

Dispatches from the Polderland - Part 4

Written by Sher Jasperse

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Melding old ways with new



(EDITOR'S NOTE: Metro Sports Report correspondent Sher Jasperse is on a bicycle tour of the Netherlands. Here is her fourth dispatch).

People sometimes describe Dutch as a coarse and guttural language, but how can you not be charmed by the sound of a street named Tweede Doodweg?

The guttural sound comes with the “g”s – as in Gouda, which is pronounced with a throat-clearing sound followed by something like “hkowda” (this takes practice).

Gouda is a little-known town in Netherlands and a better-known cheese. I always thought that Gouda cheese was named for the town, but actually it's more like the other way around.

Gouda refers to a kind of cheese in which the fat is not skimmed out, which is the best explanation I've heard for its excellent taste. It is made in the town of Gouda but many other places as well.

Yesterday we visited a dairy farm near the town of Delft that produces milk and several varieties of Gouda cheese (three-month old, eight-month old, four-year-old, and cheeses with caraway seeds and herbs). In Iowa terms, this is a two-and-a-half century farm, owned continuously by the Van Leeuwen family, which currently owns 35 milk cows and 87 acres of land.

The Van Leeuwen farm, like many farms in Iowa, uses a mixture of old and new practices. Theo and Lidia Van Leeuwen and their three sons live in a very old thatched-roof house that faces the canal, rather than the road, Theo explained, because when it was built the canal was the only way to reach the farm.

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The current thatch is 65 years old, but needs replacing, “whenever we save up enough money,” Lidia told us, echoing the financial challenges of farmers everywhere. The Van Leeuwens use computers to manage their business and are in the process of becoming a certified all-organic farm. They are also purchasing an adjacent farm, which will be managed by one of their sons.

Today we went from the bucolic to the ultra-urban when we cruised into Rotterdam, the busiest port city in the world. Like most cities in the Netherlands, Rotterdam dates to medieval times, but vast sections of the old city were obliterated by a bombing raid on May 14, 1940. Although the country attempted to remain neutral during World War II, the Germans were determined to destroy this key Allied port.

The city was quickly rebuilt in the decades after the war and continues to develop as a major metropolitan center, but many interesting museums tell the story of the city’s maritime and cultural history. As we took ourselves on a self-guided tour of the city, we were grateful for the local people who were happy to answer our questions and add personal perspectives to the history of Rotterdam. Their solid command of English is much easier to understand than our feeble attempts at Dutch!