

AROUND TOWN

Global out, local in

Real green grocers put new spin on 'health food'.

By Matthew Curlewis

On a recent sun-drenched visit to new Amsterdam grocery store Marqt, the usual street-side crates of mouth-watering produce had been replaced by a cheery avalanche of locally grown strawberry plants for sale, all bearing almost-ripe fruit. The idea was to buy the plant, grow the fruit at home and enjoy the sweet-tart pleasure of delayed gratification.

Maybe the fruit wasn't perfectly ripe and ready, like what you might find at Albert Heijn or Dirk, but buyers here are embracing the idea that their shopping choices can also directly influence the health of the planet.

The message at Marqt—and that of an increasing array of 'slow-food' oriented businesses in Amsterdam—is clear: when it comes to grocery shopping and growing, global is out, and local is in. And with this shift, health-conscious people are demanding more flavour and less of a carbon footprint from the products they purchase.

In short, 'health food', like most things *du jour*, has gone through something of an extreme makeover. In the past, organic food was eaten by 'greenies', who fell into that shapeless hemp sack with 'commies', 'hippies' and 'lefties'. These days those borders have all blurred, and more of the population is simply interested in 'good food'.

'It used to be that "eating organic" implied a whole world view, meaning you ate a particular way, and additionally you probably dressed and voted the same way,' says Merle Koomans, spokesman for Estafette, de Biologische Eetwinkel, an organic produce chain with 11 stores in the Netherlands. 'These days we have customers who fly to New York every week as business people, but upon returning home, want to shop locally. The whole idea of choice has changed.'

The organic food movement that began in the 1970s was essentially about food that was good for you, and good for the Earth. With today's heightened sense of urgency regarding climate change, more people are taking notice of how their food is produced.

For Estafette, 'good food' means food that is healthy on three fronts: for the body, planet and grower (meaning that the grower is fairly reimbursed).

'We have customers looking for a fair trade product who find themselves also leaving with something organic,' Koomans says. 'These different interests are consequently widening our customer



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base.' And clearly, this is proving successful on a business level, as having opened only a few years ago with six stores in the Netherlands, Estafette now plans to open one or two more stores each year.

At Marqt, Quirijn Bolle, and his business partner, Meike Beeren, say they keep three key factors in mind for their food: 'Tasteful, healthy and sustainable. And in that order!'

Marqt is a new kind of food-shop for Amsterdam. Located on the Overtoom in what was once a large antique warehouse, its high ceilings and quasi-industrial feel invites comparisons to New York's Chelsea Market or the American-based Whole Foods, a natural food supermarket now found in the US, Canada and the UK. Marqt's business model is completely different, since suppliers—many of them local farmers—are partners in the business and have a say in how things work on a day to day level.

Bolle, a former Ahold employee, spent a lot of time observing how larger supermarkets conduct business, and he felt it was time to radically change the model. Because all supermarkets essentially sell the same products—the same bottles of Coke and the same bags of Doritos—their business plans constantly revolve around cost-cutting as a means of survival. Not long after a supermarket begins to accept product from a small farmer, they will have to ask if they can have the product for ten per cent cheaper, and another ten per cent the next year. Small businesses cannot survive that way.

Bolle's face lights up when describing how things are different at Marqt. 'It's wonderful to watch the growers come in and see the produce they've grown so carefully, being bought by customers who truly appreciate that effort,' he says. 'It's a win-win situation for all of us.'

At the Netherlands branch of Slow

The end of plastic fruit and veg?

Food, the international, non-profit eco-gastronomical organisation, members believe food should be 'Good, clean, and fair'. Arjan van Hartesveld, who heads the Amsterdam Convivia (the local chapter), agrees that consumers are hungry for modern shopping that doesn't rely so much on the idea of fast and cheap. Founded in 1989, Slow Food Nederland's numbers have recently jumped to 1,800 members from only a few hundred with the establishment of a number of new regional 'convivia'.

'This idea of good food is not an elite thing any more,' says Van Hartesveld. 'Our membership is reflective of people from all walks of life who all share in common the idea that we should care about what we eat and how we eat.'

At a recent event, Slow Food volunteers showed up at the Wednesday Haarlemmerplein Farmer's Market—a September 2007 addition to Amsterdam's map of weekly organic produce markets—to promote the idea of eating seasonal vegetables. Producers from the market donated asparagus, and the Slow Food volunteers cooked it and gave it away to customers while discussing the principles behind Slow Food.

Van Hartesveld was clearly delighted with the results. 'It's not that we're talking to a wall anymore,' he says. 'People on the street are getting it loud and clear that we have the choice.'

Marqt is teeming with customers who seem to get the message. Bolle is also impressed. 'We didn't do any market research,' he says. 'This was simply a gut reaction, a gut feeling that consumers were ready for something like this.' And with a second store to open soon in Haarlem and another 20 planned across the country, green business is clearly making good business. **W**

Genetic arms race

How perfect do we really want to be?

By Robin Kawakami

The 1997 science fiction film *Gattaca* portrays a futuristic dystopia of new eugenics, in which embryos are genetically manipulated to produce ideal children. In the resulting society, DNA determines social class, with genetic discrimination replacing outmoded biases of race and gender. Only a decade since that film's release, scientific improvements ranging from cosmetic surgery to the Human Genome Project mean that such biological enhancements might not be that far off.

On 15 May, the Blaise Pascal Institute of Amsterdam's Vrije Universiteit (VU) will bring together an expert panel of specialists in genetics, bioethics and molecular biophysics to discuss the ramifications and limitations of human enhancement.

Dr Bert Musschenga, director of the Institute and VU professor of moral philosophy, will open the symposium with a discussion about the 'utopia of manipulability', creating perfection through human intervention. His work examines the ethics of human life extension—what some biologists predict will be possible within 25 years. 'The question is: should we want that?' Musschenga says.

Central to the human enhancement debate is transhumanism, an extreme ideology developed in the 1980s by futurists in the US. Its proponents believe that science and technology can transform humans into a more developed species—an enhanced version of *Homo sapiens* in the evolutionary line-up.

Dr Cees Dekker, a professor of molecular biophysics at Technische Universiteit Delft, who will appear on the panel, opposes transhumanism and excessive interference in human biology, warning against a 'genetic arms race'. As both a Christian and a biophysicist, Dekker believes there is a fine line between human rehabilitation and enhancement, and sees human dignity as central to his argument.

In a debate that promises to be the highlight of the symposium, Dekker will go head-to-head with Dr. Peter-Paul Verbeek, philosopher of technology at the Universiteit Twente, who argues in favour of some forms of human enhancements. Verbeek believes human dignity cannot be separated from technology, because technology makes us human. 'We should not be against [technology] per se, because that's a false form of conservatism,' he says. 'You cannot defend yourself against something that makes you what you are.'

Because of this indissoluble link between humans and technology, Verbeek believes in questioning specific kinds of human enhancements instead of rejecting

them entirely. He also thinks that ethics continually evolve: about 150 years ago in the Netherlands, the use of anaesthesia during surgery was viewed as immoral because it was seen as 'unnatural'. Now it would be considered immoral to operate on someone without anaesthesia, he adds. 'We change through the technology we use.'

In *Gattaca*, what began as an effort to eliminate inheritable diseases from society became a way of producing designer offspring, blurring the lines between health and enhancement. Could our current methods of prenatal diagnosis and selective abortion mirror that development? Clinical geneticist Dr Mariet Elting will share her experiences as a genetic counsellor, discussing whether parents are expressing a desire not just for healthy children, but more perfect progeny.

Musschenga warns: 'Changes in genetic makeup are irrevocable. Children are always confronted with the expectations and ideals of their parents, but when growing up, they can resist that. That's a part of maturation. But a change in your genetic makeup... It's already part of who you are.'

While much of the scientific know-how for genetic enhancement is still in development, Musschenga sees the popularity of cosmetic surgery as a troubling sign in the present. 'When [people] start with these kinds of intervention, they never stop,' he says. 'They're never satisfied with themselves. It's an endless quest for more physical perfection. You can stay busy your entire life trying to perfect yourself by means of operations and surgery.'

This pursuit of elusive perfection, which Musschenga sees as a growing trend in Dutch society, also forces unwilling participants to come to terms with this brave new world. 'If you're a woman of normal beauty who does not want cosmetic surgery, but all the women in your environment want it and have surgery, your relative beauty decreases,' Musschenga explains.

For Verbeek, cosmetic surgery reveals how technology reorganises the way in which people relate to the world, where personal ethics and aesthetics merge. 'People start to interpret their bodies as entirely makeable,' he says, 'and they now become responsible for what their bodies look like. That is a very difficult thing, and we might ask ourselves if we want that to continue.'

Ultimately, Musschenga wants to explore the grey areas of human enhancement: if ultrasound reveals a foetus with only one leg, while an adult has an accident resulting in a leg amputation, is it ethically acceptable to intervene in one scenario but not the other? Where does rehabilitation end and enhancement begin? While Musschenga remains vague about any 'right' answers, Verbeek takes a more definitive tone: 'Humans and technology have always been intertwined. We are not pure. We are hybrids.' **W**

Betere mensen maken, 15 May, 13.00-17.00, Vrije Universiteit-Kerkzaal. Free reservations at www.blaisepascal.nl. In Dutch.

Live to be 100

The trick is to keep breathing.

By Steve Korver

So how does one live a long, healthy and balanced life?

'Just feel good. That's the secret,' answers the poet, writer and inspired child Simon Vinkenoog over coffee and joints on a Monday morning at his garden house in Amsterdam Noord.

'Oh, and try breathing.' We both inhale, then exhale. I feel better already.

Turning 80 on 18 July, Vinkenoog starts celebrating this week at the Bimhuis by declaiming his poetry backed by a jazz band. Around the official birthday itself, there will be events organised at OBA public library and much will be published: Vinkenoog's collected poems, a scrapbook of his memorabilia, his 1951-57 correspondence with the recently deceased writer Hugo Claus and a new collaboration with the musician Spinvis. Yes, the man is still busy. And he even finds time to rate as *Amsterdam Weekly's* oldest contributor.

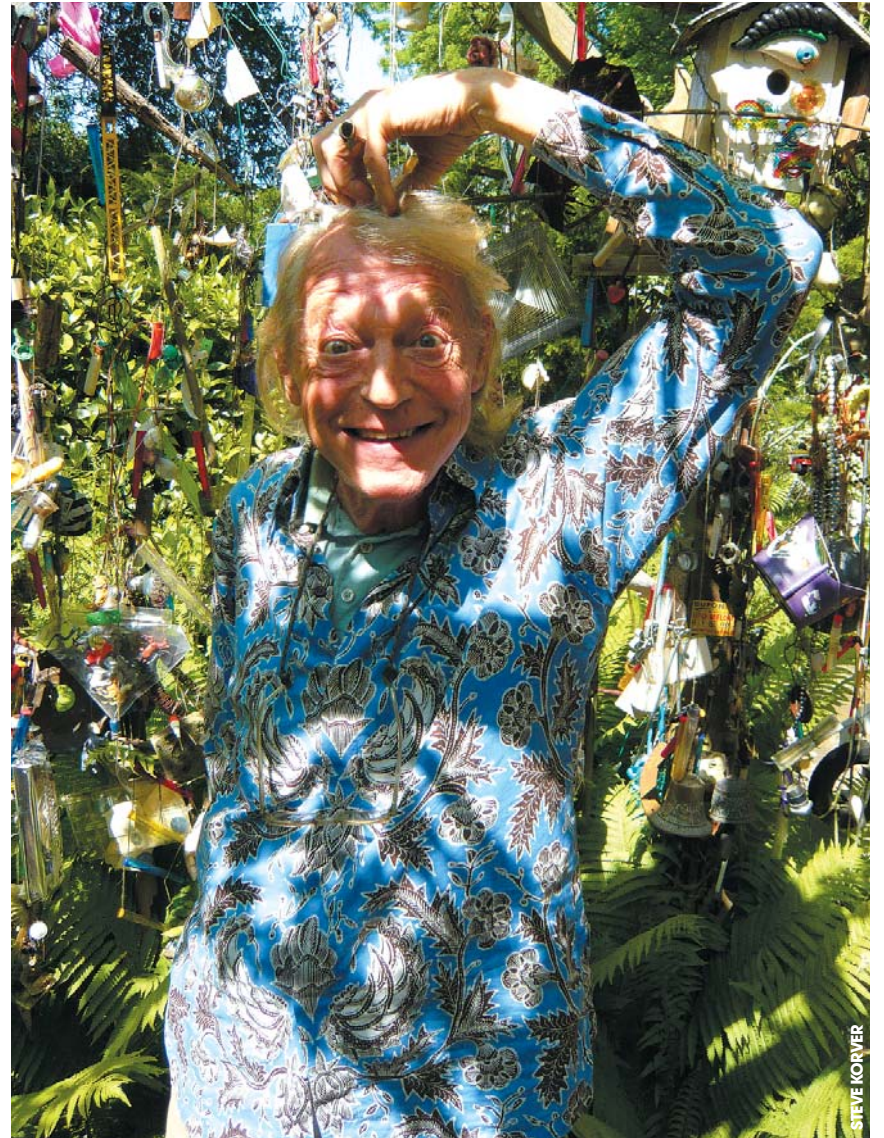
Vinkenoog has *lived*—and continues to do so. He's the psychonaut who made it. Born in Amsterdam, he barely survived World War II. During the 'hunger winter', he ended up contracting a skin disease which had him covered with a rash, and then scabs. 'But then a new skin broke through. Maybe that's why my skin still looks so young,' he jokes as he rubs his wrinkles.

After the war, he moved to Paris and befriended CoBrA painters like Karel Appel and Corneille, and writers like Hugo Claus and Remco Campert. He started publishing poems, magazines and novels before returning to Amsterdam in 1956. 'I had become a world citizen and would therefore always be a strange duck here in Holland.'

And it only got stranger when he became an LSD test subject at the Wilhelmina Gasthuis hospital in 1959. His previous main literary theme of 'hate' became 'love'. 'Before then, I was always busy with hate,' he says. 'I had handicaps, insecurities, depressions—of course, I can still burst out in tears if I see something horrible on TV but I'm no longer always busy with it. One person's nightmare is another's fairy tale.'

By the 1960s, he had evolved into a full blown shamanic hippie performance poet. And like his friend, the late American poet Allen Ginsberg, he moved with the times. In 1979, he was the 'priest' who 'married' rocker Herman Brood to the off-her-rocker Nina Hagen. He was also named the 'poet of the fatherland' and managed to get married six times.

But now he's been married to his constant companion Edith for over 20 years. 'Partnership is happiness. It's about balance, like summer and winter,' says Vinkenoog. And indeed, the couple still



come across as a pair of crazy kids in love.

'The garden is our child,' says Edith. 'And on 13 April 2004, we had a second child. That was the day we discovered the internet.' They laugh.

Once motivated, Vinkenoog just can't stop giving advice on how to live—or maybe he's just generating another poem. 'Enjoy! Be entertained by the social games you play! Look 360 degrees around you! Learn! Then unlearn! Yoga's good: it brightens up every cell! There are no endings, just et cetera! Always be in a process! Stay curious! Smell the mutation in the air! Be a generalist, not a specialist! Enter new houses! Stay surprised! Be in wonder! Everything is allowed! Don't kill time, make time! Keep your own street clean! Regard every pain as a growing pain! Stay flexible! Read Walt Whitman—he's the *opa* of hip! Trust life!...' Vinkenoog pauses.

'Actually trust is good but it's also good to stay a bit suspicious, since it's just getting more and more about the survival of the fittest out there,' says Vinkenoog as he motions towards the outside world beyond their self-made Eden.

Vinkenoog takes me on a tour of the garden, one in which even gnomes would have trouble getting around, but not Vinkenoog. He shows me his latest project: reclaiming a path through the rose bushes to the second cabin where he keeps his books. The emerging path has a sign: 'Terra Incognita: Fun in progress.'

So is hyperactivity the secret to a long and healthy life? 'Well I've always danced like a fool! Sure, maybe it's just about exhi-

Simon Vinkenoog in his garden of earthly delights.

bitionism or narcissism but, nonetheless, at least you're stretching!

'When you mentioned that you wanted to talk about healthy-living, I dug up a few books,' says Vinkenoog when we return to the table. These few books form a metre-high pile, but the one he really wants to show me is called *Live to be 100* by a certain S Sage. He points out something he's underlined: 'Maintain a consistently optimistic, positive and constructive mental attitude'.

'Really it's just about getting away from conditioning and all that Victorian moral nonsense,' says Vinkenoog. 'That whole Christian-Judaic idea of "one god" is the most dangerous of things. Our neighbour over there describes it best: "God is a garden".'

While Vinkenoog takes a moment to admire God, I notice he had been reading last Saturday's *Volkskrant* magazine. Under the headline for an interview with cabaretier Mike Boddé about his long and crippling depression, Vinkenoog had scrawled in large letters: 'Learn to live with the chaos, young man!'

Learn to live with the chaos. I think I can do that. But first I'm going to sit here for just a while longer. **W**

Simon Vinkenoog 80 with Bo's Art Trio, 18 May, 21.00, Bimhuis, €15. www.simonvinkenoog.nl