

MARKET WATCH

FOCUS

Haute Hops

ALTHOUGH MANY A SOMMELIER may consider the term "beer dinner" an oxymoron, chefs across the country are promoting the concept of cooking and pairing dishes with beer. Not only is beer a versatile ingredient, it also marries with cuisines of all types.

"People have preconceptions of what beer can do," says Filip Wouters, senior brand manager for Belgian brands at Labatt USA Inc. "They think beer food is chicken wings in a bar. But many [people] are discovering that high-end beers can go with haute cuisine." To promote that attitude, Labatt launched its Belgian Chef Tour in January 2000, which took the beer



dinner message to four U.S. cities—New York City, Boston, San Francisco and Atlanta—and featured Labatt's Belgian portfolio (BelleVue, Leffe Blond, Leffe Brine, Stella Artois and Hoegaarden). The program featured chef Ruth Van Waerebeek, who conducted Belgian beer dinner seminars in key restaurant and bar accounts and cooking schools. The menu included appetizers like terrine of chicken, rabbit and veal on a bed of greens, served with Stella Artois, and brasserie dishes like Brabant chicken, sauteed and

slow-roasted in Hoegaarden, served with celery mash and accompanied by Leffe Blond.

"In Belgium, cooking with beer is natural," says Wouters, a Belgian native. "When I was little, my grandmother used to make beef stew with Leffe and that was normal. But when I came to the United States, though, I realized that that was not the case." He adds, "In Belgium, we treat beer with as much respect as wine. We have beer that is matured up to three years in an oak barrel. So when it comes to the table ... we treat it with the respect it deserves."

Wouters notes that the tour was so well received, a second tour in expanded markets is in the works. Labatt also held a separate beer dinner event with Belgian TV chef and former chemistry professor Herwig Van Hove. The company already collaborated with Van Hove for a four-course beer dinner, held at Manhattan's Belgian brasserie Markt this past September. Van Hove served items like salad Liégeoise, which is a



ABOVE: Belgian TV chef Herwig Van Hove collaborated with Labatt in presenting a beer dinner at Manhattan's Markt.

tangy salad of fresh green beans, sliced potatoes and crispy bacon, served with Leffe Blond.