



**WELCOME TO
BELGIUM**

WELCOME TO LEUVEN, BELGIUM

Looking back, I believe we opened a window for many people – a new way of seeing travel, and a deeper appreciation for other cultures.

*Arlet Wils
founder of ViaVia Heverlee
& ViaVia Leuven*



VIAVIA HEVERLEE A NEW CONCEPT



It all started back in 1994, during the Antilliaanse Feesten, a vibrant summer festival. Jos, Piet, and I were talking – brainstorming really – about how we could take our passion for travel, cafés, and food a step further. We imagined a place that would attract travellers, where people could come together, exchange experiences, and feel a bit of that travel magic long after their journey had ended. We went to Bob Elsen with the idea, and he immediately liked it and saw the potential.

From the start, we knew we didn't just want a regular café. We wanted to create an atmosphere that reminded people of their travels, with drinks, food, music, colours, and photos from around the world. A place where the holiday feeling could linger.

I took charge of the kitchen. For me, the food had to be as authentic as possible, like the dishes people had tasted in other countries, to evoke memories of faraway places and to inspire dreams of their next trip. That was the idea behind our menu: a kind of international folk cuisine, bringing together dishes from all over the world in one place. Most restaurants focus on one country – Chinese, Italian, Mexican – but at ViaVia, we offered them all side by side.

We organised all sorts of activities to bring this concept to life: theme weekends where we cooked food from a specific country, travel photo slideshows, live music, poetry nights, travel quizzes (with flight tickets to win from Joker),



cooking workshops (based on my cookbook 'De smaak van reizen'), and even a kids' cooking café.

One of my favourite theme weekends was inspired by the Mexican novel 'Like Water for Chocolate'. It's a love story where emotions are expressed through the act of cooking. I created a unique menu around the dishes from the book, we screened the film and decorated the space with props from the story. It was a true experience weekend, full of flavour and feeling.



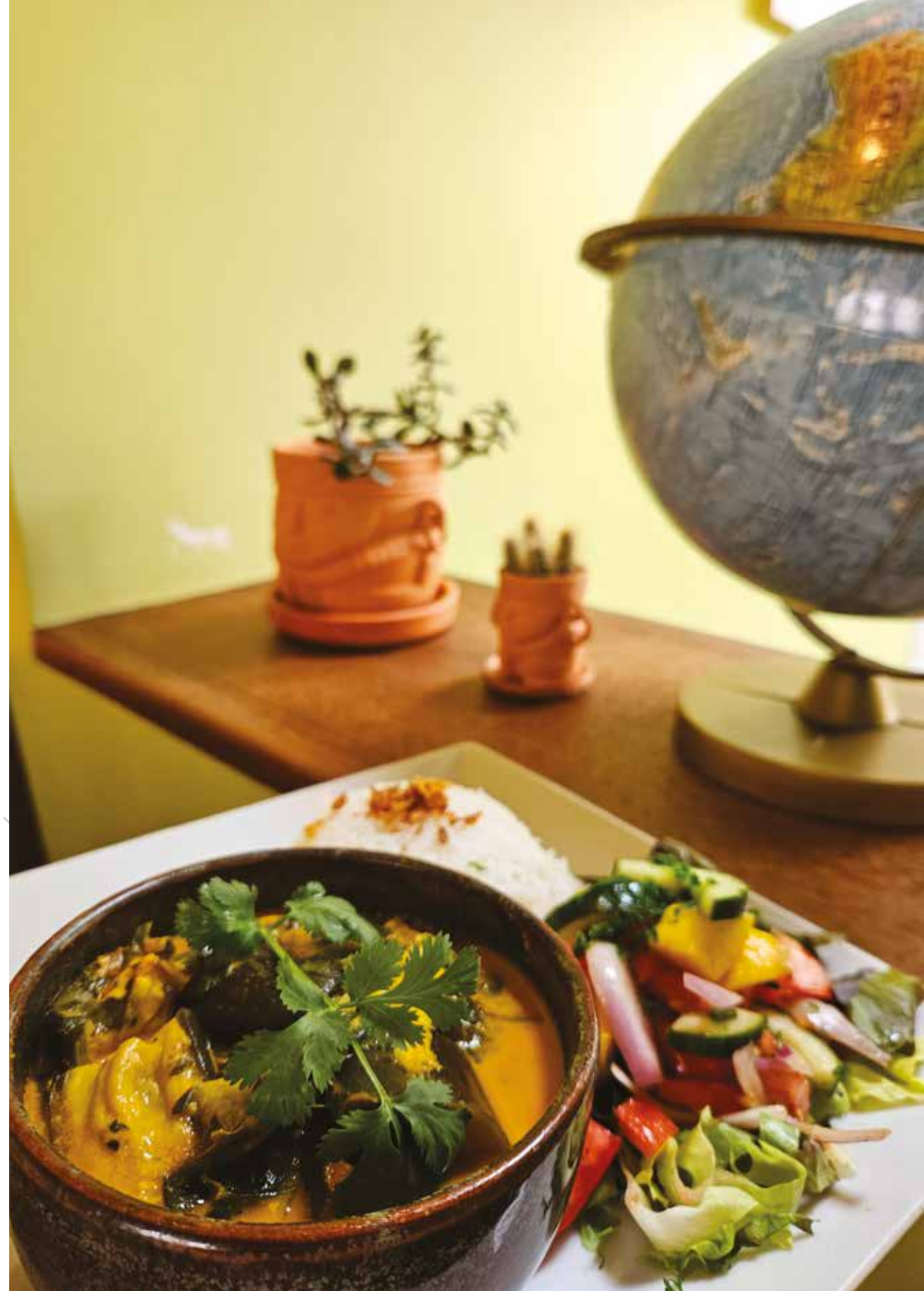
Connecting the dots

In 2024, a new chapter began as Abel took the lead at ViaVia Heverlee. His wife, Pauline, had once started the ViaVia in Ayacucho, Peru. Both came to live in Belgium, while Abel's family is still running ViaVia Ayacucho. Abel continues his ViaVia journey in Heverlee – and from afar, of course they stay connected to Ayacucho as well.

What makes ViaVia special is its link with Joker. People come here for departure briefings, reunion evenings, and more. It truly connects travel, food, and people. Even now, that is still the case, including at ViaVia Antwerpen and ViaVia Mechelen!

Later on, Caroline and Pieter took over and continued to shape the spirit of ViaVia Heverlee, keeping it a warm and lively place full of stories, flavours, and meaningful connections.

Arlet Wils
founder of ViaVia Heverlee

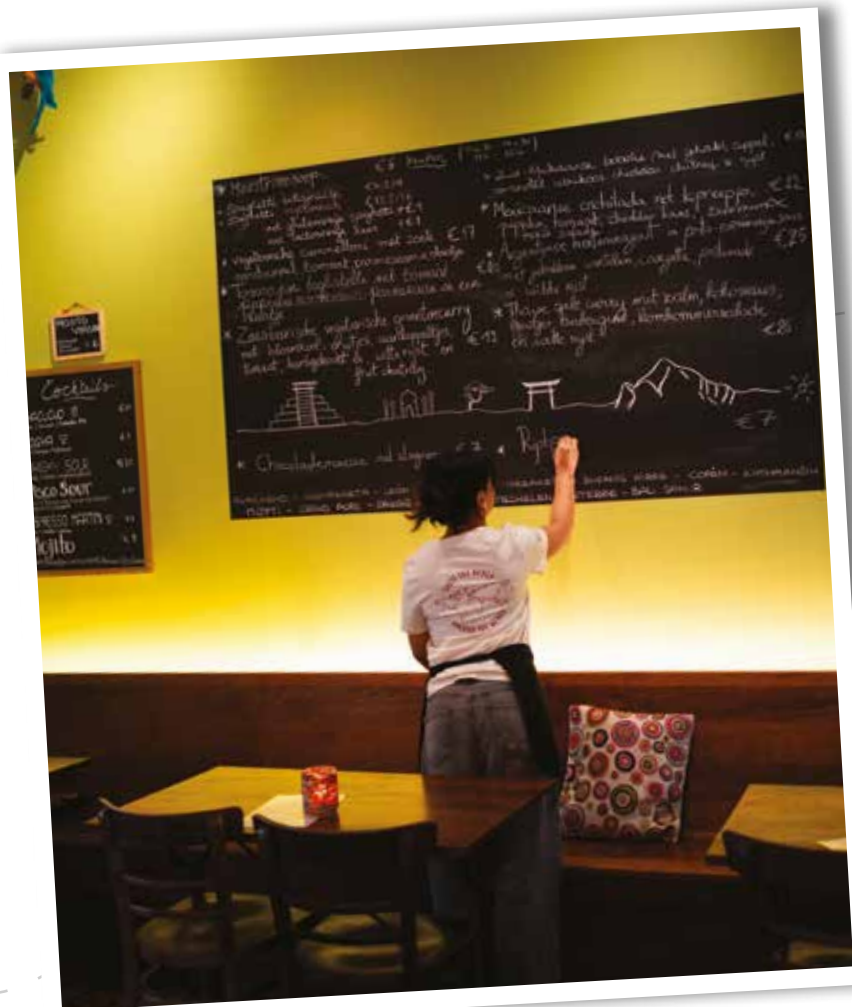




NO MENU, NO WASTE – JUST GREAT FOOD

The menu concept at ViaVia Heverlee is still as simple and sustainable as it was in the beginning: a few carefully selected dishes that change regularly, depending on the availability of fresh ingredients. Two delicious menus hang on the wall – one with a selection of tapas to share, the other with hearty dishes from around the world. You can find anything from Indonesian Soto Ayam, Thai vegetable curry, and Irish chowder, to Mexican burritos, Senegalese tilapia with chutney, and even the best spaghetti bolognese in town. Every dish brings a taste of travel to the table.

The idea is “what’s on the board is what’s available” – when it’s gone, it’s gone. Food waste is kept to a minimum. There is no printed menu or QR code – just the chalkboard on the wall. Customers know it and love it that way. There is always something for everyone – vegetarian options, world flavours, and comfort food – all prepared with authenticity and care.



South African Bobotie

A favourite on the menu of ViaVia Heverlee

Ingredients

- 4 eggs, beaten
- 2 tsp turmeric
- 400 ml cream
- 1 onion
- 1.5 apple, cut into pieces
- 1 tsp garam masala
- 1 tsp herbes de Provence
- 1 tsp cinnamon powder
- 1 tsp ground cumin
- 1 tsp coriander powder
- 1 tsp speculaas spices
- 25 g almonds
- 60 g dried apricots
- 1 garlic clove
- 100 g raisins
- 1.5 tbsp chopped parsley
- 1 kg minced meat

Preparation

- Beat the eggs together with 1 tsp turmeric and cream.
- Fry the onion and minced meat.
- Mix all remaining spices under the meat.
- Add raisins, apricots and almonds and simmer for 10 minutes.
- Put in a baking dish, pour the egg mixture on top and bake for 15 minutes in the oven at 190 degrees.



WELCOME TO MECHELEN, BELGIUM



VIAVIA MECHELEN WHERE TRAVEL MEETS HISTORY

In 2004, I set foot in Indonesia for the first time on a Joker trip. Our first stop was immediately a very special place: ViaVia Yogyakarta. Back then, it was still just a little café – but it already felt like a lively hub of cultures, stories, and encounters. I was hooked! On Indonesia, on the concept of ViaVia, and on the feeling that travel expands both your world and your perspective.



Under the tropical sun, a dream took root: one day, I wanted to run a place like that myself!

Back home, I became a Joker tour leader – a natural next step to stay close to that world of connection and wonder. It led me into a warm community of like-minded travellers who believed, like me, that travel is about bringing people together through stories, culture, and taste.

In 2009 Jeroen, CCO at Joker, told me about an empty historic building in Mechelen. Beautiful, full of character – but in need of a new purpose. I hesitated, until I met Andy, a passionate local guide and fellow tour leader. Together with his partner Bart, we decided to go for it.

We brought ideas to the table, made plans, and started a company in 2010. Renovating a protected monument took time and patience but in 2012, ViaVia Mechelen opened its doors. A place where flavours from all corners of the world come together, where the walls whisper stories, and where every day feels like the start of a new journey.

via via will always leave a lasting mark on who I am and what I do ... It's in my DNA.

*David van Damme
co-founder of
ViaVia Mechelen*





Thirteen years later, the journey continues. Andy and Bart moved on, and the torch was passed to Evie and Jeroen. Lisa, who once started as staff, is now co-manager. This way the soul of ViaVia Mechelen remains alive and fresh.

What remains unchanged is our passion. Every day, we look for new ways to improve, surprise, and grow – with fresh ideas, small interior tweaks, and creative updates to the menu. ViaVia Mechelen keeps evolving – as a place of meeting, wonder, and warm hospitality.

David van Damme
co-founder ViaVia Mechelen



VIAVIA THROUGH MY LENS

My name is Lisa, I'm 32, and I've been working at ViaVia Mechelen for five years now. I started during the covid period with a part-time job, just 15 hours a week, while I was still searching for something more permanent.

Before ViaVia, I worked as a customer advisor at a bank and as an HR consultant – but hospitality was always part of my life. I started in the sector at 16 and kept returning to it, even while holding full-time jobs. As it turns out, it's where my heart really is.

After six months at ViaVia, I started wondering: why not stay? I loved the team, the atmosphere, the work. When I got offered a full-time contract, I didn't hesitate.

"Establishing a viaVia in Mechelen was a logical step. The city's vision on diversity and non-discrimination aligns closely with the values of the global Joker viaVia network. In addition, Joker's headquarters have been located in Mechelen since 2005."

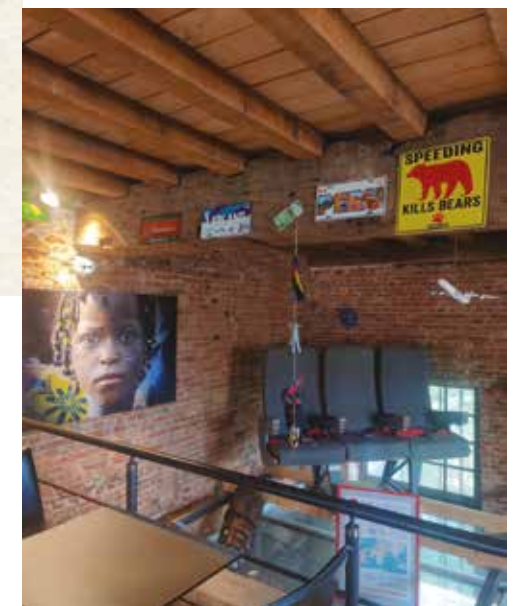
Jeroen Vincken
CCO at Joker



In October 2024, I was given the opportunity to become co-manager – a big step, with more responsibility, longer days, and a lot to learn. But I still come in every day with energy and joy. ViaVia has become my second home.

What started as a temporary side job during an uncertain time grew into a passion, a career, and eventually a shared business. When you find the right place and do what you love, work no longer feels like work – it becomes a dream you get to live every single day.

Lisa Van Roy
manager ViaVia Mechelen



VIAVIA MECHELEN, A PLACE TO MEET NEW PEOPLE

At ViaVia, connection is something we live and serve, plate by plate. It might begin with a painting on the wall that catches your eye and sparks a conversation. Or it might start at one of our long tables, where strangers become dinner companions during one of our events.

Take our Vriendentafel, for example – a simple concept that never fails to surprise: strangers who come



together for an evening of shared food, shared stories, and often shared laughter. We start with a drink to break the ice, then sit down to share soup and our Taste the World menu: a colourful spread of dishes from every corner of the globe. The flavours are different, the stories too but something beautiful always happens when people open up and eat together.

More than once, the evening has ended not just with dessert, but with the beginning of a new friendship, or even a future travel buddy.

Add to that a summer BBQ, a cocktail workshop, or a spontaneous chat at the bar, and you start to see it: ViaVia isn't just a restaurant. It's a place where encounters happen – sometimes planned, sometimes by chance – and where everyone, from locals to wanderers, is invited to feel at home.

At ViaVia, there's always something happening – people meeting up, new faces joining the table, conversations starting over coffee or dinner. Locals, travellers, old friends or first-timers ... everyone's welcome, and it's easy to feel part of it.



An artwork by Evelyne Mançel, one of the local artists exhibiting in May 2025 at ViaVia Mechelen

ViaVia Mechelen's Eclair Pie

A classic with a twist

David has always had a soft spot for eclairs – that perfect mix of creamy, airy and chocolaty. So he took his favourite dessert and gave it a ViaVia spin: the éclairtaart. Think all the goodness of a traditional éclair, but in pie form. Easy to share, impossible to resist.

Ingredients

- 1 l milk
- 150 g granulated sugar
- 90 g pudding powder
- 525 ml cream
- Petit beurre cookies
- 2 tbsp powdered sugar
- 25 g butter
- 200 g dark chocolate

Preparation

- Boil the milk, sugar and pudding powder until it thickens slightly. Keep stirring continuously.
- Whip 375 ml cream until lumpy. Do not beat until stiff.
- Mix the pudding with the whipped cream.
- Place a layer of cookies, then a layer of pudding, a layer of cookies, then pudding, then cookies.
- Melt chocolate au bain-marie and add powdered sugar and remaining 150 ml cream.
- Put the melted chocolate over the top layer of cookies.



WELCOME TO ANTWERP, BELGIUM



*At viaVia Antwerpen,
we built bridges between
the rooted citizen and the
wandering world traveller
– one flag, one dish, one
conversation at a time.*

*Ward Lauwers
manager ViaVia Antwerpen
2011-2021*



FROM THE FIRST SPARK AT VIAVIA ANTWERPEN ...

It all started in the autumn of 1996, when Joker travel guides Patrick and André, along with André's wife Chris, went searching for the perfect spot for a new ViaVia in Antwerp. After a slow afternoon, Bob and Jan gave one address a second look – Wolstraat 43, then home to a furniture shop. The Dutch owner suggested skipping the real estate agency and selling directly. Just a few months later, on January 18, 1997, the deal was done.

Not long after, André and Chris enthusiastically embraced the idea of turning the space into a ViaVia. Patrick joined for a while, and on August 29, 1997, the café opened with a cheerful reception and a signature cocktail: the Coupe El Bobjan – named after, yes of course, Jan and Bob.

In 2003, Jan Vanholsbeke and Valerie took over, giving the already successful restaurant a more international flair. Jos from ViaVia Heverlee joined the team, and together they made the place flourish.

By 2007, the torch was passed again – this time to siblings Jeroen and Marlies, who gave the café a youthful energy and vibe, drawing in a new generation of travellers and locals.

The next chapter began in 2011, when the Lauwers family stepped in. Their story continues on the next page.



... TO WARD: A LOOK BACK AT OUR TIME IN VIAVIA ANTWERPEN, FROM 2011 TO 2021

ViaVia literally means ‘a road,’ a path to each other, to other cultures, and to new experiences. It’s a crossroads of lives and a welcoming gateway to the world.

In our beautiful building in the historic heart of Antwerp, we did our best to bring this vision to life during 10 years, one of the most meaningful chapters of our lives. At ViaVia Antwerpen we built bridges between the rooted citizen of Antwerp and the wandering world traveller. Discovery and adventure were at the heart of it all – and connection came naturally.

When you walked in, your eyes were immediately drawn to the colourful flags hanging from the high ceiling. We installed 300 hooks in the beams and bought 150 flags – the best investment we ever made. Each flag told a story, stirred memories or dreams, and often sparked conversations between visitors from all walks of life.

The flags really came to life during our legendary themed weeks, when we celebrated entire continents. The café was transformed into a richly decorated space where every detail was carefully chosen to give our guests a full cultural experience. During our Asia weeks, the air filled with the scent of spiced curries and sweet mango; during our Latin America weeks, we grilled Argentinian steak and served Mexican enchiladas. Every dish was prepared with love and as authentically as possible – often in collaboration with chefs with different cultural backgrounds.



Music completed the atmosphere: from Indian sitar and African djembe to Argentina tango and European folk tunes.

Guests could take part in a traditional Chinese tea ceremony or enjoy orange wine and local delicacies from Georgia, served by people in traditional outfits. On theme nights, you were truly transported to another part of the world – exploration was at the core of it all.

The flags also added something special during the packed football nights on the mezzanine, when the European or World Cup matches were playing. It became a fun ‘flag elimination race’ as countries were knocked out, and every goal was cheered on from all corners of the ViaVia. People from different nationalities gathered to watch the game and shared laughs and match analyses at the bar afterwards.

We also have unforgettable memories of our ViaVia Loca afterwork events. The kitchen would be transformed into a small but mighty street food haven, and we got a kick out of serving dim sum, tacos, sushi, and caipirinhas across the counter. Tables and chairs were pushed aside, the stage lit up, and the space filled with global music, letting us all escape daily life for a night and feel like the world was at our feet.





From departure meetings and talk nights, to Erasmus meetups and hobby clubs – ViaVia Antwerpen hosted countless moments of connection.

We often stood back and watched with joy as the daily mix of people filled every floor. Cosy dinners on the ground level, the passionate reading or knitting club in the library, a family party or teambuilding upstairs enjoying a world buffet, and a presentation or lecture in the small room at the top. All kinds of people, all with different reasons for being there – all coming together. Philosophical conversations at the bar or on the stairs were never far away.



The feedback we've heard again and again?

"ViaVia radiates openness and accessibility. It's an inspiring space where everyone feels welcome." A breath of fresh air that made the world feel just a little smaller. The greatest compliment of all. Mission accomplished.

*Ward Lauwers
manager of ViaVia Antwerpen
from 2011 to 2021*

Chili sin carne with an Antwerp touch

Ingredients

- 1 onion, finely chopped
- 3 carrots, cut into small cubes
- 1 celery stem, finely chopped
- 1 red pepper
- 1 tsp chili powder
- 1 tsp cumin powder
- 1 tsp coriander powder
- 1 tsp salt
- Pinch of cinnamon powder
- 200 g canned chickpeas
- 2 cans of 400 g diced tomatoes
- 400 g canned red beans
- 1 garlic clove
- 2 tbsp balsamic vinegar
- 1 kg mixed minced meat
- 2 tbsp finely chopped coriander
- Nachos
- Sour cream
- Olive oil



Preparation

- Sauté onion, garlic in olive oil.
- Add carrot and celery, allow to cook briefly.
- Add minced meat, salt, chili powder, cumin powder, coriander powder and cinnamon powder and make sure minced meat is loose.
- Add red chillies, balsamic vinegar and diced tomatoes and simmer well for 15 minutes. Keep stirring so it doesn't burn.
- Add chickpeas and beans and cook for another 5 minutes.
- Turn off heat and stir in cilantro.
- Serve with nachos and sour cream.

