nobody does it like we do."

Flemish chef Peter Goossens' restaurant rose 17 places in the world rankings, but he keeps his feet on the ground

Cost of living

"Urban improvement always has a price. Plant pots on the town square can easily cost €20,000."

Ann Van de Steen, alderwoman for public works in Aalst, explains why the city paid €120,000 for an "artistic" bus shelter

Man of the world

"No, I can't sum up all 589. I couldn't even point to all the cities on a map."

US ambassador Howard Gutman has fulfilled his pledge to visit every municipality in the country

Dogged persistence

"I will be back as soon as possible."

Michel Vandenbosch, co-founder and chair of animal rights organisation Gaia, has suffered a cerebral haemorrhage and requires rehabilitation

NEXT WEEK
IN FLANDERS TODAY

Cover story

We talk a lot about biotechnology in these pages because Flanders has some ground-breaking research going on in the area. So science writer Senne Starckx has decided to go take a closer look at these companies to find out how their use of living organisms gets products on the market

Tourism

You might think that a tour of the port of Antwerp doesn't sound all that interesting, but news editor Alan Hope was surprised at what he discovered on this free coach tour, from the cutting-edge systems of industry to the old fort that defended Antwerp against Spanish raiders

Arts

Napoleon first visited Antwerp as a consul of the French state in 1803. Though most of us fall in love with the medieval city on first sight, he found it old and stuffy and wanted to transform it into a modern shipping metropolis. The city museum MAS has the story on the eventual emperor's influence on Antwerp – and they've got his hat, too – in a new exhibition



The new royal couple at the investiture ceremony last month