



Tempt your customers' tastebuds with a colourful Belgian palette

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From Belgium with taste

Fruits and vegetables from Belgium have long been a preferred choice for retailers in the UK. Thanks to its fertile soil, favourable climate, and advanced farming techniques, fresh produce from Belgium consistently delivers the quality that consumers from the UK expect, at a highly competitive price.

Whether you're stocking vine-ripened tomatoes, succulent peppers or deliciously sweet strawberries, for freshness and quality, British food professionals should look no further than Belgium. As the UK's closet trading partner, Belgian growers can deliver the freshest possible produce, often able to get fruit and veg on shelf the day after the order is placed. Often smaller than their international competitors, Belgian fruit and veg companies have significant flexibility and can tailor their offer to the needs of their British partners.

For UK distributors, there are fewer risks in buying products so close to the local market. Moreover, the supply lines between Belgium and the UK are becoming more efficient. Closer contact among farmers, traders and retailers has resulted in a highly fruitful trading relationship over many years.

The proximity between Belgium and the UK also means the food miles of Belgian fruit and veg is lower than other international trading partners, meaning the carbon footprint associated with transport is lower than imports from other countries.

Sustainability is high on the agenda for Belgian growers, with it influencing decisions in the supply chain as well as in the farm, with producers focused on growing environmentally friendly fruit and veg, ensuring that their crops are grown in harmony with nature. Growers in Belgium work closely with a wide array of research institutions, investing heavily in innovative technology and approaches to drive greater sustainability throughout the industry.

The Belgium fruit and vegetable market is renowned for being made up of family owned, medium-sized producers, with expert knowledge passed on within the family. As most fruit and veg is distributed through cooperatives, Belgian producers are able to focus on production rather than trading, meaning that produce from Belgium is some of the finest quality in the world.

Belgian producers are modern, with a strong focus on quality, sustainability and craftsmanship. Producing arguably the highest quality fresh produce in Europe, Belgium growers continually strive to innovate and make improvements in the sector.

“The diversity, quality and taste of Belgium’s fresh produce is well-known, making it a popular choice for both domestic and international markets.”

www.belgianfruitsandvegetables.eu



The best to-mate-o on your plate-o

Which fresh ingredient brings the sun into your salad? What vegetable is an essential addition to any good burger? And what is the perfect partner for mozzarella? It is of course, the tomato. There are few growers with such expertise and passion for the tomato as Mitch Vermeiren. His companies VW Maxburg and Meer Fresh Products produce quality Belgian tomatoes which can be enjoyed throughout the year. What makes these two companies so successful at producing tomatoes loved across Belgium and beyond?

“We are significantly investing in reducing our carbon footprint. This way, we deliver a great product to people and at the same time give something back to nature.”

In the late 1980s, fresh produce and the market for them looked very different in Belgium. At this time, Mitch's parents started growing tomatoes, initially only beef tomatoes. “You couldn't get many other varieties at that time,” Mitch explains. “So when my father started growing the first plum tomatoes in the mid-1990s, the business grew quickly.”

“Cultivation methods eventually evolved, and from 2015, thanks to artificial light, we could grow tomatoes during the winter months.” From their location in Meer, near Hoogstraten, the Vermeiren family's business expanded to include more varieties as well as more locations. “This is how in 2016 a broader group, Tomeco, was eventually formed,” says Mitch.



Passion for innovation

For Mitch, who grew up among tomatoes, it is the passion for innovation and entrepreneurship that brings him happiness in his current role. “Together with my sister and parents, I run the company. It's a great challenge. I mainly deal with the business side of the operation, my sister a bit more with the tomato cultivation. I actually have a technical background. I studied electro-mechanics and then a bachelor's degree in process automation, and the training does come in handy in horticulture. For example, we are intensively testing new sensors that let us know how a plant is feeling. The balance in light and moisture, and whether the plant is growing or experiencing stress, used to be estimated by the grower themselves. But with up to 4.9 plants per metre, and more than 80 hectares to check, technology is more than welcome to help us with monitoring.”



“My engineering background comes in handy when testing sensors that let you know how the plant is feeling.”

A variety of species

“Tomaco also produces cucumbers, which allows the team to practice seasonal crop rotation between these two products. However, tomatoes still make up the majority of what we grow. Traditionally plum tomatoes, but now also the San Marzano, Coeur de Boeuf, and various types of vine tomatoes are produced on customer demand. A few years ago, we also started growing the Sweetest Queen, a strawberry-shaped, sweet cocktail tomato. The advantage of that variety is that you can grab the vine without the tomatoes releasing. This is a huge advantage because it means you can sell this variety without packaging. Customers just grab them right out of the crate and put them in their shopping trolley.”

Hop on the sustainability train

In collaboration with surrounding companies, Tomeco is significantly investing in reducing its carbon footprint. “That train is moving faster and faster, and we would like to ride the first carriage,” Mitch says. “In Meer, for example, we have a pond with floating solar panels. By covering the water surface, we also counteract evaporation and reduce algae in the water. In winter, our water basins always overflow, but we now move that water to a nearby company, so they don't have to pump up groundwater. In addition, we also exchange heat from our combined heat and power units. We will make these kinds of improvements at our other sites as well. This way, we deliver a great product to people and at the same time give something back to nature.”



“We have a pond with floating solar panels in Meer. By covering the water surface, we counteract evaporation and reduce algae in the water.”



Meatballs in spicy tomato sauce

Mmm, meatballs remain everyone’s favourite! Spice up the tomato sauce with ginger, turmeric, cardamom and cinnamon.

- INGREDIENTS**

500 g of minced pork
One lemon (zest)
Four tbsps of flat parsley
One egg
Five tbsps of breadcrumbs
Butter
One tbsp of olive oil
Salt & pepper to taste
One onion
Two cloves of garlic
One carrot
½ ginger

½ tsp turmeric
Four cardamom pods (bruised)
One cinnamon stick
800 g of tomatoes
Sugar

PREPARATION

The tomato sauce

1. Chop the onion finely, press the garlic, and peel and cut the carrot into slices.
2. Fry the onion with garlic, fresh ginger, turmeric, cardamom and the cinnamon stick in olive oil for two minutes. Add the carrot slices and stir-fry for a further two minutes.
3. Chop the tomatoes, add into the mixture, and simmer for 20 minutes on a low heat.
4. Remove the cinnamon stick and add the sugar. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

The meatballs

1. Chop the parsley finely.
2. Mix the minced meat with the egg, lemon zest and chopped parsley. Season with salt and pepper. Roll them into balls and coat them with breadcrumbs.
3. Fry until golden brown with little fat.

Finish

1. Serve the tomato sauce with the fried meatballs. Finish with a little parsley.
2. Serve with mashed potatoes, fries or bread.

Variety and specialities

There are a great many different types of tomatoes. They vary from one another in size, shape, flavour and firmness. The tomato is the most widely grown vegetable in Belgium. Our growers cultivate an impressively broad range of specialised varieties. Belgian growers produce a wide range of tomato sepcialities in all kinds of colours, shapes and sizes.

300,000

Tomatoes are the undisputed number one of the Belgian vegetable production. Belgian tomato production is on the increase with produces volumes amounting to around **300,00 tonnes**.

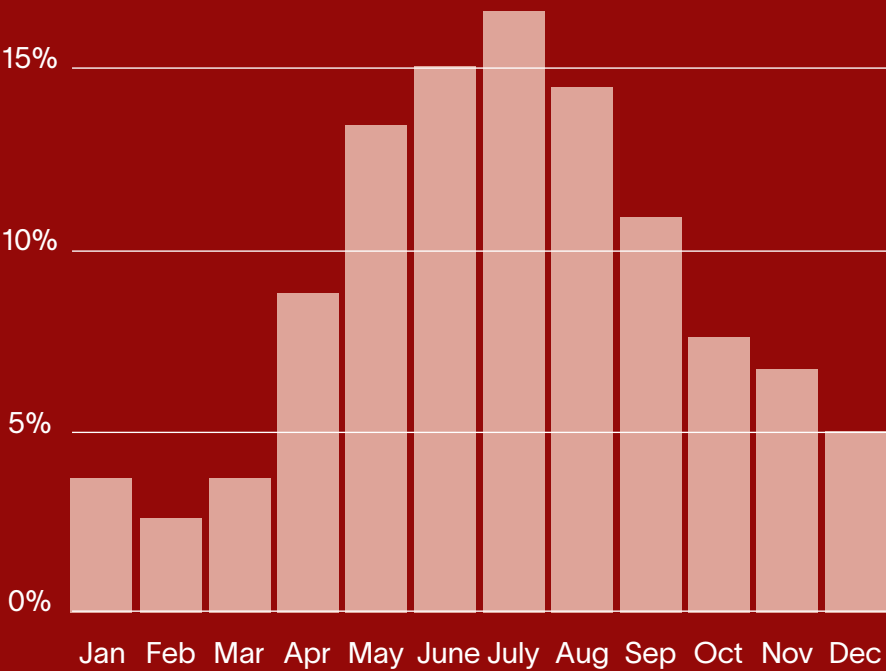


Shelf life:
Tomatoes should be stored at 12-16°C.



Belgium is one of the 4 **most important European suppliers** of tomatoes, guaranteeing a stable and high quality supply.

Production of tomatoes



Aubergine Shining in the Fresh Food Isle

The aubergine is usually associated with Southern European countries, but the plant is also gaining popularity in Northern Europe. In fact, high-quality aubergines have been grown in Belgium for several decades.

UK imports of the versatile vegetable has seen an increase of 16% over a 5-year period. There is no sign of sales slowing; there is every expectation the aubergine category will continue to grow in the UK.

Fresh from the Farm

The Heulens family from Vremde, Flanders has been growing aubergines for almost 30 years now. With a plantation of 7.5 hectares and 400,000 plants, it is the largest aubergine grower in the region, accounting for some 30% of the Belgian aubergine production. Today, the second generation is at the helm of the company, with siblings Jan, Tom and Ann. Jan Heulens has shared his thoughts on why UK retailers should be looking to Belgium for quality produce in this category, with flexibility, freshness and sustainability high on the list.

"An advantage of Belgian aubergines is the freshness," says Jan. "The producers are very responsive - harvest and delivery to exporters can happen on the same day, and it is possible to have the products available on UK shelves on very short term, in all sorts of different packaging. In general, the UK consumers prefer the medium sizes of aubergine, a grading the Belgian

suppliers can perfectly cater for." A growing influence on purchase for UK shoppers is the sustainability credentials of produce, Jan Heulens believes Belgian aubergines are well placed to help retailers maximise sales on this trend: "The application of organically integrated cultivation is a big plus for Belgian produce. A focus for us is nature helping nature, for example, the use of predatory insects to tackle some of the natural enemies of the aubergine plant in an organic way, as an alternative to synthetic pesticides. Furthermore, a climate computer in the greenhouses ensures the most efficient use of resources". "The wide use of aubergine in world food means younger generations are already more familiar using the vegetable in their meals. The aubergine is highly versatile and nutritious and for that reason often the star in vegetarian dishes. Therefore, offering UK shoppers with high quality aubergine options is a must for retailers," concludes Jan.



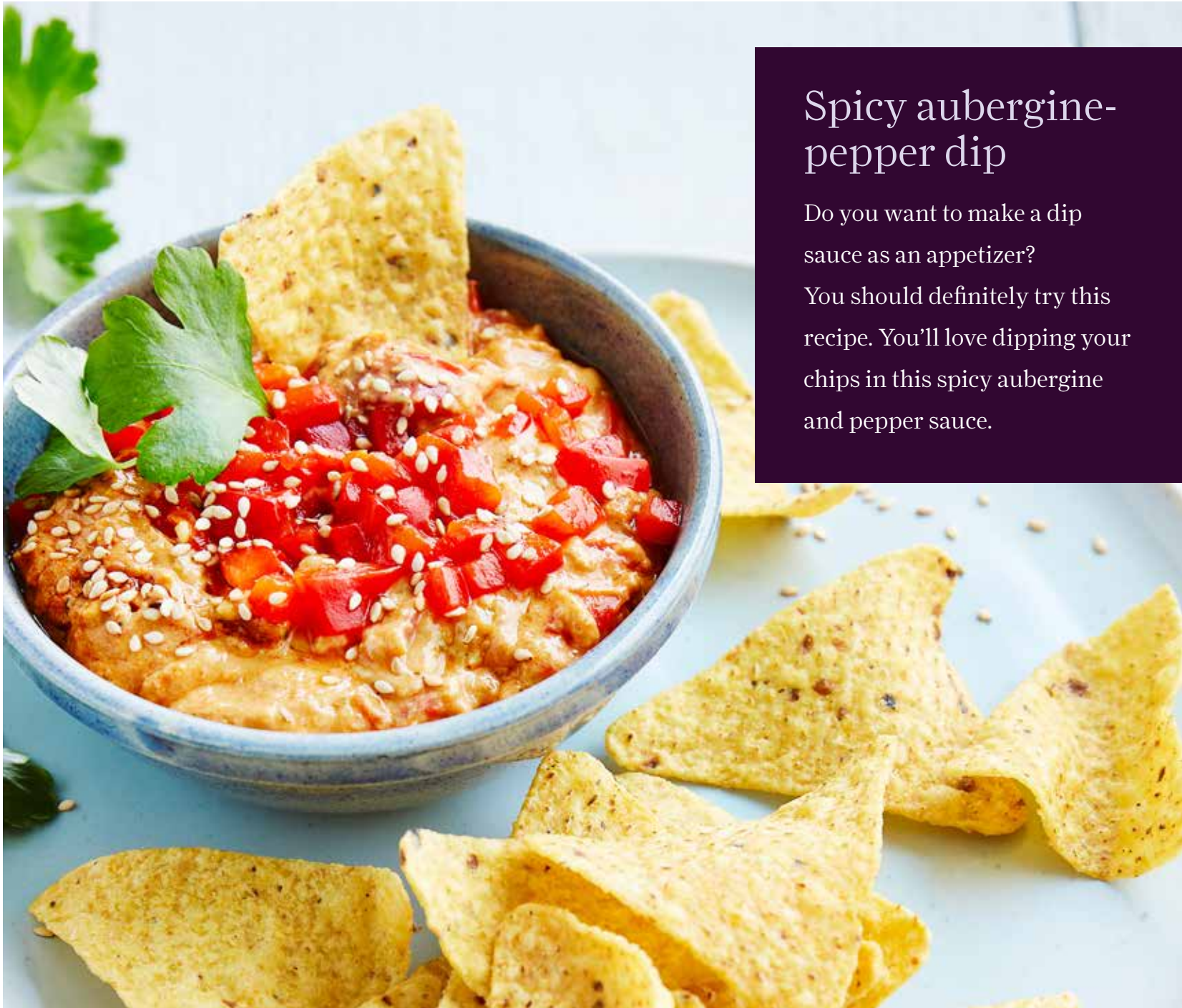
A focus for us is nature helping nature, for example, the use of predatory insects to tackle some of the natural enemies of the aubergine plant in an organic way, as an alternative to synthetic pesticides



Jan, Ann and Tom Heulens

"An advantage of Belgian aubergines is the freshness."

**Loved in Britain
Made in Europe
Belgian aubergines**



Spicy aubergine-pepper dip

Do you want to make a dip sauce as an appetizer? You should definitely try this recipe. You'll love dipping your chips in this spicy aubergine and pepper sauce.

- INGREDIENTS
- 2 aubergines

2 peppers

1 onion

2 cloves of garlic

1 red chili pepper

2 cm ginger

½ bunch of coriander

1 tbsp corn or peanut oil

225 g tortilla chips

salt & pepper

1 tsp chili powder

1.

Preheat the oven to 220°C. Poke a few holes in the eggplants with a fork. Place the eggplants and peppers on a baking tray lined with baking paper. Add the garlic, still in its skin. Place in the oven for 50 minutes. Turn the vegetables every fifteen minutes with pliers.
2.

Let the eggplants and peppers cool. Halve the aubergines and scoop out the flesh. Remove the stems, peel and seeds from the peppers. Push the garlic out of its jacket.
3.

Chop the onion, chili (without the seeds) and ginger finely. Fry in some oil and add the peppers, garlic and eggplant puree. Stir-fry briefly and season with salt, pepper and chili powder. Mix well with the hand blender.
4.

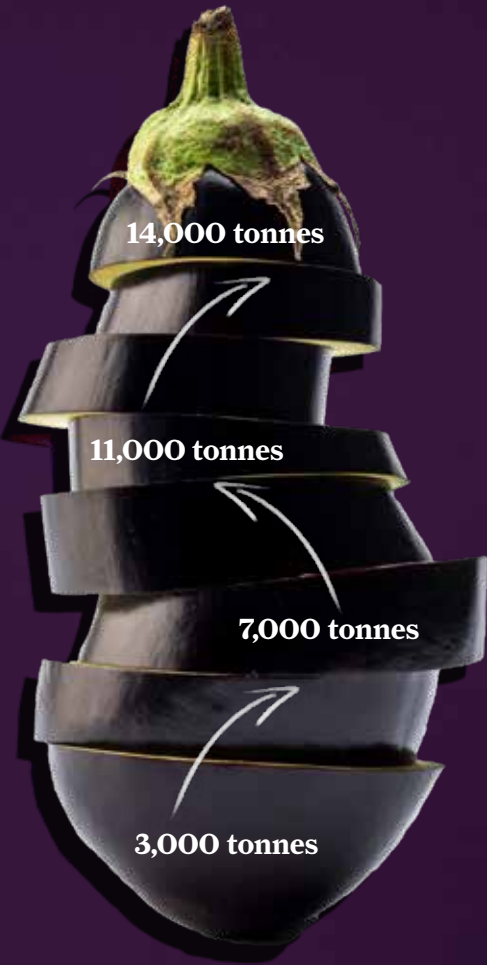
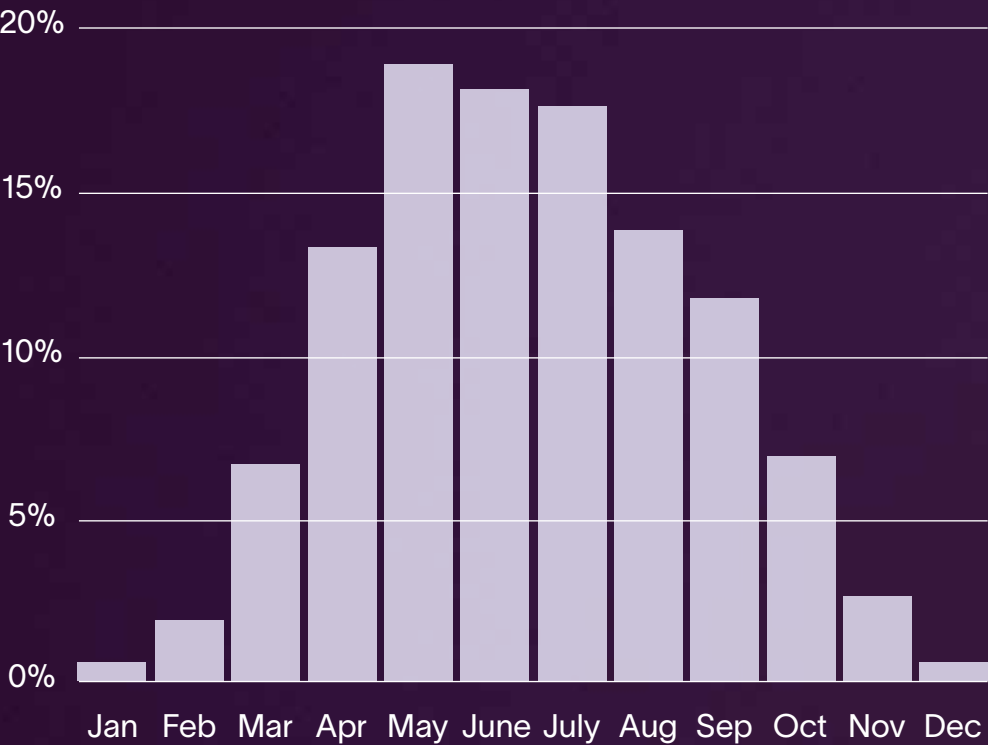
Serve with the coriander and tortilla chips.



11,000

Exported volumes of eggplants are around **11,000 tonnes** with an upward trend.

Production of aubergines



Shelf life:

- Aubergines should be stored at 15 °C and an RH of 90-95%.
- Cover to prevent drying out.
- Do not store together with ethylene-producing fruits, like tomatoes, apples, bananas, citrus fruits, etc.

14,000

Planted area and harvested production is increasing, now with around **14,000 tonnes** of production volume.



Jan Jansen was the first grower in Belgium to start winter cultivation

Belgian strawberries. Why not?

Jan is no stranger to strawberries, as grandfather Frans was also a proud grower of Belgian strawberries in the open field. He passed on his enthusiasm for strawberry cultivation to his grandson, who took over the business in 1989. He continues to expand the business and focuses mainly on substrate-grown strawberries in greenhouses. In hydroponic cultivation, the plants are put on racks that are 1.20 metres high. That's not only convenient for the pickers, but it's also beneficial for both the plants and the environment, since water and nutrients can be dosed more efficiently, and the water can be reused after filtering.

There are 170,000 plants growing in farmer Jan Jansen's greenhouse. They will yield 100,000 kg of strawberries this spring. "In this greenhouse, we grow strawberries almost all year round." Jan was one of the first Belgian growers to start winter cultivation. There is no picking between New Year and mid-January, but then there's other work to take care of. "If we really wanted to, we could also harvest during that time. However, this current approach works well for us."

As sustainable as possible

Jan works with several varieties, including Sonata, Sonsation and Elsanta. "We use these alternately, during the periods in which they yield the most," he says. "Elsanta is still the main variety in our country. However, a lot of varieties have been added in recent years. In Belgium we invest significantly in innovation, and a lot of resources are geared to developing and trialling new varieties. In fact, we have trial fields ourselves to try out different new varieties."

You can get strawberries all year round in Belgium. Strawberry grower Jan Jansen was one of the first Belgian growers to introduce growing strawberries in winter. By working as sustainably as possible, he tries to make a difference.



"We deploy biological pesticides, use and reuse rainwater, work with energy screens that insulate the greenhouse better, and heat on cogeneration. That's how we make a difference."

As a grower, Jan also makes a difference by working sustainably. "We deploy biological pesticides, use and reuse rainwater, work with energy screens that insulate the greenhouse better, and heat on cogeneration," he lists. "Once the cultivation is over, the plants are shredded and taken to a composter, where they get a second life."

Sleeping next to the plants

Jan's pickers come from Romania and he employs two permanent workers. Around 20 to 70 pickers are added depending on the season.

"It's very simple: picking is like a team sport. I can't do it without my pickers and they love coming here for the good atmosphere and hospitality." So what's his biggest challenge then? "Growing healthy plants. That's the starting point. Of course we have the necessary knowledge and experience, but even then it doesn't always come together. You need the weather on your side ... and your bed next to the plants." Jan may be modest by nature, but you can clearly see the pride he takes in his strawberries.

"Foreign fruit is sometimes imported from far away and thus has a heavy ecological footprint. In terms of taste our strawberries also easily triumph over foreign ones. "Our strawberries are juicy and full in flavour, have a good shelf life and are available for a very long period. So why not go for ours?"



UV robot fights white rot in strawberries

Belgian Growers use UV to prevent disease in strawberries. Instead of using synthetic herbicides to combat powdery mildew in the crop, strawberry growers are using UV light to combat the fungus. After all, UV light is a good and sustainable alternative. Together with research centers in Belgium, growers are now examining whether this technique can also be used for other crops such as lettuce, cucumber and tomatoes.

Frozen daiquiris with strawberries and basil

You don't have to be a bartender to prepare this frozen strawberry daiquiri. Within a few minutes you can enjoy a delicious, fresh drink.

Cheers

INGREDIENTS

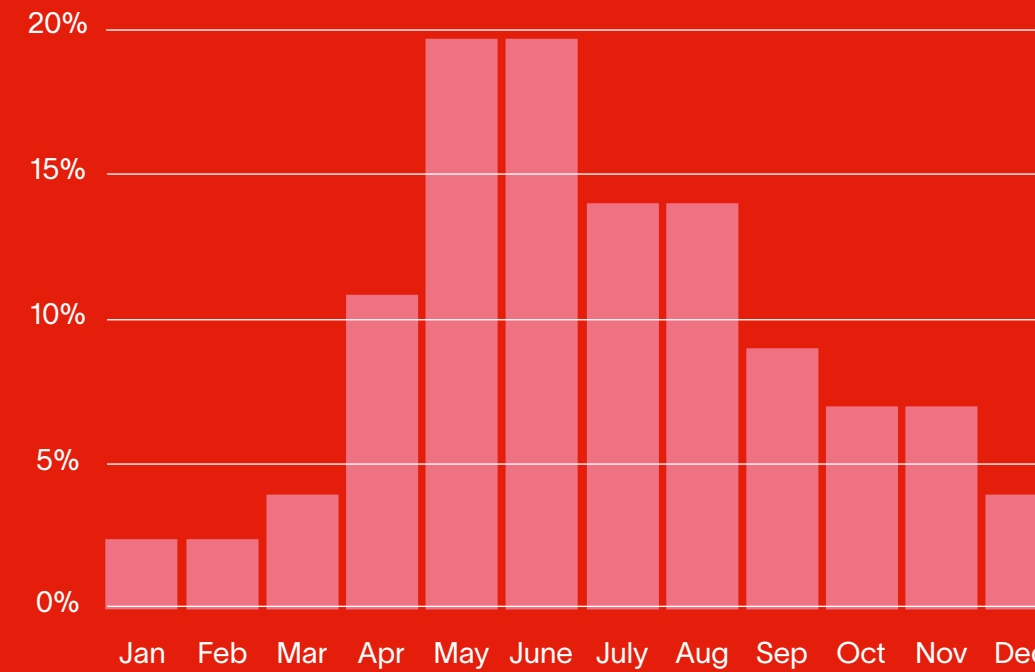
- 8 strawberries
- 100 g sugar syrup
- 200 ml white rum
- 100 ml lime juice
- 250 g crushed ice
- 8 basil leaves

PREPARATION

- Place all ingredients in a blender and mix well.
- Pour into 4 glasses and serve immediately.



Production of strawberries



40,000

Belgium's exported volumes amount to 40,000

50,000



Belgian producers increasingly produce strawberries. Volumes amount to **50,000 tonnes**.

Shelf life:

- Strawberries are delicate and should be traded daily.
- Ideally store at 2-4 °C.
- Ensure that the fruit is presented in the original packaging.

The sun always shines in Louis & H  l  na’s greenhouse

Courgettes grown with love

Two years ago, Louis started working at his father-in-law’s strawberry farm. Since last year, in addition to strawberries and lettuce, Louis and his wife H  l  na have also started growing courgettes from March to October.

We spend most of the year growing courgettes, which we plant from the end of February. The young plants must grow for three to four weeks before the first fruits show, at which point we prune them so the plant can mature further. Pollination is done by bumblebees, or by workers if the weather is bad, as the bumblebees won’t leave the hive in these conditions. don’t leave the hive. From April, we harvest non-stop for two to three months, alongside pollinating the plants. The crops we plant at the end of February are ripped up in mid-June.”

Louis grows two crops of courgettes a year this way. “We immediately start the new planting after the first crop, so I have new courgettes by mid-July,” he says. “In summer and autumn, wild bees help with pollination. As a result, we can enjoy fresh courgettes until mid-October.”

Precise timing and great care

Like many vegetables, courgettes need plenty of love, and sometimes things must move fast. “In May, you go from a small courgette to a big one in just four days, so it’s a matter of keeping up well,” Louis explains. “On top of that, the flower of a courgette only opens in the morning. So, if the weather is bad and we have to pollinate manually, we have to push on a bit, because we can’t do it in the afternoon. We have 12,000m   of courgettes, which is equivalent to 12,000 plants. So, in one year, we have 24,000 plants to take care of.



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Belgian Courgettes



“Watching the plant grow and looking back on your harvest, and the beautiful product that comes of it, is what I like most. Being outside and working with nature – that’s what we do it for.”

Plant, pollinate, and just let them grow then?

Caring involves a little more than that, Louis tells us. “Each plant has to face upwards with its heart towards the sun, as this is the part where the new courgettes grow.” Each plant is regularly checked, tended to, and straightened individually. “We cut the fruits when they are the right weight. Courgettes that are too big no longer fit in our boxes and develop seeds, which we prefer to avoid.”

Fortunately, a courgette plant also gives plenty back in return for that care. “In spring and summer, we aim for around 35 to 40 courgettes per plant. From August onwards, there are about 25 per plant. Watching the plant grow and looking back on your harvest, and the beautiful product that comes of it, is what I like most. Being outside and working with nature – that’s what we do it for.”

Dark green with a nice sheen

In spring, Louis grows Tosca courgettes, and then from mid-August, the Milos variety. He says: “I think these are two of the most beautiful and high-quality varieties available. There’s minimal taste difference between the two, but they both have a full dark green colour and nice sheen.”

Delicious in soup or in the oven

How to cook tasty courgettes at home? That’s relatively simple. Louis says: “A courgette stores for a long time and is not prone to pressure spots. At home, it’s best to store them between 10 and 14 degrees. If it’s very hot, you can store them in the fridge. They can handle some humidity, and that’s why they don’t dry out.” And then it’s time to enjoy all that hard work. “I eat them mostly in soup, but also enjoy them in spaghetti sauce, stuffed with minced meat and cheese, or gratinated in the oven,” he adds.

How to get a tasty courgette?

Louis explains: “We depend a lot on the weather. A courgette is a tropical plant and is therefore at its best grown at 25 degrees. However, if it does get too hot in the greenhouse, we can tweak it by adjusting the fertilisers.”

“Bumblebees take care of pollination. If the weather is bad and the bumblebees don’t leave the hive, we need to do it manually.”

Sweet



Courgette ravioli filled with chicken and cheese

Ravioli in tomato sauce and finished with cheese, that’s pure comfort food. Enjoy this twist with courgettes and cheese.



INGREDIENTS

- Two courgettes
- Oregano
- 300 g of your chosen pasta
- Olive oil
- Salt & pepper to taste
- One onion
- One clove of garlic
- 250 g of minced chicken
- 100 g of hard cheese
- 150 g of ricotta
- 400 g of passata
- ½ tbsp of dried oregano

PREPARATION

1. Peel and chop the onion, peel and crush the garlic and grate the cheese.
2. Heat the olive oil and fry the onion and garlic until soft. Add the minced chicken and stir-fry until golden brown.
3. Mix the grated cheese and ricotta with the minced chicken, and season with salt and pepper.
4. Cut the courgettes into long thin slices with a peeler or mandolin. Place three slices of courgettes in a star shape on top of each other.
5. Season the courgette slices with salt and pepper. Place two tablespoons of the chicken mince mixture in the centre of the star. First fold both sides of the bottom slice of courgette over the filling, then the next slice and end with the top slice of courgette. This way you get a package with the filling within the courgette slices.
6. Mix the passata with one tablespoon of olive oil, oregano and salt and pepper and pour into an oven dish.
8. Place the courgette packets into the tomato sauce. Drizzle with olive oil and season with salt and pepper.
9. Place in a preheated oven at 185°C for 25 minutes and boil the pasta until al dente.
11. Garnish the casserole with fresh oregano and serve with the pasta.

Production is between 12,000 and 15,000 tonnes

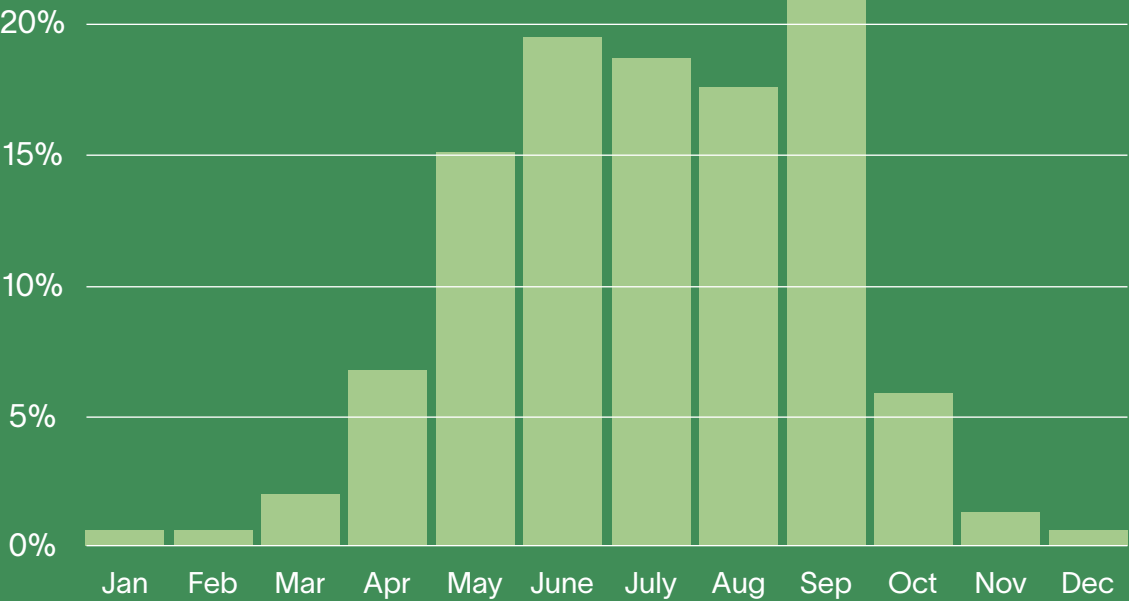
Shelf life:

Courgettes should be stored at 10-13°C and an RH of 90-95%.



Export volumes rather stable around **9,000 tonnes** with slight increase.

Production of courgettes



Passionate about growing pears

In the heart of the Hageland, we meet Mario Vanhellemont, passionate grower of apples and pears. “Harvesting a top product that consumers love, this makes me happy.”

Fruit farm Vanhellemont came into being in 1969 when André Vanhellemont and Jeannine Nijs planted their first fruit trees, alongside strawberries. “Apple and pear trees don’t yield immediately. That’s why they also grew strawberries to overcome those first years,” says their son Mario Vanhellemont, who joined the fruit business in 1994.

It was soon clear that he would one day take over the family business. “As a little boy, I always dreamed of becoming a fruit grower,” he says. After completing his studies in a professional bachelor’s degree in horticulture, he first went to work elsewhere for a few years.

This allowed his parents some time to expand the farm, and eventually took it upon himself to expand the original 22 hectares his parents owned to 60 hectares. In 2004, his youngest brother Gert also joins the company. He has a marketing background and mainly manages sorting the fruit and the two farm shops they run.

“As a little boy, I always dreamed of becoming a fruit grower.”

Bliss in the orchard

“As we continued to grow over all these years, we had the opportunity to expand the different legs of our business: the fruit farm, the sorting centre, and our range of farm products. The fruit farm grows apples, mainly Jonagold, and pears, mainly Conference.”

In total, Mario grows as many as 13 different varieties including some new varieties. In terms of pears, Conference pears remain the most popular.

Despite the uncertainty, Mario is clearly passionate about his profession. “Working innature and deciding for yourself what to do and when — that’s what I love. In winter, we start the pruning. Then we make sure the flowers come up well andthere are bees to pollinate. After that, it’s a matter of sugaring the young fruits.”

“I am always delighted when we harvest a top product that our customers love,” he explains. “After a hectic picking, I enjoy driving to the orchard in the morning by myself.”



Nature first

Fruit farm Vanhellemont adopted an environmentally friendly approach from a very early stage, making it one of the pioneers. “We first see if nature can fight diseases and harmful insects itself. We do this by introducing beneficial insects such as predatory mites, predatory bugs and ladybirds. Only if there is no other way, we use environmentally friendly solutions.”

The results are impressive. “Thanks to the ideal soil and climate, our apples and pears are of exceptional quality. This certainly applies to our Conference pears, which are unique and loved worldwide. We’re very proud of it,” he says.



“This certainly applies to our Conference pears, which are unique and loved worldwide. We’re very proud of it!”

Pear pie

This recipe for a pear tart proves that making a pie doesn't have to be difficult at all.

INGREDIENTS

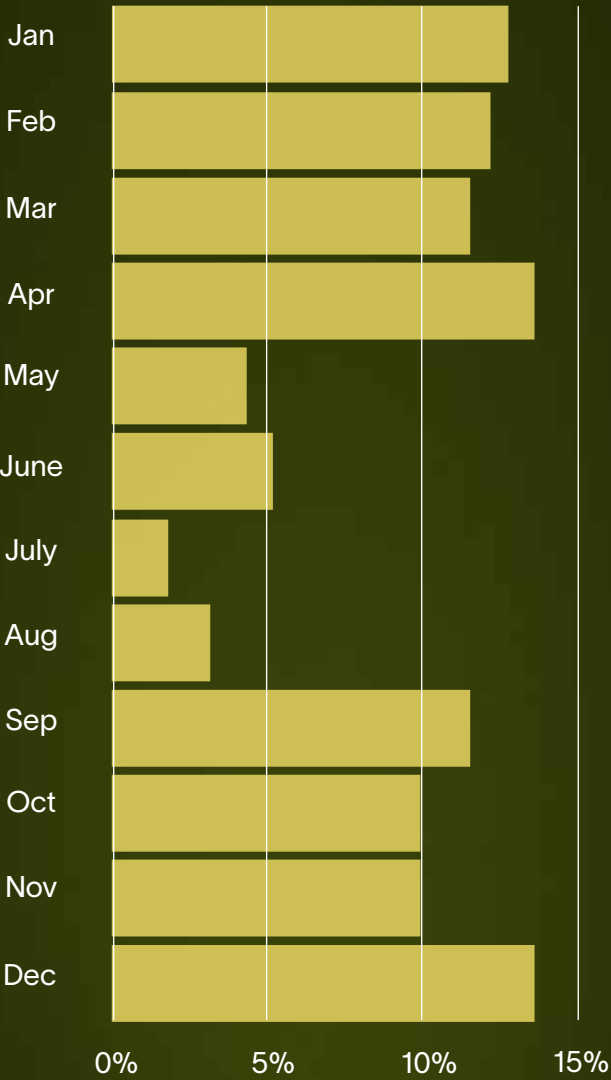
- 2150 g of butter
- 150 g of sugar
- One egg
- 300 g of self-rising flour
- Flour
- Two pears
- 250 g of cream cheese
- Two tbsps of icing sugar
- Five tbsps of almond powder and thyme
- One tsp of honey

PREPARATION

1. Beat the butter until it's soft and mix in the granulated sugar. Mix in the egg and self-rising flour, and knead into a smooth dough.
2. Wrap the dough in plastic wrap and let it chill in the refrigerator for about 30 minutes.
3. Preheat the oven to 180°C.
4. Roll out the dough on a floured work surface. Grease four cake tins with butter and dust with flour.
5. Place the dough in the tins and remove the excess around the edges.
6. Mix the cream cheese with the almond powder and icing sugar, and spoon into the cake tins.
7. Cut the pears into wedges and arrange them on the tarts.
8. Bake the tarts in the oven for about 20 minutes until the shortcrust pastry is golden brown.
9. Finish the tarts with thyme and honey.



Production of pears



400,000

Trough the years Belgium has become the largest pear producer in the EU with produced volumes going up to **400.000 tonnes**. Conference pear is Belgium's most grown pear.

315,000

Belgium's exported pear volumes show a trend ranging between **315,000 and 330,000 tonnes**.

330,000

Shelf life:
Conference pears should be stored at 1-5°C.



The challenges of growing leeks

On a freezing Friday morning, we stand in Jurgen De Roo’s field, a second-generation leek farmer. The cold doesn’t seem to bother him. Passionately and with expertise, he tells us about his craft. "Growing leeks is a challenge. It’s the first thought I have when I wake up and the last before I go to bed. But I wouldn’t want it any other way."

Father Mark De Roo first had a pig farm. He then started growing cauliflowers in the early 1980s. Later, he added summer leeks and outdoor lettuces before focusing entirely on growing leeks in 1994. Twenty years later, his son Jurgen runs the family business. He grows early leeks as well as summer, autumn and winter leeks.

“It is crucial to harvest at the right time. If you wait two or three weeks too long, it will deteriorate the quality.”



“I’m thinking of adapting my own machines to ensure they can resist extremely wet periods better.”

Years of experience

And yet Jurgen is gleaming on his field. "I really grew up in it. As a seven-year-old boy, I was already helping. I just really enjoy doing it. Being able to make your own decisions, being outside all day, watching the leek plants grow — I get up with it and go to bed with it, and I wouldn’t want it any other way."

As his job has not been getting any easier, with climate becoming more and more extreme, with heat waves, droughts and excessive rain ... Jurgen tells us that he cannot use his own machines to harvest because the leek fields are too wet. "I now hire contractors with better-equipped machines. Next year, I need to adapt my own machines so that they can cope with extremely wet periods better."

Jurgen is trying hard to maintain product and soil quality. "We are also only allowed to use a very limited number of crop protection products. Fortunately, we can overcome this by choosing specific leek varieties that are more resistant and naturally more disease resistant." He also reuses rinse water while cleaning the harvested leeks and produces green electricity with solar panels. "Leek is not only a sustainable crop, it also comes with challenges. But it is satisfying to deliver Belgian-worthy top quality every day."

“Belgian leeks are like the Rolls-Royce among leeks. So the bar is set high.”

Timing is everything

Early March, Jurgen puts his first plants in the ground for the first harvest in June. Throughout the season, planting continues regularly and for harvesting until mid-June. "It is crucial to harvest at the right time," Jurgen explains. "If you wait two or three weeks too long, the quality deteriorates."

"Growing leeks is really challenging work. This winter, across the eight plots I have, I had to start harvesting on five at the same time." Jurgen’s leeks are sold by auction.

Belgian leeks have a number of special features, e.g. a straight shape or the white part of the leek is at least 15 centimeters. The vegetable also looks highly attractive with shiny dark green leaves, protecting the edible part of the leek. "You only get this result thanks to optimal quality care, strict sorting and refrigeration immediately after harvest," Jurgen says. As a grower, you don’t know in advance whether you will really succeed in achieving the strict quality standards. Belgian leeks are like the Rolls-Royce among leeks.



Leek soup

Need a pick-me-up?
With this simple
and easy recipe, you
can quickly make
a delicious bowl of
steaming leek soup.
Cooking for
children? Simply
leave out the sherry.

INGREDIENTS

- Four leeks
- Two onions (finely chopped)
- Two spring onions
- 200 g of potatoes
- 150 ml of cream
- 50 ml of cream (as garnish)
- 250 ml of milk
- Four tbsp dry sherry (optional)
- One vegetable stock cube
- Two slices of stale bread
- 600 ml of warm water
- Butter
- Salt & pepper to taste

PREPARATION

1. Wash the leek thoroughly and cut into round shapes.
2. Chop the onions and fry them in butter in a saucepan.
3. Add in the leeks and simmer for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally.
4. While the leeks are cooking, peel the potatoes, and rinse and cut them into cubes. Add the potatoes to the leek with warm water, the stock cube, and salt and pepper to taste.
5. Cover and simmer the mixture over a medium heat for 20 minutes.
6. While that is cooking, cut the bread into cubes and fry in butter until golden brown. Season with salt and pepper.
7. Cut the spring onions into rings.
8. Add the cream and milk to the soup and mix until it's smooth. Let it warm for another five minutes on low heat – do not boil.
9. Add a tablespoon of sherry to each bowl and spoon the hot soup over it. Drizzle some more cream over it and finish with the croutons and spring onion.

60,000 70,000

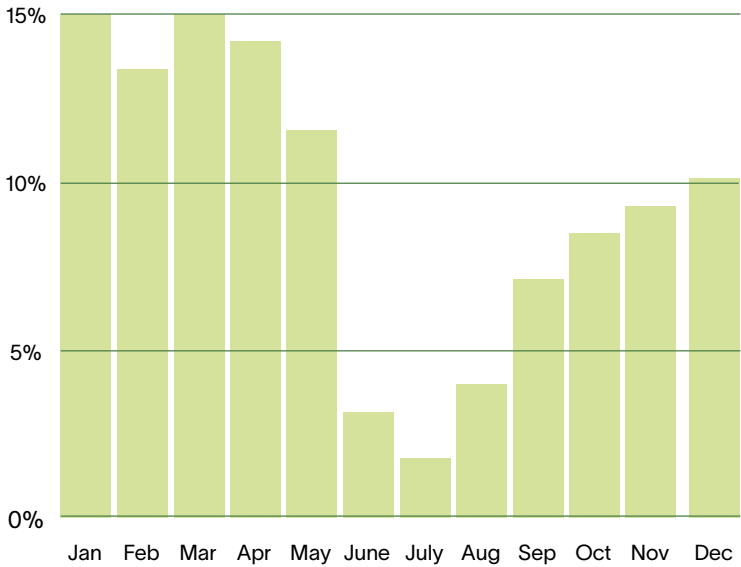


Belgium is the number one world
supplier of leeks with yearly
exported volumes between **60,000**
and **70,000 tonnes**.

Loved in Britain
Made in Europe
Belgian Leeks

Shelf life:
Leeks should be stored at 2-3 °C and an RH of 90-95%.

Production of leeks



110,000

Belgian production of fresh leeks is
rather stable, amounting to around
110,000 tonnes.

“The fresher, the tastier.”

“The common bell peppers,” Liesbet and Raf answer when we ask them what they farm here. Yet their delicious red and green varieties are anything but ordinary. Across 6.5 hectares, the team grow more than eight million delicious peppers every year.

“We had been successfully growing tomatoes for 20 years, but then the energy crisis hit,” Raf explains when asked how he and Liesbet began producing peppers. “Growing tomatoes with artificial lights was no longer profitable, so we started looking for a new crop – and that’s how we landed on bell peppers. My parents used to grow them, so the knowledge was already there. Besides, we also welcomed the change. Tomatoes and bell peppers require a different approach, both in terms of climate and labour. Who says you should grow the same crop all your life?”

Liesbet and Raf have 3 hectares of red peppers, and 3.5 hectares of green peppers. We ask if it true that those are in fact red varieties that have not yet coloured? “That’s right. Not many growers in Belgium grow green peppers. They are really popular in the UK however, with the red variety more commonly consumed here.”

From 10 cm to four metres

“In December, we plant the pepper plants, which are about 10 cm tall. We plant about four million stems. After a while, we attach them to ropes to ensure they can grow upwards. We start harvesting from mid-March when we can pick ripe peppers every week. This continues until mid-October, when we take the plants out, clean the greenhouses and prepare them for the next crop. By this time, the plants are four-metres tall and touch the greenhouse roof. That’s how we process 1.7 million kilos of sweet peppers every year, or approximately 8.5 million peppers. To accomplish all this, we work with 10 employees in the off season, and twice as many during the peak season,” says Raf.

“Nothing goes to waste, both in electricity and heat – we achieve 100% efficiency.”



“By the end of the season, the plants are four-metres tall and touch the greenhouse roof.”

Beneficial insects and cogeneration

“From planting to harvesting and cleaning up, the vegetables from these greenhouses are handled with the utmost care”, says Raf. “We try to work organically as much as possible. Sweet peppers are quite pest-prone, even more so than tomatoes. That’s why we use beneficial insects. We deploy a mix of about eight insects, such as ladybirds, gall midges and predatory bugs against aphids, spider mites and thrips, among others.”

The De Blackt greenhouses are heated by cogeneration. “Our electricity comes from a natural gas engine, which produces a lot of heat”, says Raf. “The engine is cooled with water, which is used to heat the greenhouses. Any excess electricity is sold back to the grid. The smoke produced by the natural gas engine contains CO₂, which we vent into the greenhouse because the plants use it as fertiliser, and convert it into oxygen. So, in terms of both electricity and heat, nothing goes to waste – we achieve 100% efficiency. We also collect the rainwater,” he adds.

So why do Liesbet and Raf find this work so enjoyable? “The diversity in our job is interesting. You are reliant on the weather and must adjust the climate according to the amount of sunshine each day. Not to mention, you need to ensure there are no pests lurking around. If a heat wave passes next week, the plant may well get out of balance. It takes years of experience to know exactly how to react in certain situations. Fortunately, we have it down to a tee.”



From skewers to pizza

The fresher the pepper, the crispier, and the tastier. Eating the pepper as soon as possible after purchase is what Liesbet and Raf recommend. Fun fact: wonky peppers or peppers showing sunburn marks are sold for pizzas, among other things. And that way, nothing goes to waste in Liesbet and Raf’s pepper production.

“It takes years of experience to know exactly how to react in certain situations. Fortunately, we have it down to a tee.”



Pasta with roasted pepper sauce and chicken fillet

Pasta with tomato sauce is a classic, but you can also make a delicious sauce with peppers. Serve with chicken fillet for a tasty main course.

PREPARATION

1.

Preheat the oven to 220°C.
2.

Place the peppers in an oven dish and drizzle with olive oil. Place into the oven until they are blackened, then let cool.
3.

Boil the pasta in lightly salted water until al dente. Chop the shallot, press the garlic and cut the chilli pepper into rings. Fry the shallot with the garlic and chilli pepper in olive oil until translucent.
4.

Cut the tomatoes into pieces and add into mixture.
5.

Remove the skin and seeds from the peppers. Cut the flesh into pieces and add to the tomatoes.
6.

Season with the cayenne pepper, paprika powder and salt.
7.

Add the stock and cream, and let boil over a gentle heat.

INGREDIENTS

- Four red peppers

400 g of your chosen pasta

One shallot

Two cloves of garlic

One red chilli pepper

Two beef tomatoes

½ bunch of oregano

100ml of cream
- 150 ml of vegetable stock

600 g of chicken fillets

One tsp of paprika powder

½ tsp of cayenne pepper

Olive oil

Salt & pepper to taste

8.

Season the chicken fillets with salt and pepper, and grill or fry in olive oil until golden brown and cooked
9.

Mix the sauce until smooth. Season with salt and pepper if necessary.
10.

Drain the pasta and mix in with the sauce.
11.

Spoon the pasta onto plates and finish with some fresh oregano. Serve with the chicken fillets.

40,000

Exported volumes around **40,000 tonnes** with an upward trend.



Shelf life:

- Peppers should be stored at 10-13°C and an RH of 90-95%.
- Cover to prevent drying out.

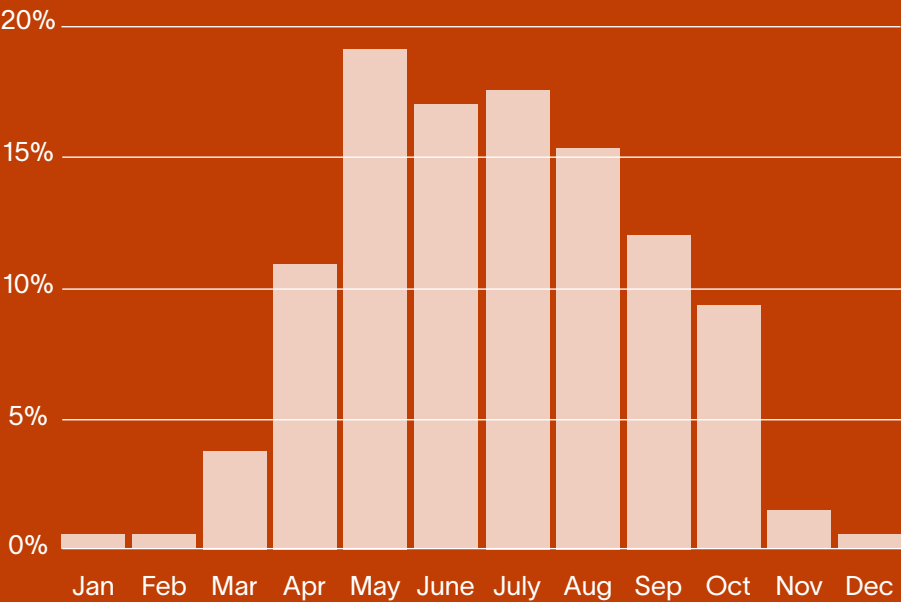


30,000

Planted area and harvest production is increasing now with almost **30,000 tonnes** of production volume.



Production of peppers



Apples from Brussels

The most crisp Jonagold apples

Just outside Brussels is Torenhof fruit farm, where we meet manager and fruit grower, Ann De Ryck. “We harvest around 400 tonnes a year. Our orchard spans ten hectares. It is relatively small, but this allows us to give our trees the proper care and attention they need.”

“In June, we manually remove excess apples to avoid overloading trees.”



Part of a fruit growing family, Ann knew from a young age that she too would make her way into the profession. “Before I got into the family business, my father advised me to do something else first, to see if the grass was in fact greener on the other side. So, I worked as a fruit cultivation consultant for ten years before moving back to the orchards,” she says.

Torenhof grows pears, but mainly focuses on cultivating apples. “We offer a wide range of flavours in a range of varieties, but specialise in the juicy Jonagold apple in particular. We believe this is one of the tastiest apples there is, if grown and stored properly.”

“We specifically design the orchard to attract beneficial insects.”



From pruning to harvesting the best care

What does an average year look like? Ann explains: “Our year starts in winter with pruning. That’s one of the best jobs there is, because it allows you to work on your tree for the long term. Later, in springtime, we make sure the tree is standing strong with its roots in the ground. We check if it is getting the right nutrition and care, so it makes it through the flowering period well. The natural molting period follows in June. If the tree produces too much fruit at this stage, we manually remove excess apples so that the tree does not become overloaded. If we didn’t do this, the apples would turn out smaller and less tasty, and the tree would become unbalanced the following year. In fact, we focus very hard on balancing the tree – in fruit growing, the weather may rule, but a strong tree is your best weapon. Finally, comes the picking season. This is the most enjoyable and busiest time of the year, because this is when you have a lot of people on your farm. It’s when you can clearly see what you’ve been working on for a whole year.”

“In fruit growing, the weather may rule, but a strong tree is your best weapon.”



Favouring integrated fruit farming

While many fruit farmers are committed to sustainability, Torenhof has a head start. The fruit farm owes this to Ann’s experience in her previous job. “As a fruit cultivation consultant, I contributed to Belgium taking a big lead in terms of environmentally conscious cultivation. We put a lot of effort into integrated fruit growing, and specifically designed the orchard to attract beneficial insects which serve as natural pest control. Furthermore, we regularly analyse the soil, leaves and fruit in order to adjust our care according to what the tree needs.”

That is not the only reason why the Belgian apples are so tasty. “Our apples are stored in Ultra Low Oxygen fridges. As long as the apples are stored in those fridges, they remain as fresh and crisp as if they had just been picked.” Another thing that makes the apples so delicious is her love for the craft, says Ann. “Every year is different, and no season is the same. I get to work in nature, according to its rhythm. This is how we deliver a beautiful, tasty and healthy product year.”



Grandmother’s apple cake

An apple cake like grandmas? You can make it with this recipe. Success assured!

INGREDIENTS

- 200 g of butter at room temperature

200 g of sugar

8 g of vanilla sugar

One lemon (zest)
- four eggs

200 g of self-rising flour

Salt

Two apples (Jonagold)

One tbsp of icing sugar

PREPARATION

1. Preheat the oven to 180°C and take a large mixing bowl to beat the butter until it's soft.

2. Add the sugar and vanilla sugar, and mix until light and creamy.

3. Break the eggs and divide. Stir the egg yolks into the soft butter. Beat the egg whites until firm and set aside.

4. Add the zest of the lemon to the batter, sift in the self-rising flour and add a pinch of salt.

5. Mix carefully into a batter and then carefully fold in the whipped egg whites without breaking them.

6. Grease a cake tin with butter and dust with flour. Pour the batter into the tin.

7. Peel the apples and remove the core. Cut into finewedges and press into the cake.

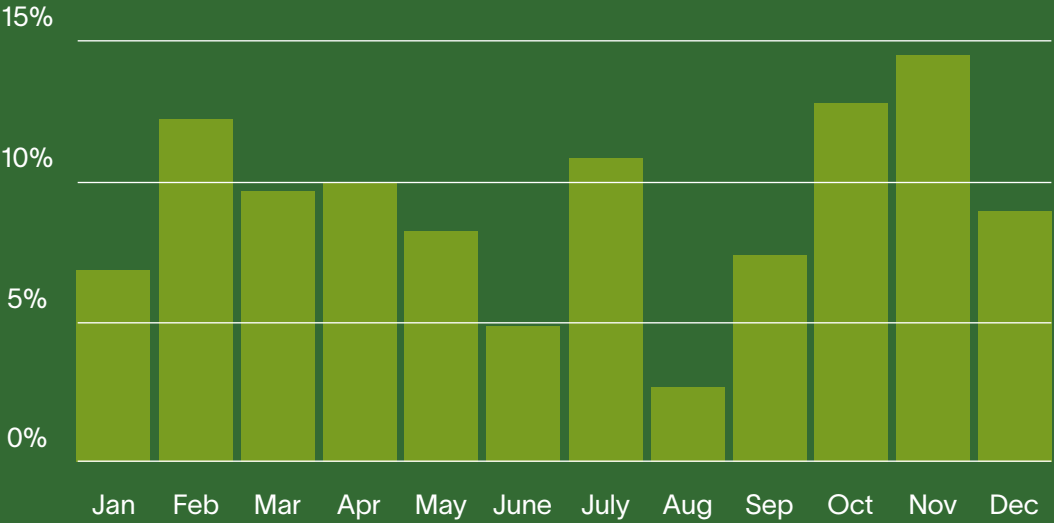
8. Bake the cke in the middle of the oven for about 45 to 50 minutes.

9. Check with a skewer whether it is done, if the dough sticks to the skewer, it is not yet done.

10. Remove the cake from the oven, take out of the mould and let cool on a cake rack.

11. inish with icing sugar and serve.

Production of apples



Shelf life:

Apples should be stored at 1-5°C.

200,000
250,000

Belgium apple production is rather stable between **200,000 and 250,000 tonnes.**

130,000
160,000

Export volumes range between **130,000 and 160,000 tonnes.**

130,000

160,000

200,000

250,000



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