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Dylan van Eijkeren

The best restaurant in Italy

The gastronomic journey of a lifetime

Original title: *Het beste restaurant van Italië*

TRAVEL BOOK

A mouth-watering journey through gourmet Italy

A feast for lovers of Italy and Italian food

About the author

Dylan van Eijkeren (The Hague, 1967) is a journalist, an expert on the former Dutch Colonies, and a dedicated gastronome. He has also published the travel books *De enige gast*, about a voyage of discovery in Germany, *Het beste land ter wereld* about the Netherlands' other neighbour Belgium, *Witboi* about Surinam and the Dutch Antilles, and *Ik zag een aap*. Reisbrieven uit het nieuwste Zuid-Afrika. In 2005 and 2009, he was nominated for the Bob den Uyl Award for travel literature.

About the book

In 2010, Dylan van Eijkeren went on a culinary journey, crisscrossing the land of pasta, ham, buffalo mozzarella and wine. Although it focuses on food, and there are the daily culinary extravagances, the true aim of this travel book is to discover the real Italy.
Van Eijkeren's modus operandi is to ask a policeman or local butcher to point him to the best restaurant in the area. This could be a four-star restaurant with a magnificent setting in the mountains or a simple trattoria in a back alley. Focusing on the local cuisine, the writer explores the cultural and social differences between the Italian regions. The result is an amusing, tasty, and easily digestible but literary travelogue.

Dylan van Eijkeren, *Het beste restaurant van Italië*
ISBN 978 90 445 16128
Paperback, 256 pages

Bibliography

De enige gast. Een ontdekkingsreis door Duitsland (`The Only Guest – A Journey of Discovery through Germany') (2004, travel literature)
Witboi, Hoe de West werd verloren ('Witboi – How the West was Lost') (2006, travel literature)
Het beste land ter wereld. Een reis door België ('The Best Country in the World – A Journey through Belgium') (2008, travel literature)
Ik zag een aap. Reisbrieven uit het nieuwste Zuid-Afrika. (`I Saw a Monkey. Travel Letters from the Latest South Africa) (2009, travel literature)

Prizes and awards

Nominated for the 2005 Bob den Uyl prize for 'The Only Guest'
Nominated for the 2009 Bob den Uyl prize for 'The Best Country in the World – A Journey through Belgium'

The press about 'The Only Guest':

`It is not only very well written, but it makes a very useful travel guide.' – *Reizen*

`An equally hilarious and thorough report of a three-month tour of Germany.' – *Grande*

`Van Eijkeren has written a funny travel book about a country of which we didn't know such a thing could be done. (…) The trip produced funny, often hilarious, certainly revealing and sometimes even moving stories.' – *Nieuwe Revu*

`Eloquent.' – *Esquire*

`A success.' – *Elsevier*

`Brilliant debut.' – *cindyhoetmer.nl*

The press about *Witboi*:

`*Witboi*'s forte is its wealth of amusing self-reflections and laconic humour, lavishly strewn across the pages.' – *Gerrit Jan Zwier, Leeuwarder Courant*

`Delicious, hilarious, touching.' – *Ronald Giphart*

`Beautiful, fantastic.' – *Arendo Joustra, chief editor, Elsevier*

`A book that stimulates your wanderlust and makes the reader forget all about our cold weather.' – *Pleasure Magazine*

`Like all travel writers, Dylan van Eijkeren dubs himself a researcher, not a tourist. And yet being a tourist, which he of course is anyway, doesn't have to be a shortcoming, since he is one with a focus on everyday life, lifting his narrative well above the usual surf and sun indulgences.' – *De Leeswolf*

The press about `The Best Country in the World':

`Slapstick prose. (…) Great to devour.' – *de Volkskrant*

`An enticing travel book on the lovely Belgium.' – *De Standaard*

`A great portret of Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels, that tries to look beyond the cliches.' – Yves Desmet, hoofdredacteur *De Morgen*

`Easy written, often rather funny road story.' – *NBD Biblion*

`Betrays the Belgium truth.' – *Gentleman*

The press about `I Saw a Monkey':

`Van Eijkeren [...] excells in apt and wryly-funny characterizations.' – *NRC Handelsblad*

`By far the best and most amusing book about South Africa published in the Netherlands in recent years.' – *Aktueel*

`Van Eijkeren has a great talent for observation and a subtle pen.' – *Veronica magazine*

`Van Eijkeren's books are a great read.' – *Dagblad van het Noorden*

`Van Eijkeren is in possession of an elegant, and witty pen.' – *Parool*

Excerpt from the book

The waitress is attractive in a studenty sort of way. She is wearing a T shirt with the somewhat mysterious text SHOW ME, I AM CURIOUS.
"Va bene?"
And would I like the menù fisso...
"Si," I say.
She brings bread, not the saltless, dry bread of Middle Italy but a good, salty, rich white loaf, almost doughy. "Don't eat too much, otherwise you won't have room for the real food later on." Oh? As a rule, comments like this are ominous, or at the very least, motherly. Especially for me, a man who is hungry, a man who lives by the motto that, even if he is no longer hungry, he should rely on his talent and willpower to continue to eat.
"And before we start, are you allergic to anything?" Apparently, allergies are still just about acceptable in Southern Italy; she doesn't ask if I refuse to eat certain foods on principle. I imagine that around here, everyone eats everything. After these two introductory announcements, the follow-up is, "We'll start shortly, sir". As if I am about to undergo an operation in an outpatients' department.
Yet SHOW ME, I AM CURIOUS does have a point. The actual meal borders on the impossible. Not just because the number of courses would be incalculable without a notebook, but more particularly because at no point do I think: stop, enough is enough, I'm fit to burst.
It starts with alici e formaggi, a doughnut ball consisting of cheese, bread dough, and anchovies. Very filling, but it also tastes of the sea, is velvety and delicious – I can't get my head round it.
Next, a platter of mussels. Slightly less exciting than the blue mussels I ate in l'Acquapazza in Cecina Mare, but still a very decent mussel. Newly-caught, a fresh flavour, with a smattering of slightly sour tomato and some coriander (which Show Me, I am Curious calls 'prezzemolo cinese', Chinese parsley).
Course three: deep-fried squid in its own ink, with tomatoes.
Four: anchovies in oil and vinegar. It is familiar, but put in the marinade only an hour or so earlier and much better than I've ever tasted before – still really fishy.
Five: a platter of pulpo salad. By now you'll be thinking that Show Me, I am Curious has overloaded the table with all those platters. Not at all. She brings them one by one. Each time the last morsel enters my mouth, she heads towards me and offers me the next little dish with a grand gesture.
Six: prawns with roasted yellow peppers. A brilliant combination.
Seven: salami from the nearby town of Fondi; a fiery sausage.
Eight: mashed potatoes with smoked ham. As creamy as a thick, white, high cloud.
Nine: spinach and ricotta tart.
Ten: a red pepper with a filling of minced meat and sultanas. I don't think this was necessary. Not because of the taste – which is a lot better than it sounds (the pepper is spicy, the meat is veal) but why a whole pepper and not a half?
"Well," says Show Me, I am Curious, "it's now time for the real thing." Never again will I disregard a piece of motherly advice. "Do you want your spaghetti con le vongole bianche or with tomatoes?"
"What would you choose?"
"Oops!" She laughs. "I'm going to ask the kitchen that."

"No," I protest but she is already on her way, then looks over her shoulder and says, "you know about food, I can see that; I don't want to disappoint you." I get the version with tomatoes, and just five clams, a disappointing number. "Veraci," she says when she sees the look on my face. Carpet clams. Whereas the vongole in Trastevere gave me the impression that I resembled the inside of a clam, these ones make me feel that I have turned into a clam.
Twelve: swordfish with a filling of pulpo (octopus) and local black olives, with cold French beans as a contorno. The dish looks like a small roll. Rolls are not exactly my favourite type of food. Often dry, often intended to conceal the fact that something is wrong, often falling apart *en route* to the mouth. Not this little roll. Succulent, even the swordfish, which can dry out quickly, while the pieces of pulpo seem to melt in my mouth.
"The main course," the waitress says a little later, without even a smile. It is quite a plateful. Deep-fried pulpo, more squid (but fried in a different batter than before; perhaps it's a different type of squid), sardines, anchovies, and a tub gurnard – triglia. One of the women I met that afternoon in front of the small restaurant, the one who speaks English, emerges from the kitchen and walks to my table.
"Va bene? Everything okay?"
"Not insubstantial", I say.
And I think: the moment I start to grow scales is not far off.
"Ha!" says she. Then, proudly, in Italian to all of the clientele, yet to no one in particular, "The foreigner thinks it's not insubstantial!"

Translated by Moze Jacobs
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