Surveying the opinions of **young connoisseurs**

DIY tasks, a face-to-face interview and a cooking workshop with classmates. Those are elements of a study by the PhD candidate Lotte Pater (Consumer Sciences). She is trying to find out in real-life contexts what young children think of plant-based meat substitutes. Text Dominique Vrouwenvelder

Children making a pizza, under the watchful eye of PhD candidate Lotte Pater (left). ◆ Own photo

And that´s not just a question of asking them, Pater explains. 'Exploratory consumer research is often done using structured interviews. But children often clam up when you unexpectedly ask them what they think about anything, because it feels like an interrogation.' She therefore developed methods in which the children get to know the question topic and can then express themselves in their own way. Pater gave children a play box of DIY and other tasks and various plant-based meat substitute products. 'Tasks like drawing, writing and colouring are difficult to interpret as research results, of course, but being involved with the subject matter in that way teaches the children about the material and gives them more self-confidence to talk about it. That helps them give their opinions later in the face-to-face chats. During the cooking session at the end, we got to know more about the interactions with other children and about what is known as the "mealtime context". Children rarely eat alone and never eat one product in isolation.'

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'In the first instance, children were positive in particular about the analogues (see inset, ed.), because those look like what they know,' says Pater. 'Later, during the interviews and the cooking workshop, they found the substitutes and replacements more attractive. Part of that is because the analogues didn´t come up to their expectations. The ham analogue doesn't taste quite the same as ham meat, so it's disappointing. For the substitutes and replacements, they hadn´t expected them to taste like anything they already knew.'

Pizza

'Children are very open to new products,' says Pater, 'especially if you process them into a meal they already know. This was about various plant-based toppings for pizzas, but in another study I also looked at lentils as an alternative to meat in spaghetti sauce. If you involve children in the cooking and it is presented to them in a mealtime context, they are very positive.' Even about the less familiar substitutes and replacements.

'What this study also shows is that it's perfectly possible to involve children in scientific research, even if they can´t participate fully in the standard research methods. If you first help them and encourage them to get to know a topic in a trusted environment, they are then ready to be very open about it. Even to a complete stranger.'

Analogues, replacements and substitutes

Pater uses three different types of plant-based alternatives to meat in her study: analogues, replacements and substitutes. The analogues are the ready-to-eat meat alternatives, the replacements are the more natural alternatives to meat such as tofu and tempeh that have comparable nutritional properties to meat, and the substitutes are the alternatives to meat from other categories such as lentils and nuts that have comparable culinary properties. These all tend to get called '*vervangers*' in Dutch.