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That Leuven feeling - visiting the home of Stella Artois

SENSATIONAL headlines like 'Stella Brewer InBev Set To Swallow Bud' sent shivers down the spines of the inhabitants of Leuven in 2008, when the Belgian beer giant took over Anheuser-Busch for a whopping \$US52 billion. The birthplace of Stella Artois was terrified that its role as global HQ of the world's largest brewer would be usurped by New York. Fears were laid to rest in early 2009, though, when the annual shareholders' meeting voted that the capital of Flemish Brabant - population 100,000 - would retain its historic role and the Big Apple would only be "a special office to help manage the company".

Sentiment is rare in big business these days. But AB InBev, as the company was renamed, released a statement that would bring a tear to the eye of even a hardened cynic. "Our company started in Leuven in one shape or form in 1366," said CEO Carlos Brito. "That is valuable. And even the fact that the United States now generates 40 per cent of AB InBev's earnings does not make up for that. One of the biggest things we have in the United States is imports: they come from Europe. From Leuven. The whole thing about the heritage, the source and the romance." And whoever thought that those who drink beer think beer?

AB InBev employs about 3000 people in Belgium, mostly in Leuven. But the first thing you notice when you hit the town, about 40 minutes' drive from Brussels, are crowds of students on clapped-out bikes. Far from just being a one-company town producing over 10 million hectolitres of beer a year, Leuven also houses Belgium's oldest university, with the first colleges founded in 1425. That's about 60 years after the first brewery opened its doors, but Sebastien Artois didn't show up for work as the master brewer at the Den Horen brewery until 1707. The name Den Horen is still used on the Stella Artois label, which is a bit of Johnny-come-lately in the scheme of things. First brewed as a Christmas beer - stella means star in Latin - in 1926, the

festive beer became such an immediate hit with the locals, company legend has it, that they have been brewing it ever since.

Their descendants aren't so fond of the amber fluid today, it seems. Belgian beer consumption has dropped by 20 per cent in the past decade. But such stats are hard to believe as you walk the cobbled streets of downtown Leuven lined with over 170 bars. Stylish boutiques and pastry shops are also as commonplace as the cobbled courtyards that lie behind stone-arched entrances. As you round the corner into the Grote Markt - the sort of spectacular medieval town square Belgium is famous for - three things skewer your attention: the 236 statues of Leuven's medieval worthies lining the 15th century facade of the town hall; the vast spires of St Peter's Church; and Fonske - a statue of a student holding a book in one hand and pouring a tankard of beer over his head with the other. A scene all the more affecting because Leuven was almost completely destroyed during World War I and painstakingly rebuilt in the 1920s and '30s.

If the weather is nippy - and even if it's not - try to stop for lunch at the Grote Markt's most historic restaurant - t'Zwart Schaap. The name translates as 'the black sheep' but you certainly won't feel like an outsider as you tuck into classic Belgian dishes in the restaurant's wood-panelled interior. You can look at the menu but be sure to order the house special - rabbit cooked in Gueuze, the blended lambic beer traditionally served in Champagne bottles.

In the nearby Oude Markt (Old Market), you'll find about 40 cheek-by-jowl drinking dens which describe themselves as "the longest bar in Europe". The modest little brewery Domus - which morphed into the giant Stella Artois brewery covering the entire north-eastern edge of town - is located here and you can stop and sip a beer and drink to where it all started. If you need a bit of peace and quiet, slip around the corner to the 14th century Grote Begijnhof, another medieval institution where women of good

family could lead lives of contemplation without taking the final step of becoming a nun. It's not that quiet these days, though; the UNESCO World Heritage-listed site now houses students and visiting academics.

Old-style markets aside, shopping is as much of a serious pastime in Leuven as drinking. Big-name stores cluster along Bondgenotenlaan and the traffic-free Diestestraat. If quirky boutiques and interior design stores are more to your fancy, head for Mechelsestraat and Parijsstraat. Rain is a constant companion in low-lying Belgium and that's a good thing. You can either tramp the streets with your umbrella working overtime or duck into a larger number of Leuven's many quality, rather than cosy, restaurants.

There's something for everyone at Tres on Muntstraat (www.tr3simple.be) from tapas through Mediterranean, Asian and luxe Belgian cuisine - a very chic eatery behind a medieval façade. They don't mind if you only want to sip one glass of wine, either. The edgy De Werf ("Under Construction") on Hogeschoolplein serves everything from pasta to wraps, but go local with een man's brood - a scooped-out loaf filled with a rich stew. The name means "one man's bread" but the menu issues a warning that it's more than enough for two (www.dewerf-leuven.be). If Michelin-starred establishments are a siren call to you, head for Couvert Couvert (www.couvertcouvert.be) for toney selections such as guinea fowl from Bresse Rossini and scallops with hazelnuts from Piedmont and Parmesan. The wine list is outstanding.

Leuven doesn't offer much in the way of long walks to work off a hefty lunch - everything of note is within a 20-minute stroll from the centre of town. The Kruidtuin botanic gardens, like the university, are the oldest in Belgium. Founded in 1738, the avenues of plants are punctuated by Baroque statuary and textbook gurgling fountains. A combo ticket to the treasury of St Peter's Church reveals the greatest work of Flemish master Dirk Bouts - *The Last Supper* - while the Leopold Vander Kelen Museum, located in the 16th century

mansion of one of the town's former mayors, is filled with period rooms and displays the sort of historic wealth that originally attracted Sebastien Artois to set up shop.

Do you know that Hoegaarden is the fastest-growing European beer in the world in popularity? I didn't either until I visited its birthplace, only a short drive from Leuven. Originally made from wheat, barley, orange and spiced coriander, Hoegaarden is the king of wit (white) beers in Belgium. Top fermented and re-fermented in the bottle, it has a long history stretching back to the 15th century but production stopped entirely in the 1950s. Then in 1966 a master brewer named Pierre Celis revived wit beer production in Hoegaarden. And although AB InBev bought the brand in 1985, the commercial giant has stayed true to Celis's principles, except to launch more "female friendly" Rosee (raspberry) and Citron (lemon) versions in 2007 and 2008. The absolute pinnacle of the brand, though, is Hoegaarden Grand Cru - a full, fruit style with hints of vanilla citrus and clove, it's guaranteed to have beer connoisseurs in raptures.

The best place to toast Hoegaarden's spectacular revival - which has seen it win a swag of international awards from a gold award in the speciality ales section at the Australian Beer Awards to a Platinum Award at the World Beer Championships in the US - is Kouterhof, the restaurant which adjoins the heritage De Kluis Brewery (www.kouterhof.be). A great lunch of traditional game dishes, mussels and spectacular pommes frites on the side should be followed by a tour (tickets are free with a meal at the Kouterhof) of the adjacent Hoegaarden museum - t'Witgebrouw (www.twitgebrouw.be). In another triumph of feeling over commercial reality, AB InBev stopped brewing beer in the town of Hoegaarden in 2005 because of efficiency concerns about the old brewery. But there were no dry eyes in town on a wintry February day in 2008 when the beer brewing giant reinstalled new fermentation tanks in the proud little town that could. 

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