

PRAXIS



15 rural entrepreneurs tell their stories!



Preface

In the publication "15 rural entrepreneurs tell their stories" the Provinciale Landbouw-kamer (Provincial Agricultural Chamber) of East-Flanders, Department Agriculture and Countryside lets rural entrepreneurs of the wide range of agricultural and horticultural businesses in East-Flanders, Belgium tell their stories. Starting from an economic point of view these managers talk passionately about their company or product.

This publication is the East-Flemish version of the European Interreg IIC project "PRAXIS: Making rural entrepreneurship work".

PRAXIS aims at comparing strategies for rural policy in the various regions of the European Union. Pilot projects to stimulate the rural entrepreneurship have been set up, e.g. micro-enterprise start-ups in the countryside, looking at innovation and supporting diversification – differentiation in agriculture and horticulture.

In addition to this publication, a forum will be organized in 2007, where rural entrepreneurs will receive support and information in the domain of communication and innovation in view of developing their product or drawing up their business planning.

In this publication we can only introduce a limited number of entrepreneurs. Through the provincial economical, agricultural and rural policy we want to create a liveable countryside, a pleasant place to live and to work in, to spend your time off and with respect for the environment and the countryside.

We hope that when reading this publication you will be tempted to undertake creative and innovative actions in the countryside.

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Higher revenues, lower expenses

SINT-GILLIS-WAAS – ON THE TOMATO FARM POMIDORY, RATIONAL ENERGY CONSUMPTION ORIGINATED A SECOND LINE OF BUSINESS. PRODUCING ITS OWN ENERGY IS AN EXCELLENT OPPORTUNITY TO ACHIEVE HIGHER REVENUES AND LOWER EXPENSES. THE COMBINED HEAT AND POWER (CHP) SYSTEM USES NATURAL GAS TO GENERATE HEAT, ELECTRICITY AND CARBON DIOXIDE. ALTHOUGH THE TECHNIQUE AND THE ADVANTAGES HAVE BEEN KNOWN FOR YEARS, THE HORTICULTURE SECTOR DID NOT MAKE MUCH USE OF IT. THE RIGHT SIZE AND THE RIGHT PARTNER ARE IMPORTANT PRIOR CONDITIONS.

With the rising energy prices the greenhouse farmers have to take additional cost-reducing measures. Energy costs already take up a large part of the total production costs. For tomato grower Geert De Breuck the combined heat and power (CHP) system seemed to be what he was looking for. It is a cost-effective technique used to generate electricity and heat at the same time. Compared with producing heat and electricity separately, this system realizes an energy savings of more than 25 percent. Traditional energy producing systems do not (efficiently) utilize the

heat produced. In order to avoid energy losses due to transport, the installation is set up on the site where the heat is needed for.

When Geert wanted to renovate and expand his business, the combined heat and power system seemed to be a realistic choice. But that was easier said than done ...

Minimum heat required

Although the principle of the CHP system is well-known, Geert had to meet many challenges. "For starters, to make the installation profitable, sufficient heat

was needed. This meant a minimum cultivation area and a minimum heating need. Depending on these two parameters, you can start combining. The lower limit for cultivating fruiting vegetables is one and a half hectare. We are growing tomatoes on an area of 27.500 m², so that was OK. Then making technical choices and sound arrangements with the partners, is quite time-consuming, but is extremely important to bring the project to a favourable conclusion. And last but not least, the system produces energy which has to be sold on the market on strict conditions."



The construction and exploitation of the combined heat and power system are based on a rather unusual cooperation.



If all challenges are met at the same time, a combined heat and power system is cost-effective.

Operating the generator set is still a hard job. "Even with a perfectly operating CHP installation. An efficient production requires our constant attention. Due to the strict terms of contract, the loss of heat or unexpected fluctuations in the electricity supply cost heaps of money." During the summer there is mainly daytime production; during the winter we use the installation during daytime and at night as well. "During the summer the electricity prices are higher during day-

The construction and exploitation of the CHP system are based on a rather unusual cooperation. It involved an investment of € 1.20 million. Pomidory cooperated with the American Power Generation Constructor Cummins. That company owns [83%] of the installation with 1500 kW electric power and it is also responsible for maintaining the installation and purchasing the natural gas. Pomidory invested [17%], purchases the heat production and the CO₂ and a limited share of the generated electricity. The rest of the electricity is sold: the profits are divided amongst the investors.

time and the plants need the generated CO₂. The heat produced is then stored in a large buffer water tank of 850.000 litres and used at night to keep the correct temperature. During the winter heating needs are enormous and the installation runs continuously. And in extreme circumstances a conventional natural gas burner connected to the buffer tank can generate additional heat."

Sustainable efficiency

When you manage to meet all challenges simultaneously, a CHP system is a cost-effective solution. The tomato grower gets more heat for the same price.. "I estimate about 10 % more. That is because the partner can negotiate a 'better' [lower] price of natural gas thanks to the bulk discount and because the efficiency of heat production generated by the CHP system is higher." Other advantages are the flue gasses. These are treated by means of a catalyst. "Per unit of heat produced there is twice as much CO₂ available for the plants. This stimulates their growth and increases the production. So the main part is used by the plants. The possibility to use CO₂ makes the cogeneration systems even more interesting. Here both the economy and the ecology

are winners. And finally we can now buy the electricity at a favourable price." Pomidory strives for sustainability, as you can see in all the aspects of their operational plan. Examples are the care for employees, the disinfection and reuse of sprinkling water and the implementation of the landscape management plan in order to integrate the company in the countryside.

"It cost us quite some energy to find the proper solution. This is a relatively unknown cooperative trade system in the agricultural and horticultural sector. Finding the right partners, putting your trust in them, finalizing the technical designs... It all costs a lot of trouble, time and money. But the result is good. The agreement applies for fifteen years, which assures a stable cooperation. The tomato grower can control the expenses better and the revenues are spread... and also the environment benefits from it. That's perfect, isn't it?"

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Wind energy: farmer harvests electricity

TEMSE – WIND ENERGY IS A PURE ENERGY SOURCE, WHICH DOES NOT LEAVE ANY RESIDUAL CURRENTS IN OUR ENVIRONMENT. AND WIND IS ONE OF THE FEW OWN ENERGY SOURCES FLANDERS ABOUNDS IN. FARMER GEERT DE ROOVER WAS FULLY AWARE OF THIS AND AS HE WAS LOOKING FOR ALTERNATIVE ENERGY SOURCES FOR HIS OWN COMPANY, WIND TURBINES SEEMED TO BE THE PERFECT OPTION.



©krista dieleman

In his search for alternative energy for his own company, wind turbines seemed to be the perfect option.

Geert and his wife own in the Waasland, a region in the province of East-Flanders a dairy and pig farm. Inspired by the example of a large distributor the family looked for an alternative energy supply for their farm. The first option was to build a small installation with a capacity of 600 kW. There soon appeared to be a problem of space. Furthermore, the Flemish energy policy aims at the clustering of energy parks and the companies are obliged to purchase part of the electric-

ity. But Geert could not let go of the idea and together with some youth friends they dreamt of a wind turbine park. They started the cooperative society "Wase Wind cvba".

A double structure

In 2000 the project really got started thanks to the establishment of Fortech, a young company supported by investors, who provide for the technical support of the project. One year later Wase Wind is founded, a cooperative

society with limited responsibility. Due to this double structure the wind turbine project can reach a wider audience. Geert explains: "Fortech constructed and exploits the wind turbines in Kruikeke. Through Wase Wind the members can participate in the wind energy project and reap the financial harvest of the project. The members using the generated energy are mainly farms situated in the Waasland, but also private persons and SME." Wase Wind cvba invested by means of a sub-

ordinated loan in the project, a financing technique the bank considers to be own funds of the company.

By the name of Braemland the construction of the wind turbine park starts at the end of 2004. Three wind turbines, of the 1.5 – 2.5 MW class, will be located south of the motorway E17 in the district of Kruikebe. Since April 2005 they produce energy. The energy output calculations expect a yearly production of 11.500.000 kWh of wind current, which would be sufficient for the private consumption of half the municipality. In a second phase, planned for 2007, wind turbines will be located north of the same motorway in the district of Beveren.

Many limiting conditions

In a densely populated area as Flanders, many elements have to be taken into account when choosing a location. "First of all the location has to meet the requirements set by urban and regional planning. An important condition is the clustering of wind turbines with an existing line infrastructure, motorway, canal or railway. The Flemish authorities staked out a zone alongside the motorway E17 in Kruikebe - Beveren. This also was one of the highest places

In Flanders there is only a very limited use of wind energy, as opposed to countries such as Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark, where currently more than ten percent is generated by renewable sources. In Flanders they mainly use wind turbines from the 1.5 tot 2.5 MW class. Depending on the height of axis and average wind speeds a turbine generates between 2.500.000 kWh en 5.000.000 kWh a year. Heights of axis of 100 m and more are possible in order to compensate for loss of energy due to obstacles in the countryside. In the meanwhile the first wind turbines with a capacity of 4,5 and 5,0 MW are running on trial. They have rotor diameters of more than 100 meters and they are mainly intended to be built in the sea. All relevant information can be found on the website.

of the Waasland, so it a great place to catch wind."

They are located in agricultural area, but they try to interfere as little as possible with the existing agricultural activities. The locations were chosen so that they can be reached using the existing roads. The base for the wind turbine only occupies 250 m² and there is an access road of about 100 meters from the road till the foot of the wind turbines. The surrounding grounds remain agricultural territory and they are available for farming.

Not only agriculture, but also habitation is an important factor when choosing the location. The people living in the neighbourhood should not have a lot of trouble with noise or cast shadow. "Every wind turbine is located at least 250 meters away from a house. According to noise pollution estimates, even the traffic at night drowns the noise of the wind turbines. Calculations concerning the cast shadow effect point out that the neighbours will barely be troubled: only when the wind and the sunshine come from the same or opposite directions and the wings turn before the sun, a cast shadow effect might occur. This nuisance mainly occurs in the morning and in the evening during spring or autumn, when the sun is in a low position."

And finally the choice has to be compatible with ecological values and aviation safety aspects. When selecting the parcels, the directives on the conservation of wild birds (along the river Scheldt), the protection of habitats (around the forts) or other nature reserves are to be strictly observed.

Green energy

The cooperative society Wase Wind is first of all meant for the agricultural sector, but the wind is blowing for everyone. "The benefits for the participating farmers are obvious. The block of shares yields an annual dividend, the shareholder can buy electricity cheaply at a fixed price and the farmer receives recompense for the building and planting rights and for the damage to the crop due to reduced light." For Geert not only the financial proceeds are important, but also the ethical and ecological aspects. "It gives a great feeling to



turn a free good [wind] into something valuable [electricity]." That's why he explores for his own company the possibilities of photovoltaic cells. And he also keeps close track of the research in the domain of combustion and fermentation of biomass. The farmer harvests electricity!

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Azaleas are mainly sold through export companies to other countries, e.g. the Netherlands, France, Italy, Germany, Denmark and even China.

The Battle for the Azalea. A survival strategy.

OOSTEEKLO – THE EAST-FLEMISH REGION AROUND THE CITY OF GHENT IS THE CENTRE OF AN INTERNATIONAL ORNAMENTAL PLANTS MARKET. HOW CAN ONE BE COMPETITIVE AND AT THE SAME TIME OFFER A PRODUCT OF SUPERIOR QUALITY? DHAESE A.&R. BVBA, SPECIALIZED IN AZALEAS, MANAGED TO KEEP ITS STRONG POSITION THANKS TO INVESTMENTS IN CULTURE CHANGES AND IN ADVANCED MECHANIZATION. THEIR CARE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND THEIR FRIENDLY PROGRAMME FOR VISITORS CONTRIBUTE TO THE POSITIVE IMAGE OF THE ORNAMENTAL PLANT BUSINESS.

The company carries on a three-generation family tradition. In 1938 the grandfather started to cultivate azaleas in Doornzele. Since it was impossible to expand the business there, father Arsène moved the company 1982 to Oosteecklo. Since 1990 his son Rik is also active in the company. He graduated at the horticultural college and married a florist. Together with father Arsène they form the three-man workforce on a territory of 15 000 m² of greenhouses and 18 000 m² of outdoor cultivation. They are the driving force of an integrated company, which cultivates azaleas and they introduced a new organizational structure by mechanization and which has an eye for the environment and education.

Successful growth

Hard work is not enough to guarantee success. A future-oriented vision is what is needed if one wants to continue to be in business. At Dhaese they knew that the company's future had to be one of growth, of expansion without increasing labour force. Mechanization could lead to a new and perfect organization. Rik explains: "Mechanization was carried out in a well thought out way, with a constructor who designed the machine tailored to the needs of our company. Since 1990 we went from 20 m to 400 m of conveyor belts and we have bought various types of machines to make the work easier. Trimming and potting is now done by machines and via the conveyor

belt the plant are brought in and out of the building. It is quite obvious: without these investments we would never have been able to increase our production and this would have been the end. Mechan-



Before the winter the plants are brought inside using the conveyor belt.



The machines used for cutting and potting the plants.



They consider education to be very important for the good image of the ornamental plant cultivation.

zation is now the strength of our company."

In order to keep production costs low, we did not only need an optimum organization of labour, but we equally had to reduce the cultivation time. That is why in the nineties the company changed its cultivation manner: they switched from grafts to cuttings. In the past they grafted the varieties on the rootstock, now they pot the cutting directly, four different cuttings in one pot. Where they used to need three years to cultivate a plant ready for the market, they now only need two years.

A closed system

Another important point of Dhaese A.&R. are the investments in sustainable development. A couple of years ago the company changed from classic cultivation to a more environment-friendly container culture. It is a system that is becoming quite common. Rik explains: "Container cultivation means that the azaleas are cultivated in sheltered soil. The soil is covered with a recyclable plastic film, then a moisturizing mat and on top of it protecting landscapers cloth. Before, in outdoor cultivation large quantities of water and fertilizers were being lost between the plants and watering the plants every day lead to an increased growth of weeds. Now when sprinkling the plants, water and fertilizers stay longer in the circuit and we need less herbicide."

The company is also specialized in sustainable water consumption. An azalea farm needs a lot of water, so they collect the rainwater. They optimized the use of irrigation water by reusing it. In container cultivation it is possible to lead the ex-

cess water via a gutter to a tank. In order to avoid the spreading of germs, this recycled water is purified. This is done in a water treatment plant with a slow biological sand filter, which was purchased in 2004. So they created a closed cultivation system with a minimum negative effect for the environment. The working of the sand filter is checked by the Trial Centre for Ornamental Plant Cultivation.

Learning on a real company

As he himself graduated at the horticultural college, Rik knows how important it is to see a concrete example of the theory. And so he opens his doors for schools. "We have worked out an educational programme and my wife gives guided tours. The children can learn about the culture of azaleas and sustainable consumption of water. They can see

for themselves how things are going in a real company. And of course it is nice publicity for our company, but we also hope to contribute to the good image of the ornamental plant business."

Schools can come on their own initiative or they can visit us through Plattelandsskassen vzw. Other interested groups are also welcome. Several times already Dhaese A.&R. bvba has been one of the participating companies on Op de Sier-toer (the yearly open day for ornamental plant businesses, organized by the Province of East-Flanders).

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Rik makes the plants ready to be sold, they are transported on a conveyor belt.



Thanks to container cultivation and water recycling there is a closed system. Germs are eliminated by means of a sand filter.



A green gateway to the future

BEERVELDE – QUALITY AND SERVICE ARE OF PARAMOUNT IMPORTANCE FOR DENIS-PLANTS. TO REALIZE THIS IN THEIR THIRTY YEARS OF EXISTENCE, MANAGER RÉNE DENIS AND HIS WIFE SOLANGE DECLERCQ HAVE DEVELOPED A REMARKABLE STRATEGY. NOT DOING WHAT THE OTHERS IN THE SECTOR DO, BUT OPTING LOGICALLY FOR INNOVATION IN THE DOMAIN OF PRODUCTS, PROCESS AND CHAIN.

Denis-Plants is a company involved in hardening off plants. It has a wide range of young flowering and non-flowering greenhouse plants. A traditional business, so it seems. But what do you think about the extensive selection of exclusive cultivars, about the own plant breeding centre for tissue culture, the advanced technology and the stubborn

approach of market development in the Far East?

From a traditional business to an exclusive floriculture business

After taking over the family business in 1975, Denis-Plants bvba was established. It was a typical and traditional flower growing business in the region of Ghent. Cut-

tings or slips of a wide variety of cultures, including Bromelia Philodendron, Ficus, and Maranta were taken for the own production. Selling the products was done by the company itself. Shortly afterward they changed to a monoculture of Schefflera, a new houseplant at that time and gradually propagation became more and more important. Young Schefflera cuttings were



The company grows steadily and each expansion involves new technology.



Every year they cultivate about 7 million of young plants, which is about 130.000 a week.



Production increased considerably thanks to the introduction of a computer-controlled camera-sorting machine.



Durability through innovation is an explicit management option.

sold to other growers. The plant propagation company became a reality. Ten years later a new greenhouse complex of 4000 m² was brought into use. Air conditioning, irrigation and fertilization are computer-controlled. Energy-saving measures (such as screen cloth and special glazing); modern cultivation techniques (including the ebb and flood system on tables and recycling of sprinkling water) and ecological applications (such as collection and use of rainwater) were being introduced. Shortly afterward the first tests for hardening off in-vitro plants were carried out. These appeared to be very successful and this technique became increasingly important. René explains the possibilities of the technique: "Hardening off in-vitro plants is a vital link in the innovation and extension of the selection of green and flowering pot plants. That's how we are able to launch new products on the market. Based on exclusivity we



supply our own developed products and other patent varieties. It equally allows us to harden off clones supplied to us by a customer." The company keeps on growing and each expansion involves new technology. As they took part in the Vlaams Milieuplan Sierteelt (a renowned centre for environmental horticulture) and as they obtained the A-label, it is now very clear that quality is a main issue.

Innovating chain

To be able to keep maximum control of the in-vitro tissue culture and corresponding quality control, they started Bruvitro bvba and DeniSphag. "Bruvitro (1997) grew to be a specialized in-vitro laboratory where every year 5 millions of tissue plants are produced, especially Calathea, Cordyline, orchids and a range of perennial plants. Each customer can have its products made to measure. DeniSphag (2001) is the exclusive European importer of sphagnum plates from New-Zealand. The sphagnum plates are manufactured using dried and pressed moss and they are an excellent aid for hardening off young orchid plants." The greenhouse of Denis-Plants currently takes up 10.000 m². Every year about 7 millions of young plants are cultivated, which is about 130.000 plants a week. "The largest part of which is exported to European countries, but also the markets further away are steadily growing: China, USA, Japan, Malaysia, Australia, New-Zealand, Korea... For further expansion of the Far East market, a laboratory will be set up in Vietnam. There they will use the tissue

cultures of Bruvitro. That is how they manage to keep the technology and the plant variety rights in East-Flanders. A green gateway to the future.

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Durability through innovation

Durability through innovation is an explicit management option. At the end of 2004, production increased considerably thanks to the introduction of a computer-controlled camera-sorting machine. That's how the company manages to increase productivity, achieving at the same time an intrinsic quality improvement. The available manpower is put wherever needed in the company. The work organization makes it possible to check for each separate activity who is the person responsible, so that there is a permanent quality control system. To do so, each step in the production process is registered. The company also endeavours to keep the production process as environmental-friendly as possible. They collect, sand filter and disinfect rainwater with UV-light, recycle it and disinfect it once again. That is how they manage to reduce the use of chemical agents and that is to the benefit of humans, environment and plants.

Staying at the Boskapelhoeve: international prestige

BUGGENHOUT – ON THE EDGE OF THE WOODS THERE IS THE BOSKAPELHOEVE. WHAT USED TO BE THE STABLES ARE NOW THE GUEST ROOMS. LIEVE DECOCK, HER HUSBAND AND HER PARENTS WELCOME A VERY DIVERSE CLIENTELE IN THE FARMHOUSE: FROM TOURISTS TO BUSINESSMEN, EVERYONE ENJOYS THE HIGH-QUALITY ACCOMMODATIONS.



The guestrooms

Four years ago the Boskapelhoeve started to provide guest rooms in the countryside. Behind this idyllic idea there is a customer-oriented business vision about quality improvement and profitability. Lieve Decock explains.

From model farm to guest rooms

The Boskapelhoeve has a remarkable past. It began as a model farm of the Boerenbond (a Flemish professional organization for agriculture and horticulture) right after the First World War. That farm was built to show the farmers how their profession would evolve: there was a fully equipped dairy farm and a large baking oven so that the people from the village could come and bake their bread; there was a forge for shoeing cart horses and the farm could provide its own electricity and water. In time, most of these things disappeared and tractors took the place of farm-hands and cart horses.

Lieve's brother runs the farm, with some hundred beef cows and 50 ha of ground. Except for the feed for the calves, the feed for the cattle grows on their own fields. With regard to the feed, the farm is for 95 % self-supporting.

Four years ago, Lieve and her husband decided, together with her parents, to give some empty stables a different use. They converted the stables into guest rooms, however, without changing the authentic character of the farm.

From Japan to America: a very diverse clientele

The location of the Boskapelhoeve is a real asset. Not far from the margins of the river Scheldt and surrounded by woods and grasslands, the farm radiates peace and quiet and beauty. Tourists can explore the numerous walk and cycle routes and families with children discover the Flemish countryside.

For the same reasons the Boskapelhoeve

is also a very appealing accommodation for business men. The quiet and remote location also means discretion, far away from the competition. Furthermore, Buggenhout is situated halfway between Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent. Also France, the Netherlands and Germany are within one day's drive. Together with the excellent quality it is the ideal combination of comfort and efficiency.

In the weekend the Boskapelhoeve mainly receives tourists from Belgium and the neighbouring countries. During the week especially businessmen from Japan to America are staying there. But the clientele is even more diverse: pilgrims on their way to Santiago de Compostela or partygoers from the well-known party halls in the neighbourhood come to "stay the night".

Renovation and quality: a never-ending mission!

The Boskapelhoeve originally had four rooms, one common kitchen for breakfast and one lounge. It soon became obvious that seven rooms were needed in order to keep up with the occupancy. The demand keeps growing and especially the combination business tourism/holiday tourism requires renovations. That's why Lieve occupies herself with the extension to nine rooms, a new kitchen and a meeting room. "Although the combination business tourism/holiday tourism may require extra renovations, I do not want to abandon the idea. It is precisely that combination that guarantees us an occupancy of 60% to 70%, which is above the Flemish average." Also the website needs to be developed further. Now it exists in Dutch, French and German. For the British and American guests we are now building an English version.



The Boskapelhoeve feels strongly about quality. They have high standards for reception, infrastructure, furniture and breakfast!

Running a tourist establishment in the city is not an option for Lieve, she would surely miss the countryside.

Quality is essential for Lieve. "The bedrooms are decorated with the hint of the past but with all modern conveniences. Each room has an own bathroom and the television and internet connections see to it that our guests remain in contact with the rest of the world. That is extremely important for the businessmen. For tourists we have bicycles at their disposal. We like our tourists to have a pleasant stay!"

Families with children can discover the story behind the farm; see how the cows are fed, feed the donkeys and play with the dog and the cat... "Not every company can visualize its story for children. That is why I think that it is a good initiative that the vzw Plattelandstoerisme in Vlaanderen introduces a new label for farms where children can take part in everyday life on a farm."

Collaboration increases profitability

For breakfast Lieve buys her products from the neighbouring farms or local establishments. It is a favourable interaction for both parties: Lieve can offer her guests delicious regional products and the farmers have an extra client. There is also plenty of collaboration with the restaurants in the region: there are special packages where the restaurant offers diner and the Boskapelhoeve accommodations.

A third partner for Lieve is the tourist service sector. Together with Tourism Antwerp they created the arrangement Stille Waters (a famous television series in Flanders). But she is also on friendly terms Vlaanderen Vakantieland, Tourism East-Flanders, vzw Plattelandstoerisme in Vlaanderen, Tourism Klein Brabant, VVV Dendermonde.... These services all supply interesting information and for a tourist farm it is important to be mentioned.

Lieve concludes: "Mutual collaboration to the benefit of all parties... that is how we keep our countryside commercially viable and at the same time liveable!"

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From cow to milk to farm ice cream. Learning on a farm.

GIJZENZELE – AGRICULTURAL DIVERSIFICATION FROM A SOCIAL POINT OF VIEW; THAT IS THE MOTIVE FOR THE VIERHOEKHOEVE. ASK A CHILD WHERE BREAD COMES FROM AND THERE IS LITTLE CHANCE THAT HE OR SHE WILL MENTION THE CORN FIELDS. THE FAMILY DE SUTTER WANTED TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT AND FIFTEEN YEARS AGO THEY STARTED THEIR PROJECTS. NOT A CHILDREN'S FARM BUT A REAL EDUCATIONAL FARM.



The complete family. The farm keeps the three children De Sutter more than busy and their parents advise and assist them.

The Vierhoekhoeve has in its existence as a family farm already undergone many important changes. Today it is a mixed farm with an own farm shop and a strong educational programme for schools. Till December 2008 they are fully booked.

Pioneers in countryside education

Hilde De Sutter, responsible for the educational aspect on the farm, explains: "In 1974 my parents took over the farm. At that time it was a closed

farm with pigs and cattle. In 1989 they got out of the pig farming business and they renovated the farm in order to increase the milk production. One year later the empty dwellings at the other side of the road were for sale. That was the big turning point for our business. Driven by idealism and a sense of social responsibility, they then decided to develop an educational farming centre, for Flemish pupils. A one-week stay on an active farm was in that time really breaking fresh ground. That both teachers and pupils like it, is a fact and since

a couple of years it is quite hard to have a free period."

The whole family De Sutter works on the farm. Hilde, her brother, her sister and both her parents: they all have their own responsibilities.

From Outdoor classes on the farm to shopping

Every year thousands of pupils and their teachers spend some time on the Vierhoekhoeve: they stay a couple of days or a full week and they discover life on a farm. They get didactic support

from vzw Boerderijklassen and there is appropriate teaching material for each form; there are practical classes and observation classes. "The children can try anything on the Vierhoekhoeve: help milking the cows, they feed and take care of the animals, they learn how to bake bread and they get an introduction in the processing of milk and wool." Hilde thinks that it is important that the children should learn about the natural origin of many everyday products. "In the bread-baking classes we start from the corn and finally we have our bread. It is all being explained in very concrete terms. The food we serve also comes mainly from our own vegetable garden, from the farm shop or from the suppliers in the neighbourhood..."

Thanks to the countryside project Pierlepein, young and old become acquainted with the farming business. This imaginary but curious and undertaking mouse is an educational concept of the Provinciale Landbouwkamer voor Oost-Vlaanderen (The Provincial Agricultural Chamber for East-Flanders) with the support of the EU, Flanders and the Provincial Council of East-Flanders. The mascot Pierlepein dwells on fascinating items of nature and he gives explanation by means of questions.

You don't have to be at school to visit the Vierhoekhoeve. There are holiday courses, the Day of Agriculture, the Countryside trail... Everyone is welcome; visitors just have to come by the farm shop first. Hilde dreams of taking part in the Open Company Day organized by the Flemish authorities.

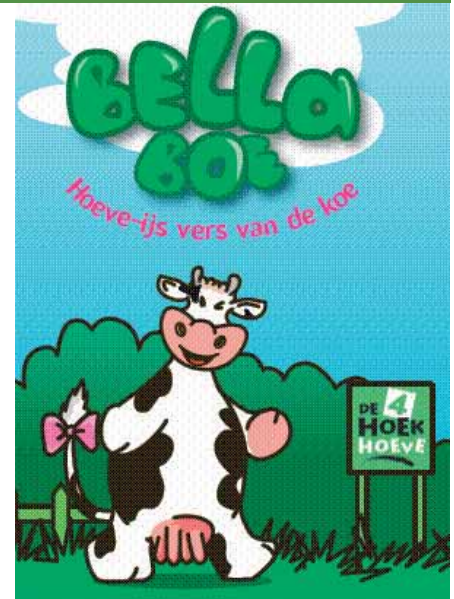
A shop in expansion

For fifteen years they had this wish and in 2006 it came true: the Vierhoekhoeve opened its own farm shop. Under the label Bella Boe they sell products such as ice cream, jam, etc... The quality care and the image they pass on to the children during the classes, is now also put into practice. Quality control is very strict. Hilde wants to extend the selection of the products. "In the near future we shall also make cheese. Visitors will be able to see for themselves how cheese is made."

Thanks to its location the Vierhoekhoeve can attract a diverse clientele: close to the city of Ghent and the motorway. The downside is that on the outskirts of the city there is not a lot of space for business expansion. It proved to be quite difficult to get a licence for the renovated animal-friendly stables.

Striving to combine economic viability with a liveable economy

As the Vierhoekhoeve wishes to increase the nature awareness of young and old, it goes without saying that this is reflected in their management. Sustainability is for Hilde indeed very important: "Each farmer is a rural manager and by consequence he is aware of his environment. It is like a kind of stewardship. We treat our fields and the countryside efficiently without extracting all the resources. We have a countryside management plan in which the company is integrated in the surrounding countryside thanks to an adequate choice of plants. But also the renovation of the



With their own farm shop their wish to do dairying at home, became true.

stable to make it even more convenient for the dairy cattle contributes to this. But their long-term planning also includes commercial aspects. They are working on a communication plan aiming at publicity in the medium and long term. Hilde wants even higher quality standards to consolidate the market position of their product. And a private adviser helps them to follow up the complex operational management.

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On the farm they also welcome people with limited possibilities. They stay one day on the farm and they give a helping hand at their within their own pace.



Every one gets a warm welcome and goes home full of nice memories.

The inspiring nature



The farm "De Volle Maan" offers a wide range of biological products with raw goat's milk as a base. The farm's shop is open every day, except on Sundays.

Kathelijne and Bart both have a bachelor degree and they thought it all out. In 1995, shortly after graduation, Kathelijne wanted to do something creative and she thought about a flower shop or a health food shop. They finally opted for a goat farm, with cheese making as the creative aspect. And although her parents were farmers, she was inspired by her aunt's attitude to life, who also liked goats.

It all started at home, with eighteen goats

Some ten years ago Kathelijne and Bart decided to begin a goat farm. Their passion for delicious and healthy food inspired them to start cheese making. "We started with a traditional goat farm. In 2000, in the aftermath of a couple of food crises and in reaction to the demand on the market, we converted the farm into a biological breeding farm. This is not at all an obvious choice, because if you want to run a small-scale but viable company, you have to go for processing." If you have to run your business on milk production only, a biological farm easily needs 600 to 1000 goats.

The small-scale farm became a full-

scale company. Five employees look after the 200 goats, which give every day 500 litres of fresh goat's milk. The goats are white Saanen and brown Alpine breeds. The fresh daily milk is processed in their own cheese dairy. Since 2005 the company also offers farm tourism. They restored an out-

SINT-LIEVENS-HOUTEM – THE DIARY GOAT FARM 'DE VOLLE MAAN' IS SITUATED IN A SHARP BEND, HIDDEN BEHIND LUSH GREENERY. BIOLOGICAL BREEDING OF MILCH GOATS, TURNING MILK INTO CHEESE, MARKETING THE PRODUCTS AND OFFERING FARM TOURISM. COULD FARMING BE BROADER THAN THAT? KATHELIJNE AND BART TELL YOU ALL ABOUT THEIR VISION AND THEIR ENGAGEMENT.

house with skill and taste and there is now room for "six persons, which can enjoy the oasis of greenery and peace. And of course we serve them a biological breakfast. This also proves our passion for our products."

And in the future? Kathelijne and Bart still have some clear-cut plans. The goat's feed – maize, clover and corn – is biologically cultivated and should in term be done by the own staff. Technical improvements of the milk production, including the milk yield of each goat and the protein and fat contents of the milk, are still on the agenda. They



Since 2005 the farm is open for tourists. An outhouse has been restored with skill and taste.

could still cut energy costs by installing solar panels. And they think a lot about the further integration of the company in the surrounding scenery and about opening a didactical farm path.

A passion for cheese making

When he was a student Bart became passionately fond of marketing and sales still fascinate him. That's why, in addition to the goat farming and the cheese diary, they decided to put their own products on the market. The cheese is mainly sold on the farm itself, on markets and through health food shops and a very small part of it, also through (local) supermarkets. By doing so, the company has full control on quality insurance. Some products of the "Volle Maan" have the Bioguarantee label.

The market share of biological dairy is still rather limited and dairy with a base of raw goat's milk still is a young product group. Cheese is not the only finished product, but it is the most important one and they sell various makings of it: from soft curd cheese (natural and with fresh herbs), fresh cheese (natural, with dried herbs, and with fresh wild onion) and semi-dry cheese (with nuts, pepper, garlic, currants, ...) to hard cheese (natural and with nettle). The range includes also some ripened, white-mould cheeses with eccentric

names such as cendré, crottin, bûchette and bûche. Making fresh cheeses only takes two days, making hard cheeses takes up to two months. Thanks to clever planning – the first group of goats drops young in January and the second group in April – it is possible to milk the goats and make cheese the entire year. The hard cheeses are useful since they allow processing the extra milk during summer. For a kilo of hard cheese you easily need some ten litres of milk. Also yoghurt, fresh goat's milk and whey are sold. Pressed cheese and butter are within the bounds of possibility, but here there are some technical restrictions.

Innovating concept

When asked for the strengths and weaknesses of the company, Kathelijne and Bart make a crystal clear analysis. Of course there still are some challenges. Changing to biological breeding means that they have to learn how to think in terms of systems and methods and this does cause some practical problems. But they are convinced that back in 1995 they should have started with the biological goat farm right away.

Taking care of both production and sales is extremely labour-intensive. Further diversification is barely possible: goat's farm, cheese diary, sales, farm tourism ... it's all taken care of. Doubts about the



An innovating concept and taking care of production and sales fits the way of thinking of the entrepreneurs. Nature as a source of inspiration!

appropriate size of the company always remain and labour organization is by far the hardest job for the entrepreneurs. But everything is running smoothly. An innovating concept and taking care of production and sales fits the way of thinking of the entrepreneurs. Nature as a source of inspiration!

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The 200 goats give every day 500 litres of fresh goat's milk. The fresh daily milk is processed in their own cheese diary.

Discovery the goat's farm "De Volle Maan"

The farm's shop is open every day, except on Sundays, continuously from 9:00 till 18:00 o'clock. From Tuesdays till Sundays the home-made cheeses are for sale on public markets in the region. You can also find their products in famous restaurants and selected retailers. When you buy the products, you can visit the farm. You are free to visit the company, except from the cheese diary. If you really want to spend some time on the farm you can stay for a weekend or a week. In a separate house you can enjoy a wonderful stay. In the morning a biological breakfast is served. For more information, visit the website.



A cabinet with milk

WACHTEBEKE – FRESH MILK WHENEVER YOU WANT, AROUND THE CLOCK? IT IS POSSIBLE! IN WACHTEBEKE, IN EAST-FLANDERS, THERE IS A DAIRY FARM, RAN BY MARNIX ALEXANDER AND TONIA DHONT. SINCE THE BEGINNING OF 2006 THEY HAVE A MILK DISPENSER. OR HOW THEIR MILK PRODUCTION GAINED IMPORTANCE.

The company is located in an open and swampy territory. In the distance there are lines of trees alongside the Moervaart.

In 1988 the couple chooses for each other and for a future on the dairy farm of the father of Marnix. Every day their ninety cows give them a healthy milk yield.

Restricted possibilities?

The dairy farm is surrounded by nature area: on one side there is nature reserve, on the other there is a large provincial property. Marnix explains: "In this valuable area expansion will be difficult; there even is some uncertainty about the future use of some of our grounds. Due to the policy of the port and the Flemish manure decree, the grounds are very popular here and they have become more expensive. As it is impossible to extend our territory, we focus on internal investments in order to try to extend our range of products."

On some of the fields Marnix and Tonia cultivate livestock feed: maize and sugar beets. The presence of a sugar refinery in the neighbourhood also influenced their choice. The refinery pulps their

beets and they can buy the beet-pulp at a very competitive price. They tried potato culture for a while, but there were too many risks involved and the extra burden was too much.

The purchase of the milk dispenser is a first step to product diversification. It is a healthy and pleasant initiative!

Years of large investments

Thanks to the structural investments made during the last ten years, Marnix and Tonia have now a beautiful and promising company.

In 1999 they decided to renovate the stable for calves and cows. At the same time they constructed a larger manure cellar. With a manure storage capacity of 1.5 million litres they are capable of tiding over the minimum period of six months required in Flanders for storing manure.

Three years later they have new money for more renovation works: the milking shed is renovated and they purchase a larger milk storage tank. When neces-

sary they can now store up to 8000 litres of milk. For the new storage tank Marnix and Tonia choose to install a tubular cooler. Marnix explains this: "The principle of the tubular cooler is rather simple: the warm milk passes through the one tube and cold spring water passes through the other tube in opposite direction. Thanks to this double tubular construction, the milk cools down from 37°C to 15°C to 20°C. The warmed-up water can be used as drinking water, especially during the winter. It proved to be a very energy-saving and advantageous, not only from an economical but also from an ecological point of view!"

Whenever possible, the company tries to recuperate its raw materials. When building the new stable they installed a rainwater tank of 100 000 litres. As the stable has a roof of 1500 m², they can collect quite a lot of rainwater. That rainwater is used as drinking water for the cattle, for cleaning the stables or for domestic use.



A panel along the road draws the attention of the people driving past.



Tonia next to the milk dispenser machine; open around the clock.

Fresh milk should be raw

October 2004: Marnix reads in an agricultural magazine about a farmer with a milk dispenser machine. He thinks that this might work in his region as well. As the farm of Marnix and Tonia is located next to a busy road and not far away from the centre of town, it seems to be the perfect place. But it was too early for new investments.

But the idea of the milk dispenser kept running through his mind. On an agricultural fair in December 2005 Marnix again makes inquiries about the milk dispenser and his plans become more concrete. Five months later a smiling cow alongside the road points to a milk dispenser machine. The dispenser stands in a wooden shelter, adjoining

the farmhouse. A cow in a cabinet. The advantages of the milk dispenser are multiple. "With our four children and the dairy farm we already had plenty of work. With the milk dispenser machine we can offer a new product, without too much extra work. The milk is not pasteurized, but raw and so it contains more vitamins. We only have to maintain and fill the machine. We do not waste our time packing since the people have to bring their own jugs or bottles. This is even better for the environment. And the milk dispenser actually is more convenient for us since our customers had to come on certain hours, now they can come whenever they please and we do not have to interrupt our work. Another plus is that a milk dispenser is beyond

the scope of regulations on sales at home, so there is hardly any paperwork involved."

Although the milk dispenser machine was not the first one in Flanders, the press paid a lot of attention to this initiative in the first weeks. The whole family goes out to distribute brochures in the streets of Wachtebeke. They made a fantastic start!

What does Marnix think about the investment now? That, he cannot tell yet, it's only six months since the project started. But the estimates are positive. The daily consumption still varies a lot. This means that publicity remains necessary.

A warm future

An enterprising mind never stops and Marnix and Tonia are developing a new idea. The dairy farm uses a lot of energy and heating oil is expensive. In the future they want to make investments in that domain. What they will do precisely, they still don't know, but it surely will be something good for nature: a solar water heater heating up the water with sunlight or picture voltaic cells, which convert light directly into electricity ... it is still a bit too soon after the last investment. But enterprising minds generally also look at the future in a down-to-earth way. So Marnix and Tonia are waiting for the right moment!



Marnix feeds the animals with his mixed feed wagon so that he can perfectly follow up the supplies.

You wish to visit the farm? More info:
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The tomatoes are being harvested

Thanks to constant innovation the company has earned more than “one feather in its cap”. Just some examples: the conversion to substrate culture, buying raw material in an organized way, energy-conscious cultivation with a combined heat and power system, product differentiation with oven-dried tomatoes ...

A father and his three sons

The history of the horticultural farm started forty years ago. Father Vlaemynck quit his job in a grocer’s shop to start the construction of a 4.000 m² greenhouse in Nevele. During the summer he grew tomatoes, cabbage lettuce during the winter. And things went well; he extended his product range with strawberries, broccoli, Durandean pears... But over the years the orchards and fields disappeared

in order to extend the greenhouses.

In 1981, his son Herman, graduated at the horticultural college, joins the company that had become a greenhouse farm. Soon afterward the two other sons also chose for a career in the company. Their entrepreneurship is obvious, right from the start: the three sons start a partnership and expand the business. They add another greenhouse of 7000 m² to the business and they have the wooden ones replaced by aluminium greenhouses, which are higher and provide a better climate.

The collaboration goes smoothly: while father Vlaemynck keeps an eye on things, the brothers divide the tasks between them: Herman takes care of the cultures, Dirk takes care of the technical aspects and Johan takes care of administration. They complement each other well.

A Prize for Southern tomatoes... from Nevele!

NEVELE – ON THE BANKS OF THE SCHIPDONK CANAL, THE TOMATO FARM OF THE VLAEMYNCK BROTHERS CELEBRATES ITS TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY.

Originally the brothers cultivated tomatoes and lettuce in the greenhouses, but in April 1986 they harvest the last cabbage and ever since the tomato has been the company’s king. After a couple of years on the look-out, in 1997 the company opts for high-quality vine tomatoes: the Flandria Pittoresk, a big and tasty tomato which keeps well. These tomatoes can be cultivated throughout the year. In January they start planting six week old plants, which yield a first crop at the end of March. After 1600 tons of tomatoes, in December, the year is closed with a cleanup.

Along with the three brothers, there are currently working six permanent employees on the farm. Every year during the high season, fourteen people join the team with extra energy and pleasure (from the beginning of April till the end of September).

From substrate to oven-dried tomato... with respect for nature!

After a workshop in Melle, the Vlaemynck



Presentation of the oven-dried tomato on the Day of Agriculture.



The father, founder of the company and his successors, his three sons.



Bumblebees take care of pollination

brothers are the first ones in East-Flanders (1983) to switch over from soil culture to substrate culture (on mineral wool). The conversion has a particular economical impact and it is considerably less polluting: the annual fumigation of the soil with the toxic agent methyl bromide and the indispensable top dressing are no longer necessary. And what's more, after fumigation with UV-rays the water can be re-used.

That our environment is fragile and that we have to take care of it, that is what the brothers are well aware of. Johan Vlaemynck explains: "In terms of innovation, here at the farm, the environmental aspect is very important. Of course we do have to consider the economical aspects as well, but there often are good and ecological alternatives. For instance we use bumblebees for pollination and we use biological means for insect control. There is a biological equilibrium of the different natural products. And in 1991 we converted to natural gas. The carbon emission is being recuperated and goes to the greenhouse for an optimum photosynthesis of the tomato plants."



The tomatoes are put ready for auction.

Johan Vlaemynck is always actively looking to improve the farm. And so, in 2003 he visits a Dutch colleague where he gets his idea for a joint purchasing programme. "When purchasing our raw materials such as gas, mineral wool, plastic film, plants... it is very hard for a company of 3 ha to get a good price. We followed the example of that Dutch colleague and together with some other companies in the neighbourhood we are now forming a group. There are 18 of us and together that is 30 ha. That puts us in a better position to negotiate a favourable price with our suppliers. And in addition to the economical advantage, we surely gain much time!" An important revolutionary innovation for the company is the installation of a combined heat and power (CHP) system, a kind of small power station. The produced heat is used in the greenhouses and the generated energy will be sold. And also here economy and environment go hand in hand, says Johan Vlaemynck: "We got the idea of a combined heat and power system on a workshop in Brussels. It is an investment of 1.4 millions of euros, but is it indispensable to be competitive in the future. On the one hand we expect to reduce our fuel costs with 25% and on the other hand this technique allows us to considerably cut the carbon emission and that is how we help to meet the Kyoto standard."

And finally, the summer of 2006 brought on an extremely creative idea: a qualitative reallocation of torn tomatoes. Until recently these tomatoes were being sold as tomatoes for the soup. That seemed a waste, since they were very juicy and delicious tomatoes. The Vlaemynck broth-

ers then decided to buy a big oven in order to dry these tomatoes. Afterwards they are marketed via an exclusive circuit as a delicacy in olive-oil with herbs. Visitors on the Day of Agriculture could taste this new delicacy of the South of Flanders and they helped to make the herbs recipe just perfect. This idea was rewarded with a two-yearly prize of the "Innovationsteunpunt" (centre for innovation) of the "Boerenbond" (Belgian Farmer's association).

The company's secret

The Vlaemynck brothers like working inside and outside their company. Workshops, the Day of Agriculture, project with the Tasting Centre for Vegetable Cultivation and the University of Ghent (project "speaking plant"), collaboration with the Innovatiesteunpunt,... these dynamics are to the benefit of all parties. Every day, from 8 a.m. till 6 p.m. they are working on the farm, except on Sundays. They have a busy social agenda. One of them is president of the indoor soccer club; the other one is president of the voluntary blood donors and the last one is engaged in the welfare in Nevele. But they never forget about the company's secret: working hard is addition and working together is multiplication!

If you want to pay us a visit, just ask, bio-engineers, children from primary school, everyone is welcome.
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A watercress aperitif to your health!

ZWALM – NEXT TO THE EARLY GOTHIC CHURCH OF ROBORST (ZWALM) IN EAST-FLANDERS THERE IS A STATUE OF A YOUNG WOMAN WITH WATERCRESS IN HER HAND. THE ENGRAVED WORDS TELL US: “HE, WHO HONOURS WATERCRESS, WILL BE RESISTANT TO ILLNESS”. A BIT FURTHER DOWN THERE IS CRESSANA, THE COMPANY OF KAREL VAN DE VELDE AND MYRIAM COESSENS, WHERE THEY CULTIVATE WATER CRESS AND PROCESS IT INTO CAPSULES.

The processing unit where the capsules are made. After a fierce fire, it rose again from the ashes, with the help of neighbours and friends.



When you enter the village of Roborst, next to the church you see a statue of a woman with watercress in her hand.

From culinary top ...

The story of Cressana starts at the beginning of the eighties. Before, Karel was a professional musician and Myriam a botanist, but nightlife became too difficult and they were looking for something new they could start together. They decided to do something with water cress. In the region Zwalm, in the province of East-Flanders they have always been acquainted with water cress: that is where in 1927 cultivation of water cress started. In 1983 Karel and Myriam again started building watercress beds in the source region nearby.

“Watercress is not an evident choice”, Karel tells us. “The culture of this vegetable is linked to a well: the primary condition for a successful watercress culture is the presence of pure and streaming spring water. Water pollution is extremely harmful for that little plant. And once harvested, the vegetable has to be proc-

essed very quickly in order to maintain its quality. Processing is mainly manual and it is a very labour-intensive process.”

Watercress grows on terraces with a width of 3 m and a length of 60 m. Cultivation is from March to the end of November. Not only in Roborst Karel and Myriam have watercress beds, but the beds are a curiosity in three other Flemish villages as well (Hundelgem, Velzeke and Neerijse).

At first they cultivated the watercress mainly for culinary purposes: it adds a spicy flavour to salads and toppings. Their biological product clearly had sales potential: full of nostalgia Karel tells us about the many early mornings he drove his packed car to the market in Brussels. And later on he switched his car for a truck.

... to healing capsule

In the early nineties Karel and Myriam



Watercress in close-up



Watercress is cultivated on terraces and it needs pure spring water.

had to cope with heavy competition from the Netherlands, where they offered watercress at predatory prices. They went on the look-out for a new market for their watercress and they decided to focus on the therapeutic effects of watercress. This vegetable is not only delicious, it also has a healing effect on the bile, the liver and the kidneys and a purifying effect for people suffering from rheumatism and gout. Also cancer patients may obtain relief from them since they contain high doses of glucosinolate.

Throughout the years the couple was looking for an appropriate way to market their products. "In 2001 we started making frozen watercress juice to be sold on the local market. It was quite successful, but its frozen form made it hard to guarantee its high quality when commercialising it and selling it through other channels. That is why we changed to freeze-drying. The freeze-dried watercress is crushed fine and processed to capsules of vegetal origin (Vcaps). We believe in the healing effects of watercress for cancer patients, that is why we switched over to the phytopharmaceutical sector."

The new product is still being developed, as regards its marketing, but the future is promising. The company employs six people and a salesman takes care of its commercial distribution. He is responsible for increasing the clientele and consolidating their market position.

The success story receives an ugly blow when in January 2006 the new processing unit is reduced to ashes in only a few hours time. Karel and Myriam see how their investment of 900 000 euros goes up in flames; some of the machine were

still unpacked. Thanks to the enormous solidarity and initiatives of many people, they were able to rebuild everything in a short period of time.

And Karel has even more dreams: he wants to make the Zwalm region famous through the production of a high-quality curative product. A new project is ready: in collaboration with the University of Ghent they will do research on how to standardise their products. They want to accurately determine the concentrations of active substances so that they will be able to make a reproducible product with the same high quality. Everything is done by the company itself, from the field to the capsule. As regards their competitive position, Cressana is not threatened by competitors from the surrounding European countries.

One hundred coaches a year

The location of Cressana in the middle of the hilly Flemish Ardennes also attracts a lot of tourists. Since the early eighties Marcel De Boe, an innkeeper, organizes sightseeing trips in the area. He shows the tourist the many water mills and stops so they can admire the watercress beds. Karel and Myriam always make some time for the tourists.

Every year they welcome about one hundred groups of tourists on a trip through the Flemish Ardennes. These visits are excellent publicity for the watercress. Of course, an entrepreneur has to know how to sell his product, but Karel speaks passionately about his company. "I like to give information on the company and the watercress. That is how people become interested. We are always open during the Bioweek in June and on the Day of

Agriculture in September. Satisfied customers largely contribute to our growing success."

Groups of minimum 25 people can visit the company from the 15th of April till the 15th of October, just make an appointment. They can visit the watercress beds, where Karel explains about how watercress is cultivated. Karel knows how to grip his listeners and interacts with them, depending on the groups. After the guided tour they are served a watercress aperitif with a base of watercress syrup. Cheers!

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Karel on one of his watercress fields.

Donkey farm De Hippomaan: Unique in Flanders!

ZEVEREN – ASSES' MILK IS SOMETHING SPECIAL IN FLANDERS. THE MILK HAS SKIN REVITALIZING FEATURES. CLEOPATRA HAD DONKEYS IN HER RETINUE FOR SKIN CARE; ALSO THE LEGENDARY EMPRESS SISSI USED THE MILK FOR THE SAME REASON. EVELINE DE GANCK STARTED IN 2003 BREEDING DONKEYS – AS A PIONEER IN FLANDERS. AS REGARDS THE MARKET PRODUCT, PROCESSING, FARM SHOP AND SOCIAL BROADENING, THE INITIATIVE SOON PROVED TO BE VERY SUCCESSFUL!



Donkeys... stubborn or not, their milk is delicious! Asses' milk is very similar to mother's milk and in the past it was often used to feed babies.

Since childhood Eveline knew that animals were her true passion. However, she graduated as translator and interpreter, she worked in the aviation sector and she was travel guide in Spain. But her love of animals never disappeared and Eveline started working out concrete plans. Thanks to good acquaintances in France, she opts for a donkey farm. For Belgium this was absolutely unique. In 2003 the donkey farm started business.

The herd

There are about forty donkeys on the farm, two of them being stallions. The main breed in the herd is Grand Noir du Berry: beautiful and large animals with a rather dark coat and a proud attitude. There are also a couple of Poitou donkeys, these are long-coated and have a quiet character. The animals can run free on 3

ha of ground. When the weather is bad they can shelter in large open stables. The farm does not produce its own hay and straw, but purchases it. That is also true for the donkeys' feed in the winter.

Donkey mares only produce milk after having given birth to a foal. When a mare is fertile, Eveline puts them together with a stallion and nature can do its thing. The foals stay with the mother during one year and are then sold to private persons. It is during that year that the mare shares her daily milk yield between her foal and the farm.

The farm also breeds dogs, as a sideline. They breed only dogs with a pedigree and sell them dog lovers.

Milk, soap and lotion

"There are many legends about donkey milk, but they all tell the same message:

that milk is healthy," Eveline says. "In southern countries during centuries they used to drink donkey milk as a kind of tonic. The milk is full of minerals, trace elements and vitamins. And it is low in fat. There is still a lot of scientific research being carried out on the curative effects of the milk, but it is a proven fact that this natural product activates the intestinal flora and increases resistance in a natural way." The milk has a sweet and pleasant taste.

Flemish donkey milk as such is a totally new product, but Eveline is looking for more. She is the first to explore the possibilities of the derivatives of the milk. Donkey milk is not only beneficial to the body, but it is an excellent skin care product. The company produces a complete range of beauty products with a base of donkey milk under the name Julie



The farm shop with the Julie en Colette product range.



This soap machine is used to make "soap with donkey milk" according to traditional methods.

en Colette. All ingredients are natural. The soap is made on the farm according to traditional methods: first the milk is freeze-dried and mechanically added to soap pellets. Other products (such as body lotion, hand cream, day cream...) are made in a laboratory with quality control.

Care and show farm

In addition to the commercial aspects, the company also has a social mission. The Hippomaan takes part in the project Groene Zorg (Green care): this is a social care project in a green environment for vulnerable groups of our society. Every day two people with limited possibilities come to the donkey farm. Eveline underscores that it is very important to do everything at their pace. "For these people

it is a very useful experience in a world outside the institution. I could not do without their enthusiastic company anymore!" Right from the start care farming was part of the company, at first this was completely voluntarily, but recently the Flemish Department of Agriculture and Fishing pays a fee for the time the farmer spends with these people.

As she cares about education, the Hippomaan became one of the thirty Flemish show farms. You can visit the farm in group and see for yourself how the animals are fed and milked and how the milk is processed. You can try the skin products and taste some milk. The farm is accessible for persons in wheelchairs and it has specially adapted bathroom facilities. These visits in groups often lead to other activities and the farm is now popular for

cycling rides, trips, family parties, trips of retired persons, etc Participating in the Day of Agriculture and the Open-company day and welcoming children on the farm has even attracted the attention of both the local and the national press. The TV programme on tourism "Vlaanderen Vakantieland" and the national radio station Radio 2 also paid them a visit.

Completely in line with the company's social engagement, the Hippomaan also offers trainee posts for students of e.g. bachelor in animal care.

Looking to the future...

Eveline drew up a business plan but it soon became clear that one person alone could not cope. Recently they decided to contract one external employee for the commercialization of the products. As people are not familiar with the product, a good communication campaign is necessary as you know: unknown, unloved. But those who do know the product keep coming back!

In addition to the sales in the farm shop, they will in the future sell their products in other shops as well. Other initiatives for the future are: actions during the Christmas period, taking part in farmer's markets in the neighbouring city of Ghent and cooperation with a pottery in the neighbourhood.



Eveline and her assistant farmers: in cooperation with "Groene Zorg", disabled persons spend some useful time on the farm.

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The selection of vegetables and fruits in the farm shop vary according to the season.

The farm, which Herman took over in 1987, is rather small. It has an area of 18 ha and 24 milch cows, calves and nursing cows. Expansion is hardly possible and Herman focuses partially on seasonal cultures such as strawberries. This was the first step and there soon would be other steps:

A farm shop is lucrative

In 2000 the Valleihoeve started selling strawberries and other products on the farm. The success leads them to suspect that there is market for a genuine farm shop. Herman and Annick invest in their shop, where they sell regional and seasonal vegetables and fruit, potatoes, free-range eggs and milk. Annick and their eldest daughter try to make different flavours of ice-cream and two

years later they can add homemade ice-cream, ice puddings and cheesecakes to the list.

The strawberry period is extremely busy, but also the chicories are in demand. That the offer is rather limited is not a disadvantage; as Herman says: "I do not have any doubts that I want to continue like this. Nature determines our offer. Selling our products directly to the customers, without intermediaries, is our biggest asset. That is how we can guarantee a fresh product, a fair price, a transparent product and a pure taste."

The Valleihoeve is member of an accredited network of farm shops in the Flemish Ardennes, a rural region in East-Flanders Annick considers it to be a favourable evolution: "They often organize activities where you can learn a

Enjoying your strawberry ice-cream

HUISE – AT THE EDGE OF THE HILLY LANDSCAPE OF THE FLEMISH ARDENNES THERE IS THE VALLEIHOEVE, THE MIXED FARM OF HERMAN DEVAERE AND ANNICK VAN CAESTER. THE COUPLE SECURED THE FUTURE OF THEIR ARABLE AND DAIRY FARM BY EXTENDING THEIR AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES: THEY SET UP A FARM SHOP, OPENED A SUCCESSFUL OUTDOOR TEA-ROOM AND THEY HAVE PLANS TO DRAW MORE TOURISTS TO THEIR FARM.

lot. There is also a joint advertising campaign and this is much more efficient than making publicity by your own."

The turnover is growing and in the meanwhile products of the Valleihoeve are also being sold outside the farm. Various traders appreciate the quality and the honesty.

Homemade strawberry ice-cream

With products as ice puddings and cheesecakes on the shelves, combined with the beautiful landscape, they started to make plans to have an outdoor tea-room on the farm. They take all the necessary steps and in 2003 there is an outdoor tea-room on their farm-yard. This was a new investment, which is however compensated by the fact that it is spread over the years.

The outdoor tea-room is a successful example of farm tourism. On the one hand there is the natural element: the grasslands with milch cows in the valley offer a marvellous panoramic view. For the hikers and bikers this is an excellent place to rest. On the other hand due to the friendly welcome of the Delvaere family the visitors come back for more. Especially children feel at home: on the toy tractors and go-carts they explore



Everyone enjoys the outdoor tea-room and its products: old and young, children, bikers, hikers and even riders.



the farm, they play with the kitten, look at the cows in the stable and feed the chickens.

Not all of the plans of Herman and Annick have come true yet. And they think aloud about more possibilities for farm tourism. "The wagon shed with five rooms was built in 1732, but it is in a reasonable condition. It is of little use for the moment and we would like to convert it to a covered patio, so that for our outdoor tea-room we are less dependent on the weather conditions. Maybe we can even serve farm meals. We are also thinking about "farmer's golf"; a game of Dutch origin. Visitors could learn how to play it here."

who like to enjoy the countryside easily recognize the tall fruit orchard, bordered with hawthorn or hedges of ashes and other trees next to the residential allotment. On the farm-yard the solitary walnut trees provide refreshing shade in the summer and before the front of the house there are the typical limes. The plan also includes the restoration of a pool. Annick means that they should have done all of this long time ago, because also the visitors appreciate it very much "People are curious to see what we do here and they like it. We have already received many positive reactions to the execution of the plan."

Practical information

The opening hours of the farm vary according to the season. For the period October – March: Monday, Wednesday, Saturday, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; for the period April – September: open every day from 2 p.m. to 21 p.m., only closed on Thursdays..

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With a view of the countryside (and its policy)

The active care for the countryside is for Herman and Annick an extra challenge and satisfaction. "People like to be here and enjoy the quiet of the countryside; this stimulates us to pay more attention to the countryside," Annick explains. "That is why we welcomed the offer of the Provincial Agricultural Chamber of East-Flanders to work out an operating plan for the countryside."

In the course of 2005 they drew up a plan within the scope of Farmers protect the countryside. This plan was implemented in the spring of 2006. They laid out new typical landscaping elements and restored others in harmony with the farm management, which accentuates the specificity of the landscape. People



From the outdoor tea-room you have a wonderful view of the grasslands with the cattle and of the landscape, a point of special interest for the farmers.



With the cultivation of cherries Marc Govaert and Nicole van de Bilt (picture) enter a niche market which in 2006 has already proven to be a great success.

Investing in niche markets and countryside development

SINT-JAN-IN-EREMO – JUST BEYOND THE ROUNDABOUT AT THE FOOT OF THE WATER TOWER, WHICH ONCE WAS CONSIDERED TO BE FUTURISTIC, A BEAUTIFUL FLOWER VERGE ALONGSIDE THE SINT-JANSPOLDER DIKE PLEASANTLY SURPRISES EVERY PASSER-BY. A BIT FURTHER YOU SEE THE ARABLE FARM ENGELENDAEL, OWNED BY MARC GOVAERT AND NICOLE VAN DE BILT. CELERIAC AND SWEET CHERRIES REPLACED PART OF THE TRADITIONAL ARABLE FARMING CROP. LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT AND COUNTRYSIDE RECREATION ARE OTHER CHALLENGES MARC AND NICOLE ARE WILLING TO ACCEPT.

Marc was educated in an agricultural college in Ath (in the southern provinces of Belgium) and in Goes (the Netherlands). In 1992 he was the fifth generation to take over the Engelendael farm, with a surface of 130 hectares. The farm's future was in his hands. But due to the constant decrease of economic return, things looked bad. "At first I thought that I could gradually expand the business, as my father had done before. However, the market was evolving in such a way that I had to make choices. I began to look further."

A brand-new Engelendael cherry

As he wanted his company to have prospects, Marc reduced the range of

traditional cultures to make room for onions and celeriac. Only a very limited percentage of the crop is cultivated on a contract. He tries to determine the best delivery date in order to receive the highest market value; so in fact he makes full use of the free market processes. This can however also lead to extremely low prices, but that is a risk he is willing to take.

A more eye-catching product is without any doubt the sweet cherry. In 2002 Marc decides to use one hectare of territory for this rather alternative culture. Doing so, he enters the area of niche markets. A niche market is a focused, targetable portion of a market sector, with a product that is not being offered on the

mainstream market. Like sweet cherries, for instance. As a matter of fact, sweet cherries have their roots in the history of the region: tradition tells us that in the past on St. John's Day (June 24) sweet cherries were being sold in Sint-Jan-In-Eremo. Marc wants to revive the old custom and thanks to him Sint-Jan-In-Eremo is now again the village of sweet cherries!

In 2006 the first commercial harvest is a fact and the farm starts to sell the Engelendael cherries on the farm itself. With a delicious product for an honest price as a motto, the cottage sales grew to be very successful, also thanks to the media and word-of-mouth advertising. Marc is satisfied with this investment. "The first

year really was a success. But also the contacts with the people gave me much satisfaction. One month of cherry-picking gave me more energy than a whole year of potato cultivation. And what's more, this cultivation fits perfectly in our work schemes." In order to guarantee the quality of the sweet cherries, they plan other investments in the year to come.

In the orchard there is also room for a couple of quince trees. The odds are that from next year onward the quinces will be sold to whoever is interested.

Investing in flowering field edges?

When developing the cherry orchard, the edge of the parcel had to remain without trees. Marc reached an agreement with VLM (Vlaamse Landmaatschappij), a Flemish institution, which pays a fee for good rural management of parcels of ground. Innovation not only refers to diversification of agricultural activities, but it also includes themes like countryside development.

From then onward Marc took an interest in agrarian environmental management. Currently there are already various agreements with the VLM. "I am a self-respecting hunter and I have always been interested in game management and biotope improvement. Environmental management is connected. The authorities have a lot of initiatives to stimulate agrarian environmental management. I seized the opportunity and I started thinking on how certain measures could be integrated in my operational management."

At the moment about six hectares of the farm land fall under the agrarian environmental management. There is bank of about five-hundred meters for which they set up a project concerning the protection of species and biotope improvement in collaboration with the Provincial authorities.

An even more attractive example are the field edges full of flowers. With the support of the Interreg IIIA-project Farmers protect the countryside; on the remaining field edges they will within the scope of the initiative (in a trial phase) sow summer grains and a corn buttercup. As these summer grains will not be harvested they will constitute an ideal biotope for arable land birds, bees and other arable land organisms for which it is sometimes very hard



A historical farm, located in a unique landscape with historical interest.



Manager Marc Govaert about the trial project for flowering field edges: "Due to the many positive reactions and the interest shown by other farmers, I hope that after the trial we can continue and extend the project."

to survive in the current farm management system. And they make a beautiful rural picture, which increases the tourist attraction of the area.

Agritourism

The Engelendael farm is located in an area full of coves, which is very appreciated for its natural and rural aspects. Recreation increases every year. Also Marc has noticed that the region has become much more appealing for tourists. "As a farmer I can respond by taking part in the countryside management. And tourists are also potential buyers of the cherries, for instance. We want to explore this idea and offer the tourist a stay on the farm so that they can really live in nature. On the farm-yard there is a historically important shed, which might be used for that pur-

pose. We intend to renovate it so groups of visitors can stay there."

Environmental management makes Engelendael more attractive and being an entrepreneur Marc is looking for possibilities to link it to an economical purpose. In that way it would be a win-win situation for everyone. With agritourism and agrarian environmental management as pillars for the future, Marc hopes to have made the right choice.

Hoeve Engelendael

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Sheep grazing on the banks of the river Scheldt

GREMBERGEN – EVER SINCE THE MIDDLE AGES A CERTAIN FARMER VERBERCKMOES HAS KEPT HIS SHEEP ON THE BANKS OF THE RIVER SCHELDT. A FAMILY HISTORY OF MORE THAN EIGHT CENTURIES FINALLY BRINGS US TO HERMAN VERBERCKMOES. HIS PARENTS HAD A FARM WITH CATTLE AND SHEEP. WHEN HERMAN TAKES OVER THE BUSINESS IN 1992, HE RUNS DOWN THE CATTLE BUSINESS AND IN 1996 HE FOCUSES COMPLETELY ON SHEEP BREEDING. WITH VISION AND PASSION HE OUTLINES HIS COMPANY'S FUTURE.



Grembergen Broek Beleven is an educational project teaching visitors on foot or by bike something about the Scheldt region by means of educational signs.

Herman Verberckmoes tells us his story about integrated sheep farming. Specially developed breeds of sheep not only contribute to an ecological nature management, but they also injected new life into the walking and cycling tourism of the region.

Sheep on the banks

Grembergen is an area of natural beauty, but maintaining the banks of the Scheldt and the Durme in good condi-

tion requires a lot of mechanized efforts and high costs. Fortunately the region can rely on sheep farmer Herman Verberckmoes: an enterprising farmer with a heart for nature. In consultation with official bodies such as AWZ (a Flemish public government institution in charge of waterways and maritime affairs), Aminor (a department of the Flemish Ministry, in charge of environmental, land, nature and water management) and the town council of Dendermonde,

they set up a project with breeds of sheep for well-defined pasture. Nowadays the sheep graze on about 25 ha of grassland owned or leased by Herman and on 45 ha of outer dike in contract with AWZ, 10 ha of inner dike via the town council of Dendermonde and on 15 ha in nature reserves. Three-yearly contracts provide an economic equilibrium. Under Herman's skilful supervision his sheep go for it and they keep the region tidy whilst grazing.



The banks are kept tidy by grazing sheep; the parcels are staked out with removable fencing.



Under Herman's skilful supervision his sheep go for it and they keep the region tidy whilst grazing.

What does natural grazing mean? Herman gives us an example: thistles. Instead of cutting thistle fields with machines, he uses a combination of mechanized mowing and natural mowing. Before seeding, the seed-buds are cut by means of machines; the rest is up to the sheep. Using sheep is cost-effective since mowing costs the authorities half the normal price and of course Nature benefits as the fauna is kept intact.

New plans ...

Thanks to the sheep the area is more open and visitors on foot and by bike come looking for peace and quiet in this oasis. To make the area even more attractive, the project Grembergen Broek Beleven took off. Herman Verberckmoes is closely involved in the project. "A map guides the visitors along the inner dikes. Along the route there are panels with information on the Scheldt region and the sheep. As happens in many parts of rural Flanders, unfortunately there also is vandalism and illegal dumping... people with good intentions giving their trimmings to the sheep without considering the risk of poisonous plants."

This does not stop Herman from making plans for the future. He dreams of an educational sheep centre in cooperation with the schools. This would make him less dependent on subsidies in the future.

...ancient knowledge

People smile when the shepherd and his Border Collie move the sheep to another part of the banks. However, the idyllic

image involves a lot of hard work and professional skill. The educational signs on the banks tell us about this know-how. But if you have the opportunity, just ask the shepherd himself. Inspiringly Herman explains: "Different types of soils require different types of pasture. Depending on their characters and the way they pasture, it is determined where which breed should graze. You have e.g. parts of the dikes that are being repaired; there I use intensive grazing, which means that large flocks of sheep graze on relatively small parcels during six days. The flora then is left in peace during six weeks. For the normal parts of the bank, I pick a suitable breed, which I put to pasture during three weeks. Finally there is the technique making use of the sheep to transport the seed. That is how I try to grow rare plants of a certain bank on other parts as well. This requires intensive supervision. I can easily say that each day I move three of my twelve flocks."

Which breeds of sheep does Herman have in his stables? There are fifteen different breeds, of which a large part is typically Flemish: Flemish Sheep, Houtlander, Heideschaap and Kempisch Heideschaap. In addition to the indigenous breeds he also has foreign breeds such as the Suffolk-Scottish Mule, Mergellander, Kerry-Hill and Drents Heideschaap. All of them together make up a fold of 430 ewes.

A mission

Continuous economical and institutional changes force a farmer to be innovative. Shepherds used to go from area

to area. Due to e.g. land consolidation, parcels of farmland were divided and rearranged. Herman says it is his mission to put nature first. His farm shed is an example. He had it built in consequence of land consolidation. "I wanted the shed to be in perfect harmony with the surrounding nature. The result was an olive-green shed with a black roof. The roof is oriented to the south-east as rain normally comes from the south-west. On the east side there is an open stable wall. This is the ideal harmony between hygiene and natural elements."

Although ecological thinking is the motive for this company, Herman also has more traditional sources of revenue: lamb sales, ewes for breeding, rams for slaughtering... Shearing the sheep gives wool, but that he considers being a cost rather than an income.

Behind the romance of this special profession, there is the reality of hard work, daring to make choices and looking for partners. Instead of whistling a little tune in the shadow of a tree on the river banks, Herman Verberckmoes is always brooding on something new or he is busy with his other passion: being an actor. And where does he draw his inspiration from? From the quiet in the shadow of the tree on the river banks? And from his energy as entrepreneur.

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A label of origin supports the promotional strategy. The label draws attention to the identity and the origin of the product.

Mmm... delicious Meetjesland

SINT-LAUREINS – THE REGION MEETJESLAND CLEARLY IS AN AGRICULTURAL AREA IN THE PROVINCE OF EAST-FLANDERS WITH A LOT OF HOME PRODUCTION AND FARM STORES. THERE ARE ALSO QUITE SOME FOOD COMPANIES, WHICH PROCESS THE AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS OF THE AREA. IN ORDER TO SUPPORT THE SELLING OF PRODUCTS AT HOME AND TO MAINTAIN THE ADDED VALUE ON THE FARMS, THE AGRICULTURAL CENTRE “HET PLATTELANDSCENTRUM MEETJESLAND VZW” SET UP, IN COLLABORATION WITH THE FARMERS, A SUPPORTING STRUCTURE FOR PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT AND JOINT SALES.

Het Plattelandscentrum Meetjesland vzw” is an initiative aiming at the development of the area. On the one hand the centre wants to familiarize the population with the local agriculture and horticulture. On the other hand it supports the development of the regional agriculture and horticulture.

The project concerning the farm and regional products of the Meetjesland region is coordinated by Luc Feusels, co-initiator of the cooperative. “The project consists of three parts, which are inextricably interrelated. First of all the or-

ganization of a structure involving farm and regional products of the Meetjesland region, then the development of an advertising strategy and a promotion centre for selling the Meetjesland farm and regional products on the market and finally the set-up of various distribution channels for Meetjesland farm and regional products.”

The structure: selling the products together

The organization is available for members-producers of farm and regional

products, for which an annual membership fee has to be paid in function of the labour force. In exchange, the producers have the right to put a label of origin on their product. That label draws attention to the identity and the origin of the product. The consumer is now sure that the product provides the renowned quality of the Meetjesland region.

From the variety of farm and regional products of the members, they select standard products in order to be able to offer a complete range of standard products, coming from as many producers



Producers often lack the know-how and the time for elaborating and developing such a communication strategy.



From the variety of farm and regional products of the members, they select standard products in order to be able to offer a complete range of standard products coming from as many producers as possible.

as possible. "To attract the consumers, we make specific combinations of farm and regional products: standard sets in various price ranges, gift sets for special opportunities, gift-wrappings with sweets or beer. Personalized gift-wrappings can be made on demand."

A promotion strategy

Thanks to the joint advertising campaign, there are more resources and a wider audience is reached. It is now also possible to spread advertising: there are general brochures and brochures for special occasions for as many target groups as possible. For tourists there are brochures in various languages, but there are also specific brochures meant for public authorities, libraries, restaurants, catering companies and delicatessen. A website is under con-

struction showing the range of products, including the products that are not part of the standard range. The organization also sets up various events, such as specific demonstration cooking courses, markets for farm and regional products, special actions in view of ... promoting the farm and regional products of the Meetjesland region.

"Promoting products from the own region encourages other entrepreneurs (tradesmen, companies, farmers, market gardeners) to develop new regional and/or farm products. So this project also creates an economic surplus value for these companies. New for the Meetjesland region is to have the farm and regional products processed by long-term unemployed people. In that way they become acquainted with the agricultural and food sector and

maybe in the long run they can find work in these industries."

Developing a distribution network

It is of major importance to construct a distribution centre. Such a centre is responsible for collecting the primary products and for processing them into new marketable products. In addition, distribution channels are explored and provisioned. This distribution centre employs some lowly-qualified people for handling the products.

"Thanks to the creation of an own regional label with own products and an own advertising campaign, we give the food industry in the Meetjesland region an own identity and structure. Producers often lack the know-how and the time for elaborating and developing such a communication strategy. Furthermore, the return is mainly for the farm itself." Mmm...Delicious Meetjesland!

Come and taste the Meetjesland region

The non-profit organization "Plattelandscentrum Meetjesland vzw" wants to promote the agriculture and horticulture in the Meetjesland region so that they become widely known. As part of this promotion campaign they organize cultural, recreational and educational activities to boost the region. The organization also supplies objective information on the modern agriculture and horticulture and on the relation to the countryside by setting up projects relating to rural development. You can visit the centre every Thursday and Friday afternoon from 13:00 till 16:30. Group visits can always be booked. You will learn about agriculture and the countryside and you can taste the rich variety of regional and farm products. Before you know it, you find yourself on a market for farm and regional products or in the middle of an interesting course. All relevant information on the website.

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