Seafood

Of Sprat, Herring, Cod and Mussel

[NICK TRACHET]

The Low Countries by the sea didn't acquire their name by accident. While for most people in the world a coast is one that has cliffs and inlets, mountains and rocks, the country between Calais and Helgoland is straight, flat and rock-less. The wind has swept the sand into dunes, but those are mostly no higher than ten meters.

The North Sea is even shallower here than elsewhere, the seabed either undulates slightly or is flat. Nowhere are there little caves or hollows for fish to hide in. Unless they dig them themselves!

People are attracted to the coast. It's the same everywhere. One can wax about it romantically but the crux of the matter is that a coast has always been a place where there's an abundance of food, just for the taking. Hunting bison or aurochs requires a lot of effort, speed and stamina, but on a beach one only has to bend down. Shells are washed up or stick on poles and stones; fish and shrimp stay behind in tidal pools. This is easy nutrition and people have always liked the taste of seafood.

Again, on rocky shores it's easy picking. But on the sandy expanse along the North Sea it took lots of searching, digging and hard work to feed oneself. Most people in those parts lived with their backs towards the sea. They farmed, right up to the dunes. The beach provided them with free fertilizer in the form of washed-up seaweed; and potatoes like sandy soil. For extra money farmers would fish from the shore with cast and fyke nets, and fishing lines too. They caught shrimp with a push net and then sold them to the well-off people in the towns inland.

But over time there would be technology. Boats, pulled in from the beach, put out nets and caught sprat (*Sprattus sprattus*) and herring (*Clupea harengus*). It turned into a whole industry, though it was only seasonal. The North Sea herring assembles at our coast in the fall. In Boulogne and Dunkirk the new herring season is celebrated at the end of October: '*hareng de toussaint, hareng plein*'. The Dutch herring season, however, is based on herring that arrive from afar, from the Norwegian coast or sometimes even from Canada. Here the herring season starts in June, when the 'new herring' is very fat and very tasty. In Belgium and Germany we use the Dutch term *maatjes* for these. At one point this fishing was so important for the Netherlands that even today one can hear it said that Amsterdam was built on herring bones. The herring catch and the

Shrimp fishermen on horseback in Oostduinkerke © Gemeentebestuur Koksijde

export of herring to the rest of Europe was the basis of the Dutch Golden Age. But that is a different story.

Sprat became a Belgian speciality. It was smoked and then canned, in huge quantities. But after the Second World War the schools of sprat disappeared from the coast and slowly the whole industry disappeared as well. The smoke stacks in Nieuwpoort and Bruges are reminders of that lost activity. The last canning factory in Belgium has now been moved from Ostend to Charleroi, a hundred kilometres from the sea and not near a harbour but on a highway intersection. The sprat comes from afar and the location of a factory depends on subsidies from the European Union.

Cod is a foreign species

Traditionally cod and haddock came from the north. Cod had been of vital importance to the Low Countries since the Middle Ages. But it wasn't caught here. Instead it came dried (stockfish) or salted (salt cod) from Bergen in Norway. Fresh cod was unknown here. In France this is actually still a problem. 'Morue', the French name for cod (*Gadus morhua* being its scientific name), is so synonymous with salted fish, that French cooks didn't know how to put the fresh version on the menu, once it became available. They timidly spoke of *morue fraiche* but that didn't sound too appetizing. Later they gratefully accepted *cabillaud*, borrowed from the Dutch, although *kabeljouw* was originally a Basque word that entered the Dutch language via Spanish. The Basque were the first Southerners to venture out to the Grand Banks off Newfoundland to harvest the fish themselves. On the way they discovered America too, but they forgot to mention this to the historians. Even today fishermen are cagey about where they go.

The inhabitants of Dunkirk later started harvesting cod off Iceland. Flemish farm boys came along. It was hard work. The cod was salted on board. Later, when cooling techniques became more common, the fish was also transported fresh. But before the Second World War no cod was caught in the North Sea. Were there none there? Were they not using the right technique? It is too late to answer these questions now, but it is rather ironic that all the talk these days is

about the disappearance of the North Sea cod, while seventy years ago no cod was caught there at all. If we were referring to a different kind of creature, we would call it a foreign species.

The cod fishing around Iceland started to peter out in the second half of the twentieth century, when Iceland introduced the exclusive economic fishing zone and was willing to defend it with canons. The rest of the world was very angry at first, but over the years all countries that border on a sea have done the same thing. The last Belgian boat to fish off Iceland was the O. 129 Amandine and its runs came to an end in April 1995. It is now moored on the quay in Ostend and has become a museum.

Small scale has the future

What we do find off our coast are flatfish. In sandy seabeds there are certain to be flatfish hiding. Lemon sole (*Microstomus kitt*) and plaice (*Pleuronectes platessa*), common sole (*Solea solea*) and turbot (*Psetta maxima*) are today the bread and butter of the fishing industry in the Low Countries. The herring catch is important to the Netherlands, but it has only a few (big) ships fishing for herring. The rest are after sole and plaice. Common sole is perhaps the most prestigious fish in European cuisine, popular in chic restaurants from Milan to Moscow - unless it is turbot, a fish that was served at the table of Roman emperors. Special cutlery was even designed for flatfish, the so-called fish knife, with which the diner can personally detach the filet from the bones.

In order to bring this lucrative fish to the surface, people started investing in beam trawlers. An intricate system of chains chases the flatfish from their hiding places under the sand. The fish are then swallowed up by the dragnet that follows behind. This kind of fishing is now under attack because it greatly disturbs the seabed, while all the bycatch, worth a lot less than the flatfish, is thrown overboard again, often dead.

Meanwhile, the flatfish stocks themselves are very healthy. Plaice stocks have even reached record highs in the last couple of years. Still, the sector needs to become more sustainable. Not least because these bottom trawlers use a lot of power, and diesel is becoming too expensive for this kind of fishing. So research into new harvesting techniques is being conducted on all sides. The Netherlands has embraced electric fishing, the so-called electric beam trawl, whereby fish are startled by electric shocks rather than heavy chains and the seabed isn't disturbed as much. But there is also mounting criticism of this method, not in the least by the fishermen themselves who don't seem to have any trust in its sustainability. With other fishing methods, like trammel netting or gill netting, virtually no motor power is required, as curtains of netting hang motionless in the sea and the fish become entangled while swimming past. These techniques are more selective than trawling too, while the quality of the fish is higher, as they aren't flattened during harvesting. Add to this the fact that this kind of fishing can be done in smaller boats and therefore provides work for more fishermen, who will bring a better fish to market, and it's obvious that small-scale fishing in the North Sea is the future.

Mussel © VLAM

Bachelors out for a walk

Big crabs and lobsters need rocky bottoms in order to exist and are therefore rarely found on the coasts of the Low Countries; we see them only in certain wrecks and on the dikes and harbour installations that humans have erected. But there is one kind of lobster that digs a hole for itself, the langoustine (*Nephrops norvegicus*). The feasibility of harvesting these is presently being studied. For one thing, we want to guarantee sustainability, which shouldn't be too hard in view of the biology of the creature. Females carrying eggs seldom allow themselves to be caught and live hidden in burrows far from the threat of nets and dragging. Only bachelors out for a walk are caught by fishermen. But the quality of the catch still leaves room for improvement. Better known is the harvesting of brown shrimp (Crangon crangon), a speciality of the Dutch fishing industry in particular. It is possibly the tastiest kind of shrimp on the planet. Taste and colour are relative of course, but the little shrimp is truly a taste bomb of concentrated shrimp perfume. The use of these tiny creatures in a shrimp bisque or tomato with shrimp is justifiably famous in Belgian cuisine.

Smoked young herring © VLAM

Codfish © VLAM
Shrimps © VLAM

Eating (mussels) for a good cause

But the most extraordinary form of seafood in Belgium and the Netherlands is undoubtedly the common mussel (*Mytilus edulis*). One country (the Netherlands) produces them and the other one (Belgium) eats them, which is comparable to the situation with the above-mentioned brown shrimp. In a report by the World Food Organization (FAO) about the production of mussels in the 1980s this remarkable sentence stands out: 'The consumers of mussels can be divided into two groups, the Belgians and the rest of the world'. Nowhere in the world do people eat mussels in such quantities and with such delight. And this in a country that hardly produces any mussels itself! The reason for this strange phenomenon can be found in the industrial revolution and the (post-) Napoleonic state administration.

Present-day Belgium was the first country on the European continent to undergo the industrial revolution. Already in 1720 the first steam engine was installed near Liège. In 1792 France annexed Belgium and under Napoleon industrialization really took off. With this, labourers began to stream into the cities and they had to be fed, of course. As the Netherlands had also become a Napoleonic vassal state in 1801, attention fell on the Zeeland mussel industry, since mussels could be delivered quickly to Liège, Brussels or Ghent via the big rivers – say within a day or two. This way the Zeeland mussel became a daily staple for labourers. In their eyes the mussel was cheap and abundant, manna, a real feast. In a great many families mussels were eaten once a week during the season, from September to March.

After the fall of Napoleon, Belgium and the Netherlands were united under a single crown again. It is remarkable that the first organization and regulation of the mussel production was formalized in the Netherlands in 1825, during the short period that the countries were together. After independence the taste for mussels among the Belgian population remained. In the Netherlands itself, where mussel beds could in prime years produce 100,000 tonnes of the Zeeland black gold, people rarely ate mussels. Only in recent decades, after a lot of marketing efforts by the big Zeeland mussel companies, have the Dutch returned somewhat hesitantly to the mussel.

Not only have the Belgians eaten extraordinary amounts of mussels in recent history, they have also done it in a way that's unparalleled anywhere else, at mussel feasts. It is a custom, certainly among people who do not prepare mussels themselves at home, to attend a mussel feast once or twice a year, a big event in any village or town, where mussels are prepared collectively for sometimes very big groups. A mussel feast is usually organized in aid of a good cause, like the Red Cross, or to contribute to the finances of a football club, a scout group, a political party or development organisation. Eating for a good cause is a phenomenon that hardly exists outside of Belgium, certainly not on such a big scale. If it were possible, the Belgians would bring an end to hunger in the world, simply by eating.

Traditionally mussels were eaten with bread, but during the last fifty years mussels have more and more often been served with fries, which is actually a difficult combination, as fries and mussels can't be served in the same dish. And *Moules frites* is really a culinary contradiction. Still, the biggest mussel event takes place outside of Belgium, in Lille in France, during their annual fair

Sprats © VLAM

in September. According to the French Wikipedia, in 2009 more than 500 tonnes of mussels (and 30 tonnes of fries) were eaten during this 24-hour event.

The Zeeland way of cultivating mussels (more ranching than farming) is unique. Holland is far from being the biggest producer of mussels in the world. It is not even the biggest in Europe. Mussels were already being farmed in the early 13th century (1235) in France. According to legend the idea came from an Irish monk, Patrick Walton, who was shipwrecked there. He cultivated mussels on ropes between poles. In the 20th century this type of suspended or rope culture became common, and places like Galicia in Spain and the Adriatic coast of Italy now produce a lot more mussels than the Netherlands, albeit of a different kind. South of Brittany the Mediterranean mussel (*Mytilus galloprovincialis*) proliferates and is bigger than the blue mussel (*Mytilus edulis*) found in Zeeland, but also tastes different and has a different texture.

Meanwhile, in the Netherlands on-bottom culture of the blue mussel continues. Wild mussel seed, or spat, is fished from the Waddenzee and put out in beds where the little creatures can grow for another year or two. In suspended culture the mussel seed is directly set out on ropes. These mussels then grow faster and are obviously free of sand and have a lighter shell than those from traditional on-bottom culture. The future of mussel production undoubtedly lies with suspended culture. But the true mussel lover swears by the sturdy black shells of the Zeeland on-bottom mussel. The taste is more intense and the shells are rarely damaged during transport or cooking.

In the last fifty years mussel consumption has changed. The Zeeland mussels are becoming ever more expensive. The Dutch authorities have (deliberately?) created a scarcity of mussel seed by prohibiting the harvest of mussel seed in big parts of the Waddenzee. According to them, the Zeeland mussel sector needs to become more sustainable, which is odd seeing that the harvest of mussels has been ongoing in the Netherlands for the last 200 years. Sustainability can only be ascertained afterwards and in this case the continuity, even in times when no one gave a thought to conservation, seems more than proven.

The popular mussel feasts are also in decline. As they are organized to make a profit, the mussels can't be too expensive or there won't be any money made. With mussel prices as they are, many organizers are switching over to spaghetti feasts or – a sign of the times - paella or couscous evenings. Mussels, on the other hand, are now also served in the better (white cloth) restaurants. Before 1970 that would never have happened. The custom of serving mussels in individual pots, a tradition that arose in the eating establishments of the Rue des Bouchers in Brussels, has also been adopted by these better restaurants.

Because of his familiarity with mussels, the average Belgian is also less afraid of other shellfish and crustaceans on the menu. Would that be why Belgians are at the top of the list of consumers of oysters and lobsters? And of champagne, too – although you can hardly expect anything else in a country where people know how to enjoy life. ■

Translated by Pleuke Boyce

Herring in vinegar © VLAM