

Belgocatering and Urban Crops join forces

Vertical farming in Medialaan!



Text: Isabel Boons | Photos: Wendy Huyghebaert

Imagine ... The most crisp lettuce, basil leaves as big as your hand or the most exotic herbs - anytime, anywhere within hand's reach. Undoubtedly, the utopia of many a chef. But this does not have to remain a dream for much longer, because the Flemish Urban Crops are about to start a revolution in agriculture, and in the kitchen too. Initiators and young entrepreneurs Franc Bogovic and Maarten Vandecruys are ready to conquer the world with their indoor growing system based on their own LED technology. Moreover, along with Belgocatering they are setting up a pilot project in Medialaan in Vilvoorde. In other words, the VTM kitchen will be serving slightly different flavours during the coming months ...

Vertical city farming!

The so-called city-farming concept is still in its infancy but it has a promising future. The principle is simple but revolutionary: the sun is replaced by LED lighting and plants are grown in layers one above the other in a container. "The system offers only advantages," says Franc Bogovic. "We do not use herbicides, cultivation time is drastically reduced, the products contain a higher nutritional value and we need 95% less water to grow the crops. By producing food locally, we also reduce the distribution chain and the amount of CO₂ emissions are drastically reduced. Today it is already possible to grow all leafy vegetables, cabbages, (exotic) herbs such as mizuna and edible flowers in our containers. Of course our team is constantly looking for new crops, and currently we are testing strawberries, blueberries and cherry tomatoes in our lab. Our big dream? Plant our installations in major cities,

so the tasty crops can be eaten when needed, straight from our growing system, as fresh as can be!"

Taste it to believe it

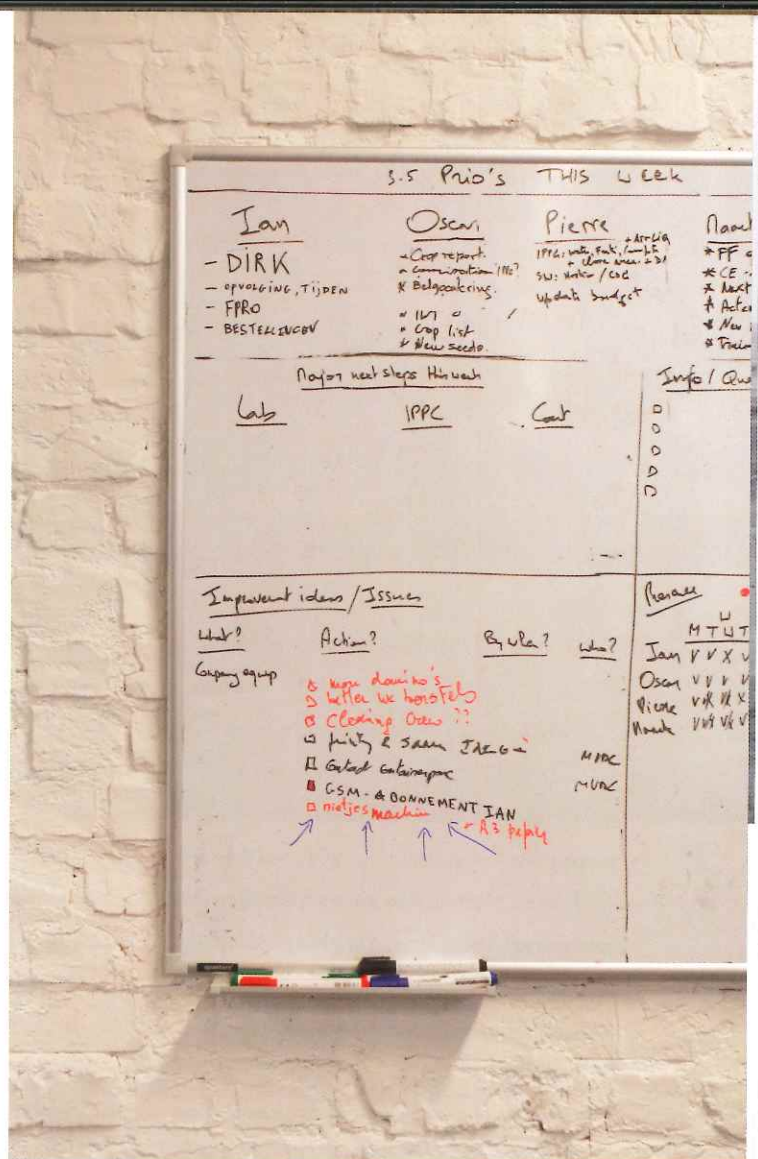
Admittedly, it sounds almost too good to be true. And as gastronomy magazine, we are of course most interested in the taste of the crops. Because lettuce grown without sunlight, what does that do to the flavour and the appearance of the lettuce? Franc does not hesitate for a second and takes us into their test space. The result is amazing. Not only does the lettuce look fantastic, but the taste is hard to compare with the taste of lettuce which we are used to. More intense, sweeter, crisper and with an incredible aftertaste. You need to have tasted it to believe it.

"It was indeed the taste of our Red Oak Leaf lettuce which convinced Belgocatering

to go with us," Martin says enthusiastically. And, indeed, not only are the bite and taste surprising, but the aftertaste is so much more intense. "The taste of the lettuce lingers much longer and the bitterness also ensures that it is easier to develop an appropriate vinaigrette to go with it. The taste of the lettuce is already so intense that some good quality olive oil and maybe a little vinegar will suffice," says Franc.

Anytime, anywhere

Forget seasons, tropical storms or temperatures that are too low. From the Sahara desert to the ice fields of Antarctica or in the garden of a gourmet restaurant, thanks to Urban Crops' vertical farms growing crops can be done anytime, anywhere. The LED lamps optimise nature and provide the perfect conditions which in turn ensure vegetables and herbs of an unprecedented quality are grown inside the containers.





Test it with Belgocatering's catering model

Maarten: "Our grow containers are insulated cells 12 meters in length in which four systems, i.e. air-conditioning, water, LEDs and automation work together. The container also has a propagation cell for the crops and once they are ready to be planted, they are transferred to the system itself. The only thing one has to do is plant and harvest, all the rest is done automatically via an app and you can watch anytime, anywhere. In the middle of the "Urban Crops FarmFlex" container there is an aisle so that you have easy access to the four growth layers. From the end of February such a container will be operational on Medialaan and will be supplying the VTM kitchen, which serves about 500 people per day. Every 30 days there will be 1,000 heads of lettuce available, in addition to various herbs. The production will be in Medialaan as it were next to the kitchen and we want to find out how our container works best with Belgocatering's model. The container will be installed in early February and as it takes 30 days to grow a lettuce in our container, the chefs will be able to start harvesting after a month. The cost of a head of lettuce in our container is the same as lettuce grown in a natural way."

Create your own custom market

The Urban Crops container systems allow you to cultivate your own private selection. In other words, you are no longer dependent on the market. "But it could be even bigger," says Franc. "If we look at the level of distribution, we

also have our 'Plant Factory', a growing system that we can install in any space. Everything is customised and fully automated and growth layers can be built up to about 25 layers."

Urban Crops is undoubtedly standing on the eve of a major breakthrough. Not only is the system revolutionary, but the results in flavour are superlative. Even Belgocatering chefs Michael De Bruyn and Dominique Tondeurs are impressed by the taste. "Michiel discovered our lettuce at my good friend Brecht's salad bar Romain Roquette and that was the start of it all," Franc concludes.

www.belgocatering.be

www.urbancrops.be