

Artisan cheese and dairy products

Start-up of a Hungarian-Dutch joint project



26 January 2009

Introduction

Recently, an initiative has been launched for a project of cooperation between Hungary and the Netherlands. It is about stimulating the rural economy in Hungary through strengthening of culinary traditions and artisan food production. Dutch dairy expertise will be deployed. The project is a practical example of how complex issues regarding sustainability and economic competitiveness can be dealt with. These are the key targets in the European policy framework. Implementation of that policy calls for concrete initiatives of cooperation, as this project. The good thing is that with the approach taken by this project not only rural development in Hungary, but also in the Netherlands will get a boost. It is precisely because of this link between practice and policy that the organizations listed underneath feel committed to promote this initiative. First follows a description of the project's core idea and then some illustrations of the background.

Colophon

The project **Artisan cheese and dairy products** is an initiative of **TableTom, az asztalom**, Mr Tom de Smet's private company. This note was prepared by Mr Rob Maessen and Mr Marien Sonneveld.

Contacts:

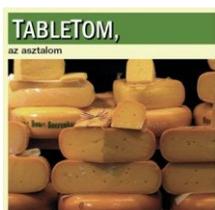
TableTom, az asztalom - Mr Tom de Smet
phone NL: +31 - 20 - 638 01 94
phone HU: +36 - 70 - 2 31 41 49
mobile NL: +31 - 6 - 52 13 53 88
e-mail: tomtabletom@gmail.com

Stichting Regiowaarde - Mr Marien Sonneveld
phone NL: +31 - 13 - 466 87 12
mobile NL: +31 - 6 - 22 94 23 18
e-mail: sonneveld@regiowaarde.nl

Joint effort

The initiative of Table Tom, az asztalom

Hungarians are proud of their landscape and the food the land produces. The country has a rich agricultural history and culinary tradition. During the communist period these traditions were in decline. But in the last few years initiatives have been taken to develop new gastronomic products and to improve existing traditional ones as well as their marketing strategy. This is done through regional cooperation of farmers, producers, wineries, restaurants and retailers. One of the promoters is Mr Tom de Smet from Amsterdam. He is a culinary journalist and organizer of international cooperation in the field of foods and drinks. He has the necessary contacts in those circles and visits Hungary frequently.



In the field of wine, meat, vegetables, and fruit the Hungarians can rely on the necessary experience

and expertise, but artisan cheese and other dairy products are less well developed. With his company Table Tom, az asztalom, active in Hungarian-Dutch relations for trade and the catering business, hospitality and gastronomy, Mr Tom de Smet sees opportunities for initiatives concerning artisan cheese, dairy and trade-related matters.

Dutch cheese has a good reputation and suits the taste of the Hungarians. They are interested in Dutch cheese for the Hungarian market, but many would prefer to develop their own artisan cheeses. Based on agricultural tradition and regional capabilities is a growing interest in the application of Dutch expertise on the development of a typical Hungarian cheese and dairy culture. The necessary expertise could be made available through a solid, long-term association with Dutch producers, organizations and experts.

The Dutch expertise and experience will provide the Hungarians with the way to build their own future of artisan cheese and dairy products. Cooperation will

not be limited to cheese and dairy, but will also include the conjunction with the landscape, organic farming, tourism, transport, marketing, and development of short supply chains to the retail and catering industry. In a similar way in the nineties the Hungarian vineculture has been revived with expertise from Spain, Italy and France. Their assistance reinforced the rural economy. Nowadays, Hungarian quality wines are back on the market and there is still an intensive cooperation with the countries that provided the support. The Netherlands - as cheese country



par excellence - is now going to support Hungarian small-sized cheese and dairy producers with the development of consumer demand for authentic Hungarian food products.

With the focus on specific products like cheese and wine there is a compelling basis for mutual, direct relationships between producers and consumers, between urban and rural entrepreneurs. Through knowledge and product exchanges, international contacts and area promotion, in conjunction with landscape management, agriculture and culinary tourism, production and sales of local products will be promoted.

The cooperative relations are not only beneficial, but also complementary. The growing attention in the Netherlands for the quality of the landscape provides an interesting added value to successful development of the identity of authentic Hungarian dairy products, because it visualises the crucial importance of the management and preservation of characteristic Hungarian landscapes. The impending loss of scenic quality is still experienced as of low urgency in Hungary. At the same time the more culinary-oriented approach and the gastronomic traditions in Hungary can contribute to a greater understanding and appreciation for food in the Dutch context. In the Dutch situation the actual link between production and consumption is likely to be lost, regarding production, cooking and taste and the social function of food ("wining and dining").

The idea is catching on in Eger, Tokaj and Tilburg

Although Hungary has different regions with cheese makers and small-scaled craftsman initiatives, the north-eastern region with the provinces of Heves and Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén offers the best starting point. This region contains important vineyards. Especially the cities of Eger and Tokaj are known as gastronomic rich and versatile. The area has a large variety of landscapes with forests, hills and mountains, protected nature reserves and fertile land with several rivers and various micro-climatic conditions in which small-scaled agriculture, animal husbandry,

fruit and vegetables flourish and, of course, the vineculture. The most north-eastern region Tokaj-Hegyálja is even on the list of UNESCO World Heritage as a protected landscape.

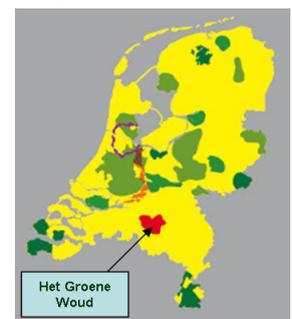
Mr Tom de Smet has many contacts throughout Hungary. For example Mr Tamás Sándor in Eger, whose company Bükki Sajt develops new Hungarian cheeses in close cooperation with local dairy farmers in the Bükk uplands, with retail and catering businesses, and wineries. Another relevant contact



is Mr Zoltán Méhesi who runs an organic dairy farm in Mosgó with cows and goats, and who is focused on the regional market. Mr De Smet is also acquainted to Mr Ferenc Kiss in Körösladány, who is

listed as one of the first producers of special mold cheeses, just like Mr Sándor Kis who started up a cheese and dairy company in Hódmezővásárhely in 1993, in cooperation with the Dutch Farmco. In addition to these cheese makers the contacts with the initiators of the Sajtút (Hungarian Cheese Route) are of interest, which have been started in 2007 by KKAOSzE (Kis-Közép és Agrárvállalkozók Országos Szolgáltató Egyesülete / National Association of Small and Medium sized Agricultural Businesses). This Sajtút, of which amongst others nine cheese companies are members now, is the principal activity of KKAOSzE and aims to develop the Hungarian cheese and dairy culture. Cooperation with Mr Tom de Smet's initiative has been agreed by KKAOSzE's president Mr László Kovács, resulting in a letter of intent in which the cooperation with Table Tom, az asztalom is specified.

Also at the Dutch side the idea of Table Tom, az asztalom has found a good breeding ground, especially in the City of Tilburg in the Province of Noord-Brabant, that has an internationally well-known reputation for efforts to improve the biodiversity. The appointment in 2005 of Het Groene Woud (Green Forest) - the area roughly between the cities of Tilburg, Eindhoven and 's-Hertogenbosch - as a National Landscape catalyses the public-private cooperation in the area of regional branding. The newly established Groene Woud Cooperative Foundation and the Land Festival Groene Woud Association are the living proof of that.



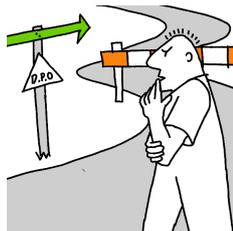
Backgrounds

Cheese and dairy project in broader perspective

The culinary traditions of Hungary result in a large variety of local food products and a great appreciation for the regional cuisine. The artisan production of wine, meat, vegetables and fruits is potentially an important source of regional, sustainable development and balanced growth of the economic, ecological and social capital.

The downside is that the culinary traditions offer little prospect yet to small-scaled farmers, artisan producers and retailers in the form of a reasonable income and social security. Like elsewhere in the world, the countryside of Hungary is on the eve of scaling up and rationalization of the food production. Major players from the food industry are gaining more and more influence on the food chain through production, distribution, processing and marketing. The artisan character of food production and the related regional diversity – important elements of the culinary traditions and regional identity – could easily be lost.

It all seems to be about the choice between globalization and progress on the one hand and small-scale production and preservation of cultural and culinary heritage on the other hand.



But is this a right representation of issues? Are supporters of artisan production and advocates of cultural and culinary heritage fighting a rearguard action? Are they resisting new technologies and changing markets out of fear for change, as proponents of large-scaled, industrialized food production say? And does the rationalization and industrialization of food production indeed and inevitably lead to a loss of traditional quality and diversity in the food supply of the consumer ¹? Not to mention the loss of biodiversity and quality of the landscape?

The fact is that our familiar landscape is the resultant of centuries-long human activity of which agricultural practices were of crucial relevance. The choice for our daily meal appears to have profound consequences for our society, the ecological capital and the appearance of our landscape and our environment.

How could we make this insight more productive? What might be our response to the negative side effects of the ongoing industrialization of our food supply? How can we combine taste, diversity and traditional values into a new business model which offers earnings to entrepreneurs, is based on corporate social responsibility and contributes to a regional, sustainable development?

Three key factors

This is the underlying question of the project for artisan cheese and dairy production that is described in this memo. We need to find a new paradigm, in which rationalization and artisan production are no longer a contradiction. There is an urgent need for an other, effective and corporate social responsibility based business model that not only aims at economic prospect and growth of shareholders value, but focuses on sustainable development. From experience gained as in the European project LIFE-SCAPE - YOUR LANDSCAPE ² it has been known that international contacts are an important incentive for initiatives in the field of regional cooperation. It concerns – mostly small-sized – farmers, producers, the catering and retail industry selling food products on local markets in conjunction with agri-tourism and landscape management. Within Europe, meanwhile, many examples of initiatives can be found that combine regional identity and landscape to form a regional brand. Taste, quality and artisan food production are in front. Personal commitment and entrepreneurship are of decisive significance, to which international contacts contribute with inspiration and knowledge exchange. This project for Hungarian-Dutch cooperation on artisan cheese and dairy production should be seen as a follow-on. One of the goals of this document is to find more allies or get partners interested to further these ideas together.



In short:

Concrete products, international cooperation on the basis of personal involvement and the development of new business models are the three key factors.

¹ "Raw milk cheeses battlefield between small producers and large, multinational companies." See for example: <http://link.brightcove.com/services/player/bcpid959009704?bclid=1350269312&bctid=1863282139> or <http://www.slowfood.nl/content/view/433/269/>

² This project is implemented under the INTERREG-IIIb Programme for North West Europe. See: www.lifescapeyourlandscape.org

The starting point is the initiative of Mr Tom de Smet to deploy his gastronomic knowledge for reinforcing the Hungarian culinary traditions. From there, an exploration is started to links in the field of food and landscape along the axis of cooperation between Hungary and the Netherlands. Such exploration should go up in the implementation of one or more projects in 2009 and subsequent years.

Network partners

The Region Value Foundation (Regiowaarde), which has its home base in Tilburg, plays an active role in this context in establishing contacts with similar developments at home and abroad, and builds on the experience of the above-mentioned European collaborative project LIFESCAPE - YOUR LANDSCAPE.

The European Centre for Nature Conservation (ECNC), also based in Tilburg, is an international centre of expertise in the field of nature and landscape. It has, together with the Province of Noord-Brabant, designed and coordinated the LIFESCAPE project. ECNC has excellent contacts in Hungary and is an advocate for Countdown 2010, the call and joint global effort to save our biodiversity.

The initiative by Mr Tom de Smet is now actively supported by these organizations with advice and practical support. Attention to artisan cheese and dairy products from the Dutch region together with authentic quality produce from Hungary offers an interesting perspective when it comes to the relationship between towns and countryside and to meet the need for new networks, production chain and links between them.

Corporate social responsibility

Ultimately, of course it is about corporate social responsibility and entrepreneurship and also in this area important alliances have been forged in recent months. For example the alliance with Mr Fons van den Hout, owner of a delicacies & cheese shop, located in the centre of Tilburg. Mr Van den Hout is a qualified cheese maker and an important cornerstone for a large number of artisan cheese makers in Belgium and the Netherlands. He endorses the importance and significance of artisan cheese for the quality of the landscape as reflected by his signing of the Countdown 2010 Declaration. Van den Hout was then co-founder of the goat cheese company Central Brabant and he would like to cooperate with Hungarian and Dutch cheese makers for the development of one or more recipes for authentic regional cheeses again.

A second important pillar is the Tilburg communications company Move of Mrs Véronique Nas and Mrs Elisabeth van Aerde. They are directly involved in the further development of the culinary and scenic values in the Hungarian region and in strengthening links with Tilburg and Brabant through their Hungarian business Move-2-Hungary, that offers holiday packages in north-eastern Hungary.

With joint effort other starting points and interested entrepreneurs are being sought, with which the presented ideas will be worked out³.

³ <http://www.hongarijevandaag.nl>, see under Food & Beverages, "Gezocht: Brabantse bedrijven ..."

Interested partners (up until now) for the project Artisan cheese and dairy production

The initiative of **TableTom, az asztalom**, Mr Tom de Smet is supported by:

Hungary:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ KKAOSzE - Sajtút ▪ Falusi és Agroturizmus Országos Szövetsége ▪ Dutch Embassy in Hungary, Economic departm. ▪ Dutch-Hungarian Chamber of Commerce 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mr László Kovács Mrs Szalay-Zala Andrea Mr Elzo Molenberg Mrs Florence van der Biezen
Netherlands:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ European Centre for Nature Conservation ▪ Fons van den Hout Cheese & Delicacies ▪ Hungary Today (Hongarije Vandaag) ▪ Move Communications Tilburg 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mr Rob Wolters Mr Fons van den Hout Mr Jan van Kuijk Mrs Véronique Nas Mrs Elisabeth van Aerde Mr Rob Maessen Mr Marien Sonneveld
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Province of Noord-Brabant ▪ Regional Value Foundation (Regiowaarde) 	