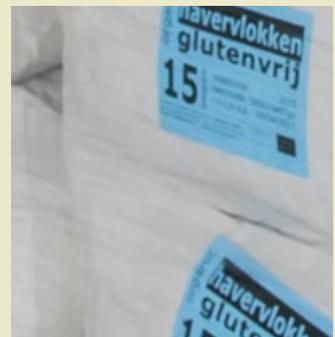


Guaranteed gluten-free



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Gluten-free oat products have been in the shops in western Europe since 2011: a boon for people with coeliac disease. The first gluten-free production chain for oats was developed by the Scheemda-based seed company Vandinter Semo. Wageningen did research and established guidelines.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHY HANS WOLKERS



Approximately one percent of people have an intolerance for gluten, a protein naturally occurring in grains. This gluten intolerance, or coeliac disease, damages the small intestine, affecting how well it functions. Oats are a grain which does not contain gluten, making them suitable for coeliacs. During cultivation and processing, however, oats tend to get contaminated by grains that do contain gluten, such as wheat. ‘That is why we worked with Vandinter Semo and in consultation with the Dutch Coeliac Society to create a clean production chain,’ says Luud Gilissen, senior researcher at Wageningen University & Research. The first certified gluten-free oat products came on the market in 2011: a first in western Europe.

NO ORGANIC FERTILIZER

It is not easy to prevent grains that do contain gluten from getting into the oat harvest. Wageningen therefore did extensive research and compiled a detailed protocol for gluten-free oat production for growers and food processing companies. The seed must be 100 percent free of other types of grain and the field should not have been used to grow a grain containing gluten for the past eight years. The use of organic fertilizer is banned as well, because it can contain grains of wheat, barley or rye which then germinate in the field of oats. ‘It is also important that the farm

Oats tend to get contaminated

machinery is cleaned to avoid contamination with other types of grain,’ says Gilissen.

Just to be on the safe side, Vandinter Semo do random checks for contamination with other grains. ‘The EU has set a legal limit on the amount of other grain gluten-free oats can contain: a maximum of 20 ppm, or one grain of wheat per two kilos of oats,’ explains director Bert-Jan van Dinter. ‘With our protocols we keep below 5 ppm.’

BUSINESS CONTINUITY

The seed company Vandinter Semo has had to invest heavily in this new area of operations, including in a machine for hulling oats that costs hundreds of thousands. Yet Vandinter is full of confidence in the future. According to him, oats are not just gluten-free but also healthy. What is more, oats are good for the soil, they are a useful rotation crop and they produce a reliable harvest. The oat production chain has brought the company new clients in the Netherlands as well as in Germany and Italy. They process the oats into porridge oats, bread flour and even pasta. ‘We used to deal mainly in grass seed, but with the withdrawal of EU subsidies those prices are fluctuating wildly,’ says Van Dinter. ‘Oats give us greater stability and business continuity.’ ■

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