



Wining and Dining Dutch Treat

Amsterdam is not just tulips and canals; it's a serious restaurant town as well.

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Let us not forget that Amsterdam is a lovely city. In today's reshuffling of global capitals amid emerging regions, nations, cities and economies as well as new, must-see travel destinations, it is sometimes remiss not to recall stellar cities and former global capitals that once were in the forefront of people's minds and itineraries. And what's not to like about a city with tulips and flowers everywhere?

Amsterdam is much like a small Paris in that it is a city on a human scale without skyscrapers at its historic center, a city that is glorious for walking — on brick sidewalks, over bridges, and along canals — amid reminders and remnants of a resplendent 17th century. It is a city of small shops replete with contemporary design. And like Paris, its museums are exceptional.

Just back from a fourth visit in five years (four books, four Dutch editions), we find the bookish and low-key cosmopolitan culture of Holland and its friendly and efficient people yet another compelling attraction. And while the food does not rival Paris', it is diverse, contemporary and good. You won't go hungry for choices or wine or something called Heineken.

As a tourist, there is plenty to do and see, but don't miss a boat trip along the canals, a visit to the Van Gogh museum (200 paintings and 50 drawings), or a peek at the small Willet-Holthuysen museum to see what an opulent private residence was in the 19th century. Then there's the organic market Noordermarkt, Jordaan, and shopping on the 9 Streets, as Amsterdam has followed Milan and Antwerp for design, furniture and fashion. And if you need a respite from global-brand overload, take a walk in Vondelpark (a Central

Park-type green oasis) and especially for business travelers perhaps a massage Esalen at Koan Float (Herengracht 321; tel. 020 555 0333; www.koanfloat.nl). If you have time, of course visit the grand Rijksmuseum and select a few rooms for quality over quantity. On our last visit, two paintings were ever so powerful: Vermeer's "The Kitchen Maid," the well-known 1658 masterpiece where the only movement is the flow of milk into the bowl and the maid's gesture of pouring it from the jug radiates a tremendous calm, and Abraham van den Tempel's "Making Music," representing harmony and family life in the 17th century. A zen experience of sort.

CULINARY DIVERSITY

Food is taken seriously in Amsterdam from the smallest sandwich place to the grand cuisine of some of the top hotels. On one of our recent visits, a local took us to the best French restaurant, **Christophe** (Leliegracht 46; tel. 020 625 0807; www.restaurantchristophe.nl) for Mediterranean fare that extended to North African and Italian cuisine. The chef surprised us in offering dishes with the basic ingredients of figs, anchovies, peppers added to tajines or pata negra, and has a daring way of using spices like a lamb loin in a pepper crust. His take on *foie gras* marinated in sweet and spicy white wine is another winner. **Vinkeles** (in the Dylan hotel, Keizersgracht 384; 020 530 2010; www.dylanamsterdam.com/taste-of-the-dylan) is another contemporary (and expensive) take on French cuisine, though dishes like pigeon with five spices and dried apricots are a bit

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View of Dining Room, Puri Mas

restrained. Other hotel restaurants worth trying are Sofitel's **Bridges** (Oudezijds Voorburgwal 197; 020 555 3560; www.bridgesrestaurant.nl) for the wonderful fish dishes with a French twist as well as a seasoned wine list, a raw bar, cocktail bar and *vinothèque* and an enjoyable garden terrace.

Our favorite eatery (and maybe our best meal in Amsterdam) is the small and unique bistrot **Bouchon du Centre** (Falckstraat 3; tel. 020 330 1128; www.bouchonducentreamsterdam.com) owned by the chef, an amazing Dutch woman with red hair who could pass for a French woman and certainly mastered the French language and cooking splendidly. She trained at Lyon bouchons but has eaten all over France growing up with parents who spent lots of time traveling and eating through France. Alas, she is only open Wednesday through Saturday and has a local clientele as regulars, so booking in advance is essential for lunch or dinner. What is remarkable is that she cooks in a kitchen that looks like a home kitchen off in the corner but is not separated from the dining room, which has only 20 seats. She does it all by herself ... takes the order, cooks and serves. Only in Holland! Granted she has a short menu of half a dozen dishes, a function of what she finds at the market, and three desserts prepared in advance, but nonetheless unforgettable. Her leeks vinaigrette was the best we've ever had both in taste and presentation, the scallops with vegetables perfectly cooked, the blood sausage with shallots super tasty, and such desserts as almond tart, lemon tart, *crème caramel* or *marquise au chocolat* are French classics. She should win the medal for entrepreneurship, passion, skills, efficiency and more.

Brasseries are big in Amsterdam and a natural with the excellent seafood coming from the North Sea. **Keyzer** (Van Baerlestraat 96; tel. 020 675 1866; www.Brasseriekeyzer.nl) gets top ratings in our book for the oysters and fresh shrimp, fish specialties cooked to order as well as excellent sandwiches and croissants. The apple tart isn't bad either. **Nevy** (Westerdocksdijk 40D; tel. 020 344 6409; www.nevy.nl) is also recommended for its fish specialties, like brill with couscous, and tempura nevy showing the local produce and foreign influences. The pie of almond and apple with chocolate and hazelnut ice cream is a treat, as is eating along the water. As an alternate, **Brasserie Harkema** (Nes 67; tel. 020 428 2222; www.brasserieharkema.nl) is a typical huge brasserie with simple fresh food and a good value.

For red meat lovers, **La Pampa** (Paleisstraat 21; tel. 020 620 0153; www.arpl.nl) is a must. The décor is rustic with wooden tables, and the *entrecôte à la braise* or the marinated pork are the reasons to go. Another meaty choice is **Cafe Loetje** (Johannes Vermeerstraat 52; tel. 020 636 5170; www.cafeloetje.nl) for arguably the best beef in town.

Amsterdam has been long known for Indonesian food, and **Puri Mas** (Lange Leidsestraat 37-41; tel. 020 627 7627; www.purimas.nl) is considered the reference. Nestled on a second floor the menu is a steal with seven dishes and nine vegetables to share, and so is the Royal if you are up to sharing ten dishes. The quality of their spices and friendly female service add a special touch. A casual spot for good Asian food from sushi and teriyaki to dim sum and imaginative noodle dishes is



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Nooch 11 (Nine Street; tel. 020 622 2105; www.nooch.nl). For some global fusion cuisine, **De Luwte** (Leliegrach 26-28; tel. 020 625 8548; www.restaurandeluwte.nl) is a fine and consistent place with a charming décor and some tables looking out on the little Leliegracht canal. There are good vegetarian dishes with curry and coconut flavors, wonderful fish combinations, and a succulent guinea fowl with bok choy and nuts.

Italian choices in Amsterdam are abundant (something that can be said these days about most cities). Should you try Hilton's **Roberto**, considered the top Italian restaurant in town and by some in the country, you won't regret it: the risottos are excellent, the squid salad perfectly seasoned, and so were the taglioni with truffles and spaghetti à la vongole. If you are a chocolate freak, opt for the chocolate tart with banana. Note: the hotel is a business-type establishment, and during the week business faces show in their restaurants. Europeans not on business tend to pick both the hotel and its restaurants for leisure weekends, so it's important to book ahead here (and perhaps rent a bike to explore the center and burn a few calories). **Bellini** (Nederhoven 7; tel. 020 644 8390; www.bellini.nl) is another high-end traditional Italian. We enjoyed the frutti di mare pizza with the local mussels and squid, strigozzi al funghi (fresh pasta with a mushroom sauce), and scallopine Bastardo del grappa (veal with Bastardo cheese in white wine).

Our dining preference in Amsterdam, though, went toward the small, cozy spots (where the locals seem to hang out), and all good values. We had a lovely dinner of well executed dishes at **Toscanini Ristorante Caffè** (Lindengracht 75; tel. 020 623

2813; www.restauranttoscanini.nl), where the pasta dishes are especially delicious, the veal with lemon and bistecca di manzo alla brace classically prepared, and the long list of desserts a real temptation. The tiramisù and tartufo seem to win among the locals, and were a perfect end to a pleasant evening. At **Pastini** (Leidsegracht 29; tel. 020 622 1701; www.pastini.nl) the antipasto misto, mint salad and crespelle with lamb made for a lovely simple dinner washed down with a good Barbera at a very affordable price. But the real find and best Italian meal we've had in our visits was the rather new **Bussia** (Reestraat 28-32; tel. 020 627 8794; www.bussia.nl). The Tuscan bean soup was as good as it gets, the grilled quail with mustard, apples and endives beautifully done, and the ravioli with fennel and mushrooms as good as any pasta dish in the best restaurants in the motherland. Ending with an apricot soufflé with pistachio ice cream made for a perfect meal. The wine list had Bussia wines (Piedmont) as well as a very good selection of wines from regions throughout Italy.

The next two restaurants are, to us, quintessential Amsterdam contemporary and should be high on the list of dining options. **Le Garage** (Ruysdaelstraat 54-56; tel. 020 679 7176; www.restaurantlegarage.com) is a hot and trendy place with a chef well known on Dutch television. It caters to the wealthy neighborhood as a place to be seen though it is gourmet cuisine and quite a treat. More casual, low-key, **De Belhamel** (Brouwersgracht 60; tel. 020 622 1095; www.belhamel.nl) was recommended by several local foodies and didn't disappoint, especially on a spring Sunday lunch/brunch where the few tables outside were heavenly. Inside



Rijsttafel (literally, "rice table") spread

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its Arts Deco duplex is pleasant and the food serious though on the large portion side. A mushroom soup was almost filling, the gravlax salad mega size, though superbly seasoned, and the duck in port wine with potato purée perfectly prepared and so was the apple/cinnamon tart.

A nifty organic restaurant we admire that's outside town and worth a detour is **De Kas** (Kamerlingh Onneslaan 3; tel. 020 462 4562; www.restaurantdekas.nl). Housed in a converted greenhouse (particularly magical at night), the organic Mediterranean-style greens come from their hothouse and the meat from their farm.

SOJOURNING

Amsterdam has plenty of grand, luxurious hotels as well as wonderful bed and breakfasts. If you like to stay in "the canal belt," like we do, and want luxury do try **The Dylan** (Keizersgracht 384; tel. 020 530 2010; www.dylanamsterdam.com), a paragon of chic boutique style with a few canal-view rooms. Personally, we prefer the nearby **Ambassade** (Herengracht 341; tel. 020 555 0222; www.ambassade-hotel.nl), where publishers put their authors and it feels like family. A row of canal houses means one can enjoy the canal view from the breakfast room or in the adjoining parlor room, the hush-library and the wonderful staff and setting.

On the small-is-beautiful side, **The Seven Bridges** (Reguliersgacht 31; tel. 020 623 1329; www.sevenbridgeshotel.nl) is a small gem with eleven rooms, each individually decorated and

furnished 17-20th century style. With eight luxurious rooms, 717 (Prinsengracht 717; tel. 020 427 0717; www.717hotel.nl) is perhaps the romantic address par excellence. A gem of a different kind is **Le College Hotel** (Roelof Hartstraat 1; tel. 020 571 1511; www.thecollegehotel.com), a converted 19th-century schoolhouse, and the modern guest rooms were once classrooms. It has forty "hip," crisply designed rooms near the Van Gogh Museum.

After a good night's sleep, for a great breakfast or light lunch head to tiny **Chez Buffet von Odette & Yvette** (Herengracht 309; tel. 020 423 6034) where all is organic coming from a nearby farm. Delicious omelets, muffins and salads. Much like Amsterdam, small and delicious. ☿

