

## **ANOTHER METEOR OF STARS**

### **BOTANIC SANCTUARY ANTWERP ANNOUNCES COLLABORATION WITH 3-MICHELIN-STARRED CHEF VIKI GEUNES**



Viki Geunes brings three-star culinary service to Botanic Sanctuary Antwerp. The highest achievable culinary stars alongside the highest achievable hotel stars, this calls for unforgettable moments. Guests enjoying a banquet event at the Botanic Sanctuary will experience gastronomical highs, provided by Zilte.

'In Zilte, we work in tune with the seasons, in harmony with nature, and that now seamlessly aligns with Botanic. Experience will be at the forefront, just like at Zilte, with a strong emphasis on excellent personal service. The events at Botanic, whether it's brunch, lunch, or dinner, will now be served at a three-star level: you're not just coming for a meal, you'll be immersed in a three-star experience.' Viki Geunes

With five premium restaurants under one roof, Botanic Sanctuary Antwerp is unique in the international hotel world. Alongside Hertog Jan\*\*, Fine Fleur\*, Het Gebaar\*, 1238 and Bar Bulot, it's also home to fourteen rooms that are used for a variety of events. In addition, the Botanic boasts a unique banqueting service by Silverspoon, the exclusive label of top Belgian caterer J&M. And from 1 September, this is enhanced still further with the addition of well-known 3-Michelin-starred chef Viki Geunes of Restaurant Zilte in Antwerp.

'It has always been our ambition to deliver the highest possible quality, including when it comes to banqueting. I have the utmost confidence that the combination of the best caterer in the country and our own 3-star chef will realise this ambition,' says Marc Alofs, managing director of Botanic Sanctuary Antwerp. 'We have deliberately chosen not to call upon our own star chefs, with whom we have been working for two years now. They are focusing on their own projects, and we fully understand that. But when Jan Jacobs of J&M told me after an event that he had worked successfully alongside Viki Geunes, I invited both of them for an initial chat. It was a very constructive conversation and we agreed that Jan and Viki would exchange ideas once a week and develop seasonal dishes based on Viki's recipes. Viki's input and expertise add huge value to our offering, and both he and Jan are experts in their fields. All the dishes are prepared in-house, in a separate kitchen, and under the instruction of a Silverspoon kitchen chef to guarantee continuity.'

Jan Jacobs of J&M is delighted to be working with Viki Geunes again: 'We speak the same language and, maybe it sounds like an exaggeration, but we know what the other is thinking. I'm committed to living up to his reputation in the world of gastronomy and achieving the finesse and creativity that his dishes are known for. Of course, you can't compare a 3-star restaurant with banqueting. At Zilte, Viki cooks for a small number of guests. We cook for groups of 20 to 300 people. We can be working on 20 to 30 events per week, depending on the season. We have a permanent Silverspoon team in house every day, which is a must for the rapidly growing number of seminars, product presentations, company parties and weddings.'

### A Gift to the City of Antwerp

3-star chef Viki Geunes is equally pleased to be working with Jan Jacobs again: 'I don't see this as an experiment, but as an extension of my professional activities as Zilte is closed at the weekends. For me, Botanic Sanctuary Antwerp is a gift to the city. On the one hand, you have the historic past of the site and, on the other, there's a new, top of the range location that's totally unique. I know that working with a top caterer like J&M won't change the DNA of my work, and our banqueting concept meets the expectations and requirements of both the management and our guests. It makes Antwerp a real culinary hotspot in Europe. And who wouldn't be happy with that?'

Marc Alofs has the last word: 'By only working with the best people, we ensure that Botanic Sanctuary Antwerp lives up to its status as a five-star superior hotel and that it remains number one. Only the best is good enough for our guests.'

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### About Viki Geunes

Viki Geunes is a self-taught master of the culinary arts and proof that natural talent can reach the pinnacle of culinary heights without catering college or high-profile internships. Born in 1972, he originally trained as an industrial scientist. With iron discipline, Viki Geunes taught himself how to be a chef. By 1996, the talented autodidact had opened his first restaurant, 't Zilte, in the centre of Mol, a town to the east of Antwerp. His wife, Viviane Plaquet, was by his side from the start, dedicated to providing their guests with the warmest welcome. Initially, Geunes offered simple and tasteful dishes, but soon he developed an interest in innovative techniques.

The move to a new location in 2000 provided the impetus for the dedicated chef to move his cuisine along too, and his contemporary, intense flavours and playful signatures really started to take shape. His creativity, talent and highly-developed sense of flavour, temperature and texture contrasts earned Geunes a first Michelin star in 2004. The red guide was just the start of a whole series of recognitions. In 2005, Geunes was praised by the Gault&Millau guide as Belgium's best young top chef, and two years later, the same culinary publication awarded him the trophy for the best dessert menu. The two renowned guides then began to play leapfrog; a second Michelin star was awarded in 2008, and the following year he became Gault&Millau's best chef of the year. After moving his restaurant to the MAS Museum in Antwerp, and renaming it Zilte, Geunes was honoured with a third Michelin star!

In 2008, Viki Geunes took part in the Flemish TV programme *Keukenrebell* (Kitchen Rebels) – a format that has been compared to Gordon Ramsey's Hell's Kitchen – with Geunes as the teacher to a group of young people. A year later, his book, *Just Cooking*, was published to public acclaim.

What free time he has, he likes to spend travelling with his wife and daughter. This enriches his already broad food horizon and exceptional taste: 'I'm always working on new things, at home or abroad, because this work never ends.'

Geunes's move, in 2011, to the ninth floor of the newly opened *Museum aan de Stroom* (MAS) in the old port of Antwerp, offered him a fresh environment in which to develop his unique talent. MAS is more than a museum. This remarkable monument offers stunning views over the city of Antwerp and its old and new harbours. At the time, his restaurant, designed by the famous architect Vittorio Simoni and enriched by contemporary artist Koen van den Broek, was the only two-Michelin-starred restaurant in Antwerp.

In 2020, daughter Gitte Geunes joined the team, underpinning the family feeling for which the restaurant is so well known. That was also the year in which Geunes decided on a complete overhaul of his restaurant and philosophy, moving his business to the other side of the MAS, completely changing the interior design concept, and changing its name to Zilte. Dropping the t' symbolises that his cooking will be even more focused on the quintessentials. The once sleek and white interior is now modern and warm, featuring natural colours and materials. Although guests no longer enjoy a view of the port of Antwerp, they now have a splendid outlook over the city. In January 2021, the top chef was awarded a third Michelin star. Zilte is currently one of only three three-star restaurants in Belgium.

In 2023, Zilte joined the prestigious Relais & Châteaux association of individually owned and operated luxury restaurants and hotels.

### About Silverspoon

Founded in 2007, Silverspoon is one of Belgium's leading events caterers. The Antwerp-based company works in partnership with many exclusive events and sports competitions, including the Knokke Hippique horse-riding competition, the recent Hockey World Cup and the Stephex Masters show-jumping competition. With 18 people on the payroll, the company operates from the headquarters of J&M Catering in Schelle. Since 2020, Silverspoon has been in charge of all banqueting, event and Sunday brunch catering at the Botanic Sanctuary Antwerp. In the summer of 2022, Silverspoon was taken over by the Belgian food service specialist COMPASS Group. The Silverspoon team is committed to honest cuisine using fine ingredients, always with a focus on quality, freshness and seasonality.

### About Jan Jacobs

Jan Jacobs (57) is the founder and driving force behind J&M Catering. Since the company's establishment in 1992, Jacobs has grown the business into Belgium's number 1 events caterer. In 2019, Jacobs' company was responsible for no fewer than 3,000 events, and boasted an annual turnover of €23 million. In 2022, J&M Catering and Silverspoon were taken over by COMPASS Group. Jacobs has remained on board as CEO of J&M Catering and Silverspoon. He also founded and owns two restaurants: Fiera in Antwerp's *Handelsbeurs*, the world's first purpose-built commodity exchange, and Madonna in the recently renovated Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Antwerp.