

FARE OF THE COUNTRY



Fishing for Shrimp in Flanders



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By ANNE SHAPIRO DEVREUX

IN the North Sea on the Flanders coast, Belgium's gray shrimp are caught beneath an almost perpetually gray sky. The bulk of them are harvested by boat, but at Oostduinkerke, shrimp fishermen on horseback still drag their nets at low tide to scoop up these tiny glistening delicacies. A basketful of gray shrimp can be a comically monstrous sight; each shrimp is less than an inch long and, before they are cleaned, all appear weirdly mustached. Just caught and heaped in a brimming basket, the slippery shrimp are rubbery-looking, like the ghoulish plastic varmint you can buy in toy stores.

ANNE SHAPIRO DEVREUX recently



Although an ordinary tomato filled with gray shrimp and mayonnaise (served cold, especially popular in summer) is the commonest recipe for them, they are an expensive ingredient — in Brussels, they cost about \$12 a pound cleaned — and have inspired the best chefs of Belgium to concoct gourmet platters around them.

Belgium's beaches are fronted by squat concrete condominiums, and swimming is chilly, with much wind and rain. Harmless medusas are often stranded on the wet sand at low tide. Pinball joints called luna parks front the boardwalks to divert those who are bored waiting for the intermittent drizzles to cease.

In Oostduinkerke, the dim boardwalk is parallel to the town's main street, along which a tram runs, connecting much of the

as a car, accommodating four or six pedaling adults. Oostduinkerke, along with Koksijde and De Panne, can be as gray and cold as the shrimp for which they are famous.

But at Oostduinkerke, there is La Bécassine, a restaurant known for its chef, André Goossens, who is nationally celebrated for his artful culinary innovations based mostly on the gray shrimp. La Bécassine is installed in a rustic, flower-adorned villa on a quiet, residential back street. Several Belgian government ministers with vacation homes along Belgium's bleak shoreline are said to be among the Bécassine's most regular weekend clients. The homey, elegant décor is dotted with a proud collection of dreamy work by Paul Delvaux, the Belgian surrealist artist.

Mr. Goossens' most acclaimed shrimp

ABOVE Fishermen and their horses work at low tide.

RIGHT Cooked, dried shrimp ready for weighing.

LEFT A fisherman and his wife sorting the catch.



Photographs by Jiri Jiru

sprinkled with a mingling of minced onion, lemon juice, cream and chopped parsley. Gray shrimp bisque, which has a subtler, perhaps smokier, taste than lobster bisque, is an ever-present jewel on the Bécassine menu. Like all top-ranking chefs, Mr. Goossens follows the market to plan each month's menu. But his most cherished feature, gray shrimp, is a year-round constant, even if the catch is less abundant in June, July and August.

In those summer months, Oostduinkerke's shrimp fishermen on horseback still plod out into low tide several days a week (especially when one of the two daily low tides falls well within daylight hours). Each outing lasts only about a half hour, but in winter they drag for about two full hours (one hour before lower tide, and one hour after)

maximum winter load could possibly weigh in at about 175 pounds.

Shrimp fishing on horseback used to be common all along the almost 40-mile-long Belgian coastline. In an abbey near Oostduinkerke, records have been found of shrimp fishing on horseback going back to the mid-1500's. Before World War I, on foot, women used to push nets in front of them to catch shrimp. Until 1960, mules were used along with horses. Mules are cheaper and stronger than horses, but became scarce in the 1960's. In 1950, when fishing on horseback began to dwindle, Oostduinkerke's city government began to subsidize its mounted fishermen to preserve this ancient tradition and to attract tourists. Also, Oostduinkerke is blessed with a wide, flat beach having barely any demar-