

MYSTERY OF THE MEUSE

Presented before the Chicago Literary Club

By

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I'm oft reminded of a certain sense of inevitability in the march of life. On a recent visit to the wonderfully preserved medieval city of Bruges in Belgium, where the city center is a UNESCO World Heritage site, I happened to notice something charming while walking about town. It was a handsome old yellow Labrador dog, resting its head on a cushion in the open window of an ancient house, overlooking the canal busy with tour boats. I snapped a long shot and then a telephoto close up of that sweet animal across the wide canal.

A week or so after returning to the States following our trip, once again I watched the movie, "In Bruges," the earlier viewing of which prompted my interest in visiting the town. In one of the film's first scenes there was that Lab, or one identical to it, appearing in the same window in which I'd photographed him from across the canal. Seven years after the film was shot on location in the City of Bridges, we had accidentally stumbled across perhaps the very same dog, still comfortably observing life across the canal in Bruges from the very same window. It was meant to be.

This entire trip to Belgium, with a dip into France, quickly proved to be in the category of the inevitable. Shortly after I joined the Chicago Literary Club in 2005, I researched and presented my first essay to the group.

I'd recalled the adage, "Write about something you know." After a bit of struggle, I hit upon the topic of the etymology of French fries. That might have seemed a logical topic for the recently retired chief spokesperson of McDonald's to address, and I did know something about McDonald's ubiquitous fries. But in truth I knew little about the mystery of their long and circuitous culinary history.

So I set out to become further educated on the subject, and my ultimate presentation to the club I immodestly titled, "French

Fried: From Monticello to the Moon – A Social, Political and Cultural Appreciation of the French fry.”

My French fry story was well received by a bemused club membership and I promptly moved on with my life. A year or so passed. Then I received an odd phone call from New York. The director of a newly written series for France 5, that country’s educational television network, was in New York scouting sites and interview subjects for a series of six one-hour programs titled Global Food, being shot by a crew traveling around the world. One of the hours would be devoted to the French fry – of course, this being a French television production. The series director had discovered my Literary Club essay online at the club’s website, and he wanted to fly me to New York to be interviewed on camera for the film. Of course, I agreed.

Who knew that our Literary Club, so steeped in its traditions of reflective and thoughtful writing, would open the doors to my very first French Film! I was to discover that much of the film was based on my essay, which I had pieced together using hundreds of historical sources. Another year or so passed, and the Global Food series was completed and aired throughout France. But it wasn’t until months later that a version was produced with narration in English for international distribution, and I could now both see and understand it. There I was, and there was much of my essay’s content, in brilliant French Technicolor.

Toward the end of the film, it depicted the development underway in Belgium, at the time of its production, of a museum dedicated to the history of the fried potato. This museum had not yet opened when I wrote my essay. Why a museum in Belgium dedicated to what the world knows best as the French fry? First, the fried potato is ubiquitous in Belgium.

Thousands of “Frites” shops dot Belgian cities and countryside. They serve fries in their nation’s trademark paper cone, often topped with Mayonnaise, rather than ketchup. Fries often become a light meal. I was to dismiss that museum and those Frite Shops from my conscious mind for several more years. Fast forward to early 2014, and Vicki and I began to think about our next overseas vacation.

We have always enjoyed driving trips in Europe. Having recently viewed the film “In Bruges,” which was set in that colorful city, we thought we might start there. We added the nearby equally bedazzling medieval city of Ghent, and then I suggested we dip into northern France, while in the neighborhood, and tour the Champagne district, from which we’d happily been sampling the liquid produce for decades, and now wanted to see, and taste, firsthand

Finally, I recalled my French fry essay and the lively debates about whether that tasty dish originated in France, Belgium, or elsewhere. One of the stories, clouded in the mists and mysteries of time, was that the misnamed fry was first created by the wives of fishermen along the banks of the Meuse River in Belgium. “Is the Meuse Valley close enough to include in our tour?” I asked Vicki. She said it was. So we added “the mystery of the Meuse” to our itinerary. We would drive the fabled stretch of the Meuse River and the beautiful Ardennes forest area, from the border with France, up through the cities of Dinant, Namur, Huy and Liege.

We did not yet realize that the investigation of the culinary traditions of the region would become quite so central to much of our coming tour. This could have been a mission worthy of that most famous of Belgian detectives and gourmands, Hercule Poirot. But it was Vicki and I and our traveling companion Lydia who would have to rise to the challenge.

Belgian surrealist Rene Magritte said well what he painted when he mused, "Everything we see hides another thing; we always want to see what is hidden -- by what we see."

We flew directly from O'Hare to Brussels, promptly boarded a train heading west toward the sea, and debarked at the station in Bruges, where we proceeded to our hotel, the Heritage, in an old townhouse on a curving ancient street close to the city's fabled square. We took note that, both over lunch and dinner in two charming local restaurants, generous servings of French fries came with every dish we ordered. The next morning our local guide picked us up at our hotel and we began a walking orientation tour of central Bruges. First to be pointed out was a stately restored 18th century theatre just around the corner.

Next was a stone townhouse in a Dutch motif, also beautifully restored, which our guide described as the oldest such structure in Bruges, and indeed the year 1399 was carved into the lintel. But I spied a sign in bright lettering over the door – Frietmuseum. "Does that mean what I think it means – French Fry Museum?" – I asked incredulously. Indeed, then and there the dye was cast. I'd had a similar revelation a decade earlier, when we visited Jefferson's Virginia home, Monticello, and stumbled across the historical note that his French chef, Honore Julien, had brought back to the New World his recipe for French fries.

This building in Bruge was in fact the very fry museum that had been depicted as under the early stages of development in my French film about fries of almost a decade before. I had not recalled that it was located in Bruges, yet here we were at its doorstep. I almost drowned in the inevitability that we would stumble upon this singular museum devoted to the fried potato, the only such institution in the world. We had to see it, and at the same time it came to me that my desire to visit the

Meuse Valley, the purported birthplace of the fry, also in Belgium, was no coincidence either. I knew then that I would gain insights that must be shared with my old friends at the Literary Club and McDonald's Golden Archives.

One unexpected insight was that the charming building housing the fry museum was historic for more reasons than being the oldest documented structure in Bruges. It also was part of a small complex that was to become one of the earliest financial exchanges in history, and in fact gave its name to the modern bourse, which is a synonym for the modern stock exchange system around the globe.

The first part of the structure, with its 1399 date, was the place in which the commercial representative of the town of Genoa, Italy, lived and stored merchandise imported from there to be sold in Bruges. The second part of the building was constructed in the 15th century for the Consul of Genoa. Not only did the town of Genoa have commercial representation in Bruges, but also so did Venice and Florence. The three storage buildings surrounded an establishment, began as a hostelry in 1285, which was owned by the family of Robert van de Beurse.

This building became known locally as "the Huis de Beurse," or the "Beurse Purse" and became the hub, with its symbol of three purses hanging outside, where many traders and merchants from across Europe began to meet to make arrangements and contracts to exchange goods. The managers became famous for offering to them judicial financial advice. It is often considered to be the world's first modern stock exchange, and was institutionalized as the Bruges Bourse in 1409. Bruges had become such a major trading capital of the European Hanseatic League, that in 1456, one hundred fifty vessels made port into the canal – in one day.

Not to digress, but this unexpected experience of stumbling across the primordial stock exchange reminded me of my own first, rather dramatic encounter, with the modern incarnation of such an exchange, back in 1986. I was then handling financial media relations for McDonald's Corporation, which was about to celebrate the 20th anniversary of its listing on the New York Stock Exchange, and had just been named one of the Dow Jones 30 Industrials. We decided to make the occasion a high profile event, so organized to serve a full breakfast to the entire membership of the New York exchange. In addition to building a giant temporary kitchen to cater this ambitious collation of Egg McMuffins, hash browns, juice and coffee, we arranged to have our CEO ring the opening bell, while a raucous Ronald McDonald glad-handed and entertained traders on the exchange floor. We raised a stately McDonald's golden arches flag alongside the U.S. banner outside the NYSE's famous façade on Wall Street, much as the Italian traders of old Bruges had hung their symbolic purses outside that first Bourse.

Meanwhile, back to where the trading started, in Bruges, we returned the second day of our visit to spend a morning browsing the several floors of the Saaihalle, as the museum building was originally known. The museum traces the history of the potato, from its misty origins in Peru to the explosion of what is today locally known as the Belgian fried potato. Dozens of exhibits, hundreds of photos and videos and tons of fry memorabilia bring the culture of the fried potato to life. Note I did not say the French fry, but the Belgian fried potato. And herein begins the curious etymology of the origins of what most of the world outside of Belgium, and France, knows as the French fry.

Of course, in France it would be redundant to call a fried potato a "French" fry. So there, most locals call it *pommes frites*, of

which the direct translation, of course, is “fried apples,” but to the French means fried sliced potatoes. French legend has the pommes frites first being sold on the Pont Neuf Bridge in Paris in the mid-1800s.

But others say that American soldiers in World War I were responsible for fries gaining their “French” prefix. These troops were in southern Belgium, where much French was spoken, when they first tasted fries, and as the story goes, they took back memories of the French fries they had enjoyed, being unsure of the real estate upon which they were standing.

Our driving tour dipped to the south over today’s French side of the border, and I might mention here that some Europeans today think of Belgium as the Canada of France, for reasons of geography, and factors of linguistics and culture. We headquartered at a restored 18th century country manor house bed and breakfast, and from there we crisscrossed the compact 44,000 acres of the Champagne region, where the vines were being trimmed for spring. One day we came across a small, country church, and found inside set into the chapel floor, the grave of the creative vintner who started it all, none other than Dom Perignon.

In the district’s two largest cities, Epernay and Reims, we toured the ancient chalk caverns of Moët & Chandon and Veuve Clicquot, where tens of thousands of bottles of vintage champagne awaited their bubbly fate. One evening, we rediscovered over a sumptuous dinner of lamb chops and pommes frites a charming 16th century chateau in the village of Fère-en-Tardenois, near Reims. Located adjacent to the ruins of a 12th century castle built by the grandson of Louis the VI, Vicki and I had overnighted there on our first trip to France, more than 35 years ago.

However, back in Belgium, the story of the slivered potato's origins remain complex and cloudy. And that history, and the mystery of the Belgian fried potato it entails, does not begin there, or even France, but in Spain.

The Spanish Netherlands was a portion of the Low Countries controlled by Spain from 1556 to 1714, and included modern Belgium, Luxembourg as well as part of northern France. By 1714 these areas had been annexed by France. Some speculate that fried potatoes may have been invented in Spain, the first European country where the potato arrived from the New World colonies. This theory presumes that the first appearance was as an accompaniment to popular local fish dishes in Galicia, in the northwest of Spain, from where it spread to the rest of the country, and thence on to the Spanish Netherlands. Belgian farmers were some of the very first in Europe to embrace the potato soon after it arrived in Europe; by the 1600s, many had switched from growing wheat to raising potatoes, which offered a higher yield per acre.

Belgian journalist Jo Gerard claims that a 1781 family manuscript makes reference to the tradition that potatoes were deep-fried prior to 1680 in that part of the Spanish Netherlands today known as the Meuse Valley. His account reads, "The inhabitants of Namur, Ardenne and Dinant had the custom of fishing in the Meuse River for small fish and frying them whole, especially among the poor, but when the river was frozen and fishing became hazardous, they cut potatoes in the form of small fish and put them in a fryer." The Spanish had fried their potatoes in olive oil, and cut them into pieces to cook faster. The classic Belgian fries were cooked in unrefined beef tallow, called "blanc de boef," sometimes mixed with horse tallow.

The modern McDonald's French fry is cooked in all-vegetable shortening. An interesting side story to McDonald's fries is that when Dick and Mac McDonald opened their pioneering self-service drive-in in San Bernardino, California, in late 1948, they didn't even serve fries, but rather potato chips, at 10 cents a bag. A fellow named Art Bender, who served the first customer at that first McDonald's recalls that fries, also a dime, replaced potato chips on the menu 18 months later, and were instantly so popular that a separate service window and line had to be set up to serve them.

Back in Belgium we visited several historic cities along the banks of the Meuse River in south and central Belgium, as far north as Liege, and asked our guides and others we encountered about the veracity of this story of the Belgian origins of fries. Not one person could confirm it was true, though none had a better version to tell. Nonetheless, all were certain that the Belgium fried potato is anything but French.

As we toured the Meuse, we became more interested in this most singularly ancient of the world's great rivers, dating to some 380 million years ago, at the time of the continental collision and terrain-building fold belts of the late Paleozoic era. Steep-sided valleys carved by swift-flowing rivers, the most prominent of which is the Meuse, typify the region. We often saw ancient citadels high in these cliffs, offering protection and control of trade and villages along the teeming river below.

In Namur, the capitol of the region, we stayed in a fanciful small hotel called the Nest, in a reimagined 100-year-old farm above the citadel overlooking the river and the medieval city. Each day, as we drove to tour the surroundings, we traversed a steep road of a dozen or more switchbacks, reaching down the promontory from battlement to battlement, to descend to the

bridge over the Meuse. The strategic position of this region, called the Ardennes, had made it a battleground for European powers for centuries.

The region repeatedly changed hands during the early modern period, with parts of the Belgian Ardennes being incorporated into France, Germany, the Spanish Netherlands, the Austrian Netherlands and the United Kingdom of the Netherlands at various times. However, genetically, Belgians of the area today, whether Flemish or Walloon, share a combination of Gallo-Roman and Frankish blood.

The Ardennes was the site of major battles during both world wars. The centennial of World War I and Battle of the Ardennes is expected to bring broader tourism over the next several years to these beautifully wooded, historic surroundings. In World War II, the Meuse and its crossings were a key objective of the last major German counter-offensive on the Western Front, The Battle of the Bulge, in the winter of 1944-45. Many towns of the region were badly damaged during the two wars, but both the communities and their historic sites have been fully restored.

One such community along the upper Meuse valley we visited is Dinant, in the Walloon area an hour's drive south of Brussels, and not far from Namur. Its name derives from the Celtic, meaning Divine Valley, and it's been populated since Neolithic and Roman times. It is home to the Grotto de Mont-Fat, the Roman temple to the Goddess Diana, which more recently sheltered its inhabitants from German bombing in World War II. It is located where the river cuts deeply into a plateau, in a steep-sided gash between the rock face and the river, which left the village little room to grow except into a long thin town.

The limestone cliffs overlooking the town and its onion-domed bell tower, from its 11th century fortified citadel, have

supported a high end quarrying industry producing black marble and bluestone. Its strategic location has exposed it to battles and plague over the millennia. In 1466, Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, punished a local uprising by casting 800 villagers into the Meuse and setting the city afire. In the 16th and 17th century wars between France and Spain, and later the Austrians, led to destruction and famine. Then came World War I. In August of 1914, the Germans, invading down the Meuse valley and battling French forces, summarily executed 674 civilian residents, the first such major atrocity of the war. Among those wounded in the city's destruction was a man of destiny, then Lieutenant Charles de Gaulle.

The city suffered mightily again in World War II. Yet today, totally rebuilt, it has retained its medieval personality, with some modern touches. The blue-roofed town is the 19th century home of Adolphe Sax, and his lineage has brought a tradition of jazz to the town, with jazz festivals and the colorful Saxophone Bridge. Today, it hosts the Bathtub Regatta every August, helping maintain the Belgian reputation for the quirky, when 25,000 guests gather to bask in the joie de vivre along the river. We drove through miles and miles of the wild Ardenne, amidst ancient farms and the occasional war memorial, in that part of Belgium that lies south of the Meuse, where in ancient times, hyenas and bear, reindeer and mammoths paced its fields and woods.

We took an aging cruise boat from the heart of Dinant several miles upriver to visit a châteaux that has been compared, not through exaggeration, to Versailles, yet is little visited. Sitting along the Meuse, with its Renaissance architecture and terraced, intricate gardens filled with mazes, fountains and 300-year-old orange trees, the Castle of Freyr would be at home among the chateaus of France's Loire valley. It has remained in the same family for 20 generations. The Castle,

which has been called “The ghost ship on the bank of the Meuse,” sits across the wide stream from the Cliffs of Freyr, the most famous climbing area in Belgium, where we saw intrepid week-end climbers of the Belgian Alpine Club crisscrossing these highest of walls to be found north of the Alps and south of the Fjords.

Much of the Meuse is as beautiful as Germany’s Rhine, and has more castles per capita than any other country, including France. Louis the XIV, better known as the Sun King, demanded to be housed at the Castle of Freyr in 1675, while his forces attacked Dinant, and the peace treaty was later signed there. Known as the Coffee Treaty, at this agreement between France and Spain, coffee was served for the first time in Belgium.

The Meuse has harbored its secrets for eons. The dominant marine predator during the 20 million years of the Cretaceous Period, when the seas were high and flowed deep inland around the globe, came to be known as the Mosasaur, meaning “the lizard of the Meuse.” The first remains of what some say resembled a giant flippered crocodile were first discovered in 1764 in a limestone quarry near the city of Maastricht, on the Meuse. Some of these creatures were known to be up to 57 feet in length, weigh two tons and resembled modern monitor lizards, but elongated and stretched out for swimming. They were plentiful around the world and their young were born live, and not from eggs.

When French revolutionary forces took over Maastricht in 1794, they heard rumors of the lizard’s skull being hidden away, and a reward of 600 bottles of wine reputedly brought forth a dozen grenadiers, who turned it over to be sent to Paris. There it was mistakenly identified as a fish, a crocodile and a sperm whale, before it was found to be a primordial lizard, which had gone extinct 65 million years ago.

I don't know what a fried Mosasaur might have tasted like, but I can say that more contemporary Belgian cuisine has evolved a style of its own. Those of us in the U.S. may know Belgian food best for its exquisite chocolate and its tasty wheat beers, but within the country the cuisine reflects that of neighboring France, Germany and the Netherlands. It is said, too, that Belgian food is served in the quantity of German cuisine but with the quality of French food.

Among the most popular dishes in Belgium are moules-frites, mussels steamed with onions and celery and served with exquisite fries, and is sometimes referred to as the country's national dish. Almost as popular is Waterzool, a rich stew of fish, or sometimes chicken, vegetables, cream and eggs, also with a side of fries, and usually associated with the town of Ghent. Note that fries are integral parts of these beloved dishes, as they are with most local dishes in this country. Most Belgian households have a deep fryer, allowing them to make their own fries and other deep-fried dishes at home.

And then there are the dedicated food stands found within city centers and along main roads into most towns that specialize in giant servings of fried potatoes. They are often served with a variety of sauces and eaten on their own or in the company of other snacks. Traditionally, they are served in a "cornet de frites," a cone-shaped white piece of cardboard then wrapped in a piece of paper with the sauce on top and a small plastic fork. Nowadays most friteries also serve them on small trays, as we observed tourists snacking from along the canals of Bruges. These stands, kiosks and caravans – some 4,500 of them throughout the country -- are virtual national institutions and variously called "friteries" or "frikot" or "friture."

Belgian fry sauces are most often mayonnaise-based, and frequently there are a dozen or more options. Ketchup takes a

distant place from the most popular. Mayonnaise had its origins in Mahon, the capital of the Balearic island of Minorca. In the mid-18th century, the Port of Mahon was taken by French Marshall Richelieu, and a shortage of food supplies ensued. His chefs made do with a preparation of eggs and oil, and when his army returned to France, his countrymen began to prepare the new “Mahonnaise” sauce “in the Richelieu style.”

Earlier I mentioned the popularity of mussels with fries. Mussels are a Belgium staple, as they are cheap and plentiful, and were once considered food for the poor. The number of friteries boomed after World War I, but today these humble eateries are dedicated almost entirely to serving fried foods. It turns out that moules frites have migrated to fancier environs, like bistros and urban restaurants. But the meal is still a casual one, as was our first luncheon in Bruges, when the three of us shared a bowl of fries and a pot of mussels.

In a typical preparation, the fresh mussels from tributaries of the North Sea are cooked over high heat with whatever broth and ingredients are called for, for about five minutes.

Meanwhile an assistant thinly slices flavorful yellow-fleshed, high starch bintjes potatoes, and fries them in oil at a fairly low temperature, until they are limp. After they are drained, the fries are dipped back into the fryer at a higher temperature, this second frying making them crisp and golden on the outside, fluffy and tender within. The perfect Belgian, or Flemish, or French for that matter, fried potato.

More Americans would be familiar with steak frites, also considered to be a national dish of Belgium, but also of France, which both claim its invention. Historically the rump steak was commonly used for the dish, though today an entrecote also called the rib eye is pan-fried rare in a reduction sauce, and then served with those ubiquitous fries.

Throughout our trip, we had no problem with language. With so many languages spoken there, everyone seems to speak at least a little English. Although on one occasion, when we stopped at a little village for lunch, my wife ordered from the Flemish menu what she thought was sautéed pork. It was pork, and it was sautéed, but it turned out to be a pair of pig's ears.

One more widely popular dish is known as Carbonnade flamande, or Flemish stew. It is a traditional Belgium sweet-sour beef and onion stew, seasoned with thyme, bay, mustard and mushrooms. A beer with a bitter-sour flavor is used in cooking, and just before serving, a small amount of cider vinegar and red current jelly is added to enhance the sweet-sour flavor. Again, fries, or perhaps boiled potatoes accompany each serving, along, of course, with a bottle of local beer.

Beer, an integral part of Belgian cuisine, has more distinct varieties per capita than anywhere else in the world, even in this age of craft brews. Some 1,132 different varieties are produced in the country. The brewing traditions there traced to the Trappist Monks of the Middle Ages, whose descendants still fund some of their monasteries that way to this day. Wheat beer is popular with seafood and fish, blond or tripel beers with white meats, dubbel or other dark beers with dark meat and fruit lambics, such as delicious cherry beer from Brussels, with desserts.

And that reference to dessert brings us to what are locally known as Liege Waffles. Charlemagne, founder of the Holy Roman Empire, was born and raised near Liege. With its access to transport and easy sources of fuel, Liege became the heart of the early Industrial Revolution in Europe.

In fact, industrial production there had become so dense that in 1930 it was the center of the infamous Meuse Valley Fog, a perfect storm of industrial pollution and climatic conditions that killed 60 and injured thousands of people and cattle over 2 to 3 days. On a much more positive note, local legend has it that in the 1700s, the Prince of Liege, already a great medieval city along the Meuse, oversaw his chef's invention of the waffle. He had the chef add something now called pearl sugar to the dough, along with vanilla, and was captivated by the texture and sweet aroma, which is now shared with waffle fans around the globe. While Liege waffles are the country's favorite, in Brussels they serve a rectangular, deeper waffle, and another popular variety is called galettes, a thin, soft breakfast waffle. These days, waffle shops abound across this country, and no walk down any shopping street would be complete without a display of crisp waffles alongside bowls of fresh strawberries and whipped cream and chocolate sauce.

After our trip, I stopped for lunch on a drive to Green Bay at the town of Belgium, Wisconsin. Sure enough, I saw Belgian waffles on the menu, and had to try it. Fresh from the pan and topped with those strawberries and whipped cream, it couldn't have been more perfect if we had been dining in Liege.

And finally, the essence of every town, shop and restaurant is captured in every taste of Belgian chocolate. The cocoa bean has been on the scene in Belgium since it was brought over in the days of the Spanish Netherlands. Chocolate was first consumed as a popular hot drink, and indeed chocolate was introduced to Switzerland when the mayor of Zurich first tasted it in Brussels in 1697. The praline was invented in Brussels in 1912. Thousands of chocolate shops now dot Belgium, many of them small and making their own delightful candy from quality cocoa beans, cocoa butter, pure sugar, often with fruits and nuts, and never cooked with vegetable

shortening. Best known of the Belgian chocolatiers is Godiva, where founder Joseph Dapes first served his rich candies in 1926 at his Grand Place shop on a cobblestone street at Brussels' Central Square.

And so with that, this verbal dine-around tour in Belgium draws to a sweet close, as every meal ought. I hope you have enjoyed this modest sequel of a dissertation on the possible origins of a Belgian dish much of the modern world has come to know as the French fry. And we skipped through some other curious sites and tasty dishes allied to the ubiquitous fried potato, which glide through time, space and stomachs, centered in Belgian orbit.

In this brief review, I hope to have done some justice to our culinary journey into Belgium. One of the small country's great writers, Nobel Laureate Maurice Maeterlinck, put it best when he said, "How strongly do we diminish a thing as soon as we put it in words." I would suggest that Belgium's cuisine, much like its World Cup Soccer win against the U.S., is anything but unassuming. Indeed, Belgium offers the traveling gourmand and gourmet an ample measure of exciting tastes, bathed in a vibrant history, in glorious settings, along with more than a soupçon of the inevitable myths and "Mystery of the Meuse."

To bring us back to earth, as we traversed the halls of the Brussels airport in search of our plane back to the States, we approached a sleek McDonald's restaurant, and there up on the menu board we spied fries, or actually "frites," as it's spelled in French, the dominant tongue of Belgium's capitol.

Our investigations into the mysteries of the primordial Belgian fried potato had brought us back to home base. While it seemed we ran into McDonald's all over the country, even in Bruges, the fact is that the number of McRestaurants per capita in crowded Belgium is a tiny fraction of the ratio here in the U.S. and less than half that of France and Germany. Not so surprising, and even inevitable, in this land where their own delightful local cuisine abounds, and the Belgian fried potato remains king.

In this small nation, where the newspaper comics remain a distinct and integral part of the national culture, where rich culinary traditions run deep, and may even have contributed to the modern physiological expression "Belgian Bottoms," the revered Belgian version of the fried potato remains, assuredly, no joke.