



BROTHERS EXPERIMENT WITH DUTCH SOYA BEANS

From dairy farmers to entrepreneurs

Bart and Tom Grobben's parents have 70 dairy cows. To which they have recently added a hectare of soya beans. This is an experiment by the two brothers, one a Wageningen alumnus and the other a Master's student at Wageningen University & Research. They want to develop their own soya products. 'Cultivating contacts with others is huge fun.'

TEXT LINDA VAN DER NAT PHOTOGRAPHY SVEN MENSCHEL

The plants on their parents' farm in Enschede are looking healthy, says Tom Grobben (25). They are about 50 centimetres tall with fresh-looking leaves, but the weeds between the plants are running wild. The Master's student of Management, Economics & Consumer Studies and his brother Bart (28), an alumnus who did the same degree, recently spent an entire Sunday pulling up the unwanted greenery. 'Until nine thirty in the evening,' sighs Bart. 'We were aching all over the next day.' As the sons of dairy farmers, they have some experience

of growing crops such as maize for the cows, but soya is a new venture. Bart, who graduated in 2016, works at Het Foodatelier in Enschede, where he helps food producers come up with strategies for marketing new products. Tom is nearing the end of his Master's programme in Wageningen; he expects to graduate in the autumn. He is currently on an internship at Wageningen Economic Research, where he is researching business succession in the farming sector. An appropriate topic because, like the farmers' sons and daughters Tom has spoken to for his research, the Grobben brothers have also thought long and hard about taking over their parents' business.

LITTLE ROOM FOR MANOEUVRE

'Cows are great animals,' says Tom, 'and my brother and I both love them but the question is whether we've got enough enthusiasm. You always have to be on the spot >



BART GROBBEN

Age: 28

Studied: Bachelor's in Natural and Social Sciences, University of A'dam 2009-2013

MSc in Management, Economics & Consumer Studies, Wageningen 2014-2016

Works: New Business Product Manager, Het Foodatelier, Enschede

'The farm has become a part of us'

‘We don’t want to come up with yet another veggie burger’

with cows, 24/7, including nights. I’m not sure yet whether I want that.’ ‘What is more, the position dairy farmers are in wouldn’t really satisfy me,’ adds Bart. ‘You have a business, but you haven’t got much room for manoeuvre with a dairy farm. You don’t have many options for product differentiation when you deliver your milk to a cooperative. You’re paid based on the volume of milk and the fat, protein and lactose percentages. That is what it boils down to. That’s a position I’d rather not be in.’ That doubt is a frequent topic of conversation around the kitchen table. Tom: ‘Bart and I are real entrepreneurial types. We’d like to continue with the farm; we have a fantastic location with 60 hectares. It definitely has a future. But the question is what kind of future.’ Bart: ‘Given current prices for milk, there are two options for a financially viable business. We can scale up or we can go for quality and differentiation. Scaling up means buying a second robotic

milking machine and doubling the number of cows. That doesn’t fit with our views on sustainability so we looked at other options.’ Lots of different ideas have been discussed over the past few years. The proposal that got the entire family enthusiastic was Dutch soya beans.

‘At the moment,’ says Tom, ‘most soya is imported from South America, where unfortunately they’re still chopping down tropical forests to plant soya fields. You’ve also got to consider the small farmers being driven off their land by the big soya companies, the carbon footprint of the transport and the whole debate around genetically modified crops. It would make a big difference if we could grow our own non-modified soya here in the Netherlands.’

BENEFITING FROM WAGENINGEN

There are only a few Dutch farmers growing soya beans as the cold conditions in the Netherlands are not ideal for this tropical crop. But the Grobben family, with their two Wageningen-educated sons, were still prepared to go for it. That’s the nice thing about studying at WUR, says Tom. ‘An article by the Wageningen soya expert Ruud Timmer was one of the things that got us enthusiastic about growing soya beans. I sent him an email early on asking for advice. Wageningen has so much expertise on soya bean cultivation, for example know-how about new varieties and ways of increasing yields. That’s a real luxury and you can benefit from this as a student.’

Even so, the two brothers worked out a lot of things for themselves, according to Bart. ‘We were able to choose between three or four varieties that are suitable for human consumption. We gathered the basic information about growing soya beans from various sources. We started with a Google search and ended with a seed supplier paying a visit to the farm.’

The soya seeds were sown at the end of April. ‘We took a very practical approach,’

says Bart. ‘There’s just one right time of year for sowing and that moment was coming closer and closer. We still didn’t have a firm plan of what we wanted to do with the soya but we decided to take the plunge anyway. I’m normally the kind of person who thinks twice before taking a decision but we didn’t want to wait another year.’

PULLING UP WEEDS

Tom: ‘We were able to borrow the farm machinery from our neighbour and he helped us with the sowing. It was new for him too. Every time his phone rang, he’d say: “I’m planting soya beans at the Grobbens,” and then he’d have to explain our experiment. That was quite funny and eventually all the neighbouring farmers knew about it. They like the fact that we’re trying something new but they are also sceptical. They don’t know anything about soya cultivation and find it strange that we’re putting so much effort into it, spending all day pulling up weeds with our bare hands.’

After they had finished sowing, Bart – who lives and works in Enschede – sent his brother in Wageningen regular text messages with status updates. ‘They say soya is an easy crop, but it was still nerve-racking,’ explains Tom. ‘Once the first shoots appear, pigeons can demolish the entire field in a week.’ Fortunately, they were in luck this year. ‘Perhaps the pigeons in Twente haven’t learned to appreciate the delicious taste of young soya plants yet. Or else they weren’t paying attention.’

The Grobben brothers not only plan to grow soya beans, they also want to develop a soya product for human consumption. Tom: ‘In the West, soya is mainly used in the production of animal feed, but food products like tempeh, tofu, soya milk and soya yoghurt are becoming increasingly hip.’ That is another reason why it is so good that the lads have links in Wageningen. ‘For example, I’ve talked to Professor Huub Savelkoul of the Cell Biology and Immunology Group,’ says Tom. ‘He told me about the positive influence that soya has on the human immune system, as well as the effect of a soya allergy.’

Jannet de Jong and Gitte Schober at the Wageningen organization StartLife are helping the brothers contact people who can assist them in working out the details of their



TOM GROBBEN

Age: 25

Studied: Bachelor’s in Business Administration, Management, Economics & Law, Saxion University of Applied Sciences 2009-2013 MSc in Management, Economics & Consumer Studies, Wageningen 2014-2017



WUR alumnus Bart Grobben (right) and his brother, WUR student Tom, want to continue with their parents' farm, but preferably not as a dairy farm.

initiative. 'StartLife supports startups in agriculture and the food sector. They give advice on what steps we can take to improve our soya plan. We want to make something that there is demand for, rather than yet another veggie burger,' says Tom.

The two brothers are not sure yet what this will be. They would like join forces with a head chef and nutritional expert to develop a product that is both healthy and – most importantly – tastes good. Preferably a chef from the Twente region, say the proud Twente boys. They are already in contact with a local restaurant that is interested in their project, says Bart: 'Cultivating these kinds of contacts with others is huge fun. The harvest may fail but we'll still already have made these investments.'

The two Grobbens will be able to harvest the plants when they have grown waist-high, after the summer. Until then, the brothers can regularly be found at their parents' home. They do everything together where possible, such as pulling up weeds all day. A lousy job, but they can still have a laugh if they do it together. Tom: 'That the two of us – Bart and I – are exploring this entirely new terrain is just fantastic.' Bart: 'It's become a kind of brother bonding. We are in closer contact now than ever before.'

Their parents do have difficulty with the fact that their dairy farm may come to an end, says Tom. 'They have never said it in so many words, but they themselves work day and night with the cows. Of course it's difficult to think that might stop – for us too. At

the same time, whenever we discuss the subject they always stress that we should do whatever makes us happy. Our intention is to carry on with the farm – that's our top priority.' Bart: 'We grew up with the farm, which has become a part of us.' We don't want to just abandon it. We're just taking things one step at a time. For the moment this is an experiment, a project in addition to our work and studies that gives us energy. But we both want to get some work experience. We'll be really pleased with anything that's a success. And if there are some failures, so be it.' ■

Info: you can follow the Grobben brothers' soya bean experiment on their Facebook page 'Natuurlijk Twents'