

GERA STUURWOLD & RUUD HENDRIKS

A combination of living together, working and farming

Studying biodynamic agriculture



If you are young and you have an interest in organic production and want to work in this field, Warmonderhof (in Dronten the Netherlands) may be of interest. Founded in 1947 it provides full-time training to students with a range of backgrounds from both within Netherlands and abroad. It covers biodynamic and organic arable farming, horticulture, livestock and fruit cultivation and provides learning by doing.

“The combination of living together, working and farming appealed to me, there is no other training at this level in Europe” said Gaia Firth a 21 year old, third year student on the vocational training programme in biodynamic agriculture at Warmonderhof. About twenty-five students start the four-year training each year. Virtually all eighty students live on the school grounds, also home to several companies who offer internships and practical learning experiences. Approximately fifteen percent of the students come from abroad, mainly from Germany and Belgium, with an equal mix of males and females.

Do Veltman, coordinator of the campus says: “many students at the intake interview talk about their appreciation of the atmosphere here. They usually have a huge drive to learn about the production of organic food”.

Pressure

The students do much of the work on the eighty-five hectare farm: taking care of the animals, sowing, planting, harvesting and maintaining the equipment and the buildings. Do Veltman again: “they have theoretical lessons in the morning and practical work in the afternoon. There is a milking team and for four weeks all students have to start milking at 5.45 am. The carrot harvest and weed control is also intensive. In addition to this the students organise many activities, such as a monthly meal which they cook for people from the neighbourhood. Many young people have a sideline selling organic produce on the farmers’ market or on a web shop”. Ruud Hendriks, teacher and responsible for soil fertility adds “rest, cleanliness and regularity sound very old fashioned, but students must learn these virtues or otherwise it will not work. Agri-

culture is a lifestyle, it is more than a job. If you walk around here at 11 pm in the dark most students have already gone to bed, you sometimes wonder if there are really so many young people living here”.

Life on campus

“It is very social here”, according to recently-graduated Sophie Easter (22): “it made me quite nervous in the the first few months”. Another student said “you must enjoy the liveliness in the homes and you have to learn about boundaries. People are very respectfully to each other, also with students with autistic traits. But of course there are also sometimes quarrels”.

Eight students rent rooms in student houses. They usually have dinner together. “I keep an eye on practical matters and watch over their welfare. Sometimes they find it tricky to manage balancing



their rights and obligations to each other. But the hassle of washing-up and cleaning is instructive. In addition to the statutory tuition fee, students pay € 760 per year for the use of facilities and € 225 per month for their room. Veltman: 'life here is cheap because there are few temptations- the ice cream seller who was here yesterday does not come very often. Students often eat cheap vegetables.'

Learning Companies

For more than 40 years Warmonderhof was independent, but in the 1990s it merged with the Greenhorst, an agricultural training centre with several locations. However, the Warmonderhof Foundation and associated businesses remain the main drivers. Hendriks: "we have 3 entrepreneurs working on the farm, a dairy farmer, an arable and vegetable farmer and a fruit grower. Students feel the tensions that exist on a farm: how dependent the enterprise is on the weather and the possibility of the harvest failing. If you make a mistake you end up with the milk flowing in the gutter then this directly affects the operating result." Dairy farmer Verheye: "students do almost everything together. Every four weeks I get a new group: four from the 3rd year and two from the 2nd. They learn about the good times and the bad ones". Firth is happy that she is learning how to run a farm and a company and is hoping to go back to Belgium afterwards and start making cheese.

Regular, organic or biodynamic?

"There is still a large gap between organic and regular food production," says Hendriks, "this is very apparent for a young person making this choice". If your parents have a conventional farm or you come from an entrepreneurial family with a supermarket, then it seems

that the choice for organic is a choice against your parents. Yet only this year alone in our region (Flevoland) twenty farms converted to organic production. Some of them might continue onto biodynamic farming. Biodynamic agriculture is more experimental and spiritual than organic farming. We work less on the basis of feasibility and focus more on using the possibilities on the spot. We look at what the soil itself offers as an opportunity. Firth: "there are students who have nothing with the biodynamic angle, sometimes because they do not know about it. You can get to learn about it here, and some change their opinion in the course of the training".

Curriculum

The curriculum is remarkably broad. "Because I come from a free Waldorf school art lectures are quite normal for me, but not everyone has a connection to such things", says Firth. "You learn to

work with tools and to create beautiful things of wood or stone." Hendriks: "the art lessons stimulate creativity, a quality that is also useful for a farmer. Students often discover capacities that they did not realise they had."

There are six main subjects in the curriculum, each consisting of a number of components. These primary ones cover agriculture (animal husbandry, arable farming, horticulture, fruit growing and soil fertility) and engineering (tools, engines and farm buildings). In addition, there is economics (accounting, management and entrepreneurship), anthroposophy (perceptions, earth and human development, biodynamic preparations), arts (art, drama, games and end-of-year celebrations) and biology (zoology, botany, landscape and phenomenology).

Firth: "I came here because of the wide, varied curriculum. There is something for everyone. In addition, you have many opportunities after this training." ■

