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# This Man Is Changing the Way Dutch People Think About Eggs

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Ruud Zanders isn't interested in producing poultry as cheaply as possible, and don't ask him how we should expect to feed the world in 2050.

“I cannot feed the world and I don’t want to,” he says. Not anymore, at least. At one point, he worked as a large-scale poultry farmer and used the conventional, cramped chicken stalls that are found all over the Netherlands. But now he is only concerned with alternative ways to raise chicken and eggs on a small scale.

That began when he became the director of Rondeel, a poultry operation based in Eersel. While Rondeel (<http://www.rondeel.org/>) eggs are not technically labeled organic, the chickens live in what the company calls “The Roundel,” a circular stall that mimics their natural environment as much as possible.



Then, in 2013, Zanders started his own business, Het Pluimhuis (<http://hetpluimhuis.nl/>). One of his first projects there was to save male chickens, or cockerels, who had the bad luck of being born in the wrong chicken stall. Because they don’t

lay eggs, they are considered useless in an egg-laying operation. In the Netherlands, male chicks are usually gassed and end up as protein meal for snakes or zoo animals.

Right now, Zanders saves hundred cockerels from that fate each week (<http://www.hollands-haantje.nl/>). They're raised according to the principles of organic farming—though they aren't labeled as such, because that would require major adjustments and a significant investment for Zanders. "It's still small, but more and more chefs are interested in the cockerels for their restaurants," he says. "The next step is to make sure that they are also available for consumers."

To say that this goes against the tide of the industry would be an understatement. And cheap chicken and eggs aren't just coming from Dutch farmers—they're coming from the rest of Europe, too

(<http://www.boerderij.nl/Pluimveehouderij/Nieuws/2015/2/Pluimveevleesproductie-EU-niet-concurrerend-1703179W/>). "Lots of poultry farmers in our country are in a deep crisis," Zanders confirms. "As a Dutch farmer, you cannot compete with the low-cost labor and fewer regulations in other countries."

Most Dutch farmers don't even produce exclusively for their own country, as about a quarter of what they grow disappears abroad, increasing competition domestically. A Dutch farmer who opts for more space, better food, and a longer life for his chickens actually puts himself at a disadvantage. According to Foodlog, even egg farmers are in a serious crisis (<http://www.foodlog.nl/short-news/detail/coalitie-laait-eierboeren-doormodderen/>) because the EU is opening its doors even wider to battery-cage eggs from around the world.

It's a complex problem, even for Zanders. He isn't necessarily against industrial, large-scale, operations, because sustainability means something different on every continent. "In countries where there is hunger, my concepts are useless," he says.

He also understands why farmers sometimes choose profit over sustainability. “As a farmer, you put a lot of effort into doing what you do better than others. But if you don’t get paid for it, it’s not profitable,” he says. “Northwest Europe is reasonably prosperous, and therefore the community asks for other things: more animal welfare, knowing where their meat comes from, and what its impact on the environment is. Here, we have a market for other initiatives.”



Zanders believes in selling products that are recognizable, and making farmers more accessible to their customers. “It is nice when people know, “These eggs come from that farmer and I can dial him up on the phone just like that!”

Het Pluimhuis is currently offering two kinds of eggs: “care eggs” (<http://www.zorgeieren.nl/>) and “jungle-free eggs.” The former are free-range eggs that are collected by mentally ill and handicapped volunteers who work as “help farmers” on a farm in Hegelsom, in the province of

Limburg. “This farm gives people a meaningful daily activity,” Zanders says. “For every illness or disease, there’s a job on the farm. Everyone can do something.” The care eggs have been available in a number of supermarkets since October.

In early February, Zanders introduced the “jungle-free egg” in conjunction with environmental organisation Milieudefensie (<https://milieudefensie.nl/>). The chickens are fed with feed produced in Europe, not with soy from areas where rainforests are being cleared for massive soybean farms. These eggs, marketed as “GIJS eggs” in supermarkets, were awarded three stars—the highest possible—by the animal protection organisation Dierenbescherming (<http://beterleven.dierenbescherming.nl/>). “Not only is the feed sustainable,” Zanders says, “but we also try to close the loop by bringing manure back to the farmland, too.”



I wondered if Zanders didn't feel discouraged by the rest of the poultry and egg industry. If many of our chickens don't even remain in the Netherlands, and unwanted chicken products and eggs are increasingly entering our country, what's the point? Is all this talk about sustainability just for show?

"Farmers have a choice, whether they admit it or not," Zanders says. "You can either bring as much product as possible at the lowest possible cost to the market, or you can do it completely differently, like me." He won't get rich off his eggs, but he doesn't want to. "I can earn my bread, so I'm not unhappy. Money is not the important thing here."

Zanders thinks that the coming years will see an even greater disconnect between industrial farms and sustainable farms. "In the 60s, people demonstrated in the streets with banners," he says. "'Where is our meat?' they said. Nowadays, they say, 'Make mincemeat of the cattle industry!' But most farmers are still operating in a system that began during those first banners, a system that was also necessary then. But society has changed. People now want other things."

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