

# Old traditions, new practices

**O**nly 60 years ago, the agricultural landscape in the Netherlands was quite similar to what exists today in many countries: large numbers of small family farms that combine various crops with different species of livestock for milk, meat, manure, traction or transport, and also serving as cultural manifestations. Marketing was done directly at the farm gate or through small shops. But today, over 90% of the Dutch citizens go to the supermarket for their basic needs in terms of food. What happened in the meantime?

Since the 1960s Dutch agriculture has gone through a complete metamorphosis. After suffering a severe lack of food during the Second World War (1940-1945), agricultural policies in Europe were designed to prevent any possibility of a similar situation happening in the future. Major government support was used to protect internal markets, providing easy access to credit and subsidies for the use of chemical inputs. The aim was to maximise food production: obtaining the highest possible yields per hectare or litres of milk per cow per year. The implementation of these policies led to a period of phenomenal growth:

in nearly 50 years, the milk production of an average dairy farm increased 14-fold: from 37,000 litres per year in 1960 to more than 500,000 litres in 2007.

In the process, farms have become bigger, specialised in either crops or livestock, with high levels of mechanisation, and the country is famous for its yields, exports and “efficiency”. Together with this, the social effects have been equally phenomenal: employment in the agricultural sector has seen an 18-fold reduction: only one person was needed in 2007 to produce the same amount of milk that had required 18 people in 1960. Moreover, over 90% of the farms have had to close down – a process that is still going on today. This process not only influenced farming and rural development, but also implied a change from local marketing to the dominance of the few major retailers and supermarkets that we have today.

**Scandals and blurred chains** But another tendency is gradually gaining ground. Since the turn of the century, a growing number of Dutch citizens – the vast majority of them living in urban areas – wants closer links with those who produce their food. Parents want to show their children that milk comes from a cow and not from a supermarket

The August 2012 issue of *De Boerderij*, a popular magazine for Dutch farmers, showed how “innovative farmers are increasingly successful in finding their consumers”. More than 3,300 farmers (out of a country-wide total of 67,000) are selling their produce directly to consumers – bypassing supermarkets in the process. And this number is growing fast. The age-old practice of direct marketing is coming back to the Netherlands, and consumers are playing an important role.

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**New ways to engage with consumers.** Photos: JawsMedia Productions/Michiel Wijnbergh/Waddengoud/Koos & Monique van der Laan

container. Buying “anonymous food” in the supermarkets is no longer the only option and direct linkages between farmers and consumers are growing, in both numbers and in forms. Today, an urban citizen can, for example, choose to “adopt a cow”, enjoy a camping site on a farm, or engage in one of the numerous other activities that provide an extra income for farmers.

During the past few years, different factors have fed consumer interest in knowing about the source or the origins of their food. These include a growing movement against so-called “mega-stables” – the large-scale industrial animal production units that increasingly dominate the Dutch countryside. This has received extensive media coverage, focusing especially on the animals’ wellbeing and also on environmental issues. More recently, the growing threat of multi-resistant microbes, for example in poultry meat, has been documented by the media. People are becoming more aware that food safety cannot be taken for granted.

A more recent scandal was the presence of horse-meat in ready-made meals labelled as “beef”. Suddenly people realised that dozens of manufacturing companies, all over Europe, are involved in producing their food, with ingredients travelling thousands of

kilometres and going through different hands and multiple transformations. Not surprisingly, growing vegetables in one’s own garden is increasingly popular; forging direct linkages with farmers is another expression of that concern. Words like “local” and “sustainable” trigger consumers to buy their products directly from farmers, instead of through supermarkets. “Local for local” is a new trend – still small, but gaining ground. This is all about consuming products from your own region.

A recent report estimated that today 40% of the Dutch farmers have diversified their income with secondary activities. But farmers are also trying out different initiatives to market their products, and are being followed by a growing number of consumers.

**Farmers’ initiatives** Some farmers have been quick to pick up the opportunity and are developing innovative ways to engage directly with consumers. Often special quality products – such as organic products or “forgotten vegetable varieties” are offered, and in this way farmers attract special client groups. Other marketing initiatives include:

- *Farmers’ shops at the farm.* Around 5% of all farmers have a small shop on their farm, where they sell

their produce as well as other locally produced items that are often not available in supermarkets. This number is growing and since 2006 such farms work together under the name *landwinkels* (or “country shops”). Social media play an important role in this new development: it is estimated that farmers with a website sell twice as much in their shop as those without;

- *Direct delivery systems run by farmer co-operatives*, such as the farmer’s co-operative in Altena Biesbosch, where farmers are selling their potatoes, cheese, vegetables and fruits directly to consumer groups or restaurants. This co-operative has a membership of 100 farmers and 160 consumers – and this number is growing;
- *Direct delivery systems run by individual farmers*. This is becoming especially popular in the case of beef: individual farmers have developed a client group to which they deliver directly on a regular basis. Often local dual-purpose breeds – such as the *Brandrode Rund* – are used, and in this way animal diversity is promoted. Some of the marketing examples include *Natuurboer uit de Buurt* (or “Nature Farmer in your Neighborhood”) and *Hemels Vlees* (or “Meat from Heaven”).

Generally speaking, farmers get a better price for the products sold directly to consumers – sometimes up to 200%. But this is not the only advantage. Farmer Berrie Klein Swormink, who delivers beef directly to his clients, emphasises how “*I get more feedback and acknowledgement for what I produce. It requires more effort and that does not always pay out, but you are directly engaged with your clients. It is important for me, not only for the money, but also for the appreciation.*”

**Consumer power** At the same time, throughout the country, consumers and their organisations are taking the initiative. More and more consumers are not going to the supermarkets but elsewhere to get their food, and are putting their ideas for a better world into practice. As a result, a wide array of initiatives has developed over recent years, involving various kinds of groups, at a local and at a national level.

- *The Week of the Taste* is a yearly event that takes place throughout the country, where producers and consumers meet around “good food” and new products are presented. As part of this series of events, “the heroes of the taste” are selected through a contest: to find out for instance who produces the best local cheese or beer;
- *Versvokos* are consumer co-operatives run on a non-for-profit basis that buy their vegetables and fruits directly from a nearby farmer. Consumer

groups place orders and the fresh food is then distributed directly to them;

- *Webshops*: many different websites present an overview of all farmers’ shops in the Netherlands. Some of these, such as [www.thegreenbee.nl](http://www.thegreenbee.nl), are visited by thousands of people every day. Consumers can place orders and the food-packages are delivered to their homes. This service also includes updates via Twitter about new products.

Consumers are supporting farmers by buying their products. Yet they also play a larger role. In many cases they provide money in advance, helping farmers cover part of their production costs. In some cases they also invest in new technologies, for example there is one programme that helps farmers install solar panels. Just as importantly, consumers provide valuable information. Participants in the “adopt a cow” scheme are invited to the farm twice a year, and also to become “friends” through social media. In this way farmers are informed about citizen’s ideas and priorities and sometimes adapt their management practices. Koos and Monique van der Laan of the Beekhoeve organic farm, for example, started keeping calves with the cow, because they found out that that was actually one of the issues that their “friends” were concerned about.

The most important power which consumers have, however, is their capacity to influence policies – those at a national level, and even those which shape the actions of supermarkets. This was clear in September 2012, when Holland’s largest supermarket chain, Albert Heijn, unilaterally decided to pay farmers 2% less for their produce, in spite of earlier agreements. The Youth Food Movement – the Dutch branch of the youth section of the Slow Food network – made thousands of “2% discount” stickers and distributed them in front of the shops so that people would stick them on fresh products and then try to pay 2% less. This created a lot of media attention.

The number of marketing initiatives mentioned above is growing by the day. Many of them include traditional ways that seemed forgotten but are proving their value once more. They install a feeling of pride and innovation rather than dependency, both amongst farmers and citizens. Consumer preferences and the changes in marketing patterns linked to these preferences are proving to be a viable path towards a truly sustainable agricultural system.

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