



FIVE GENERATIONS

A SHARED PASSION FOR BELGIAN HOSPITALITY

Since 1926, the year in which the Canterbury hotel and restaurant – the Niels family's first establishment in Brussels – opened its doors, five generations have left their mark on the history of Belgian gastronomy.

Today, Maisons Niels comprises four iconic brasseries: Au Vieux Saint Martin, Au Savoy, Au Grand Forestier and Claridge.

In 2028, the Zavel's most iconic restaurant, Au Vieux Saint Martin, will celebrate its 60th anniversary. This story is also reflected on the menu, through classics that have now become the restaurant's signature dishes. One of these is the filet américain, which celebrated its centenary in 2024.

Some establishments survive trends and generations without ever losing their identity. Behind Au Vieux Saint Martin, Au Savoy, Au Grand Forestier and also the Claridge lies one and the same family. For five generations now, the Niels family has cherished a particular vision of the Brussels brasserie: generous and refined cuisine, carefully selected produce, an interior designed with the utmost attention to detail and, above all, exceptional care for their guests; all fundamental values which, since the opening of the Canterbury in 1926, have shaped the reputation of the Maisons Niels.

JOSEPH NIELS, THE EARLY YEARS OF HISTORY

It all began with Joseph Niels, a contemporary of Auguste Escoffier. In London, he worked at the Savoy, one of the most legendary restaurants of the time, where he met the famous French chef. It was there that a recipe was created which would live on for generations: the steak tartare that Joseph Niels brought back with him to Brussels in the mid-1920s. He put his own spin on it, thus creating the ‘filet américain’, the signature dish of the Canterbury, the restaurant he opened in 1926 on Boulevard Jacqmain. This dish was to become one of the hallmarks of the brasseries that subsequent generations would go on to open. It has been prepared ever since according to an unchanging recipe, and this dish which was honoured in a book in 2024 to mark its centenary remains one of the signature dishes at the group’s four establishments.

THE BELGIAN BRASSERIE THAT DOESN’T REINVENT TRADITION

Alongside this time-honoured dish, the great classics of the Belgian brasserie have, of course, also found their place in the four Maisons Niels restaurants: prawn croquettes, Parmesan fondue, bouchées à la reine and Flemish stews. Behind this apparent simplicity, however, lies a very contemporary requirement: there is no central kitchen here. Each restaurant operates from its own kitchen, with its own teams. The basic ingredients are prepared in-house, as are the mayonnaise and the ice cream used in the desserts. Consistency must stem from the craftsmanship of the kitchen teams, rather than from outsourced production.

FOUR BELGIAN VENUES THAT COMPLEMENT EACH OTHER

This philosophy is particularly evident at Le Vieux Saint Martin, which will celebrate its 60th anniversary in 2028. As with Le Grand Forestier, a restaurant that has been based in Watermael-Boitsfort – on the edge of the Sonian Forest – since 2015, and also at Le Savoy, the restaurant on Place Brugmann in Ixelles, which was established in 2018, and Le Claridge, a rotisserie that opened in Waterloo in 2022, the same DNA is evident: that of a family-run business that leaves nothing to chance and gives each venue its own unique atmosphere, in keeping with the neighbourhood in which it is situated.

ART, THE NIELS’ DISCREET SIGNATURE

When Albert Niels took over the Café de la Justice on the Grote Zandplaats in the late 1960s to turn it into the Vieux Saint Martin, he enlisted the help of Christophe Gevers, a leading figure in 20th-century Belgian interior design. Albert Niels was not content merely to choose attractive furniture. He wanted

to be able to check its comfort for himself. Every piece of furniture is therefore tested at full size, on a 1:1 scale, before being given final approval.

This attention to detail can still be seen today in the group's various branches. The original works of art – by Karel Appel, Pierre Alechinsky or Walter Swennen – that adorn the walls come from the Niels family's personal collection and contribute to the atmosphere of each restaurant. Maisons Niels also enjoys incorporating contemporary art into everyday objects. Artists are regularly invited to design the label for a bottle of wine or the design of the matchboxes offered to guests.

THE ART OF CUSTOMER SERVICE

This ethos is, of course, also reflected in the service, which is just as important as the dish itself. Recognising a regular customer. Welcoming a new customer as if they were already expected. And ensuring that the dog accompanying its owner also receives a fitting welcome. This philosophy is one of the cornerstones of the Niels establishment: consistent quality, yet never impersonal. For whilst the décor, the recipes and certain procedures are passed down, hospitality cannot be set in stone. It reinvents itself with every service, with every team and every guest. At Niels, the restaurant managers are former chef de rang, which is testament to every employee's connection to the Brussels establishment.

MAXIME NIELS, THE FIFTH GENERATION

Since 2025, the story has been carried on by Maxime Niels, son of Frédéric Niels and great-great-grandson of Joseph. At his side are his father and his grandfather Albert: three generations currently united around one and the same house, with a simple ambition: to preserve what is worth preserving and to allow the rest to evolve further. This is undoubtedly where the unique character of the Niels family lies. Their heritage is not merely a backdrop, but a foundation from which the family continues to write its story.

2028: THE BOOK ON THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY OF LE VIEUX SAINT MARTIN

To celebrate the 60th anniversary of Le Vieux Saint Martin, the family is working on an anniversary book that will be much more than just an institutional publication. For months, the author has been gathering anecdotes, memories and stories from family members, local residents and the institution's clients. The result: nearly 150 pages of stories – some unexpected, some entertaining – enriched with numerous archive photographs. The book serves as a vivid tribute to Le Vieux Saint Martin, but also as a piece of Brussels' history, told by those who lived through it themselves.