

DEVELOPMENT ECONOMIST THIJS BOER:

‘You know what, I’m going to set up that factory myself’

Five years ago, Thijs Boer embarked on a great adventure: setting up a crisp factory in Rwanda. ‘If the urban youth are going to snack, they might as well buy a bag of crisps made from potatoes grown by Rwandan farmers.’ The factory is now breaking even, while hundreds of local farmers are getting a good price for their potatoes.

TEXT RENÉ DIDDE PHOTOGRAPHY SVEN TORFINN / HH

Thijs Boer (33) buys up the potato harvest from 250 farmers in the north of Rwanda. Some have half a hectare of land and supply a maximum of 5000 kilos, and one or two have 20 hectares, says Boer in a conversation on Zoom. Some farmers have been able to expand thanks to Boer. ‘Because they get a 15 to 20 per cent higher price from me than from the local traders,’ he explains. ‘As long as the quality is good. That is a must. Sometimes I and my team, which includes three young agronomists from the University of Rwanda, advise them to leave the potatoes in the field two weeks longer. They have to be at precisely the right level of ripeness, so the crisps don’t go brown because of the sugars. We also teach them the importance of the dry matter content level. If they don’t listen, they just have to go to someone else. I’m not an NGO.’ Farmers in this small East African country are not very used to these kinds of requirements. But Boer is not a typical potato buyer. He makes crisps in a factory between the potato fields just outside Musanze, the

potato capital of Rwanda, 90 kilometres or two hours’ drive north from the capital city, Kigali. The crisp brand name is ‘Winnaz’ – which sounds like ‘winners’. Since 2015, the potatoes have been going to Boer’s factory, where they are washed, peeled, cut, inspected, fried, flavoured and weighed. Twenty minutes later, they leave the factory in red, blue or green bags (salted, salt & vinegar, paprika) with the factory’s black-and-white logo. Thirty-five people are employed in Boer’s crisp factory. Is this fatty, salty snack the right form of added value to introduce in Rwanda, though? Boer has been asked this before. ‘Crisps from big multinationals like Lays are imported from Kenya, South Africa, and even Europe. The growing middle class, especially the young urban population, buy crisps to snack on with a drink. So if they are doing that anyway, they might as well buy a bag of tastier, less salty crisps that are made with potatoes from Rwandan farmers.’ Boer thinks it is important for developing countries to be self-sufficient in food production. It annoys the young Dutch

businessman that in spite of its economic growth, this country imports as much as 85 per cent of the food it needs from Egypt, South Africa, India, China and the United States. ‘While 95 per cent of Rwandans are farmers. I have seen studies that make it clear that 40 per cent of the food needed could easily come from Rwanda itself.’

How did you come up with the idea of a crisp factory in Rwanda?

‘It started with field research for my Master’s in Development Economics in Wageningen. At first I was supposed to go to Ethiopia, but when that fell through I ended up in Rwanda, a smaller and less heterogeneous country. For my research I needed to look for ways of boosting the productivity of small potato farmers in the north. And that’s when I hit upon crisps. My idea then was: the farmers would start collaborating to improve the quality of the potatoes, and form a cooperative that would set up a crisp factory. But the plan for a cooperative factory came a bit too soon for them. >



Thijs Boer, founder of the Winnaz crisp factory in Rwanda, tastes his crisps.



This Boer with a colleague at his crisp factory just outside Musanze in Rwanda.

‘Farmers get a 15 to 20 per cent higher price from me’

‘I liked this location. Not just because of the climate, the way of life and the absence of crime and corruption, but also because everyone is working hard to turn Rwanda into a successful economy. I’m a bit of an adventurer, so I thought, you know what, I’ll set up that factory myself, and the

farmers can buy me out later. I got help with the investments from the Dutch ministries of Economic Affairs and Foreign Affairs. My parents invested in my company too. It is quite easy to go into business here. I can just drop in on the minister if I want.’

It still seems a big step, and a rather uncertain market.

‘That’s true. It goes against all the rules of economics: starting something in a small country with a very small economy and with a product there is hardly any demand for. So for the first few years I might actually have worked for nothing. But my aim of providing small farmers with more security got off the ground from day one. And we were soon collaborating with at least 10 young Rwandans who had just graduated in the domains of agronomics, agribusiness and quality management at universities and vocational training colleges. They assess potatoes on the farms, in the field, they are quality managers in the factory, and they sell the crisps in the city.

‘Only now, after five years, are we breaking even, meaning we are selling more than we

spend on the costs. In figures: our turnover is 225,000 euros in crisps, based on 130,000 kilos of potatoes. The task now is to expand. We are working on the export of our Winnaz crisps from Rwanda to neighbouring Uganda and Congo. These are much bigger countries with much bigger economies. But even in Rwanda itself, there are opportunities. We analysed the supermarket shelves recently. It turns out we have a market share of at least 65 per cent. We are bigger than Lays! We are now actively involved in the Made in Rwanda campaign, which promotes national products and encourages people to spend their money supporting the national economy.'

Are you thinking of other potato products?

'No. It is very difficult for me to influence the potato sector. Dozens of varieties are grown here, with different traits, and it's not easy to get hold of good seed potatoes. But I am thinking of equipping our machines for making crisps out of vegetables such as beetroot and carrots. That fits the health trend, which is on the rise here too. Another option is to strengthen our business model by using our packaging line to provide local and regional producers of beans or nuts with relatively fast and cheap packaging for their products.'

So how did you end up in Wageningen?

'I first did Management, Economics and Law at the applied sciences university in Groningen. When I had a temporary job at the land registry, a colleague there had recently graduated from Wageningen, and persuaded me to go there. Once I started going to lectures and discovered the night life, I was a convert. I made friends with a lot of international students, mainly Africans. And I enjoyed getting to know different cultures and their cuisines. Wageningen was much more fun than Groningen. When I'm in the Netherlands, I still go for a beer or a coffee at a pavement cafe in the market square.'

Did you benefit from your degree programme? And did you learn business skills at university too?

'I learned that the economy is bound up with politics. Thanks to Erwin Bulte's lectures,

I understand the economics of developing countries better. And thanks to Liesbeth Dries, I have a better grasp of how it works in those countries institutionally. I also took courses in Wageningen for future entrepreneurs. One thing I learned was that 90 per cent of enterprises, both in the Netherlands and elsewhere, fold within five years. In that sense, I've already been quite successful. Ha ha. No, but seriously: how to do business is something you can't learn from books. For the first two years, I made all the



THIJS BOER (33)

Studies: BSc in Management, Economics and Law at Hanze University of Applied Sciences Groningen (2009), MSc in International Development Studies, Wageningen (2013)

Work: Founder and general manager of the Winnaz crisp factory in Rwanda

'Maybe I can work myself out of a job here'

crisps myself and I kept a close eye on my staff. By now I've realized they can make better crisps than I can. I am someone who thinks up concepts. I have ideas. I'm doing more marketing now. Once that is up and running, I'll get managers to do it.

'The main thing is to make your peace with the fact that you enjoy a lot of freedom in the prison you've chosen. I am the son of a dairy farmer in the north-east polder who grew some potatoes on the side. My mother was just as enterprising. Maybe I've got a gene for entrepreneurship.'

Do you miss the Netherlands badly? I imagine it's a lonely life, especially in this corona year.

My girlfriend Judith studied in Wageningen too; we were housemates on the Stationsstraat. She came along to Kigali, got a job here, and was the breadwinner for the first year. She recently went back to the Netherlands, where she's working in The Hague. That is far from ideal, even though I knew it would happen. Luckily we are used to travelling a lot.

'Maybe I can work myself out of a job here. I am making this call from Kigali and I haven't been to the crisp factory in Musanze for a week now. I do check the books and the turnover is great: no problems – and without me. Eventually I might be able to run the business from a distance. It isn't my dream to stay here all my life. I'd like to start other businesses, preferably in the agri-food sector. And it's important to me to change things, like I am now changing the potato value chain for the better.' ■