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## Dutch 'vegetarian butcher' carves new niche for Unilever

When ninth-generation Dutch farmer Jaap Korteweg turned vegetarian and set up a shop selling meat-free products over a decade ago, his friends thought he was joking. But the founder of "The Vegetarian Butcher" had the last laugh when the company was gobbled up by British-Dutch consumer giant Unilever in 2018. Unilever has now put the firm at the heart of its plans to carve out a one-billion-euro (\$1.2-billion) a year slice of the increasingly juicy global market for meat-free products. "It's a dream that comes true for me," Korteweg told AFP at the site of a grass-roofed, eco-friendly house he has built on former farmland that has been returned to nature. "I'm a ninth generation farmer, grew up on the countryside of the Netherlands, between the bulls and the cows for milk," he adds. "So it's not logical maybe that I did it this way for the Vegetarian Butcher. But what I now see is that my family and my brother and sisters are very positive about this transformation and the new business."

Once a self-confessed "big meat lover", Korteweg says his conversion came 20 years ago, when he was asked to store dead pigs in his cold storage areas during a swine fever outbreak. "For me that was the moment to stop it, I'd had enough of that system using animals for meat," he said—although giving up eating meat was "not easy" and "like stopping smoking or drugs".

## 'Dream come true'

Korteweg then created a small "butcher's shop" in The Hague using expert chefs to come up with vegan and vegetarian alternatives to bacon, meatballs, mince, kebabs and other meat products. "My goal was to become the biggest butcher in the world as soon as possible, and at that time people laughed at it because they don't take it seriously," he said. "But for me I took it seriously because I wanted to create an alternative for the industrial meat." The company expanded and its profile rose, producing a range of quirkily-named vegan products for sale in supermar-

kets, including "Little Willies" sausages, which made headlines in Britain for their risqué name.

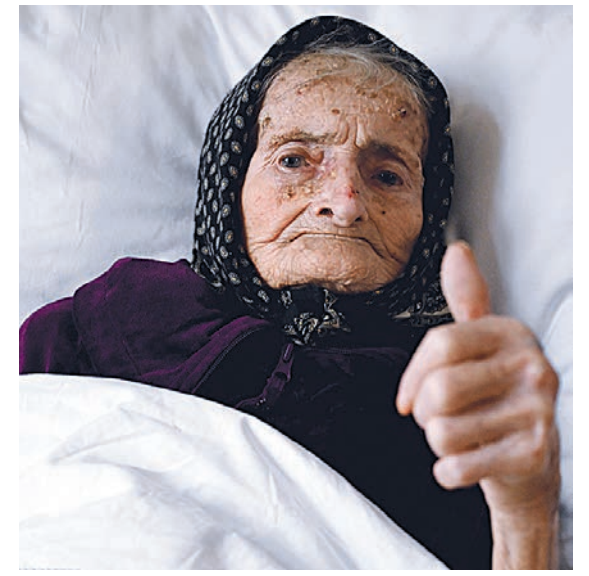
Tall and bald, Korteweg himself posed for publicity pictures holding a meat cleaver and wearing a butcher's apron spattered not with blood but carrot juice. And his move towards plant-based products was ahead of the curve. Consumers worldwide were beginning to turn away from meat products, both for health reasons and also because of the climate emergency, as beef production is a major global polluter. Now the global plant-based "meat" market is on track to be worth \$100 billion in the next 15 years, with British tycoon Richard Branson investing in Impossible Foods, while Beyond Meat is part-financed by billionaire philanthropist Bill Gates.

## '100 times bigger'

The Vegetarian Butcher's plant-based products are now on sale in 20,000 outlets across 30 countries, according to Unilever, which has also struck a deal to provide Burger King with a vegetarian version of its flagship "Whopper" in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. "Now the next step at Unilever is great, they invest a lot, and they have the knowledge and the power to bring it all over the world, so the team is exploding, and the results too," said Korteweg. "It's a dream that comes true for me."

He rejects criticism that Unilever has been "greenwashing" or "wokewashing" its image by publicly promoting sustainable plans including meat-free food while still being a major plastics polluter. "I don't think it's greenwashing because they take it too serious, if it was greenwashing they'd sell the Vegetarian Butcher and stop the development, but they have the goal to make it 10 times, 100 times bigger," he says. The original Vegetarian Butcher has meanwhile taken something of a step back, with Unilever appointing a new chief executive to oversee its global expansion.

"I am the founder and it's never going to change, but I am in the taste panel still and I'm the face of the company," he says. "It's a free role but I like to do it." Korteweg is now spending more time on the farming that he still loves, as well as on helping restore former farmland to the wild. "I'm still a farmer but a vegetarian butcher too," he adds.—AFP



Croatian Margareta Kranjec, 99, gives the thumbs up as she rests in her bed at an elderly people home in Karlovac, Croatia, after being hospitalized for three weeks in late October for COVID-19 (novel coronavirus). —AFP

## 'Thumbs up' Croatian woman beats COVID-19 aged 99

A 99-year-old Croatian woman gave the thumbs up on Thursday after she successfully beat the new coronavirus. Margareta Kranjec, who lives in an old people's home in the central city of Karlovac, was hospitalized in late October after testing positive for Covid-19 but released three weeks later. "It's over, I feel fine now," the Vecernji List newspaper quoted Kranjec as saying. Kranjec is bedridden due to her age and fragility but has no serious health conditions.

She was among several residents who tested positive for the virus, although she was asymptomatic, the home's director Stefica Ljubic Mlinac said. "With her fragility and old age it is really amazing how the coronavirus did not do her any harm," Ljubic Mlinac told AFP. "It's such nice news" amid the gloom of the pandemic, she added. Croatia, a country of 4.2 million people, has registered nearly 140,000 Covid-19 infections with nearly 2,000 deaths.—AFP



In this file photo shows the logo of the Vegetarian Butcher concept store in The Hague.



In this file photo a plate of 100% plant-based chicken chunks is displayed at The Vegetarian Butcher concept store in The Hague.

—AFP photos

## Hospital staff 'truly exhausted,' says Texas doctor in viral hug photo

Through multiple masks, a face shield and a protective suit he likens to those worn by astronauts, Dr Joseph Varon bends over his COVID-19 patient and waves into the phone she is holding up. At the other end of the video call, several loved ones express their delight at seeing the man who helped save Gloria Garcia from the disease that has killed more than 278,000 people in the US and counting. Varon, the chief of staff at United Memorial, a small hospital that primarily treats minority patients in a low-income north Houston neighborhood, made headlines when a photo of him hugging an elderly

what I will eat because you don't know when you're going to eat again." He says he has gained 35 pounds (15 kilograms). Outspoken and frustrated, Varon complained to the media as far back as July that he and his staff were running "on fumes." "My staff is very tired. My nurses, they will start crying in the middle of the day. They will break down because they are so overwhelmed with the number of cases we're getting that they are truly exhausted," he tells AFP.

## Reinforcements

Inside the critical care Covid ward, the beds are full. Staff take vitals and check on patients. Varon does his daily rounds. Garcia, ahead of her video call, sits up in bed and carefully arranges her hair and makeup. Other patients lie back on their pillows, with get well cards taped to walls. The health workers' faces can barely be seen through the layers of protective gear. Some, including Varon, wear large photographs of themselves around their necks. It was the loneliness and lack of human contact on the ward that drove his pity for the man he hugged in the viral photo, he said.

During the summer, as cases across Texas surged, they were backed up by a specialist army team providing medical support. But the military soon moved on. Varon and his staff kept working. They have some reinforcements still: since the pandemic began, travelling nurses across America have rushed towards the danger even as others have hunkered down. Demetra Ransom is one of them. She left her home in Florida to head first to New York, epicenter of the US outbreak in the spring, and then to other hotspots before landing in Houston. At United Memorial she is tactile with the patients, touching their arms and shoulders to comfort them.—AFP



Chief of Staff Doctor Joseph Varon smiles and waves to Gloria Garcia's family as she video calls them from the COVID-19 ward at United Memorial Medical Center in Houston, Texas. —AFP

Covid patient on Thanksgiving went viral. The hug was a candid moment of empathy. And Varon's wave to Garcia's family is enthusiastic. But make no mistake: the doctor is exhausted.

When AFP accompanied Varon on his rounds on Friday, it was his 260th straight day of work. Even the few hours he steals at home each day are interrupted by endless phone calls. He sleeps, he says, no more than one or two hours a night. "Don't ask me how I can do this," he adds. Donuts play a role. He displays a box, adding: "Whatever they bring is

## LAPA signed a cooperation agreement with 'Geek Express'



Fareah Al-Saqqaf, Chairman of the Board of Directors of LAPA.



Manal Hakim, CEO of 'Geek Express'.



The Performing Arts Academy "LAPA" announced the signing of a strategic cooperation agreement with "Geek Express", a Lebanon-based Company for the purpose of providing coded art workshops (combination of coding and arts). In these workshops, children will learn to create literary and artistic content through technology. These workshops come under the slogan "We are all for the universe" that "LAPA" raised, challenging the conditions of the Corona pandemic by creating opportunities for creativity and online learning. "Geek Express" is a leading company in the field of technological education and programming, certified by Microsoft and has won international awards such as the Best Application Award from MIT.

About the cooperation agreement, Fareah Al-Saqqaf, Chairman of the Board of Directors of "LAPA", said: "We seek to develop our programs for children and adults and keep up with the development in the field of technology and the digital world, also

strengthening Arab partnership is at the top of our priorities. The cooperation with "Geek Express" comes for development, educational and economic goals in the interest of the Lebanese and Kuwaiti parties".

She added: "This confirms our commitment to the national approach, supporting youth opportunities in the Arab countries we work in, which are Lebanon, Yemen and Jordan. It also confirms our interest in investing energies in these countries, opening a joint Arab labor market and developing economies based on creativity and innovation, working remotely and exchanging experiences in the fields of technology. The Lebanese labor market is full of competencies in technology, advertising, media, visual and theatrical arts, so we have a close connection with Lebanon, and the presence of LOYAC Lebanon facilitates that for us".

Al-Saqqaf affirmed LAPA's commitment to its strategic goals, the most important of which is establishing partnerships and promoting joint Arab cooperation, especially

regarding youth, education and creativity issues. She also explained that this agreement provides a set of programs directed in the fields of literature and the arts to encourage children to compose and draw stories, learn the basics of music and develop applications in artistic fields. This serves our vision of the collective awareness that we seek and the development of human relationship with each other and the environment around us under the slogan "one universe".

Manal Hakim, the CEO of "Geek Express", expressed her happiness with this cooperation, saying: "We offer a variety of technology and programming courses specially designed for children between 5-17 years with professional professors. We always strive to present our programs to suit the requirements of our partners, while maintaining our high standards. We are happy to cooperate with "LAPA" and support it in achieving its goals. We will work together to create a new vision for educational programs that integrate technology and the arts".

## 104-year-old World War II veteran back home after battling COVID

World War II veteran from Alabama celebrated his 104th birthday at home this week after a hospital stay battling Covid-19. Major Wooten, of Madison, Alabama, was admitted to hospital on November 24 with coronavirus, his granddaughter Holly Wooten McDonald said on her Facebook page. Wooten was discharged from Madison Hospital on Tuesday, two days before he turned 104 years old, and his granddaughter posted video of his release. Doctors, nurses and family members lined up with posters and balloons and serenaded Wooten with "Happy Birthday" as he left the hospital in a wheelchair.

Wooten, known as "Pop Pop" to his family, thanked the hospital workers before heading home. Wooten served as a private in the US Army during World War II. Three of his brothers also served and one was killed in action. Wooten was among a group of veterans who visited Normandy last year for the 75th anniversary of D-Day.—AFP

## 'We all survived': Wuhan artists keep virus memories alive

A melancholy guitar melody intertwines with an ethereal beat as wild-haired singer Lu Yan intones his hometown's feelings into a microphone: "Virus in Wuhan. We all survived." In music, graffiti, even comics, Wuhan artists are beginning to pay homage to their city with works referencing its coronavirus suffering, punishing 76-day lockdown, and subsequent rebirth. "Wuhan's people made a great sacrifice for the whole nation and world," Lu said of the song's intended message.

The song, "WUHAN2020", is the title track of the pandemic-themed debut album by Wuhan synth-rock trio Hardcore Raver in Tears, conceived and written remotely while the bandmates were separated during the lockdown. Stress and cabin fever provided inspiration. "I was worried the world would end," said Lu, after singing through a black mask during a rehearsal in a Wuhan studio. The coronavirus emerged in the city one year ago, before spreading into a global pandemic. The vast majority of China's 4,634 officially acknowledged COVID-19 deaths occurred in Wuhan. Its economy was pummeled, and its name indelibly linked to the pathogen. To many Wuhan citizens, the pandemic period is best forgotten.

## 'Speak righteously'

But graffiti artist Huang Bowen tries to keep the memories alive. Huang, a self-taught 22-year-old designer, tagged the city with virus-themed graffiti during the lockdown, using a pass gained as a pandemic volunteer to evade restrictions on moving around what had become a ghost town. Huang's sub-



A graffiti artist, in a store where supplies are sold to make graffiti, prepares his bag with spray paint cans in Wuhan.—AFP

jects have included ophthalmologist Li Wenliang, one of several Wuhan doctors who first warned of the spreading contagion in December 2019 and were told by authorities to keep quiet. Li later died of the virus. Politically sensitive art is taboo in tightly controlled China.

As with nearly all his pandemic graffiti, Huang's homage to Li—the phrase "Speak righteously and remember this forever" spray-painted on the walls of the Wuhan Central Hospital where Li worked—was quickly painted over. "I don't mind, because I think I've done what I wanted to do and it

was enough for me to express what I wanted to say," said Huang, who cultivates a Bohemian look with wide-rimmed glasses and a wispy goatee. He previously used English words in his graffiti, switching during the pandemic to artistic renderings of Chinese characters. "It's more direct, and something everybody understands," he said.

## Rebellious streak

As he spoke, Huang and two fellow taggers worked under cover of night on a mural inside an abandoned residential building—a green pine forest encircling a giant blazing match, all book-ended by the two Chinese characters for "hope". Chinese media reports have highlighted an explosion of Wuhan video-bloggers who have documented the outbreak and how it has affected citizens, including an amateur rapper/vlogger who sings about the city in Wuhan's unique dialect. Chinese-American artists with Wuhan roots have also created comics celebrating the city, to show it is not just Virus Ground Zero.

Wuhan has long had a rebellious streak. It was the scene of a 1911 uprising that sparked China's revolution against imperial rule: was later known as a polluted industrial city with a rough-hewn blue-collar population; and more recently has become famous as China's capital of punk rock. But rock singer Lu said the sobering pandemic experience had given his band a kinder, more mellow sound. "No matter for people in Wuhan, Chinese people, or people around the world, being kind-hearted is the starting point," Lu added.—AFP