

Hasselt: The Taste of the City

I arrived at Hasselt station and, like everyone else, jumped on a bus without paying. Public transport has been free in Hasselt since 1997, when the socialist burgomaster Steve Stevaert launched the idea. Critics said he was just being a populist and started calling him Steve Stunt, but the plan turned out to be a huge success. It led to a thirteenfold increase in passenger numbers over the next decade and brought transport planners from all over the world to study a little town in Limburg province.

I was there as a tourist, not a public transport planner, so I hopped off the bus at the next stop and started to wander the streets looking for sights. I soon realised that Hasselt doesn't have many. There's no big square, no great art collection, none of the sense of ancient history you feel in nearby towns like Tongeren or Maastricht. Yet it's somehow quietly appealing.

The smell of malted barley

Perhaps jenever has something to do with that. Hasselt is a distilling town in the same way that Leuven is a brewing town. They have been producing the stuff for centuries and organise a festival every year to drink a glass or ten.

Jenever is something of a speciality of the Low Countries; people have been distilling it in the damp cities of Flanders and the Netherlands since the sixteenth century. It was originally made from malt wine produced in a pot still, just like single malt whisky, and gets its name from the *jeneverbessen*, or juniper berries, that were added to improve the flavour and, so people hoped, cure various illnesses.

The Flemish jenever industry was more or less wiped out in the early seventeenth century when the Archdukes Albert and Isabella banned it. But it survived in the Dutch Republic, where it was served in dark *proeflokalen* (tasting houses) and exported to England as Hollands gin, or Geneva. It became associated in the minds of the English with debauchery and sin, helped along by Dutch artists like Frans Hals and Jan Steen who liked to paint tavern scenes with merry jenever tipplers holding aloft their tiny glasses as they drooled over some smiling Dutch serving girl.



Advertising poster for Orange Bitter Hasselt jenever.

The line in French at the bottom warns the reader to 'avoid imitations'. Nationaal Jenevermuseum, Hasselt.

Hasselt's jenever industry survived because the town fell under the rule of the Prince Bishops of Liège and when a count was made in 1850 it boasted 24 distilleries. They gradually closed down in the twentieth century, leaving just 15 in the early 1980s. Only one local distillery has survived to this day producing Hasselt jenever, which is now, like Champagne and Cheddar, a protected name under European legislation. So when you drink a *Hasseltse jenever*, you know it comes from Hasselt and not some shiny new factory in Japan.

The industry may be in decline, but the jenever tourist industry is in rude health. Hasselt's main tourist sight is a marvellous museum devoted to its local speciality. It is located in a rambling brick building which was originally a farm belonging to the order of White Nuns, but was turned into a distillery in 1803 and a museum in 1982.



The Hasselt jenever festival, 2007.
Photo courtesy of Stad Hasselt.

Inside the Nationaal Jenevermuseum, Hasselt.

I paid for a ticket at the desk and was handed a small token which could be exchanged at the end of the visit for a glass of jenever. Things were already looking up, I thought, as I wandered around the old industrial spaces learning about the allure of jenever, the complex flavours that can be added to pep up the taste and the social culture that has grown up around this distinctive alcoholic drink. The visit takes in the different stages of the distilling process, including the vast cellar where the grain is germinated and the malting tower where the smell of malted barley still lingers in the air from the last distilling session.

In spotlight interiors the visitor is surrounded by old relics of jenever drinking, like the slender stoneware jars in which it is sold and the typical small drinking glasses shaped like tulips. There is also an exhibition of old signs and advertising posters that reveal the various creative attempts over the years to expand the drink's appeal beyond its core market of greying old men.

The free tippie on offer when I visited was the museum's own Sint-Lambertusdrèpke, a sublime combination of jenever and 15 different herbs and spices. When I asked for the recipe, the lady behind the counter shook her head and told me that it's a closely-guarded secret. Much like Coca-Cola.

Standing in the wood-panelled *proeflokaal*, I couldn't help thinking that, despite the branding, there is still something old-fashioned about jenever. You might find a bottle in a Flemish friend's drinks cupboard, but it will probably be covered in a layer of dust, having last been opened when an elderly uncle visited ten years ago. It rarely gets ordered in the fashionable urban bars where young people drink.

Even the look is old-world. Jenever comes in brown stone bottles stopped with corks that have been sealed in place with a blob of red wax. When you order it in a *proeflokaal*, the bartender slowly pours the clear liquid into the glass until it reaches the very rim. You can't pick up the glass, or the contents will spill on the counter, so you have to bend over, hands behind your back, to take the first little sip. The ceremony is really a bit too Masonic for young people to embrace.

Yet the organisers of the jenever festival try their best every year to combat the image of an old man's drink. One memorable year, they sought to rebrand it by producing posters showing a pretty young woman sipping from the same glass as an old man. '*Jenever gets sexy*,' ran the excited headline in the local edition of *Het Nieuwsblad*.

The museum only produces about one thousand bottles of Sint-Lambertusdrèpke a year, and they don't sell it anywhere else, so it's quite difficult to leave without picking up one as a souvenir. And so, with a small brown earthenware bottle tucked into my coat pocket, I set off to explore the town's other attractions.

Innovation

First on the list is the town museum. I had been there before, about ten years ago, when it had just been modernised. But Hasselt doesn't like to let things stand still too long, so it has been modernised again, this time removing every last trace of the old museum, including the name, which used to be Museum Stellingwerff-Waardenhof but is now Het Stadsmus.

The Hasselt beguinage.



The abbreviated museum is a cool place with white walls where children stand in front of paintings listening to headphone commentary while groups of older people learn about the history of the town. I suppose I had been hoping for something a little more cluttered, like the Huis van Alijn in Ghent or the glorious muddle of the local history museum in Ostend. But the Stadsmus isn't that kind of place and I left the building thinking that it is possibly only a matter of time before someone decides that the name must be further simplified to Mus, or perhaps ultimately M.

Hasselt is the sort of town that is always modernising. That became clear when I wandered into the Begijnhof – the beguinage, hoping to spot an elderly woman in black emerging from her little house. But of course the Beguines have all died out, and Begijnhofs all over Flanders are being converted to new



St Quintinus Cathedral.
Photo courtesy of
Stad Hasselt.

uses. The one in Hasselt has been colonised by internet companies and small businesses doing clever things. It's inevitable, of course, but sad to think that no one is still counting rosary beads behind lace curtains.

I then took a look around St Quintinus Cathedral and followed a sign to the carillon museum, which is installed at the top of the tower. Several flights of wobbly wooden stairs led up to the bells, some of which have been hanging there since the fourteenth century, which is something of a small miracle given that the heaviest weighs more than 3,000 kilos.

A final very steep ladder leads into a tiny room high above the city streets furnished with pine walls, a framed romantic poem by the English writer Patience Strong and two fire extinguishers. This curious hideaway is where the

town carillonneur, René Vanstreels, plays concerts on the bells every Sunday. Judging from the sheet music piled up next to the keyboard, he has a wide repertoire, ranging from Mozart to Jacques Brel, not forgetting his own carillon composition, 'The Singing Tower'.

Back at street level, I quickly realised that Hasselt is a seriously upmarket shopping town. The ground floor shops along the eighteenth-century Kapelstraat are all occupied by top designers like Jean-Paul Gaultier, Armani and Krizia. Someone around here is making money, I thought, even though the jenever industry is almost dead and the Limburg coal mining industry collapsed decades ago.

One of the shops caught my eye. It was called Helsen Tailors, the name in English, and it claimed to have been selling gentlemen's suits since 1939. I had



Upmarket shopping
in Hasselt.

no need of an English tailor, but took a quick look inside to see what it had to offer. The staff looked smart and professional behind the polished mahogany counters, as if expecting a duke to appear at any moment. Wandering around the interior, I noticed a well-padded leather sofa, a set of English hunting prints and a scarlet hunting jacket.

How very traditional, I thought. But I was only partly right. The family firm is now run by Stijn Helsen, who, he claims, made his first pair of trousers at the age of 12. After studying fashion in Milan and working for a time with the flamboyant London designer Vivienne Westwood, he carved out a niche for himself designing costumes for Hollywood blockbusters such as *Spiderman II* and *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

He has another shop in Hasselt called the Stijn Helsen Concept Store which is much more modern. Soothed by glass and purple lighting, his customers browse a stylish collection of clothes, beds, lamps, mirrors and vases.

Intangibles and Limburggevoel

As I continued to wander aimlessly, I began to realise that a town like Hasselt, or any town in fact, is more than just a collection of buildings. Travel writers often forget that. They think that you just need to list the buildings, the restaurants and a recently-opened boutique hotel. It's not that easy. A city is also a place of unfamiliar smells, tastes that stay in the mouth, fleeting glimpses of other lives. It's hard to pin these down. They do not have opening times. You can't rate them with stars.

Hasselt is a town that has these intangibles in abundance. A few years ago, it was voted the most pleasant city in Flanders. I can understand that. Its cobbles are briskly clean. Its restaurants are quietly cool.



Still from *De Smaak van De Keyser*.

Photo courtesy of VRT/
Toerisme Limburg.

In 2006, Hasselt won another award as the *Hoofdstad van de Smaak*, the capital of taste. The label has stuck. It has even led to a TV series launched in December 2008 on Eén, an epic ten-part drama titled *De Smaak van De Keyser*. Set in a Hasselt jenever distillery, it tells the story of three generations from a distilling family as they experience war and love and tragedy.

On the subject of '*smaak*', it's hard to think of anyone with more of it than Steve Stevaert, a former bar owner with an odd Limburg accent that people outside his home turf like to mock as quaint. In 1995 he became Hasselt's first socialist mayor and won enormous popular support as well as considerable criticism for his free public transport scheme.

By 1998 he had moved his office to Brussels and taken up a job in the Flemish government as minister responsible for public planning. He soon gained coverage in the media by ordering the demolition of prestigious villas that had been

put up in the open Flemish countryside without proper planning permission. For several months, Belgian newspapers printed astonishing photographs of luxury villas being felled by bulldozers, everything down to the gold bath taps and Tuscan floor tiles reduced to rubble. Steve Stunt had earned his title. But the rough world of Brussels politics finally proved too much for his health and he eventually settled into the less demanding role of Limburg provincial governor.

A few months ago, I opened my *Knack* magazine and out fell a glossy publicity folder. The cover image showed two clenched fists with the slogan ♥ LIMBURG written in black ink across eight fingers. Flicking through the shiny pages, I was reminded that Hasselt was the capital of a fiercely proud province. It has become something of a running joke in the Flemish press that any phone-in competition in Flanders will be won by the Limburg candidate. The competition for the nicest town in Flanders was won by Hasselt. A competition to choose the most deserving building to restore went to a small syrup factory in Borgloon. And no one was particularly surprised when last year's contest to choose the prettiest village in Flanders was taken by Oud-Rekem in the province of – you can probably guess.

The press started to talk about a *Limburggevoel* – a Limburg feeling – to describe the fanatical loyalty of the Limburgers. It leads to energetic local people setting up committees and organising mass text messaging campaigns, simply to ensure that the winning village or crumbling monument lies in Steve Stunt's province.

It can get irritating after a while. Every time a TV series is set in Limburg province, *Limburggevoel* goes manic. A few days before the launch of *De Smaak van De Keyser*, the provincial tourist office sent out an eight-page glossy folder in *Knack* in which this epic drama was viewed as little more than a bright showcase for Limburg regional products, the word '*smaak*' cleverly interpreted by the tourism marketing department to include tasteful hotels where you might want to spend a night in a *Smaakkamer*.

Then I remembered that Noel Slangen came from Hasselt. He worked as an advisor for Steve Stevaert and then moved on to help Guy Verhofstadt smooth out his image in his successful 1999 federal campaign. Slangen was a new type of political adviser in Belgium closely modelled on Britain's despised spin doctors. The fact that *slangen* means 'snakes' in Dutch merely confirmed his slimy reputation.

Towards the end of the day, I was beginning to understand Hasselt, at least as well as anyone can. It is an immensely proud town, fanatically independent and hugely supportive of its local celebrities. It is, I had recently discovered, the birthplace of the Belgian singer Axelle Red, who was named Fabienne Demal by her parents, but now sings in French, lives in Brussels and barely seems Flemish at all. For a long time, I assumed she was French, but then I heard her once on radio speaking in a beautiful soft Limburg Dutch accent and realised where her roots lay.

Limburggevoel kicks in again. They are hugely proud of Axelle Red in her home town, even if she sings in French and has all the mannerisms of a Parisian. Hasselt University recently awarded her an honorary degree, not only for her music but also for her 'worldwide citizenship,' and Hasselt residents voted her *Straffe Madam*, or Iron Lady, in 2007, which is apparently an honour in these parts.

A search on YouTube for Axelle Red singing in her native language yields nothing, but I finally found a track on her internet site called 'Grootvader





Photo courtesy of
Toerisme Limburg.

Geplant' in which she sings in Dutch of a grandfather's funeral. She renders this sad song in a beautiful warm Limburg Flemish voice that sounds far more authentic than her French persona. As I listened, I tried to imagine a competition to find the sexiest female voice in Flanders. And it would be won by Axelle Red, of course, because she's a Limburger.

At the end of my day in Hasselt, I took a free bus back to the station and caught the train to Brussels, thinking over what I had experienced. I hadn't seen any famous paintings, or discovered any memorable cafe, but I had smelled coriander and tasted jenever and finally come to understand the stubborn local conviction that this is the best of all possible towns in the best of all possible provinces. I believe you would call this *Limburggevoel*. ■

www.hasselt.be

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