

PROJECT NEWBIE

DEEL 4

How can we help starters and successors?



SUCCESSORS WHO ARE ACTUALLY STARTERS

SLOVENIA

What challenges do successors and start-ups face? Lack of land and capital or do they lack the knowledge or the right network? A group of European researchers and advisers from the Newbie project want to investigate this. This time we are in Slovenia, where we meet three starters within the vicinity of the capital Ljubljana.

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Damjana Ostanec Heric



Uhan family



Janez Colnars vineyard

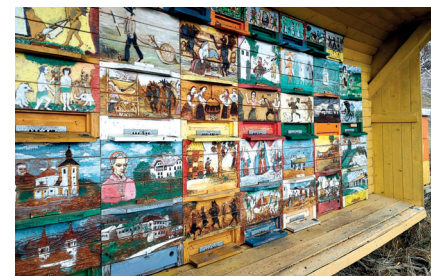


It is like traveling through the miniature railway that I had as a child. An idyllic landscape with hills and low mountains are interspersed with green meadows and occasional arable land. And a lot of forest. Sixty percent of Slovenia is forest. Everything should have been white by now, buried under half a meter of snow. But the climate is changing here too, and the temperature is unusually high for the time of the year. 2 million people live in Slovenia, 280,000 of them in Ljubljana. The few pieces of arable land that exist are under pressure from housing and industry.

The first farm that we visit belongs to Damjana Ostanec Heric. After completing her agricultural studies, she took over the business from her parents in 2014. But actually she is also a starter because her parents

could not live solely from the farm, whereas Damjana has converted and expanded it into a vegetable farm where she and her family earn an income. But that requires major investments. Last year alone 123,000 euros were invested, and that is a significant amount in Slovenia.

Originally this was a cattle farm, but when Damjana took over the farm, she switched to growing vegetables. The farm covers 6 ha with 10 polytunnels on part of it. It grows more than 20 types of vegetables, the most important of which are sweet peppers and chili peppers, which are preserved at the farm. Damjana does the processing and her husband, who does not have an agricultural background, is now doing the cultivation. In the future, they want to stop supplying fresh vegetables and process everything themselves.



The products are sold to wholesalers, directly to thirty stores, at the market and in the farmyard store. She also sells vegetables to schools and nurseries because a hot lunch is served there every day. Every school in Slovenia has its own kitchen with staff.

It is a lot of work and Damjana's parents also help in the farm. And then you also run the risk that some of the products on land will be eaten by the animals from the surrounding forest, such as deer, wild boar and even bears! Damjana and her family are not yet living on site of the farm but they are planning to build a house there next year.

"The income of this likeable family is under pressure due to a changing climate."

On to the fruit farm of the Uhan family, where Aljaž and his parents grow apples, pears, cherries, plums, peaches, hazel and walnuts. Originally this was a mixed farm, but it became a fruit farm in 2000 after the communist era when everything had to be delivered to the local cooperative. They started with the cultivation of apples but now produce all kinds of different fruit on 10 hectares of land. They sell most of their fruit fresh, including in the farm shop, but also process it into juice, vinegar, jam and dried fruit. In addition, they have 35 bee colonies that live in a barn where each colony has its own painting above the exit opening. They also have 200 laying hens that can roam freely in the orchard.

Climate change is already a daily reality for this family business. Until 5 years ago the winters were long and cold, after which it became spring and the trees started to flower. They were not troubled by frozen flower buds in this region. But now that the winters are milder, as during our visit, the trees bud earlier and run the risk of night frost damage. They try to prevent the damage with fire pots but this does not work well. What they need is a sprinkler system, but that will cost a lot of money. The income of this sympathetic family is therefore under pressure due to a changing climate.

Before we go to the third and last farm, we also visit the largest agricultural secondary school in Slovenia. The director shows us around and tells us about

the vision of the school. Due to the limited amount of land available for agriculture, which is also very fragmented and often difficult to work on, Slovenia will never be able to compete with other European countries. The future for the students lies in regional production and (processed) products with high added value. At the school, students can learn how to process products right up to distillation.

The third visit is a vineyard where we also taste the wine, of course. We are met by Janez Colnar, the eighth generation of Janez in the family tree. It is the custom that every generation calls the firstborn son Janez. This too was previously a part-time farm that Janez has modernised. He can now live off it. He started making *cviček*, a young wine with low alcohol content (9.5%), which is typical of this region. Before he started making this wine, he first studied for one and a half years at a winemaker in Luxembourg. Now he also makes other red wines and a wonderfully fresh rosé. In the past there were also 40 beef cows and there are still 20 pigs, but they are going because ambitious Janez is going to convert the pig stable into a wine cellar.

Janez took over the farm in 2015 and he was able to invest half a million euros thanks to European funds. Many farmers use these funds because Slovenia is subject to a European scheme for areas where farming is challenging. In addition to building a new wine cellar, Janez also wants to increase tourism by building a B&B with eight rooms and giving guided tours. He also wants to expand to grow 100,000 vines. However, it is not about quantity but about quality. He goes for few grapes per plant, so you get more concentrated juice and a tastier wine. He also works with natural preparations such as a preparation of stinging nettles. Now he sells most of his wine in Slovenia but his wine is also sold in Belgium and England.

On the way back to Ljubljana, it is quiet on the bus. The wine has certainly contributed to this, but we are also particularly impressed by three newcomers to agriculture who may not have started from scratch, but who have all made a part-time farm with courage and perseverance into a fully-fledged family business. ■

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