

Cognoscenti

magazine

Because life is short

Kasteel Wittem Wittem

In Maastricht, 2003 is the Year of d'Artagnan—named after the musketeer from the time of Louis XIV who is immortalized by the Alexander Dumas novel, “The Three Musketeers.” The real Count d'Artagnan, Charles de Batz de Castelmore, died in battle outside Maastricht's city gates some 330 years ago.

In today's Maastricht, the French-tinged character remains, although the town is polyglot: there are venerable churches in Old Maastricht, a lively University, and in the Stokstraat Quarter, trendy shops coexist with Roman ruins along the narrow streets.

Visitors seeking to enjoy the charms of Maastricht during the day yet spend their nights in a more tranquil setting should consider **Kasteel Wittem**, a Relais & Chateau hotel in the laid-back hamlet of Wittem, about 20 minutes' outside the bustling city.

Opened some 35 years ago by *père* Ritzen, the luxury property is run by his sons, Peter and Marc. The name “Kasteel” is apt enough: this is a real castle! Guests staying in any of the 10 rooms have the pleasure of lodging in a true medieval for-

ress—the walls are more than seven feet thick! The curiously shaped “Tower Room,” located in the oldest part of the castle, makes an unforgettable setting for a private dinner, and to complete the fantasy, the entire castle is surrounded by a double ring of moats, with lovely estate grounds just beyond.



A medieval fortress turned hotel. Below, corner room in warm yellow tones.

The spacious room occupied by visiting Cognoscenti Magazine editors during a recent visit was appealingly decorated in shades of yellow with sketches of ballet dancers adorning the walls. The room's pentagonal shape added interest, while from tall windows on the three sides of the room, we watched flowering chestnut trees hundreds of years old sway majestically in the breeze. A retractable TV was cleverly housed in a wooden box—a nice way to get it out of the way when you don't want it.



But the hotel offers more than just fine lodging: “We focus on the cuisine here,” says Peter Ritzen. This level of devotion is evident in the quality of the dining experience itself. Before dinner, we sipped Els *Genever* in a lounge decorated with wood-paneled walls and black-and-white illustrations of Bacchanalian feasts.

In the restaurant, two black-marble fireplaces hold court on opposite walls. The lighting is discreet: two chandeliers descend gracefully from the ceiling, and white candles in silver candelabras glow on each table. Fresh-cut pink roses add a sensual touch

to the otherwise formal atmosphere. During our meal, seating of guests and subsequent service was very professional, although slow.

Chef Ralf Berendsen cooks meats and fish to admirable degrees of tenderness. He serves fine continental cuisine “with a German tone.” He want his guests to remember “the pleasure, the tranquillity, and the return to another time.”

In the amuse-bouche, gazpacho with fresh green pepper worked surprisingly well with lobster. Next came *foie gras* prepared four ways, including a “cherry” artistically fashioned from a dollop of foie gras with a red jelly exterior made from beetroot powder and a truffle “pit.” Another nice presentation flourish came in the form of a sliver of Austrian *Baumkuchen*, its lightly grilled pastry layers working nicely with foie gras.

“Royale” Dublin prawns poached in orange oil with fennel and sweet red pepper followed—an excellent dish with only a few dominant flavors (tender shrimp, orange, and fennel) all harmonizing together, the sweet red pepper effectively contrasting the tangy orange oil.

The meat course featured young Bresse pigeon roasted on the carcass, with pea risotto, chanterelles, sautéed artichoke bottoms and Banyuls sauce. The fresh pigeon was deboned after slow-roasting, its tender flesh exhibiting none of the excessive gaminess found in preparations from other, inferior kitchens.

Among the wines, we were pleased by the *Daniel Rion et Fils* Vosne-Romanée Village 1998. It wasn't particularly complex, but it opened nicely in the glass to re-

veal a charming rustic style with ripe fruit—and even a surprising jamminess—that included notes of cassis, strawberry, and raspberry and tobacco. Working well with the pigeon was a *Domaine Remizières* Crozes Hermitage 1998 Cuvée Christophe, dark red in color, simple and a bit imprecise but well concentrated with rich red fruit and roasted chocolate flavors.

The dessert was a play of variations on strawberry and rhubarb—in sorbet, in terrine, as a mousse, or as a crème brûlée with a rhubarb lining—the rhubarb effectively cutting the sweetness of the strawberries.

This article was written by contributing editors to *Cognoscenti Magazine*.

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A particular focus on the cuisine

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