

Mycelia is a feminine w

Mycelia is a relatively small Belgian spawn producer, specialised in the worldwide supply of mother cultures and spawn for speciality mushrooms, as well as consultancy and training services and research into this subject. The company recently relocated from Ghent to Nevele. An ideal occasion to enjoy a glass of wine with owner and driving force behind Mycelia, Magda Verfaillie.



Mycelia is a team. Magda in the middle, between Pascal (l) and secretary Maatje (r), in front of the new spawnplant in Nevele.

That Mycelia produces mycelium and spawn, some 30 tons a week, is probably widely known. That owner Magda Verfaillie, a powerhouse of unstoppable energy, travels the globe with her partner in business, and in her private life, Jos van den Ponsele from SACO2/Combines (microsac permeable bags and microboxes) is no secret either, but the actual company and the people behind the scenes have a more shadowy profile.

Spawn in the cellar

Magda graduated from the University of Ghent as a biologist/botanist. "Professor Poppe put me onto the mushroom trail. In the cellars at the faculty he produced a little spawn. At the time, there was no spawn production in Belgium, and Poppe thought that he stood to make millions with his production!" After graduating, five students continued this line of production, but only Patrick Sedeyn and Magda set up viable companies. In 1993 Sedeyn sold his spawn company to Mycelia. "We both supplied a wide range of exotics in particular, a niche market, be-

cause we soon realised that we would be unable to compete with the major players in the area of mushroom spawn."

"The first company was called 'De Zwamdraad'. It was the end of the 1970s. The first production (a couple of hundred litres per week) mainly went to the amateur, hobby market. At the time I learned and experimented a lot." In 1985, Magda started 'De Zwamvlok' in Antwerp. "I'd already got to know Jos then, he had a large company in health food. I could do some product development and research there, as he had a large autoclave and his own laboratory. 'De Zwamvlok' was actually a company within a company, and I was able to set up my production, grown to about 2 tons per week, there'.

In 1990 Jos sold his business. "We decided to establish a company Ghent under the name Mycelia. It was a better name; short, simple and feminine." In an old meat factory, we worked on expanding the company. Not with production in bottles, that method took up too much space. "Somycel already had bags at the time. We developed that further with filters in the side seams and Jos concentrated fully on producing bags. That's how SacO2 saw the light of day." Magda now has 100% ownership of Mycelia, while Jos has

full ownership of SacO2/Combines. "We are entirely independent operations, but our clients are often the same" And so, when you meet Magda abroad, Jos is also around, just like recently in Cape Town at the trade fair of the 17th ISMS congress.

Bad luck

Magda's tale reveals that the company's growth was no bed of roses. "Each time we grew in size, our problems grew along too", she laughs. For example, a mistake in the construction of the overpressure cabinets turned out to be an almost insurmountable problem that cost the company a huge amount of cash. "We employed 12 people at the time, who we nearly all had to fire. We just about managed to survive the initial period by the skin of our teeth." Magda also had to learn about running a business, but fortunately the bank (and her father) kept their faith in the fledgling company. And every cloud had a silver lining. "We always had too little money, so were forced to look for creative solutions." Some space to breathe was only created when she was able to takeover Sedeyn's company, which was a serious business rival for Mycelia. "It was a good decision; the market was too small for two such similar companies. We were, and still are,

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the only ones of our kind in Europe in this specialised area." Another advantage of the difficult early years is that they have made Magda a practical expert in all imaginable errors and mistakes that can be made when dealing with spawn. "Everyone makes exactly the same blunders. When we give advice now, we can sum up all the mistakes made by the customer in matter of ten minutes."

Mycelia is a team

Magda is full of praise about her team, which is predominately female. "Pascal has lots of organisational tasks, without her the company would not have survived, but the others are all indispensable too. I may be the owner, but Mycelia belongs to us all." All the seven employees come from the Ghent region. "With the exception of one person they have all remained loyal to the company after the move." Magda also explicitly mentions Joris Hozee, professor in biotechnology at the Katholieke Hogeschool Sint-Lieven, with whom Mycelia works very closely. "KaHo is specialised in fermentation, Belgian brewers are all educated there. And spawn is actually a fermentation process. If KaHo wants to test something in practice, then they do it at Mycelia and vice versa. One example is the development of a bulk machine in the framework of a European project with 13 participants that is coordinated by Mycelia."

On the move: "We've been wanting to leave Ghent for about ten years. We were



At the autoclave in the new building.

situated right in the centre with all its narrow old streets, which was really impractical especially from a logistical point of view. After a long search the premises of grower/spawn producer Belsac caught our eye." Mycelia is now renting the premises from the investor who took them over from Belsac.

In the new building, equipped with climate installations from Dalsem, the production methods will be slightly adapted, more in bulk. "We are not going to switch entirely to bulk production, because we still have to be able to produce spawn in small amounts, we have about 15 different recipes, all with different treatments and temperature conditions. Mycelia's power is also that we can produce entirely to customer specification, no matter how small the quantity." Hygiene has top

priority; the sterile room at the company is 'class 10,000'. That is an absolute necessity, as with all the different cultures, recipes and raw materials there is an extra risk of cross contamination. "Using the new system, we can produce larger production series without any risks." The largest spawn supplies of Mycelia concern shiitake, Pleurotus Eryngii and Nameko, which are mainly destined for Germany, France and the Netherlands. One third of our turnover is generated by mother cultures and knowhow.

Advice and travelling

Another core activity of Mycelia is organising training sessions all over the world. "Languages, foreign cultures, solving problems, spreading knowledge; it all comes together. I think it's fascinating to get to know other cultures. There are people all over the world who share the same passion. Mushrooms are actually just an excuse; I could quite as well have done something else. A good example is the trip to Iraq (zie MB 7), where we met a really great family. Even though their life is so different, we left with a warm feeling. During your travels you realise just how small you are in the large universal scale of things. We consider a personal relationship with our customers to be highly important and we try to visit them all. This is a trait I inherited from my father, he was active in the leather industry. I have the greatest respect for him."

Magda had the option of concentrating entirely on consultancy and advice, but she thinks it's important to keep up to date on the practical side of things and so continues to produce spawn. "It's definitely not a form of charity, advice generates as much as spawn production. If all that is taken is advice, that's fine by me - as long as it's paid for - but many of the projects ultimately result in supplies of mother cultures, which are also easy to transport over long distances. That's a different matter with spawn for exotics."

The question remains of where she gets her energy from, and why she persisted in the face of so many obstacles in the early years? Serious: "An immense passion for the product..." And with a smile: "...and a measure of pure obstinacy I think, you have to be a bit crazy to do this!"



Magda in the Mycelia / SACO2 stand at the 17th ISMS in Cape Town, with Jos (standing) and Joris behind the desk.