



FermentBrussels

a toast to urbanibalism

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Zoë seeks sweetness and finds an intensification in it. A further intensification was provided by the making of an intoxicating drink from honey.
— Carl Kerényi, *Dionysus: An archetypal image of an indestructible life*

FermentBrussels is a fermented honey concoction based on the recipe of a primordial drink, *hydromel*: the first alcoholic drink of human kind (the *ambrosia* of mythology). This brew is remade today from ingredients sourced and scraped from the bowels of Brussels, and in particular from its *microflora* (the invisible army of yeasts that makes Belgian beer and bread unique). This aperitif *made of* the metropolis is also a salute to *urbanibalism*, the practice of feasting on unsuspecting ingredients found within the cityscape. While gathering these along the concrete sprawl of Brussels we met a beekeeper, a brewer, a microbiologist, a phytosociologist as well as several urban dilettantes. What follows is an abbreviated chronicle-recipe of the making-of this urbanic honey ferment.

Urban honey. The honey has been harvested by the most active beekeeper in Brussels: Marc Wollast. For him setting up hives in public locations is part of a campaign for bio-diversity in urban zones. Some of his hives are on the roof of one of the university buildings and he also in the throes of negotiation with the property owner of the Gare du midi to place a constellation of hives on the station's roof. Unlike their fellow country bees, urban bees are able to sup much more nectar from the city's indiscriminate array of flowers. Sourced from brambles on balconies to dandelions in the cemetery, this honey contains an invisible geography defined by the circuits of cross-pollination. This city sourced honey is also surprisingly non-polluted since bees function as natural filters.

Wild yeast. Yeast is an animal of the air. Yeast spores are everywhere. The air of Brussels is home to an intriguing fauna of yeast strains, the *Brettanomyces bruxellensis* (aka “Brett”). Like any yeast, Brett converts sugars into alcohol and CO₂. Its synergy with other local bacteria is what has created the distinctive sour *lambic* beer. The Cantillon brewery, situated west of the Gare du midi, is one of the few remaining breweries to make this unusual beer by spontaneous fermentation: here the beer wort is left in a big open vat just under the perforated roof of the brewery. This way the wort is exposed to the Brussels air until the fermentation begins (7 days or more). Given that a beer wort is comparable to the honey-water mix of hydromel, we decide to use some drops from a bottle of Cantillon lambic, giving us a pre-caught portion of Bruxellensis yeast to inoculate our first batch.

Edible urban plants. Recipes for hydromel were quite common in medieval times. Piquant plant foliage or roots were used not only to flavour the fermenting honey or for medicinal purposes, but also to activate the yeast. This florid-macerated hydromel is called ‘metheglin’. An urban phytosociologist was able to give us advice on where to scout edible communities of urban veg-edibles and rhizomes: along walls, canal embankments, semi-forgotten or unmaintained zones. And so we trekked along the Brussels canal; kilometres of relentless grey and unforgiving spartan walls which seem sterilised of any vegetable vivre. Our luck turned as we found an old station master’s office and a train platform gone to rack and ruin, yet between them was growing a small clique of harvestable varieties including silverweed, burdock, sticky willow and ground elder.

Natural fermentation. By way of unexpected serendipity, we also met hydromel expert and founder of the Belgian *Confrerie de Hydromel* monsieur Michel Poncé. He lives in Ottignies, south-east of Brussels, where he actively brews and ages hundreds of litres of fruit wines from rhubarb wine anno 1998 to bone-dry metheglins. Poncé is a purist and is willing to disseminate his hydromel-chemistry-expertise to thirsty beginners. Taking (some) of his advice in tow we embarked on the first (failed) attempts of fermentation. For this final batch we use the urban honey, a water decoction made from Brusselian burdock roots (*Arctium Lappa* which is very rich in curative properties: an excellent blood cleaner, for instance) and the unique Brussels Brett yeast culture. After a short period of fermentation, the ferment is siphoned into soda bottles which then continues to foam and froth for a few extra days, giving enough time to create a sufficient and enjoyable level of fizz and alcohol.

Although the know-how required to confect this urban brew is still in a rudimentary stage of invention, we’d nonetheless like to raise our tasting cups to the coalition of insects, parasites, histories and to all the small encounters between ourselves and other amateurs and professionals alike to which our urban existence is indebted.

Our indelible thanks to:

Brettanomyces bruxellensis, yeast
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brettanomyces_bruxellensis

Brasserie Cantillon, Brussels
www.cantillon.be

Sandrine Godefroid, urban ecologist, Vrije Universiteit Brussel
www.vub.ac.be/APNA/staff/Godefroid/Godefroid.html

Luv van der Vuyst, microbiologist, Vrije Universiteit Brussel
www.biomatnet.org/secure/Contacts/C1108641.htm

Michel Poncé, Confrerie des Vinificateurs Amateurs, Ottignies
home.scarlet.be/~td132839/cva/publications/guide.htm

Confrerie de Hydromel, Tihange
www.prov-liege.be/confreries/confreries/fine_hydromel.htm

Marc Wollast et les Abeilles dans sa Ville, Brussels
www.apisbruocsella.be

FoAM, Brussels
fo.am/open_sauces

Biography:

Living in Amsterdam, **Wietske Maas** and **Matteo Pasquinelli** assay the experience of the city as a materialistic form of life that grows autonomously from any planned 'city ecologies'. Against the superficial aesthetics of 'food design', they explore the very material necessity and historical roots at the basis of any cuisine. A more spontaneous art of the food chains of the city is their concern and enjoyment. Their practice of gathering and hunting the urban space: *urbanibalism*, is about turning unsuspecting urban ingredients into something edible. In practice their changing community of urban gastronomers — from brewers, butchers to birdwatchers — usually culminates in a monthly social dinner. Urbanibalism and its process of collection, preparation and (public) consumption raises questions about the future of food economy as well as new aesthetic engagements for life in the metropolis.