



CITIZENS WITHOUT LAND BECOME FARMERS

At the Biobeurs (organic fair), Els Hegger and Stefan Hanstede won the Newbie Prize for aspiring farmers. Their award-winning business model offers a solution for starting a business without your own land. They are now even offered more land than they can handle.

TEKST MARCEL VIJN | PHOTOS DE MOBIELE GAARD

On the way to De Mobiele Gaard (The Mobile Garden) in Lochem, the farm of Els Hegger and Stefan Hanstede, I hear Els say on the radio: “From the very first moment that I interviewed a farmer for my studies at Wageningen University, I thought: ‘Shit, I want to be sitting on the other side of the table’”. When I arrive, Els (39) and Stefan (52) are just listening to the interview. Later that evening, Dutch television will also feature their interview. “We are a bit tired of being interviewed,” says Els. But after a few minutes, the two entrepreneurs are again full of enthusiasm about their young and very special farm. How did they manage to become farmers without land? The crux is that they work on

private plots of loaned land. The patches of land are often from townspeople who live in a former farm, but do not know what to do with the remaining land. In exchange, the owners receive a portion (10%) of the harvest in-kind. Because Els and Stefan are not ground-bound they can in theory work on different plots every season, making their farm mobile.

Els elaborates about her background: “After my studies I worked at the university for a number of years. Then I wanted to put my acquired knowledge into practice. I could do that at an organic farm in Zeewolde. But after a while I wanted to take my family back to the Achterhoek, where I come from. I met Stefan at a working group on biodiversity at Natuurmonumenten, an organization for nature conservation. Together we started talking with Natuurmonumenten about leasing a farm. At some point we were fed up with talking. We just wanted to get started. We found our common ground in that.” Stefan: “We asked in our working group whether there was someone with a piece of land or who knew someone who had some. Luckily, there were two people with land. We bought five pigs based on that. This is how De Mobiele Gaard was born. Originally out of

DE MOBIELE GAARD

Work: 2 owners and 2 trainees
8 plots: a total 18 ha
 · 2 plots: horticulture (total 6,000 m²)
 · 3 plots: 4 pigs (total 12 pigs)
 · 4 plots: a total of 180 laying hens
Orchard: 90 fruit trees and small fruit



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necessity and as a temporary solution, now as a serious business. Due to the fact that we received a lot of media attention in the beginning, our supply of land is now more than enough.”

Neither have a practical agricultural background.

Stefan says that he learned a lot from his two grandfathers who were both self-sufficient farmers. Els has always had a vegetable garden and during her studies and work at the university she had visited a lot of farmers throughout Europe. At the Biobeurs, a trade fair for organic farmers, they met many young people who also want to become farmers but who see obstacles everywhere and therefore do not progress with their plans. Els and Stefan are not afraid to keep going and making mistakes on the way. “You learn more from your mistakes than from your successes,” says Els. “Start basic. It doesn't have to be immediately big and compelling, it has to be well thought out.”

How does the collaboration work? After all, in the season they sometimes see each other more than their partners. It turns out they complement each other. Els is enthusiastic and impulsive and always wants to go full swing. Stefan is calmer by nature and thinks about things a bit more. They sometimes disagree with one another, but ultimately the outcome is improved through collaboration. They don't really have a division of labor because they both want to be able to do everything in case one is sick or going on vacation.

De Mobiele Gaard has a shop in the yard that is open for two days during the season. It sells its own products and products from third parties, including bread and wine. Els and Stefan make their own paté in the professional kitchen of a catering friend. They also want to make herbal tea, soap, pesto, rillettes and lard. They try to stay within the existing laws and regulations but sometimes they push the boundaries. Then Joe Salatin's book, Everything I Want To Do Is

Illegal, is a source of inspiration. In addition to retail sales, they deliver packages to consumers, a conference center and a hotel. They adjust their seed plan accordingly. One of their pieces of land is located at the hotel so that guests can see where their food comes from. There is also a school in Brummen that cooks with the products of De Mobiele Gaard.

They are offered a lot of land. There is even a waiting list! That means making choices. Els: “In the beginning we came up with a whole design for a food landscape, but we abandoned that. Now we are going to talk first and start on a small scale, so that we can remove our materials quickly if necessary. The click with the landowner is decisive.” For example, there are owners who take care of the pigs on their property on a daily basis and enjoy it a lot.

They now grow vegetables and fruit and keep pigs and chickens. When asked whether they might make choices in this regard in the future, Els and Stefan immediately respond with: “We want diversify further!”. They have enough new plans - Suckler cows to be kept on 2 hectares of natural land; Sell dairy in the store and start small-scale catering on Saturdays. Also on the agenda: organizing more events, such as a cooperation day, a vegetable garden course and an event relating to the cookbook week. Because of this diversity, you also reduce the risk, because if one activity doesn't deliver a profit, the other will. This is not just about the financial profit. For example, keeping pigs are very costly. But the pigs are simply part of the farm and are, of course, also a huge crowd puller.

When I leave, I am given a box of eggs. But apart from eggs I also take the enthusiasm, courage and perseverance of these two entrepreneurs with me. I would like to come back to see how their farm continues to develop. ■

Marcel Vijn is a researcher at Wageningen Research.

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