



LOES MOOR-HULSHOF, OPERATIONAL DIRECTOR
AT THE VEGETARIAN BUTCHER:

'I want to make sure factory farming is soon superfluous'

Loes Moor-Hulshof is the woman behind The Vegetarian Butcher. Together with frontman Jaap Korteweg and marketing man Nico Koffeman, she has built up the company step by step over the past eight years. It was taken over by Unilever at the beginning of this year. Hulshof is delighted. 'This is the moment we were waiting for.'

TEXT ASTRID SMIT PHOTOGRAPHY MARIJE KUIPER

In a factory in Breda, a machine is pushing out long, fat ribbons of soya dough.

Nearby, people are sorting the subsequent product: rough chunks made from these ribbons. These are the vegetarian chicken pieces sold in the supermarkets. Along with other meat substitutes, they have entered the fray to compete with real chicken. The factory floor is spacious and could easily accommodate a few more machines and workers. And that is exactly the idea, says operational director Loes Hulshof of The Vegetarian Butcher, the Dutch company that makes meat

substitutes such as vegetarian hamburgers, chicken, steak tartare and the recently launched smoked sausage. All of which have to look and taste like real meat. 'At the beginning of this year we were taken over by Unilever. Now we can upscale considerably. In the next few years we want to conquer the German and British supermarkets, then the ones in Scandinavia, southern Europe and other western countries. After that we hope to set our sights on the east. We want the whole world to start enjoying our vegetarian meat, making factory farming superfluous.'

This is the kind of language you would expect from the Dutch animal rights party (Partij van de Dieren) rather than a commercial company. But those two worlds meet at The Vegetarian Butcher: Jaap Korteweg, the company's creator and head, was once married to party leader Marianne Thieme, and his business partner Nico Koffeman represents the animal rights party in the Upper House of the Dutch parliament. Hulshof is a party member too, and a fervent vegetarian like Korteweg and Koffeman. 'It makes no sense that we kill and eat animals. It's just so wrong. Seeing livestock being >

transported on the motorway brings tears to my eyes.'

Hulshof, who grew up in Lievelede, first studied Food Technology at Van Hall Larenstein University of Applied Sciences in Leeuwarden. 'I had been cooking entire dinners since I was 14, so that choice of degree programme was logical.' She finished off her applied sciences degree at 20 and, not ready for the job market yet, enrolled to do Food Technology in Wageningen, majoring in Food Process Engineering. Atze Jan van der Goot, now professor of Protein Structuring and Sustainability, was her supervisor. She found out, though, that she was not really a born technologist; her minor about integral food logistics manage-

ment appealed to her more. Hulshof: 'Thinking in terms of supply chains felt like a homecoming. The links between the seed and the pork chop. Later I realized it is better to make that chop out of the seed more directly, rather than via a pig.'

TROUT FISHING

When Hulshof was studying Food Technology in Wageningen, she was still a carnivore. Until one day, when she went trout fishing with her family. 'I didn't mind catching the fish. But I couldn't kill it. It seemed to be asking me, what are you doing? Soon after that I stopped eating meat.' And this was someone who had grown up on a farm: Hulshof's father was a dairy farmer. Her brother, who studied in Wageningen too, took over the farm from his father. 'My brother loves meat and can't stand the animal rights party. I come from a real CDA (Christian Democrat) family. That can be tricky sometimes, although I have stayed on good terms with my family. My brother was a witness at my wedding.' After graduating, Hulshof worked for Unilever as a trainee, and went on from there to a job with Mars in Oud Beijerland, near Rotterdam. One of her main projects was to create a light version of a satay sauce. But she didn't get much satisfaction out of this work. At some point, she asked herself: when I'm 80 and looking back on my career, will this have been the peak? She tried to introduce one meat-free day in the Mars canteen, but it met with too much resistance. One day she read an article in the paper about her former supervisor, Atze Jan van der Goot. In it, he spoke of his latest project: developing new meat substitutes. Hulshof got in touch with him and went to see what he was doing. 'I wanted to get involved. It didn't matter much to me what I would be doing, as long as I could contribute something to that plant protein transition.'

SETTING UP

Van der Goot put her in touch with the

entrepreneurs Korteweg and Koffeman, who had big plans but not much experience of finding their way to the market. 'I talked to them, was taken on, and we started setting up the organization.' Friends said she was crazy to give up a good, permanent job at Mars. 'They've gone quiet about that now,' says a proud Hulshof, who got shares in the company when she started there.

They have formed an effective triangle over the years since they started in 2010, says Hulshof. Korteweg is the public face of The Vegetarian Butcher, Koffeman is the marketing and communication brain, and Hulshof is the organizer. 'Setting up all the company operations that facilitate the growth of the brand: that is what I've been doing for the past eight years.' Communication, the production of artificial meat, supplying supermarkets, recruitment, packaging, internal controls: Hulshof did whatever was needed at any given moment. 'We built it up like that, step by step.'

Collaboration with partners was a very deliberate strategy for the company. 'Until two years ago, we didn't have a factory of our own but had all our products made in meat factories. Now we produce some of them ourselves here in Breda, but most of them are still made at Unox and Mora. Those companies will keep their links with us. We want to become the biggest butcher in the world; we don't have to make everything ourselves.'

PLANT MEAT MATTERS

The Vegetarian Butcher also sought collaboration with Wageningen University & Research, and invested in Van der Goot's research on the structuring of plant proteins using something known as shear cell technology. This provides a gentle way of processing plant proteins from soya or wheat to create a structure like that of beef steak. Since 2017, this project has been transformed into a large public-private consortium called Plant Meat Matters. Several companies, including Unilever, are



LOES MOOR-HULSHOF (1979)

1996-2000: Food Technology, Van Hall Larenstein
2000-2004: Food Technology, WUR
2004-2006: Unilever Unox, process and product development
2006-2007: Unilever Knorr, management trainee
2008-2010: Mars, innovation project leader for Suzi Wan and Seeds of Change
2010-2012: The Vegetarian Butcher, innovation and production manager
2012- present: The Vegetarian Butcher, operations director



Loes Moor-Hulshof on the production line for vegetarian hamburgers.

participating with the aim of readying shear-cell technology for industrial application. The partners can use the knowledge obtained along the way in their day-to-day product development. As soon as Van der Goot's vegetarian beef steak is ready, The Vegetarian Butcher will get it on the market. 'We believe in the power of innovation. We need each other,' says Hulshof. Since the company started, it has doubled its workforce every year. 'Now there are 85 people working here, and we've got

is run by a very strong management team. I don't do it alone. That might be my strength: being able to build up a team that carries the organization. I actually feel a bigger responsibility to get the human race into vegetarianism. That pressure is much stronger. The Vegetarian Butcher is just a means to that end.'

VAST SALES POTENTIAL

So the Unilever takeover is very welcome, says Hulshof. 'Now we can really conquer

has not been greeted with such enthusiasm in all quarters. Some people are afraid. The Vegetarian Butcher has sold its soul. 'I understand that. But I'm not worried about that. Our ideas about the future are quite similar, and the higher goal – the growth of plant-based meat on the market – is more important. And we've had good discussions about that. We are only 0.04 per cent of Unilever, a really tiny little plant. They want to keep that plant intact and nourish it. We get to say which other parts of Unilever we want to make use of in order to grow big.'

Hulshof has her hands full with the takeover. 'From being an organization with 85 people, we are now part of a company with 160,000 people. That is a gigantic leap of course. How do you organize that well?' Her own career will always be driven by the higher goal. 'I'm not out to become the director,' says Hulshof. 'I want to make sure factory farming is soon superfluous. More and more people are buying vegetarian products as a matter of course. That is the start of a major change, and it's really great to be doing it.' ■

'Seeing livestock being transported brings tears to my eyes'

another 10 vacancies again, from product developer to project leader,' says Hulshof. Isn't that a massive responsibility? Hulshof seems relaxed: 'No, not at all. The company

the world and at a blow, we get vast sales potential, with access to supermarkets in 190 countries. That is fantastic. This was the moment we were waiting for.' The takeover