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###### In Brussels, Frites Are More Than Just Fries

Meeting a doctor at a frites stand in Brussels was fortuitous, in an enabling-poor-behavior sort of way. “It’s obvious that French fries are not very healthy, but that doesn’t mean that you should not have them at least once a week,” said Philippe Wuyts, a psychiatrist I found in line at Frit Flagey, one of the more famed spots for fries in the Belgian capital. “Even as a doctor I would recommend for everybody to have at least one portion.”

Friterie Clémentine, about 45 minutes from the city center of Brussels by tram.

Frites and sauce spill over the edge of a cone at Friterie du Miroir.

A cone of frites at Frit Flagey in Brussels.

Even so, my plan — try at least 10 of the best ***friteries***, as French-speaking Belgians call the stands that dot seemingly every public square — would certainly not be advised by most doctors. So I made a secondary plan: exercise every day (not part of my regular routine) and forgo all other famed Belgian treats: chocolate, waffles and beer, restricting myself instead to salads and similarly light, healthy fare.

There are many ways to deep-fry a potato, but at the stands I visited, the basics were universal: Long strips of Bintje potato, sliced on site to maybe a third-of-an-inch thickness, pre-fried in beef tallow, then fried again to order. Served in overflowing cardboard cones wrapped in paper, eaten with tiny forks and topped with the customer’s choice of at least a dozen sauces, most mayonnaise-based.

In the course of visits to 10 ***fritkots***, as the stands are known to Dutch-speaking Belgians, I did note some difference in the fries: slightly crisper here, a bit undercooked there. But trying to rank them by fries alone was not only impossible in one visit each, but perhaps also unnecessary. For it’s not just about the product, it’s about the ritual: Fries as destination. Fries as family outing. Fries as indulgence. It’s about the staff: friendly or businesslike? And perhaps most of all it’s about the place: preferably in a picturesque public square, probably near a church, preferably with plentiful outdoor seating.

In other words, fries for Belgians are like ice cream for Americans. Even if your stand has the best mint chocolate chip, the experience is ruined if the worker is mean, you can’t sample other flavors and there’s nowhere nice to sit in the sun and lick to your heart’s content.

To set a baseline, I started my survey at [Maison Antoine](http://www.maisonantoine.be/), probably Brussels’ most ballyhooed *fritkot* and often named its best, centrally located on Place Jourdan, surrounded by bars famous for letting you bring in fries to nibble alongside your Chimay. The prices — 2.20 euros for a small, 2.50 for a large (about $3 and $3.40) — were very similar to the fries everywhere. The sizes were, too: a small was way more than enough for one person and a large pretty much a meal for two. (Sauce was generally an additional 50 to 80 cents.)

Maison Antoine’s versions were, of course, delicious, like regular fresh-made fries after a long night of drinking, but without the drinking. They had a richly flavored, crisp-but-giving exterior (attribute that to the animal fat and frying to order) and were fluffy but substantive on the inside (thanks to the Bintje varietal and the Belgian fry sweet spot between shoestring and steak varieties). I chose the sauce Andalouse — mayonnaise, tomato paste, peppers — which, also predictably added a flavor kick (and fat kick, as if that were necessary).

But by the end of the weekend, Maison Antoine was one of my least favorites. The service was surly and the place too much a magnet for outsiders to have a local feel. (It was still miles better than fries in the historic center, where they are served to tourists in gaudy cones the colors of the Belgian flag.)

One of my favorite spots was a little stand the color of a New York taxi, [Friterie Clémentine](http://www.chezclem.be/) in Place St.-Job, about 45 minutes from the city center by the 92 tram, which darts through pretty neighborhoods of southern Brussels before passing right in front of the stand and stopping just beyond. (Confusingly, it’s the stop after Station St.-Job.) Place St.-Job is lined with old buildings whose floors aren’t quite aligned with their neighbors, staggering building heights to charmingly ad hoc result; at the stand’s picnic-like tables I found a family and several couples sharing fries with mayonnaise. (The stand is getting replaced this summer and will be closed for a while; call before making the trek.)

More popular and central is [Flagey](http://www.tripadvisor.com/Restaurant_Review-g1136493-d2143315-Reviews-Frit_Flagey-Ixelles_Brussels.html) (where I met the doctor), but though I could find nothing wrong with its product — O.K., my fries were a tiny bit soggy — it was on a huge, impersonal (if stylish) square that could not compare with the neighborhood charm of the smaller places. Even the spot I walked to from there, [Fritkot Bompa](http://fritkotbompa.tripod.com/), was instantly more entertaining. A handwritten sign advertised “tartare maison” — homemade tartar sauce — and when I asked the worker if it was the sauce of the day, he replied with a flourish: “It’s the sauce of the day, of the week, of the year!” I liked this guy, just as I liked the tween girl who offered me a cheery “Bon appétit!” as she walked in while I munched away. (And I loved the tartare maison, thicker than any fried clam accompaniment Americans are likely to be used to.)

I also got into a rhythm with my nonfrites diet and exercise plan. I had discovered [Exki](http://www.exki.be/), a chain that serves sells prepared salads and sandwiches, often with organic ingredients, and offers cafelike seating with free Internet and newspapers. A shout-out also to the choose-your-own-ingredients salad at [the Deli](http://www.thedeli.be/), where 6.50 euros got me a meal-size salad and very friendly service. Exercising went less well — it happened to be freezing when I was there, and so my two attempts at jogging were brief; I made up for it with a pricey but much needed yoga class, hoping my fellow yogis could not smell the beef fat vapors emerging from my pores.

Though most stands I visited had an old-fashioned look, one stood out as purposefully modern: [Chez Fernand](http://www.chezfernand.be/), in the upscale but disappointingly not quaint Woluwe-St.-Lambert neighborhood. It was a family-run operation (yes!) that had the look of a fast-food chain (no!), with employees in purplish-pink uniforms that matched the neon décor (no no no!). Still, at 1.80 euros, their fries were the cheapest I’d found, and easily as crisp and tasty as the others. The owners hurried fries to customers sitting on the plaza outside (the first table service I had seen), and I witnessed a very uncorporate potato delivery: an old guy in a blue sweater with elbow patches hauling bags one by one from a hand truck into the kitchen.

If I had to say which spot I liked best, I guess it was [Friterie du Miroir](https://www.facebook.com/FriterieduMiroirFrituurdeSpiegel), northwest of the city center in the Jette commune. Sure, my fries, a big pile of them, were perfectly crisp and so hot I felt I was eating them straight from the fryer, but I’m not sure that’s why I chose it. Maybe it’s because I happened to order them with spicy pili pili sauce, or because it was in Place Reine-Astrid, which also hosts a daily green market, or because I was so far from the touristy center, or because I ate them chatting with a European Union translator, or because the owner of the place had run it for 37 years. Frites, I now knew, were not just fries.