

‘We need to learn how to deal with affluence’

Global food supply expert Louise Fresco has received the Outstanding Alumnus Award from Wageningen University. After an international career with the FAO, Fresco is now professor at Amsterdam and distinguished professor at Wageningen University, ‘I have a duty to be visible’.

TEXT ALEXANDRA BRANDERHORST PHOTOGRAPHY BART DE GOUW

What is it like to receive the Outstanding Alumnus Award?

‘It’s a fantastic accolade, a confirmation of my Wageningen roots. I still keep in regular contact with colleagues and the Executive Board and I give the occasional guest lecture. Wageningen has grown from a rather small minor university of applied sciences to an internationally oriented university and research centre, while keeping its focus on applied, multidisciplinary science.’

Even at secondary school you used to campaign against famine.

‘I was at the European school in Brussels and I wanted to show all those rich kids that there were poor people who hardly had enough to eat. With a couple of my fellow pupils, I arranged for a day in the school canteen where there was only dry rice on offer. That made an impact. The next step was when I realized it was purely a matter of luck whether you were born in Biafra,

the Netherlands or Calcutta; that gives you a duty to do something for the world. That’s still the guiding principle in my life. But I was never a militant campaigner. I’m more of a dialogue and compromise person. I was always a well-behaved girl even when I was a student in the progressive 1970s.’

What are the key issues when it comes to feeding the world?

‘Chronic hunger is linked to underdevelopment. That means the top priority is to combat poverty; you need to focus on general economic development. We will also need to have enough food for the expanding cities around the globe. And we will need to make food production more sustainable. In short, we have to invest in agriculture and innovation. This is something that was neglected for years. Only when food prices started to rise in 2008 did politicians realize the need for investments to make the shift from self-sufficient farming

OUTSTANDING ALUMNUS AWARD

On 15 March, during the celebrations of Wageningen University’s 95th Founders’ Day, Louise Fresco was handed the Outstanding Alumnus Award. The jury called her ‘one of the best known and most influential alumni in recent years, who is recognized as an authority worldwide’ and ‘an inspiring example to students and researchers’. The Wageningen University Fund awards the prize every four years to graduates who have made an exceptional contribution to society in Wageningen’s domains. Previous winners were writer Frank Westerman, cancer researcher Floor van Leeuwen and ‘bugman’ Ruud Kleinpaste.



to professional agriculture. Now, food and agriculture are high up the agenda even in the Netherlands. The general public is more involved, with the inevitable associated misconceptions - for example that organic farming is always better or that biotechnology is inherently dangerous.'

Are you a role model for women scientists?

'Yes, maybe I am. There aren't that many women at this level in science and policy making. I have a duty to be visible. I try to help young people and encourage them in their scientific careers. I don't have to prove myself anymore by producing a certain number of scientific papers every year so I have the freedom to be of service to others.'

Are you idealistic, realistic or a combination of the two?

'I do aim for an ideal, namely a world without hunger and poverty. Over the years I have become more realistic about what you need to do to achieve that but I've remained optimistic. We can learn from our mistakes and from each other. For instance, take the reduction in the number of car accidents compared with 25 years ago thanks to a combination of technology and behavioural changes. Cars are safer, we drive more carefully and we have better legislation. The same applies to food. Look at how well fed we are in the Netherlands and how much choice we have after tens of thousands of years of scarcity. Now we need to learn how to deal with affluence. That's the biggest challenge today.' ■

Info: www.louiseofresco.com



LOUISE FRESCO

- 1952 Born in Meppel, grew up in Brussels
- 1970 Degree in Rural Sociology of the Non-Western Regions, minor in Tropical Plant Breeding
- 1986 PhD with distinction in Tropical Plant Breeding
- 1990 Professor of Plant Production Systems in Wageningen
- 1997 Director of Research, FAO Agriculture Department
- 1999 Assistant Director-General of Agriculture, FAO
- 2006
- to date University professor of sustainable development in an international context at the University of Amsterdam
- 2012 Publication of her book *Hamburgers in Paradise*