

The Mouth

By Nanci Tangeman

I'll never tell

Eetcafe Loetje

Johannes Vermeerstraat 52, 662 8173

Kitchen open 11.00-22.00, Sat from 17.30, closed Sun (Everybody on the waiting list gets served.)

Cash, PIN

A couple of times a year, it happens. Someone says, 'I found this great steak place, but I promised the waitress I wouldn't tell my friends about it.' It's always the same story. The tipster is scared to be blamed when all the tourists in tennis shoes show up wanting ice in their Pepsis. And it's always the same restaurant they're scared to disclose: Eetcafe Loetje.

There's reason for the hesitation. Loetje's is just off the Museumplein, a haven for bumbling sightseers. The menu is on blackboards—in Dutch—and the staff are definitely too busy to act as translators. On most evenings, the crowd is thick and noisy, waiting for tables. Regulars know that the first thing you do when you get to Loetje's is swim upstream to the end of the bar, put your name on the waiting list, then stand back. The servers are liable to mow you down if you dare get in their way.

I love Loetje's. I want it to stay a local hangout. But since they've opened a second *eetcafé* in Oudekerk (and soon a third in Laren), I figure it's safe to bring in some tourists and set them loose.

Partner-in-all-things-local and I decide to do just that. We choose the out-of-towners carefully. You know the type. 'We like



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to go where the locals go, to travel off the beaten track,' they say. We pick them up at their hotel. (The Hilton.) We walk them the eight blocks to Loetje's. (She's in stilettos.)

After an amazingly short wait for a table, we translate the menu for our tourist friends, including macaroni and cheese (€6.75), sate (€8.50), mini hamburgers (€6.50) and calf's liver with bacon and onions (€13.50). The 200g beefsteak *ossenhaas* (€16) or tuna steak (€14) are our suggestions. Our friends go for the beef. She asks for a side of steamed vegetables. (We snicker at her attempts to go local.) Loetje's offers only mixed salads with house dressing (€3.75), potato salad (€4.25) or fries (€2.25) for sides. She's a trooper and follows our lead with fries and salads. Then she does something that amazes us. She asks for a really rare steak... AND GETS IT!

Our MO at Loetje's has been the same for years—don't waste the servers' time by asking for special orders or trying to make chitchat. Order and ignore the often brusque,

often incomplete, service. The food is worth it.

Tonight is no exception. The steaks (both tuna and beef) are thick and oozing butter. The fries and salads are fresh and the servings generous. But the service is like nothing we've ever experienced at Loetje's. Tonight, it's our waiter who's making chitchat! For the first time, we stick around and order dessert: chocolate mousse (€4.50) and a giant bowl of ice cream (€4.50). After coffee we lead our tiny tour group back down the unbeaten track to the Hilton. I issue no warning to keep the *eetcafé* under wraps. The secret's out. If you want to blame me, go ahead. My bad.