

Dutch vegetarian butcher takes on the 'Frankenburger'

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Never mind last month's revolutionary test-tube beef burger grown from meat stem cells. The Dutch are way ahead with a "vegetarian butcher" who transforms plants into "meat". Dubbed the "Frankenburger", the lab-grown beef —developed at a cost of more than 250,000 euros (\$330,000)—was unveiled by scientists in London and served to volunteers in what was billed as the start of a food revolution.

But "we are much more advanced, so-much-so that we have built an unassailable lead over [meat](#) produced from [stem cells](#)," said Jaap Korteweg, founder of the "Vegetarian Butcher".

While the "cultured beef" in London was made using strands of meat grown from [muscle cells](#) taken from a living cow, the Dutch butcher needs only [plant matter](#) to make his "meat".

Korteweg's shop on a main street in downtown The Hague is packed with a range of products from veggie "hamburger" patties to "meatballs" and even "tuna" salad.

One of the secret ingredients is a soy paste, which when put through a special pressurisation machine, imitates meat fibres, a technology invented by the University of Wageningen in the central Netherlands.

Ingredients vary. For chicken, he uses more soy, while beef is made from carrots, peas and potatoes. The "meat" taste comes by adding herbs and spices and all the rest.

The vegetarian chicken "tastes just like real chicken", and the tuna salad is also close to the real thing, according to an AFP journalist and several customers, who conceded some products weren't quite realistic but said they tasted good.

The demand for an environmentally friendly and vegetarian alternative to meat is growing, with [meat production](#) notoriously inefficient, requiring huge swathes of land to grow the crops to feed the animals.

"Our hamburger's [environmental footprint](#) is seven times less than that of a real hamburger," claimed Korteweg.

"Our chicken only requires half to a third of what's needed to produce a real chicken. I'm talking about use of land, water, the grain and feed normally fed to chicken," he said.

Three years after opening, the Vegetarian Butcher sells its products in 500 stores around the Netherlands, mainly supermarkets and specialist food stores.

Korteweg says that sales have doubled each year since, and hopes to open his own factory next year to boost his share of the market and drop prices to below that of the real thing.

Though now slightly more expensive than real meat, his products cost about the same as organic meat.

The Vegetarian Butcher has struck a chord with Dutch animal welfare organisations and its pro-vegetarian Party for the Animals (PvdD), which has two seats in Parliament. One of those seats is held by Korteweg's wife and PvdD leader Marianne Thieme.

But just as French beef farmers reacted with outrage at developers of the

stem-cell burger, the Dutch meat sector has issues with the Vegetarian Butcher.

'Don't call it a hamburger'

"Every consumer has the right to choose what they eat, of course," Jos Goebbels, the head of the Dutch Central Meat Sector Organisation (COV), told AFP.

"What we do have a problem with is that they use terminology specific to meat, while everybody knows that there's no meat in there," he said. "It shouldn't be called chicken, or a hamburger but should rather have another name, because it tricks consumers."

Goebbels did not, however, feel that veggie meat posed a threat to the chicken or beef industry.

In his quest to make veggie meat taste like the real thing, Korteweg has enlisted the help of chefs, as well as scientists.

"The great difficulty is to reproduce on a large scale what we're able here to produce with our experiments in the kitchen," chef Paul Bom told AFP.

Another problem is people who say "they simply could not imagine consuming an alternative" to meat, said Bom, so "the only solution is to get them to taste it."

Dutch environmental group Natuur & Milieu is doing just that, promoting veggie food with free tastings in supermarkets.

"We believe vegetarian food is a relatively easier alternative to achieve than say, finding an alternative to jet fuel or introducing electric cars on

the road," said Olof van der Gaag, the organisation's campaign manager.

If everyone in this country of 17 million ate one less meat-containing meal a week, he asserted, it would be equivalent to cutting the carbon emissions of a million cars.

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