

The Mouth

By Nanci Tangeman

Ostrich peepers

Restaurant De Struisvogel
Keizersgracht 312, 423 3817
Daily 18.00-00.00
Cash, PIN, major credit cards

The boys in our group are distracted. It has somehow come to their attention that the steep stairs leading down into De Struisvogel could provide a bit of a show. All it would take is one female customer descending from the street level to the cellar restaurant in a short skirt. Hoping for a Sharon Stone moment, our boys can't seem to make it past the appetiser selections on the menu without glancing towards the brightly lit stairs outside the glass doors.

Tucked underneath a corner building in the Negen Straatjes, De Struisvogel would be much easier to find if the white marquee lighting over its door wasn't at knee level. The restaurant was transformed when smokers were booted outdoors in July. The tiny cellar used to be hazy and claustrophobic. Even now diners sit shoulder to shoulder, but at least the air is clear, except for the aroma of food.

'Struisvogel' is the Dutch word for ostrich, the house specialty. De Struisvogel offers a reasonably-priced (€23) three-course menu, with several choices. Eventually, we manage to get our boys to focus on those choices and we are able to order.

The meats at De Struisvogel are organic or free range, but there are also vegetarian options. For starters, the beef carpaccio with parmesan cheese and herb oil (€1.75 supplement) comes from the Blonde d'Aquitaine van Palmesteyn farms. The soup of



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the day is our first pumpkin soup of the season, with goat cheese blended in. The vongole (clams) are stewed in wine and served on a bed of pasta.

Our boys keep an eye on the stairs as the free range ostrich steaks (€3 supplement) arrive. The meat looks a lot like a rare beef steak. The taste, though, is lighter, and the texture a little tougher. The ostrich comes with a choice of sauces, extremely fresh steamed vegetables and potatoes. The *blanquette de veau* is a hearty French stew of organic veal, carrots, celery and mushrooms, cooked with herbs and, according to the English menu, 'white wine'. The oven-roasted salmon steak is moist inside, with a light dusting of basil and pecorino crust, served over vegetables.

As we try to find room for the mandatory third course, a pair of bare legs walks by the window. Our boys wait expectantly, but the legs stride right past the stairs. The boys act dejected.

On a full stomach, the fresh mint tea and small white chocolate ice cream truffle is about right. The

chocolate parfait is actually a big slab of rich chocolate, and the Dutch yoghurt with forest fruit is a combination of creamy and tart. The crème brûlée has a delicate crust on top. All the desserts are house-made. There is also a cheese platter (€1.50 supplement) available.

In the end, we've overindulged. As we leave the cellar, I can only hope that the other parties in the restaurant aren't as obsessed with the stairway traffic as our boys were. Our climb up the steep flight, backsides to the diners, is about as far away from a peep show as you can get.