

VISION

Growing pains for meat substitutes



The popularity of meat substitutes is growing so fast that there is a danger of a shortage of ingredients, and producers fear a price rise. Researcher Atze Jan van der Goot acknowledges the problem but thinks the increasing demand could lead to upscaling and thus to lower prices.

How come there are shortages?

‘Meat substitutes consist of proteins from things like soya, peas or grains. There are plenty of soyabeans but the issue is the proteins that are extracted from them: there’s the bottleneck. At the moment not enough companies have the right installations for extracting the proteins from soya, peas and grains, and those companies are reaching their maximum capacity. The refining process is labour-intensive, complex and costly, and by-products such as fibres, carbohydrates and chemical compounds have to be properly disposed of too. So it is not easy for factories to expand fast. It requires serious investments.’

‘The refining process is labour-intensive, complex and costly’

Are there ways of facilitating this process?

‘We are studying the possibility for less refined products. That way you might have an ingredient that does not consist entirely of protein, but that also involves fewer processing stages, results in fewer by-products and is cheaper as a production process. Products such as lentil burgers are less processed, for instance, but the problem is that their structure and taste are not like those of meat. So we are trying to find out how you can make products that do have the taste and structure of meat without needing so much processing.’

What do the shortages mean for prices?

‘Companies such as Cargill and Dupont, which make the ingredients for meat substitutes, are already investing more in production. But expanding that production capacity is a slower process than expanding a production line for meat substitutes. Producing meat substitutes takes less resources in the end than meat, because such large quantities of beans and grains are required for livestock feed. So in the short term you get a price hike, but in the long term growing demand for meat substitutes will lead to higher production capacity for the ingredients – and therefore perhaps to a fall in prices.’ [®] TL