



Wall food by Febo

Amsterdam: the automat capital of the world

By UBEL ZUIDERVELD

Remember Marilyn Monroe singing her hit song *Diamonds Are A Girl's Best Friend* in the 1953 movie *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*?

*A kiss may be grand
But it won't pay the rental
On your humble flat
Or help you at the Automat.*

The Automat - millions of New Yorkers used to eat there. But they stopped doing that when McDonald's and Burger King conquered the city. Nowadays buying hot food from an *Automatiek* is typically Dutch.

Without a doubt eating hot snacks at the *Automatiek* is as Dutch as windmills, wooden shoes and tulips. Thanks to the Amsterdam-based fast food chain Febo, the largest city of The Netherlands became the Automat Capital of the world. Many tourists think

the *Automatiek* is one of Amsterdam's most outrageous attractions, besides the red light district and the coffee shops that sell soft drugs of course. Most of these tourists don't know it, but sixty years ago not Amsterdam but New York was the world's largest Automat town.

In 1912 two entrepreneurs from Philadelphia, Joseph Horn and Frank Hardart, opened their first New York

Automat at 1157 Broadway. After having pioneered a so-called waitressless restaurant in their home town, Horn & Hardart came to the Big Apple with their cafeterias and automats (that they purchased in Germany). The novelty needed instructions: 'First drop your nickels in the slot. Then turn the knob, the glass door clicks open. Lift the door and help yourself.'

Initially customers could only buy cold dishes at the Automat, like cakes, fruit and sandwiches, all at a very



reasonable price. Later on Horn & Hardart introduced hot Automats. The customers could choose components and thus compile their own hot meals. Horn & Hardart became a hot thing. The hard-working men and women of the fast-growing city needed good, reasonably priced food. Horn & Hardart grew to be the biggest restaurant chain in the country.

In the middle of the 1950s Horn & Hardart had about fifty outlets in New York alone. Horn & Hardart became a New York icon. The Automats were pictured on postcards, America's own Rembrandt, Edward Hopper, made a famous painting of the Automat and Irving Berlin even honored the Automat in his musical *Face The Music*, as Marilyn Monroe did in her hit song *Diamonds Are A Girl's Best Friend*. Around the time Monroe sang the song, Horn & Hardart served more than 800,000 New Yorkers each and every day, mainly through their self service automats. But the company failed to innovate in time and lost relevance for the growing middle class population. McDonald's, Burger King and Wendy's, where the consumers could purchase hot food at drive throughs, took over.

Horn & Hardart lost the battle and New York lost its position as the Automat Capital of the World. In 2006,



with the aid of an Automat dealer from Groningen, *Bamn! Food* tried to bring the Automat back. The revival was not successful. Three years after opening, the Automat in the East Village closed.

The glorious days of the Automat never returned to New Amsterdam. Old Amsterdam, the capital of The Netherlands, took over, thanks to a Dutch family-owned business called Febo.

Febo turned 70 this year. The Amsterdam company celebrated its birthday with the publication of the book, *Febo - A Phenomenon*. Febo *Automatieks* can be found all over The Netherlands nowadays, but the company was not the first in the country to sell hot and cold food in Automats.

The *Automatiek* conquered Amsterdam and the rest of The Netherlands in the 1930s, long before Febo opened its first bakery in Amsterdam in 1941.

The bakery, started during the German occupation near Amsterdam's Olympic Stadium was an instant success. It was said in those wartime days of scarcity that entrepreneur Johan Izaäk de Borst could even create tasty food almost without ingredients. But there was one product that his customers liked in particular. *Maison Febo* became famous for its hot meat croquettes.

Dutch fast food

McDonald's is by far the biggest fast food chain in The Netherlands. But there are still about 4,800 typically Dutch snackbars, cafeterias and fritures. After many decades of growth, from 1997 on the number of these fry-shops started declining by about a percent every year. But the typical Dutch fries and snacks are still popular. The most popular snack is the frikandel (see picture on facing page), a sausage consisting of meat, flour and herbs. The Dutch mostly eat their frikandel with pieces of onion, mayonnaise and hot curry sauce. Second comes the good old kroket (croquette), mostly filled with a hotchpotch of meat. Even McDonald's in the Netherlands sells the McKroket (a croquette on a burger bun). Other popular Dutch snacks sold in automats are: cheese soufflés, burgers, satay, egg rolls, meatballs, bami- and nasischijven (crusty snacks filled with Indonesian style noodles or rice).



FEBO - JORGE ANDRADE

Busy crowd at a Febo outlet near the Amsterdam Arena Soccer Stadium



After World War II the Amsterdammers lined up in long rows for the delicious snack. Maison Febo made so much money with croquettes that De Borst decided to quit baking bread and pastry. He closed the bakery. In 1960, just around the corner from his former bakery, in fact in the family's living room, he opened up his first *Automatiek*. The number of Automats in The Netherlands was already declining and the *Automatiek* would probably have vanished if it wasn't for Febo. Thanks to the company, drawing hot food from the wall still is a common Dutch habit today.

The first Febo *Automatiek* was only a very small snack bar without seats. It had some Automats and a buffet where the customers could buy fries and ice cream.

Again customers queued. The Febo croquette became popular in all of Amsterdam. To keep up with the growing demand, Febo opened more outlets in Amsterdam, especially in the 1970s.

For a long time Febo was bigger than McDonald's in The Netherlands. McDonald's opened its first European restaurant in Zaandam in 1971 in cooperation with Dutch supermarket giant Albert Heijn and this outlet, about ten miles from Amsterdam, inspired the founder of Febo. De Borst introduced milkshakes, burgers and turned his business into a franchise organization, which was rather unique in the Dutch catering business of those years. Febo grew and grew. From Groningen to Den Bosch and from Arnhem to Sneek and Venlo. Fe-

Customer loyalty

Jan van Boven was born in 1923. He is a Febo franchisee in Amsterdam and he still works in his *Automatiek* every day. A remarkable man Jan is without a doubt the oldest fast food entrepreneur of The Netherlands.

He tells about a couple that emigrated to America and came back for their first visit to Amsterdam in a very long time. After all those years they immediately recognized Jan. "Are you still working here?" they asked him. Jan answered: "Well, I've been to bed in between."

The couple told Jan they moved to the USA and it was their first visit to Febo in 26 years. Jan said: "Mmm, some fine customers you are, visiting us only once every 26 years."



Jan van Boven



Johan Cruyff with a young fan in a Febo outlet

Johan Cruyff

Ask people around the world to mention someone famous from The Netherlands and, if they can, many will come up with the name of Johan Cruyff. No, not Vincent van Gogh or Rembrandt, but Cruyff. He is considered one of the best soccer players ever. Cruyff won a lot of prizes with Ajax Amsterdam, the club where he started his career, and CF Barcelona, his second home.

In 1974 he played with the Dutch team in the final of the World Championships against the Germans (and yes, the Dutch lost the game.) He even spent two seasons in the USA, with the Los Angeles Aztecs in 1979/80 and with the Washington Diplomats in 1980/81.

Cruyff is a big Febo fan. He wrote the foreword for Marcel de Jong's book about the company. Cruyff's Dutch office is in the Olympic Stadium in Amsterdam. Opposite the arena are two Febo outlets. Broodje Halfom is one of Cruyff's favorites. Broodje Halfom is a typical Amsterdam snack, a bread bun with salted beef, baked liver and sometimes pieces of bacon. The sandwich is said to have been invented more than a century ago by Jewish sandwich shops in Amsterdam.

bo's can be found in nearly all large cities in The Netherlands. Today, it has 65 *Automatieks* and is still growing.

About ten years ago the third generation of the family joined the organization's management. Four years ago Febo opened a brand new factory in North Amsterdam, the most modern Dutch snack production facility. Febo innovates but stays true to the principles of 1941. The Amsterdam company went on making top quality snacks with the finest (and therefore not always cheapest) ingredients. While the vast majority of snack bars and cafeterias in The Netherlands sell frozen snacks, Febo still delivers fresh croquettes, frikandels, chicken wings, burgers and other snacks.

And Febo stayed true to the *Automatiek*. It still accounts for about sixty percent of the turnover in the outlets.

Some people, especially students, even use Febo as a verb. I febo, you febo, he febos and we febo... 🍷

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