

THE INNOVATION JOURNEY OF ...



Mike Maduro
Freggies

In a new series, Foodvalley NL interviews game changers from the ecosystem, whose innovations enable the transition to a sustainable food system. Get inspired by their innovation journey.



Vegan start-up finds sparring partner and network through Foodvalley NL

PEOPLE CHANGER MIKE CAPTURES HEARTS WITH FREGGIES

Foodvalley NL helps game changers scale up innovations that enable the transition to a sustainable food system. Start-ups that help consumers live more sustainably and healthy play an important role in this change.

In this first episode, Jeroen Willemsen, Innovation Lead Protein Shift at Foodvalley NL, talks to Mike Maduro about his company Freggies and the innovation journey they have made together. “Mike is a people changer.”

Mike Maduro and Jeroen Willemsen meet in a sunny apartment in Rotterdam to talk about their partnership. Due to the pandemic they have to keep their distance, but

despite the physical limitation their strong connection can be clearly felt. The entrepreneur and the Innovation Lead at Foodvalley share a mission to supply the exponentially growing number of people in the world with affordable, sustainable and tasteful food, even in 2050. But there is more to their relationship: they have a personal connection. “That has actually been the case right from the start”, Willemsen reminisces. “We met for the first time at the Horecava gastronomy and catering exhibition and Mike’s personality struck me immediately. I could tell, by listening to his story, that he was onto some-

thing. I tasted a delicious Freggie's satay, and I noticed that he was able to really get through to people. Mike is a people changer. He is someone who convinces people that his food does not just taste good, but that it is also important to be open to his mission to adopt a more plant-based diet. People just know that he is genuine. That is the true power of Freggies, and with it Mike makes a difference in a much-needed transition".

From college to festivals

The name Freggies is short for Fried Vegetables or Fresh Veggies. For the brand, Maduro develops vegetable snacks, vegetarian finger food, juices, salads and plant-based meat substitutes. Obviously, he is not the first to come up with the idea to replace meat with vegetables, but he undoubtedly has a unique and personal perspective. "I have Antillean roots. My father worked as a butcher and my mother as a nurse. Food is very important in our culture and I was brought up with the idea

that our meals should be hand-made and healthy. I also played American Football at top level; I won the Dutch championship in 2011. And food is also an important part of sports, of course. When I left home, I worked full-time and studied Technical Business Administration in the evenings. I did not have much time to cook and realised that the available selection of tasty and healthy dinners was very limited. Finding food that was both healthy and tasteful was a challenge. I also noticed that vegetables were not yet the important part of our diet that they should be.

That is why I started to experiment at home with snacks based on carrots and legumes and let my family taste them. Local media network RTV Rijnmond had broadcast a story about it, which led to my first invite to cook at a festival. Suddenly, I was a cook and a product developer."

Maduro went from being an engineer, top athlete and butcher's son, to a cook at festivals, preparing vegetarian snacks. That must have been some transition. "Yes, it was very different from cooking at home", he admits. "I grew up with a lot of spicy food, so I was used to it. But the kids at those festivals sometimes teared up when they were eating my snacks. I learned a lot from observing which flavours worked well and which were too much. Cooking at festivals also helped me realise that I had to decide whether I wanted to go through with this. In 2016, I was cooking at Foodfestival Rotterdam, a multi-day event. There, people who had tasted my snacks came back to my stand the next day with cool bags, because they wanted Freggies in their own freezers. At that moment, I knew I was onto something and that there were business opportunities if I chose to pursue this path. So I decided to take serious action."

“I WAS LOOKING FOR
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MAKING PROGRESS WITH FOODVALLEY NL

The bear's fire

Opportunities always come with challenges. Although Maduro had developed a good product and knew how to convince his audience, he did not have any experience producing large volumes. While looking for a suitable manufacturer, he found Foodvalley NL through the municipality of Wageningen, which turned out to be a crucial step. "I was looking for a company with a network in the food business and, more importantly, in the area of innovation and up-scaling. A network with access to the right manufacturers who were open to think along with a start-up. The Dutch food industry is not very big in that area and I needed someone with contacts everywhere."

At Foodvalley, Mike was set up with Willemsen, who was won over by Maduro's story right from the start. "Within the larger theme of protein transition, we need game changers who can inspire people and get them

Whoever joins Foodvalley NL will be put on the fast track. Entrepreneur Mike Maduro joined while having many questions and needs. Which answers did he find at Foodvalley NL?

- **Manufacturing partner.** In order to scale up, Maduro needed manufacturers who believed in him and his product. Through Foodvalley NL's international network, Freggies came into contact with a manufacturer who wanted to make room for the start-up, even though volumes were limited. Together they adapted the recipe and professionalised its production.
- **Potential partners.** Maduro met with various parties to share his story and seek advice, which enabled him to move forward with his innovation process, including his brand's positioning.
- **Guide.** Foodvalley NL challenges, connects and supports those innovations that make a difference in the sustainable food system. They do this by listening closely to Maduro's questions and paying attention to which questions he does not ask, but which he will have to answer in the future.

on board. Sometimes we have the tendency to just look at the product. Which should, of course, be tasteful and sustainable, but you also need a good story to get people to eat more plant-based products. Structurally, Mike gets through to people. And that is important, because nothing is more personal than the food that you eat. It is not enough to believe in the

products, you have to believe in the person who makes them. Only personalities like Mike's, who can change the people around him, will enable us to reach our goal to supply ten billion people in 2050 with healthy and sustainable food."

Maduro: "I have this fire burning deep inside of me that drives me to eat healthier and more sustainably.

That is why I am determined to set the transition in motion to go from mostly animal-based to plant-based proteins. If you do not have that fire, there is no point in even starting. But I genuinely feel that I have to do this.” Willemsen: “That personal drive is essential. It is why we have decided together in a marketing session, to make Mike the face of Freggies. He is big and strong, like a bear, and that has been incorporated in the logo.” Maduro: “People think of me as a teddy bear and a bear does not just eat meat, but also lots of veggies. The bear also radiates strength, which relates to my experience with American Football, but also to the high-fibre and high-protein Freggies that give you energy. It is a perfect match for my product and for me personally.”

Strategic experience

Willemsen saw opportunities and unlocked doors that Maduro could not open himself. “It is different when we from Foodvalley NL approach a manufacturer with a question than when a modest start-up such as Freggies seeks support. In our network of manufacturers, we can act as an

“WE NEED PEOPLE WHO CHANGE PEOPLE”

ambassador for his brand and establish a connection which otherwise would have been very difficult. By now Freggies is actively testing and producing thanks to one of Foodvalley’s contacts.” Willemsen did not ‘just’ help Freggies to meet potential partners, Maduro emphasises. “Jeroen is my sparring partner. With his knowledge of Foodvalley NL and his background as an entrepreneur he is able to challenge me and help me structure and guide my thoughts. He supported me before and after my interview with Dutch radio station BNR, for example, and helped me find the best way to present my message. He has been in the field for so long and he has experience on a much more strategic level than me. That helps me

be a better entrepreneur and it helps Freggies to develop much faster.

Willemsen: “Mike had a lot of questions when he joined us. Of course we tried to answer these, but I believe it could be even more important to listen for questions he does not ask, but which I know he will need to answer in the future. That is what our experience at Foodvalley NL can do. And I also think it is important to not ask all those questions right away. It is better to not know about some things too far ahead, because it may cause your spirits to sink if you realise how much work still needs to be done. You need some naive enthusiasm to change the world. That is what we should cherish in people.” •



INNOVATION LEAD JEROEN WILLEMSSEN ABOUT FREGGIES...

“In the series ‘Game changers’, we share stories from parties who make a difference in our food system. To accelerate the protein transition, we have to learn from stories from all involved parties: multinationals, investors, scientists and definitely also starting business like Freggies.”

“With his authenticity, drive, enthusiasm and love for tasty food, Mike can make a difference in our food system. He gets through to and convinces people he meets with his personality, but also with his products. Only then can you grow to become a game changer. The combination of a sincere story and a tasty product convinces consumers to choose healthier and more sustainable food options more often. That is the reason why as many people as possible should know Freggies’ story.”

Text Joost Scholten, photography Nina Slagmolen

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