

Eating Out in Amsterdam: Way Beyond Herring



Herman Wouters for The New York Times

A salad at Restaurant As. [More Photos »](#)

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Published: January 20, 2012

NEARLY 10 years ago I went to [Amsterdam](#) in search of Dutch food; for the most part what I found was Mediterranean. This past fall I tried again. To put it nicely, I failed less miserably. Because although it is safe to say that the Dutch have yet to rediscover their culinary heritage in the fashion of some of their nearby neighbors, there has been much progress.

I was happy, for example, to see komijnekaas — cumin cheese, which is pretty much as it sounds — even though it is not a world-beater, in place of Parmesan; to see vegetables boiled and mashed, not grilled; to see butter not olive oil; and turbot instead of tuna. When I traveled here 10 years ago I found little more than herring (incredibly good, and possibly the best way to spend 2 euros) and bitterballen (meat croquettes). This time I found mackerel, mustard, horseradish, zander (pike-perch), lovage, nettles, endive and root vegetables galore.

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Still, it should not be forgotten that the [Netherlands](#) has been an international trading hub for hundreds of years and that its most distinctive contribution to global cuisine may have been the introduction of a portion of Indonesian food to northern [Europe](#). (An entire generation of adventuresome food lovers, myself included, ate its first Indian food in [London](#), Vietnamese food in [Paris](#), Turkish food in [Berlin](#) and Indonesian food in Amsterdam. Possibly sad, but true.) So a certain eclecticism is legitimate.

My goal, however, was to find more evidence of Dutch food, and after much research and eating I found it. Nothing here is Dutch the way a trattoria in Lucca is Tuscan, but at least in these restaurants you'll know what country you're in.

Restaurant As

After all of that, I must confess that my favorite restaurant here is kind of Dutch-French-Californian, with the inevitable bit of Italian thrown in. The chef, Sander Overeinder, trained at Chez Panisse, which you might suspect when confronted by a plate of locally made raw pancetta with slow-roasted endive and apple vinegar. Fantastic stuff, as is the beet [salad](#) with vinegar and clove cheese. Air-dried beef was another thing I could've eaten more of. Bread, baked here, is superb.

There is a fine chicken accompanied by potatoes mashed with chopped raw endive and some bacon and onion. (Many classic Dutch dishes feature mashed vegetables in uncommon combinations; they're good.) There is also a perfectly sautéed piece of zander with a bay leaf beautifully threaded through its skin and rich, ultra-rare venison chops on cubes of narsnin turnip celeriac and carrot with a jus of stock butter sage and

on cubes of parsnip, turnip, celery and carrot with a jus of stock, butter, sage and juniper.

So the food may be international, but as I hope you've gathered, it's Dutch-oriented and really good. And that's not the best part — nor is the moderately priced and quite interesting wine list, which coughed up a lovely dry Vouvray.

The best part is that As occupies a former church, built in the 1960s, and the scene is outstanding. In fine weather, much of the action is outside, where the kitchen resides year round. Here, away from the city center (though easy to get to) there is enough room to raise a little flora and fauna, including chickens. Tables, some communal, are scattered inside and out. And there is an overall pleasantness and serenity that pervades. The building is round, made of concrete, lots of old wood and metal, and makes you feel good. At least it does at lunchtime in the fall, and I can imagine it's the same at other times too.

Restaurant As, Prinses Irenestraat 19; (31-20) 644-0100. A three-course meal for two is about 92 euros (about \$120, at \$1.25 to the euro). (None of the prices here include drinks or tips.) And do not confuse As with [de Kas](#), which is in a greenhouse, about which I've written before, and which is also very good.

Wilde Zwijnen

Little did I know when we traveled (by tram, the second-best way to get around this town after a bicycle) to this nice neighborhood in the eastern part of town that I'd wind up in ... Brooklyn. Not really, obviously, but a noisy, hip place, pretty far from the town center with beat-up furniture, minimal décor, reasonable prices, a lively open kitchen, terrific food, piercings, tattoos and people of all types and persuasions inside and out.

And, as in the most-fun places in Brooklyn, there is an emphasis on using local ingredients whenever possible, including wild boar (which is what wilde zwijnen means). Ingredients like this do you no good whatsoever if you don't know what to do with them, but the staff here does. We had local sausage and lentils spiced with cumin and tarragon — an odd marriage, but one that worked — and raviolis stuffed with rainbow chard and a buttery sauce of a Dutch cheese not unlike Parmesan. (All the cheeses here are local, and trying them out is a pleasure.) We also had a salad of exotic greens, and by "exotic" I mean I had trouble identifying them.

These were followed by a piece of turbot in a sauce of what tasted like butter and fish stock with celery and langoustines, all very nice if a tad bland, and venison chops (yes, twice in one week!) with fresh cèpes (porcini, but we're not calling them that here), smoked potato and parsnip chips.

In perusing the current menu, I have reason to believe it's become a little bolder since my visit. I would have liked a chance to eat both here and at As again. That should tell you something.

Wilde Zwijnen, Javaplein 23; (31-20) 463-3043; wildezwijnen.com. A three-course meal for two is about 70 euros.

Blauw

If you are in Amsterdam, you kind of have to eat Indonesian food. Put another way, unless you travel to [Indonesia](#) regularly you would be a fool not to. To my knowledge, an average Indonesian restaurant here is better than the best in the States, and a good one is a terrific eating experience. Blauw (it means blue, but the place is red; go figure) is one. It's also best visited after a walk through the gorgeous [Vondelpark](#).

You can order à la carte here but unless you know Indonesian cuisine well you'll be guessing. The safe bet, which amounts to a tasting menu, is called rijsttafel (rice table). After deciding on whether you want meat or not, you will be presented with a dozen or so dishes, many of which you'll never identify but most of which you'll enjoy. If you're a [vegan](#), ask about whether the nonmeat option will work for you, as there might be dried shrimp, or meat stock, or even something farther off your path in some of these dishes. There will certainly be egg.

Friends have told me that these kinds of restaurants must be judged by their sambal sauce and by their krupuk (shrimp crackers), which are served with peanut satay sauce. I don't know if that's true, but both the sauces and the krupuk were super here. So was the [pumpkin](#)-coconut soup, the fried bananas and the hard-boiled eggs in tomato sauce

— a dish you see almost everywhere in [Asia](#) and Latin America, and one for which I have a weakness regardless of its origin.

No doubt, part of Blauw's popularity is that it's far slicker than your average hole-in-the-wall. In fact it's downright pretty; one whole wall is dominated by a striking family portrait, and there's a balcony. There are candles set into the tabletops to keep plates warm — presumably because it takes so long to meander through the various dishes, which come more or less at once. There is also air-conditioning to counter them.

Blauw, Amstelveenseweg 158-160; (31-20) 675-5000; restaurantblauw.nl. An I-dare-you-to-finish-this meal for two is about 70 euros.

Lastage

I generally make a point of avoiding Michelin-starred restaurants, and there are fewer than a dozens in Amsterdam. Though Lastage was not one when I visited, it felt like one, and soon enough realized its destiny. So my enthusiasm here is somewhat stifled: this place is trying way too hard. It isn't that it's not lovely: it is. Elegant and small, it is effectively in an apartment with just 30 seats. The design is also clever, lending guests a touch of privacy and even a little luxury. It isn't that the service isn't terrific; it is. And it isn't that the food isn't good; most of it is. It's that it screams, "We are a Michelin one-star restaurant and we are talented enough to warrant it!"

But do you need, for example, foie gras mousse in eel jelly with a checkerboard slice of eel and chive mousses, with cherry jam and frisée? If you answer "yes," you may also like sea bass with mozzarella and gin, crunchy quinoa, egg, romesco sauce and cress purée.

When restraint is shown here, the food is much more likable, to me at least. Cream of artichoke with bacon and capers, kidneys with sauerkraut and mustard seeds, snails with garlic, blood sausage and chervil — these I could get behind.

You have to be in the mood for fancy here; if you are, it ranks high. If you're not, remind yourself to keep the sarcasm in check.

Lastage, Geldersekade 29; (31-20) 737-0811; restaurantlastage.nl. A three-course meal for two is about 75 euros, but the courses are small so you may want the four-, five- or six-course menu, all of which are more, up to about 135 euros for two.

Greetje

This brings us back to the beginning: Greetje serves the most honest and thoroughly Dutch food of the restaurants discussed here. Sadly, the food is not the best executed, but that, of course, can change.

Meanwhile, the bread is served with pork fat mashed with apple and onion (there's good butter, too), and I can only imagine how happy that would make you if you grew up eating it. Two soups — cream of chicory with bacon, and onion — were served in cute tureens atop doilies; they were underwhelming. The best dish, by far, was a fillet of sea bass with nettles and lots of butter.

But rather than point out flaws, let me say that the servings are more than generous and that the very authentic food doesn't have far to go to be more enthusiastically recommended. And the place is in a real old canal house. It's been a restaurant for 80 years, it looks well lived in, neighborhood people actually eat here and — if you're lucky or book far enough in advance — you may get a view.

Greetje, Peperstraat 23-25; (3120) 779-7450; restaurantgreetje.nl. A three-course meal for two is about 75 euros.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: February 5, 2012

An article on Jan. 22 about restaurants in Amsterdam misstated the number of Michelin-starred restaurants there. There are fewer than a dozen; there are not dozens. (There are dozens of Michelin-starred restaurants in the Netherlands.)