

FOODSERVICE CONSULTANT

Crystal ball dining

EXPERT OPINION ON THE
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Belgians reach Broadway

Omer Ipek and Skel Islamaj have been sharing their European cuisine with Americans for a decade. Sue Holaday speaks to those behind the scenes helping to realise their latest Belgian concept

The Yale University community got a taste of Brussels last year when Maison Mathis, a Belgian bakery café franchise, opened in the midst of the shopping area known as Broadway in New Haven, Connecticut (CT).

The café, which bakes its own breads and pastries fresh daily, is owned by Belgians Omer Ipek and Skel Islamaj, who also own Rudy's, a landmark Yale University bar which they took over 12 years ago and later moved to a new location.

Additionally, Islamaj and Ipek own

B.Cafe in Manhattan with another partner. Islamaj describes it as “an honest reflection of the Belgian food culture that we grew up with”. It's one of two Belgian restaurants they opened there, that Islamaj, who lives in the city, oversees.

Maison Mathis is, first and foremost, a bakery. When asked why open a bakery, Islamaj laughs. “I keep asking myself that. It came about when we decided to pay a royalty/franchise fee for Creneau International's concept. They had Belgian beer cafés around the world and they had this bakery concept on paper.” Creneau,

based in Belgium, connects brands, spaces and consumers through design concepts with concept development, interior design, implementation and franchise follow-up.

Yale, Islamaj recalls, was looking at other Belgian concepts for the space, a former Panera Café. “We told them to wait, because we might be interested in the location.”

The site is, he says, a flagship for Creneau, which has one other unit in the US, in Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport. “They helped us

B MAISON MATHIS

\$340,000
Total cost for all equipment

\$3.75
Starting price for sandwiches



with the buildout,” Islamaj adds.

Although the focus immediately is on making New Haven a success, the partners are currently thinking about other sites in the US and are looking at Boston, according to Islamaj.

The challenge of not being a baker did not limit Islamaj. “We have Belgian bakers working for us. I’m more of a traditional chef with a different culinary experience. Baking the right breads can be hard. There are a lot of factors such as humidity that can affect it. We’re trying to fine-tune the breads. You get other challenges, the normal ones from buildout to staffing. Our consultant was recommended to us by our architect and was very helpful working with us on the baking equipment.”

His foodservice consultant, Rick Sevieri, associate member of FCSI, partner in RJS Barber Associates in Old Lyme, CT, worked with the concepts designers in Belgium and Dubai. “What’s cool was the co-ordination. All the front of house, millwork, tile, lights, etc was built in Belgium and shipped to the US,” he says.

“We bought the [display] cases which were Italian and our crew helped them buy the equipment. It was a \$340,000

package [for all equipment].”

The design, he recalls, was very European and clean, with white counters. We specified a fairly simplified kitchen with a TurboChef, six-burner range, Doyon bakery oven, retarders, etc. The space was tight.”

Martin A Benassi, AIA, Architect LLC from Hamden, CT saw the challenge as working with an international company. “We were Skypeing for information and input on the design, and then there was the time difference. Everything was made in Belgium and shipped to be assembled. We had to have everything measured and all set up before the fabrication could be done. This was like getting an Ikea package that you have to assemble. They even sent a painter and a master carpenter to help set it all up.”

“I was surprised when everything

“What’s cool was the co-ordination. All the front of house, millwork, tile, lights, was built in Belgium and shipped to the US”

fitted. The space above the restaurant is a Yale dormitory, so everything had to be suspended from the ceiling – we had a sound limitation. We couldn’t bore into the ceiling at all. All the ductwork had to be hung because you couldn’t puncture the ceiling. That created a challenge. We had to satisfy Yale and get everything approved and couldn’t even put up a sign on the building without permission. And there were a lot of fire, safety and code requirements to be met. Plus there were issues because it was a mixed-use project.”

In Litchfield, CT, Kevin Ahern of Litchfield Builders also viewed the site as the challenge. “It was very tight. It’s an active location in a small footprint. We had to stage things shipped from Europe offsite and bring them in and do minor assembly. It turned out to be attractive and inviting with lots of glass in the storefront. It looks like it fits in. New Haven has a lot of newer facilities in older buildings. This one was a major plus.”

The equipment and cabinets were “top of the line,” he adds. “Everything was cutting edge. We were able to hit our time frames.”

50lb

Size of the bags of flour that need to be stored in the café

100 people

Total number venue can seat, with a further 50 outside when the weather is good



Creneau, Ahern adds, “brought big pieces to the puzzle – a big kitchen package because all the baking is done there. They needed storage for 50lb bags of flour and had giant mixers and 36-inch pots for dough, plus large-scale ovens.”

In Atlanta, he says, the concept is much smaller, sharing space with another restaurant. “The footprint was 10ft of storefront. New Haven is a whole different animal.”

At the restaurant, the flagship for the concept in the US, manager Kelly

“They needed storage for 50lb bags of flour and had giant mixers and 36-inch pots for dough, plus large-scale ovens”

Festo points out that all pastries are baked fresh each day, starting at 4am. “We do croque monsieurs, Belgian waffles, breads, pastries, and we also make fresh espresso beverages,” she says. “We serve Belgian beers and wines and have five draft beers as well as bottles.”

Prices range from \$3.75 to \$8 for sandwiches and \$5 to \$8 for salads. Inside the restaurant seats around 100 people, Festo adds, while there is space for another 50 to sit outside in good weather. ■