

Interview

“WE NEED TO REACQUAINT PEOPLE WITH OLD HABITS”



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for Boer & Tuinder

TRANSLATION

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CROPDIVA wants to see underused crops back in the field. Among those underused crops are a few legumes, such as faba bean and lupin. What are the current challenges these crops face on the market? We asked Wouter Braet, a fifth-generation executive at Braet-De Vos.

Braet-De Vos is a company specialized in the cleaning of dried legumes, grains and seeds. It is mostly a supplier company that delivers their goods to processors and small packer companies.

The eye of the beholder

At the time we meet, the CROPDIVA crops are not core business for Braet – De Vos. They are more familiar with crops like brown beans and peas. “Beans are still a risky crop to grow”, Wouter starts off. Harvesting is done at about 18% of moisture, but customers often want to get down to 16%. This means that additional drying is necessary. “Drying can be done with a cascade dryer, as is common with grains. Excessive drying, however, can cause cracks in the surface, which, after soaking, results in an unattractive appearance.” Brown beans are therefore dried in a box dryer system, where warm air is blown through the boxes. When Wouter later on shows me some samples of his products, it becomes clear to me that appearance indeed matters when it comes to legumes. Consumers today are willing to pay more for red kidney beans or speckled beans, compared to locally grown brown beans. After all, nicely polished split peas do look much more

appealing than their untreated counterparts.

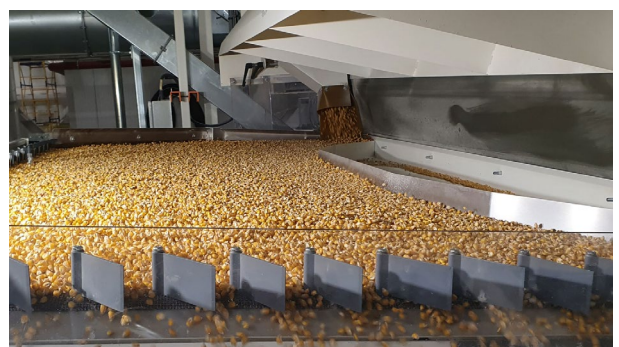
Too expensive

We seek for beauty not only in what we see, but also in what we eat. Is this then the whole reason why legumes currently are not the most popular of crops? According to Wouter, there is more to the story. “The land is too expensive around here,” Wouter responds when asked about the other limitations of growing pulses in Flanders. “There is too much pressure on farmers to get high yields. That’s why, at Braet – De Vos, we started sourcing from Canada and America. In these countries, land costs less than a tenth of what it does here. Russia and the Ukraine are also significant players on the market, but the better quality still comes from Canada and the US.” Despite all of this, Wouter still actively takes part in research that wants to bring legume crops back to local soil. “Do not get me wrong, we are definitely interested in things like brown and red beans as a crop and have already tested chickpeas as well.” He is also involved in an ILVO (Flemish Institute for Agricultural and Fisheries Research) project on mixed cropping. “The problem there is that triticale, for example, has ripened off quite well at the time of harvest, but faba beans have not. This means that, yet again, additional drying is required, which also incurs additional costs.” Price thus remains the Achilles’ heel for pulses and legumes.



Volume is key

The current market limitations however do not stop at appearance or price. Another important aspect is scale. “I need volume. Small-scale initiatives focused on short supply chains are nice. They can bring a strong added value to negotiate a better price with a local restaurant, but in general, the quantities are quite small. If we want to do the same thing on a larger scale, and in a sustainable way, the cost increases significantly. For example, I cannot have workers handpick bad beans or peas from the sorting belt. I have pre-cleaners, post-cleaning air machines, specific gravity tables, destoners, colour sorters, X-ray machines, metal detectors, magnets, etc. I have to keep those running. I am also obligated to have various certificates for cleaning and trading, such as FSSC, BRC, GMP+, FCA, SKAL, SEDEX and so on. There is a price tag attached to that. This year, I was able to buy French chickpeas that cost about 1000 euros per ton after we had cleaned them. The price I would need to pay local initiatives is generally much higher than 1 euro per kilogram.



On top of that, they cannot offer the volume that we need. My fastest sorting line reaches almost 10 tons per hour. If a farmer offers me 1 hectare with a 3 tons yield for testing, the product has already been processed entirely by the time the machine is properly adjusted. Potential customers that buy the finished product, also require volume.

They want us to offer them a constant flow, and a constant quality. For soy beans, for example, the locally produced volume is there to some extent. However, if the protein content is not high enough, the beans are not suitable for food and have to be processed into feeds. Local soy beans are too expensive to take that risk. Buyers are willing to pay a little bit extra for local production, but not double the price.”

Old habits die hard?

It seems the market of legumes has quite a lot of challenges to face. How do we turn the tide? “Local production is wonderful”, Wouter concludes, “but actually, we need to start by reacquainting people with old habits. Pea soup used to be very popular in the past. Today, much less so. People consider it as winter food only and won’t eat it in summer. Our revenue has increased recently because our number of customers has increased, but in reality, we see that the volume that is requested by existing customers decreases. People want speckled beans or red beans, even though we have our traditionally local produced brown beans available. If you ask me, the explanation for that is simply that red or speckled beans look better in salads. People buy with their eyes. To follow that trend, we are now trying to grow these red and speckled beans locally. But there is no need for that. We already have beautiful beans at hand!”



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