

# CAFÉ LIÉGEOIS

**A COLD DESSERT MADE FROM ICE CREAM AND COFFEE, SERVED IN A TALL GLASS CUP  
AND ASSOCIATED WITH THE CITY OF LIÈGE IN BELGIUM**



Image courtesy Brasserie Costa, Sarlat-la-Canéda, Dordogne, France.

**BRIAN WALLING**

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## Background

I lived for several years in Liège, Belgium, and worked in a business closely tied to the gastronomy industry for which Liège is renowned in the French-speaking world. I therefore had more than usual exposure to the dessert that carries Liège's name. Café liégeois is not a coffee drink. It also did not originate in Liège in Belgium; its origin is Paris, France.

## Café liégeois – description

Café liégeois in Belgium is a cold dessert made from ice cream and coffee that is served in a tall glass cup.

It is made – although there are numerous variations on the recipe – with one or two shots of espresso coffee in the chilled glass, a couple of scoops of coffee-flavoured ice-cream on top of the coffee and then a generous helping of chantilly cream<sup>1</sup> on top. Additional decoration, such as chocolate shavings, sprinkled cocoa powder, glacé cherries and wafers, is often used to customise the end product. Before the chantilly cream is added, it seems to be almost de rigeur in Liège to pour a generous amount of melted chocolate over the coffee ice-cream, thus introducing a definite note of chocolate to the dessert. The chocolate may in fact derive from the other similar local favourite dessert, dame blanche, which is almost a century older than café liégeois.

## Café liégeois – origin of name

Although not of Liège origin, café liégeois has been firmly adopted by Liège's gastronomy industry as something belonging to Liège and as a symbolic Liège dish. Its origin goes back to 1914 and the start of the 1st World War.

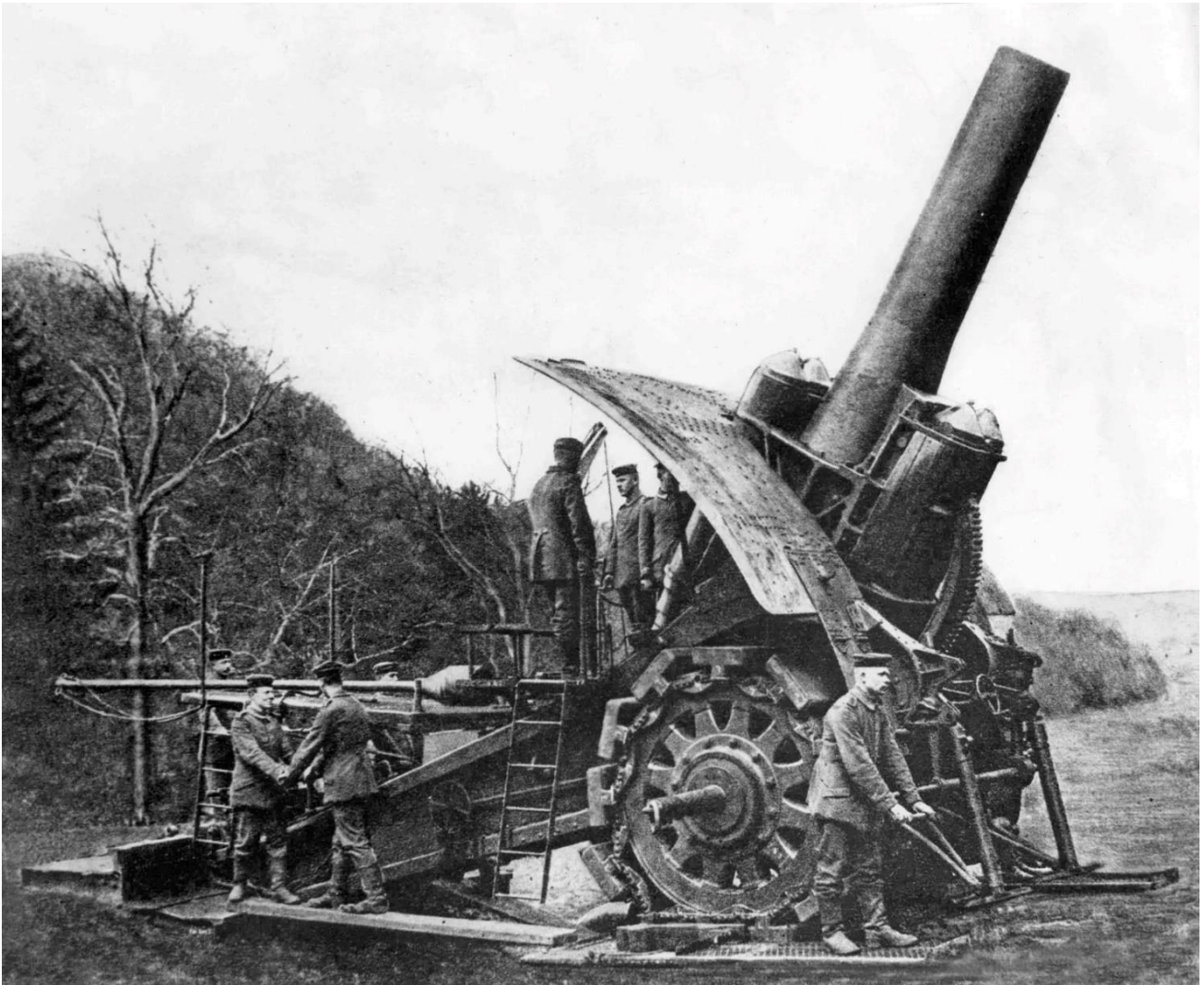
The Battle of Liège, which took place on 5-16 August 1914, was the opening engagement of Germany's invasion of Belgium and the first battle of the 1st World War. Liège, like some other Belgian cities, was defended by a ring of massive modern forts (12 in the case of Liège) some distance out from the city, designed a quarter of a century earlier to obstruct and delay any enemy incursion into Belgium and allow time for the arrival of allied forces from neighbouring countries that had pledged to defend Belgium's neutrality.

German forces invaded Belgium on 5 August 1914 and captured the city of Liège on 7 August after driving in and persuading the garrison there to surrender. Liège's defensive forts, however, fought on and mounted a serious obstruction to a German advance westwards across Belgium and into France. Germany rushed two newly developed ultra-heavy mobile siege guns to Liège. These were larger than any previous mobile gun, 42cm calibre (16.5 in) and firing projectiles weighing up to 800 kg over a distance up to 8 km (5 miles). These guns quickly became known as the infamous "Big Berthas" after the Krupp daughter who had just inherited the Krupp armaments empire. Over several days the two new guns progressively destroyed all the Liège forts, except for the last one that surrendered on 16 August.

It is likely that the resistance at Liège delayed the Germans from reaching Paris by around one week. Parisiens were extremely grateful for this extra time to organise themselves and their defences, expressing their gratitude to Liège by renaming their much-loved café viennois as café liégeois. With Vienna being Austrian and thus Germanic, this seemed a logical and easy way to snub the Germans.

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<sup>1</sup> Chantilly cream is a very traditional French ingredient made from whipped cream which has been sweetened with sugar and has vanilla essence added. It is believed to be named after the Château de Chantilly, 50 km (30 miles) north of Paris, where a spectacular banquet was given for King Louis XIV in the 1670s.



A German 42cm (16.5 in) Big Bertha mobile siege gun in action on the western front in 1914. The gun fired explosive projectiles weighing up to 800 kg over distances of up to 8 km. Two guns of this type pummelled Liège's defending forts to destruction or surrender over several days in August 1914. Liège's resistance delayed the German advance into France and Paris, for which Parisiens expressed their gratitude through *café liégeois*. (Image courtesy Encyclopaedia Britannica.)

The *café viennois* of Parisiens at that time seems to have been – like its Viennese counterpart – a one or two shot espresso with a generous dose of chantilly cream on top and possibly a sprinkling of cocoa powder or grated chocolate as decoration. Whether the rebranded Parisien *café viennois* underwent any changes then or later as a result of the Liège association is not clear, but the Liège version certainly did – probably over time – under its newly minted name – see description of *café liégeois* on page 2.

## Orthography

The name of the city in question is spelt Liège, with a grave accent on the “e”. The adjective, signifying of or from Liège, is spelt *liégeois*, with an acute accent on the first “e”. Note that this accent changes from grave to acute as you switch from noun to adjective. Also note the French language rule that adjectives formed from proper nouns (such as nations, places, countries, languages etc) do not retain the noun’s capital first letter in their adjectival form. Thus *Liège, liégeois; Belgique, belge; Angleterre, anglais*. Alongside *café liégeois* you thus also have *café viennois*, which is mentioned elsewhere in this note.

## Dame blanche

Dame blanche or coupe dame blanche is another widely liked, ice-cream based cold dessert that has long been popular in Belgium and Netherlands. It bears some similarity to café liégeois. A similar dish exists in German and Swiss cuisine, where it is called Coupe Dänemark – apparently due to some association with Copenhagen that was promoted by that city's famous Tivoli pleasure gardens.

This dessert is based on vanilla ice-cream, topped with chantilly cream and then doused with melted chocolate. It is often served in shallow dishes as well as in tall glasses. As with café liégeois, a variety of small decorative toppings may accompany the main contents.



A present-day Belgian dame blanche dessert (file photo).

Coupe dame blanche is believed to have been first created and so named by the celebrated Parisien chef, Auguste Escoffier, who was an opera-lover, to celebrate a highly successful French opera of 1825, called “La dame blanche” (rarely performed after the end of the 1800s). The original Escoffier dessert creation was in fact rather more elaborate (including, for example poached peaches and white currants) than today's version, which is slimmed down to just the essentials of the original dish.

The opera's title, which means “the white lady”, refers to “dames blanches” (white ladies) which hold a place in French, Flemish, Dutch and north German myth and folklore, as well as in Normandy and Brittany in France. There are also some similarities with the Banshees of Ireland. The “white ladies” were female spirits, supernatural beings or ghosts that you might meet in the woods or en route when travelling and which acted as guardian spirits (if you treated them nicely), but which could cause you obstruction or problems if you ignored them. The Lady of the Lake, of Arthurian legend, may also possibly connect with the “white lady” legend, especially as there may be a “Celtic” cultural link between some of these areas, such as Ireland, south-west England, Normandy and Brittany.

It is not clear how this old Parisien dish became and remains a favourite in Belgium and Netherlands, while appearing to slip down the popularity list in France itself, but the close proximity of these countries probably facilitated the original spread of the dish.



An image depicting a scene from the 1825 opera "La Dame Blanche".

The opera, *La Dame Blanche*, although usually categorised as a comic opera, seems more like a melodrama, with its exaggerated depiction of a family inheritance feud, including one person masquerading as a ghostly "white lady". The music and libretto are French, but curiously the story's setting is in Scotland, with Scottish characters. The various plots appear to have been taken from several works by Sir Walter Scott, the celebrated Scottish poet and author.

While very popular in France in the 1800s, the opera's music is rarely recognised today, except perhaps for one tenor aria: *viens, gentille dame*<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> This can be heard at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRJIYFPei1I>

## Surprise appearance

Café liégeois rarely, if ever, appears on the menu outside Belgium; I have never seen it in SE Asia. It was therefore a great surprise recently to see a café liégeois on offer in the bakery of the newly opened 5-star Marriott hotel here in Penang, Malaysia, where I live. However, this café liégeois took the form of a sophisticated patisserie item, sitting on a small ceramic cake tray, covered in chocolate, on the bakery's cake shelf, and bearing no resemblance at all to a café liégeois. One wonders what is inside!

I am pleased to see that the wrong spelling of the item's name that can be seen in the photo has now been corrected by the hotel. The second word should start with a small "l" and have an acute accent on the first "e".



## Café liégeois and dame blanche: the difference

The two dishes are distinguished by their basic components.

Café liégeois is made with coffee and coffee-flavoured ice cream (+ the chantilly cream topping). There is no vanilla ice-cream nor melted chocolate.

Dame blanche is made with vanilla ice cream and melted chocolate (+ the chantilly cream topping). There is no coffee nor coffee-flavoured ice cream. Unlike the café liégeois, which is served in a tall glass, dame blanche is often served in a shallow dish or coupe and even sometimes on a flat plate.

## Liège's location

Liège is located above the name Luxembourg and just to the right of the name Belgium.

