

SUPPLEMENTS

ChampFood, and nothing else!

ChampFood celebrates 25 years of business this year. We reflect on the company's evolution with Jan Baltussen and Eric Vernooij and the changes in the supplement market, many of which were initiated by ChampFood.

By Roel Dreve

Toon Donkers, Jan Baltussen's father-in-law, is one of the pioneers behind the development and production of the first supplement, Millichamp, back in the 1970s. "At the end of the 1980s, Toon saw opportunities for an improved product. One that was more in line with developments taking place toward phase III and incubation of compost in tunnels – aspects that were top of the agenda in the early 1990s. ChampFood contained a wider variety of raw materials than existing products and offered different release properties so it produced higher yields in later flushes, better quality mushrooms and a longer shelf-life. In short, a new product that was a good response to tunnel compost, at that time a new concept. Donkers was instrumental in the success of ChampFood." Together with his relative Gerard Krol and Jan, he stood at the cradle of the company that celebrates its 25th anniversary this year. Vernooij: "The expertise entailed in producing supplement is highly specific, and Toon has that expertise in abundance, he is a living historical database." "He 'officially' stopped work in 2000, but he still drops by every Wednesday to check if everything is OK", adds Baltussen with a smile. The emergence and growth of phase III production was paralleled by ChampFood's rapid expansion in the 1990s. "We started production in Eindhoven before moving to Gemert in 1994, where ChampFood solely produced supplement. In 2008, still driven by a need to expand our capacity, we relocated to Vierlingsbeek. When we started in 1991 we produced 17 tons per year. We now produce 14 tons an hour! And we have almost reached 'full' capacity here too", explains Jan.

Global market

Similar to the spawn market, the supplement market has also changed. In the past, growers met in study clubs, shared a lot and there was less mutual competition. The majority of

'From 17 tons a year to 14 tons an hour'.

growers who switched to phase III compost also started using supplement, or more of it. The results spoke for themselves and sales were mainly driven by word of mouth. Baltussen: "Growers added the bags of supplement themselves on the head filler, but later on composters also started using our product. Walkro (known then as Theeuwen) was first over the bridge. They were initially anxious about hygiene issues, but soon gained confidence in our product and mastered the art of controlled dosing rates. This forced supplement producers to change their commercial strategy accordingly. "In the Netherlands, we used to sell direct to growers, with the emphasis on quality improvements. But nowadays the market is more price-oriented with compost producers using supplements sourced from various suppliers, so that growers often don't know exactly which supplement is in their compost", says Vernooij. ChampFood customers abroad are often still the actual growers, who also make their own compost, so they are the decision-makers. "Outside the domestic market, our wide experience means we can offer more to the end user and add value to our products" comments Vernooij. Baltussen agrees: "We know all of our end users personally, and can actively contribute to discussing the properties of our range of supplements, and how to use them best. We are a producer, distributor and advisor in one package and all we make is ChampFood, and nothing else." According to the company, which has 10 fte, it commands a share of around 40% of the global market.

Changes

Highs and lows in the past quarter of a century? Baltussen shrugs: "We haven't really experienced any lows! Progress has been gradual and steady; introducing new products and facing the challenge each time of expanding your market share. In the USA for example, you come across



The headquarters in Vierlingsbeek.



▲ Eric Vernooij (left) and Jan Baltussen.

companies at trade fairs claiming that with the improved product 'X' you can supposedly realise an additional yield of 1½ kg per square metre compared with the previous product. But if you do the sums, that adds up to a whole lot of extra kilos over the years! We are more modest, and give a realistic picture of what you can expect to see in extra yields using our supplement. We also warn of the risk of using supplement if there is a higher pressure of infection, or other problems related to growing. After all, you shouldn't eat cream if you feel sick." Baltussen considers Eric joining the company as a high point: from 2009 until present the turnover has doubled, partly due to Eric's committed efforts and the extra possibilities offered by the new production plant. Vernooij: "Customers are very

price-conscious, but the price of soybean has fluctuated widely and become more expensive, in some years noting a 30% rise." Baltussen, with his chemical background, is concentrating more on innovation as well as sales, while Vernooij with his rich experience of compost, supplements, spawn and casing soil, has taken on a greater role as the visiting card of the company for customers.

Customers, in Vernooij's opinion, lack knowledge on the differences in supplements, and sometimes fail to properly check what they are actually buying. Baltussen: "Eric's arrival has brought more advice to the table, meaning at growing room level. Ultimately, we have always learned most from our customers. An identical product will 'behave' differently on various types of compost as structure, moisture content, temperature and biological activity all exert a huge influence on the release of nutrients contained in the supplement. Our specific product knowledge, coupled with feedback from our customers about the results, means we can customise the products to suit the individual needs of our users." Consequently, more than 40 different blends and different price categories are produced.

Another change for the two men is their personal joint venture with Lambert Spawn America. They admit it can sometimes be convenient for ChampFood if they have to visit a customer for Lambert or the other way round. "But it is not a one-on-one combi of course", clarifies Vernooij. Lambert Spawn Europa BV and ChampFood are two individual companies with a number of shareholders in common.

Jubilee

For the near future, the two men at ChampFood see increasing differentiation among supplements. Not a single, revolutionary new product, but more 'EKO' and 'BIO' organic products. They are currently looking forward to the big jubilee celebrations planned for 31 May, an event to which many of their business relations have been invited. Christiaens Group will be organising a tour for its customers on the same day that will end in Vierlingsbeek and transport to Vierlingsbeek has also been arranged for ISMS-tour participants.

"We are planning a fabulous evening for everyone as a way of thanking our customers, without whom we would never have been able to launch ChampFood onto the market in the first place", concludes Jan Baltussen.

ChampFood has a new website: www.ChampFood.com The company is a Bronze Sponsor of the 19th ISMS conference and will naturally also be present at the Dutch Mushroom Days, stand 23. ←