

# [ You win some, you lose some ]

**A failed experiment, an error in your model, a rejected article: in academia such things tend to be labelled failures. As for talking about failure? Not done! But that's just what WUR co-workers do in this regular feature, 'You win some, you lose some'. Because failure can be useful. In this instalment, we hear from Vincenzo Fogliano, professor of Food Quality and Design.** Text & illustration Stijn Schreven

'In the first two years of my lab work, I did nothing but make mistakes. For example, I tried to purify a protein from maize cells using chromatography, in order to identify it. Time after time I couldn't find the protein afterwards: I had collected only 0.1 per cent, while the other 99.9 per cent went down the drain. I was utterly baffled. All my work could be binned and I had collected next to nothing.

'Two years later, I discovered that I'd been using the wrong filter column: the pores of the filter were too small and the protein was being washed away with the buffer solution. That was a turning point. While I was still deep in the shit, I could only see the huge amount of time wasted and I was frustrated that the results were not as I expected. But then I suddenly saw all I had learned and how much I now understood about things I wouldn't have delved into so deeply if I hadn't had the failure. And I managed to finish my thesis quickly after that.

'I have another example. The first time I applied for a job abroad, I was one of the last two candidates. When the other one got the job, I found it hard to accept. I had already started dreaming about what it would be like, and

I had told my family. Suddenly that dream was shattered. As a scientist, you

**'While still in the shit, I could only see the time wasted'**

develop your own research and CV. Your career is all about you. So that rejection felt personal: I was not good enough.

'In the months that followed, I doubted myself and my decision to go into science, and I blamed the system. But when I got the chance to apply for a place in Wageningen, I saw things more positively and I understood what I could do better. I needed to explain my strong points better. The selection committee won't automatically grasp the value of your research. Thanks to that earlier setback, I was better prepared this time.'

