

WELKOM OP
VUUR
TOREN
EI
LAND





VUURTORENEILAND: LIGHTHOUSE ISLAND. It's a small island at the entrance of the Amsterdam waterfront — formerly guarding the city from attacks from the Zuider Zee, which has long since been cut off from the North Sea, poldered, filled in. But it's still an island, reachable only by boat, seemingly austere, bare but for the relics of fortifications and underground ammunition cellars.

But here, ingeniously, one of the finest restaurants I know has been installed. In summertime one dines in a glass pavilion atop the island, looking out on the fascinating harbor. For the winter this is dismantled and stored away — a three-day job — and the operation is moved underground.

Underground is where we dined the other evening, November 2nd, 2017. This is how the evening went: we left the dock about 6:30 pm, on the restaurant's own boat, a slow tender capable of carrying 100 passengers but fitted out now for fewer. The entire evening's clientele takes the trip together, comfortably seated in a cabin with table

suited for six for the most part.



We were quickly provided with the evening's appetizers: beetroot, beet leaves, and lettuces, nicely dressed, with bread and butter. You eat with your fingers, immediately engaging you in the sensory rewards the evening holds in store. An aperitif comes quickly to your place, light and refreshing. Afterwards a cocktail if you like — I had an old genever and a good one — and, later, a glass or two of wine.

The cruise takes nearly an hour, and no one is in a hurry. We are delayed a bit at the locks, where our boat moves from Amsterdam water-level higher, to IJsselmeer level. Another boat wants to go through the locks, and apparently has priority, as we wait for them to pull up alongside: a royal boat, apparently, given the golden crest on its cabin entrance, the spotless condition of the craft, and the



uniforms on the two friendly but guarded crewmen we hail: What's your boat named? The answer is muffled in the wind. Where are you bound? For Lommen...

Silently lifted to the new level, we leave the locks and motor on under the nearly full moon. The night could hardly be more romantic: the moon reflects in the dark still waters; there's hardly another boat to be seen or heard; a fog bank hovers in the distance to the south. But before we know it we've quietly docked at the island, where we disembark, two by two, and are greeted by an attendant who hands us lanterns to light our way up the path to the buildings.

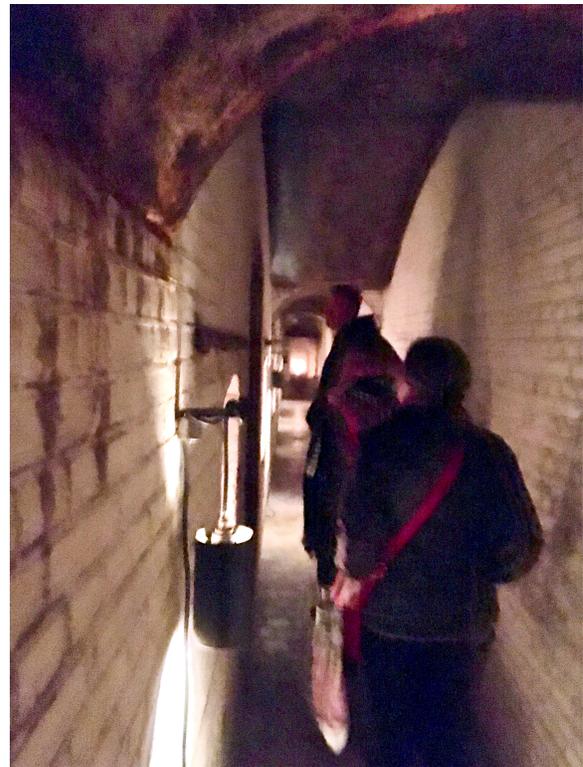
I remember the terrain from our last visit, two or three years ago when the restaurant was new, and we arrived by daylight on a summer evening. The scents are marvelous: the lightly brackish water of the IJsselmeer; the heather; the grass where it is trodden. By lanternlight the island is magical, the moon hanging off the side of the *vuurtoren*, which no longer burns, there being no longer any need for lighthouses in the placid waters of this harbor.





We carry our lanterns up and over a low hill to a streetlike area fronting the facades of the underground bunkers — long rooms, their walls about head-high, the brick ceilings arched, the floors roughly tiled. Some of these were for storage in their day; others were barracks. For decades they were simply abandoned. Now they have been ingeniously repurposed: sandblasted, cleaned, fitted out for this improbable restaurant. Out in the cool November air a welcoming fire burns in a small firepit; overhead there's a string of lamps — but not *too* much light: the mood is mysterious and promising.

Entering the underground rooms, an attendant takes our lanterns — no need for them now; the place is fully electrified. We walk through a narrow passageway past a series of vaulted rooms, some still awaiting repurposing — perhaps there will one day be a small hotel here. Summer or winter, I think it would be an ideal getaway, a place to rest and re-focus, an hour's ride from the modern city.



Past the wine room: bottles laid up on their sides, hundreds of them, whites and reds, in their own vaulted cellar. I think about the work that goes into bringing these cases and cases of bottles from the boat-dock — by daylight, of course; still a chore to load them into the boat, bring them back out, and carry them up to the bunkers.

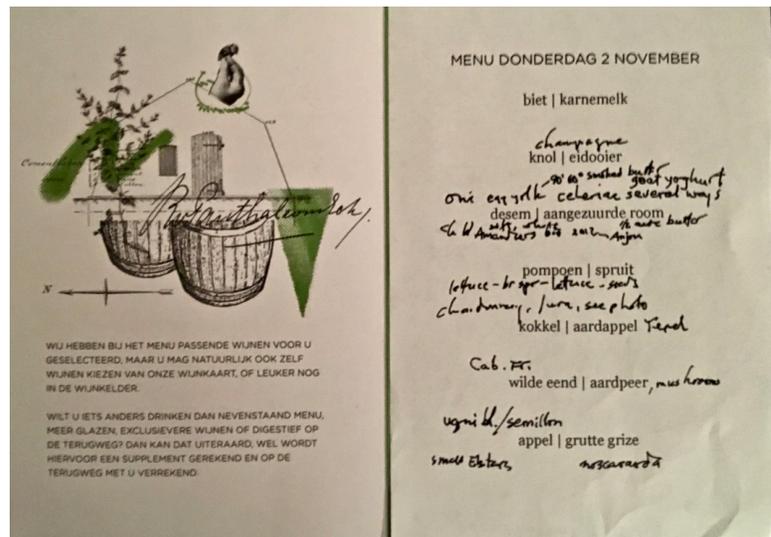


On, then, past the kitchen: again we're invited to peek in from our corridor, even share a few words with a pair of cooks carefully preparing what will be our first course. It's a big kitchen, manned by just three cooks, apparently equally responsible for the five or six courses we perhaps sixty diners will be provided over the course of the evening.



And then into the dining room, where strategically lit tables are arranged, well set apart, in another of these spacious vaulted rooms. This one has a distressed metal arched ceiling, tiled walls and floor.

Our menus, with table assignment, had been given us on the boat:



This is what it listed:

biet | karnemelk

knol | eidooier

desem | aangezuurde room

pompoen | spruit

kokkel | aardappel

wilde eend | aardpeer

appel | grutte grize

And this is what it was: reconstructed from my chickenscratched notes:



Champagne: Hugues Codmé, Blanc de Noirs, Grand Cru

knol | eidooier

oni, egg yolk cooked at 60• for 90 minutes, celeriac several ways, smoked butter, goat yoghurt

desem | aangezuurde room

Soft white bread, half-churned butter

Chenin blanc: Les Amandiers, 2012 (Loire)



pompoen | spruit

lettuces, Brussels sprouts, seeds

Chardonnay: Côtes du Jura, Pauline et Géraud Fromont, vieilles vignes, 2015



kokkel | aardappel

cockles; Texel potatoes, garnished



wilde eend | aardpeer

Wild duck, quince, mushrooms

Cabernet franc: Les Roches Sèches, "Le Jeu", 2011



(lagniappe, not on menu:)

A raspberry floating on Rillettes in a tiny hamburger bun



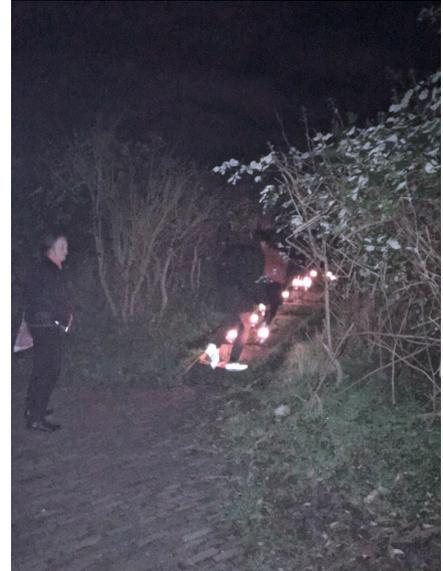
appel | grutte grize

Small Elstar apples in Muscovado sugar, sprinkled with goat cheese powder

Ugni blanc/Semillon, Lestignac "less brumes", Camille et Mathias Marquet

— *and then dinner was over.*

Regretfully we got up from our chairs, about eleven o'clock, and retraced our steps to the boat. On the way I looked into the empty bar: what a fine place to linger over a glass of Armagnac, I thought. Perhaps one day there *will* be a small hotel on the site: how nice to climb into bed after a warm bath...



We found our lanterns on the path at the end of the “street,” lit, ready to take in hand for the short walk to the dock, where the boat was patiently waiting.

Little cakes were waiting for us, and delicious coffee brewed, naturally, from carefully selected beans roasted partly still in their skins.

And I suppose I could have asked for an Armagnac, but instead an *oude genever* came to mind, and it too was carefully selected.

As we moved through the cabin after our slow contented cruise back to Amsterdam, I asked the young woman at the espresso machine if anyone ever complained about anything. She looked at me as if I'd asked if there were three moons in the sky. No, she said; everyone is always so happy! And indeed we were.

By now the full moon was hanging over the lights on the Amsterdam waterfront: nearly midnight. A thoroughly, thoroughly...

