



Participants during a tour of Barendse-DC in the Netherlands, the world's largest greenhouse with orange peppers.



Lettuce on a hydroponic system in Belgium.



Primeale, a key vegetable brand of the Agrial Agricultural Cooperative in France.



Crops under LED lighting at Urban Crop Solutions in Belgium.

EXPERIENCING EUROPE'S VEG INDUSTRY: AUSTRALIAN LADIES LEAD THE WAY

In April this year, a group of nine Australian female vegetable levy-payers and industry members travelled to France, Belgium and the Netherlands, where they visited farms, universities, agribusinesses and seed companies. They gained an insight into European horticulture as well as the issues growers and producers face, being on a much smaller scale of land compared to Australia. Carol Knight reports on some of the highlights from the tour.

Nine female vegetable industry members embarked on the trip of a lifetime when they travelled to Europe on the 2018 Women's Industry Leadership and Development Mission from 21 April to 4 May 2018.

The 13-day tour, led by AUSVEG, allowed these women the opportunity to experience farms, machinery and precision agriculture firms, a leading agriculture university and meet with prominent horticulture groups who provided an insight into vegetable growing operations and the issues European growers face on a daily basis.

The primary objective of the mission was to provide female industry leaders with insights into European vegetable trade and growing operations and enable them to gain an in-depth understanding of the processes, procedures and issues faced within the region.

The mission was part of *Women's and Young Grower Industry Leadership and Development Missions (VG15703)*, a strategic levy investment under the Hort Innovation Vegetable Fund.

A FRENCH PERSPECTIVE

The mission began with a visit to the Mont Saint Michel area in western France where the group stopped by Primeale, a key vegetable brand of the Agrial agricultural cooperative that operates throughout the country.

Participants were shown a presentation by Guileame Hugues from Agrial – Service Production that detailed the regions where vegetables are grown in northern France. The group consists of more than 14,000 growers and employs 21,000 staff.

The following day, the group headed out to view the different types of supermarkets and fresh produce markets within and around Paris. The presentation of fresh produce in these supermarkets amazed the group, however it also consisted of lots of plastic and bamboo baskets.

The Rungis International Market was next on the list. It is the world's largest fresh produce market spanning 234 hectares, located on the outskirts of Paris. This market mainly supplies to

the French markets and five major supermarkets in Asia. A point of interest was that there were no long-term purchasing agreements in place; this was replaced with daily purchases. There were also no requirements for Quality Assurance systems to supply the market. The group noted that the quality of the produce was good, and there were many vegetable products and varieties available that are not found in Australia.

Next up was a visit to a chicory farm in the north of France, which was part of the BUFL group – a fresh farming cooperative model. The group was shown how the chicory was processed after it is harvested; it was quite an old mechanism but very efficient. While the farm's main crop is chicory, it also has a diverse business model that includes grain and cattle, plus a reticulated water sanitiser recycling system.

BELGIAN INSIGHT

On day six, the group crossed into Belgium to tour Urban Crop Solutions, a business that has created a fully automated indoor farming system using LED Lighting that is both efficient and effective under any given climatic condition.

The group was presented with a tour from Urban Crop Solutions' Brecht Stubbe and Nicolas Tsurukawa, who showed the group the company's technologies and the potential for vertical farming to revolutionise the future of global horticulture. Growers noted that the speed and change of technology in the industry is so advanced that the equipment could quickly become obsolete, so it is important to be informed of the latest technologies that are on offer to growers and the wider supply chain. Nicolas also travelled to Australia in June to present on vertical farming technologies at the 2018 Global Innovations in Horticulture Seminar.

While in Belgium, participants were fortunate to visit Bert Depoorter, a hydroponic lettuce grower who showed the group around his facility. His system is fully automated and only requires four staff to operate the business.

Later, the group had a great opportunity to visit Colruyt, a hard discount supermarket which stocks all major brands. But

with the fresh produce stored in a refrigerated area, you were walking in the cold to visit this section!

DUTCH EXPERIENCE

Upon arrival in Amsterdam, the group met its local guide Paul Van Gemst, who led the way to a market that sourced locally-grown food, Land Markt. The group then joined Paul and Gertjan Wubelling at their home for a traditional Dutch meal featuring plenty of locally-grown vegetables (see box-out for further details).

The next stop was Barendse-DC, the world's largest orange pepper cultivator with 20 hectares of sweet peppers and 10 hectares of baby tomatoes. Barendse-DC has implemented a sustainable method of producing its capsicums, using geothermal energy and cogeneration systems that consume natural gas to produce heat, carbon dioxide and electricity. The heat is stored during summer and ultimately used to heat the greenhouses in winter, while the carbon dioxide is purified and later used in the greenhouse as fertiliser.

In the afternoon the group visited a Syngenta demonstration field. Ivar Zwaan provided a tour of the facilities, and participants were very impressed with the technology and processes on display as well as the interactive board that displayed over 100 seeds. Guests were invited to test their knowledge and guess which seeds were listed. All the seeds were contained behind a vaulted door, and Ivar advised that those seeds were worth more than the Royal Bank of the Netherlands.

The following day, the group visited Bird Control Group where a presentation was given by Area Sales Manager Gijs Groen about how the company has developed an automatic laser system to reduce pest bird presence in a sustainable way, making businesses more profitable by protecting crops and eliminating health and safety hazards. Participants were also shown a demonstration about how the laser works in an open field.

In the afternoon the group visited Koppert Cress, a microgreens growing operation that has built a brand and marketing campaign to set it apart as a premium producer. It sells to high-end Michelin star chefs and has initiated a significant marketing campaign to provide a 'Cressperience' to anyone who visits the operation.

One of the world's leading research institutions for agricultural technology and innovation, Wageningen University and Research Centre, was the second-last stop of the tour. The group was extremely impressed by the advancement in biosecurity systems and the researchers' use of gene modification to breed plants with desirable traits.

The mission finished with a visit to vegetable breeding company Rijk Zwaan. Group Manager – Communication and Public Affairs Anneke van de Kamp presented to the participants, who were highly impressed that 30 per cent of the company's profit goes back into research and development. Interestingly, seeds grown

in Australia are also tested in Holland before returning to Australia for planting.

After the presentation, the group was shown through the facility by Evelien van der Meer – Specialist Sales Support before they travelled to Rotterdam for an industry dinner with Jolanda van Kralingen – Specialist Communication. All participants engaged in fulfilling conversation, especially regarding school programs that focus on increasing vegetable consumption.

FORGING CONNECTIONS

After a fortnight of exposure to influential contacts from leading international businesses and witnessing the latest in global horticulture trends, the group returned to Australia armed with fresh ideas, greater insights and international contacts which will be important for the growth of their businesses as well as the wider Australian vegetable industry.

Participants are encouraged to share the knowledge and networks gained on the mission with other growers through their local networks to help improve the overall viability of the national vegetable industry into the future.

LOCAL HOSPITALITY DELIGHTS MISSION PARTICIPANTS

Day nine was a special day for tour leader Carol Knight, who was reunited with her Amsterdam-based brother and local guide Paul Van Gemst. Paul met the group and took them through the streets of the city to Land Markt, a fresh produce market in northern Amsterdam where most of the produce is grown locally. It also has a restaurant with this produce featuring on the menu.

That evening, Paul and his partner Gertjan Wubelling hosted the entire group for a three-course dinner which consisted of traditional Dutch fare. This sparked a lot of conversation around how different cultures enjoy their fresh produce, and the ways in which they use it in everyday meals. The participants enjoyed this unique experience and thanked the couple for their generous hospitality.

INFO

AUSVEG would like to thank those who gave their valuable time to meet with the delegation, particularly Primeale, Rungis International Market, BUFL Co-op, Urban Crop Solutions, REO Auction House, Paul Van Gemst, Barendse-DC, Syngenta, Rijk Zwaan, Bird Control Group, Koppert Cress, Bert Depoorter and Wageningen University and Research Centre.

The final report for this project will be made available on the InfoVeg database at ausveg.com.au/infoveg.

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