

Resource

DECEMBER 2025 VOLUME 20

The journalism magazine for all at Wageningen University & Research



Well-rested lettuce
grows faster

Prize for fire work

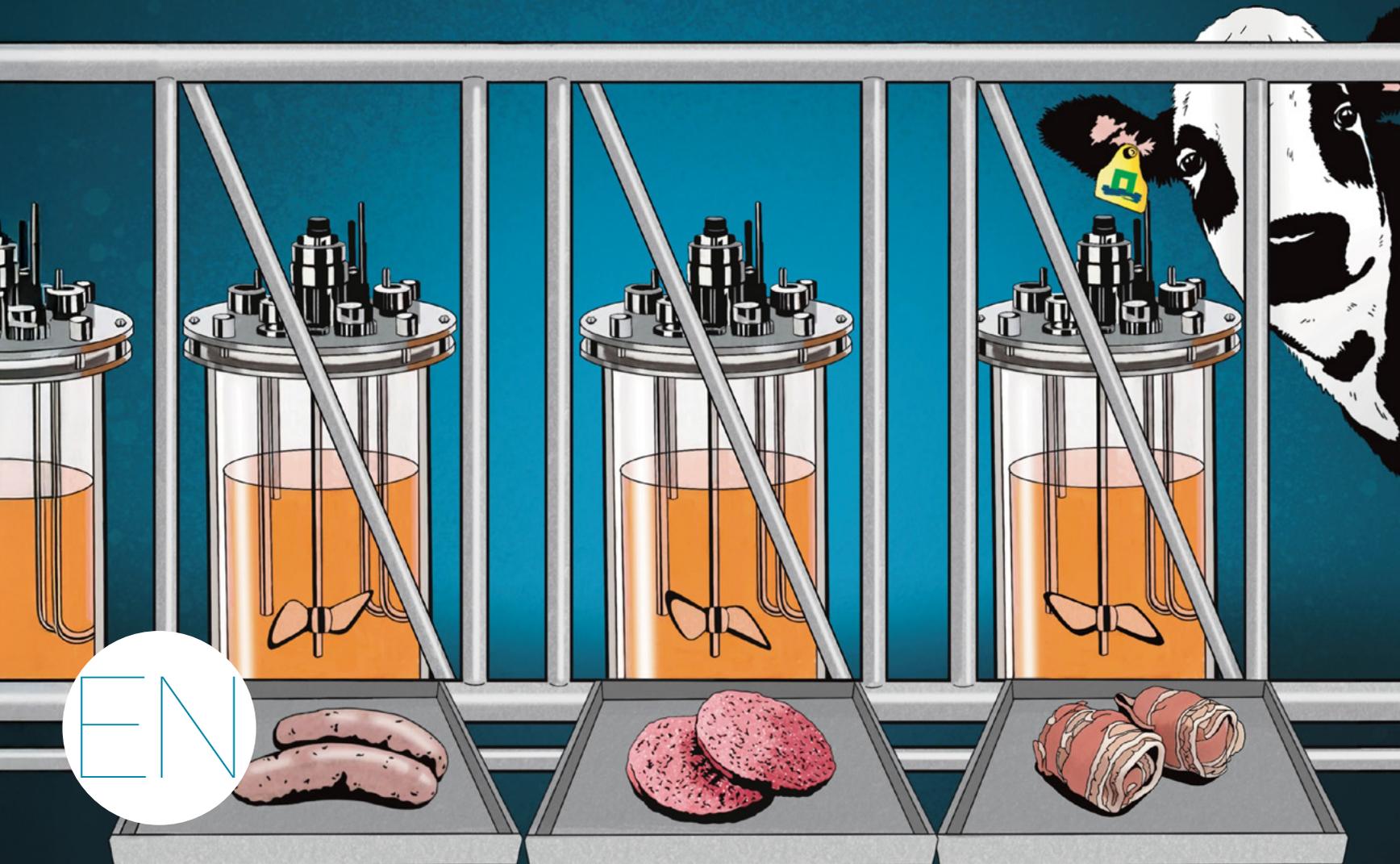
Letter to the editor: Awkward legacy

10 candidates for Cover Prize

Do the 2025 News Quiz!

NOW
Extra big winter issue
+ An exclusive interview with Board about Gaza

Cultivated meat From lab to farm | p.22



[Live&Learn]

A botched experiment, a rejected paper: such things are soon labelled as failures in academia. As for talking about them — not the done thing! But that is just what WUR scientists do in this column. Because failure has its uses. This time, we hear from Dora Schouten, a Master's student in Animal Sciences. Text Nicole van 't Wout Hofland •

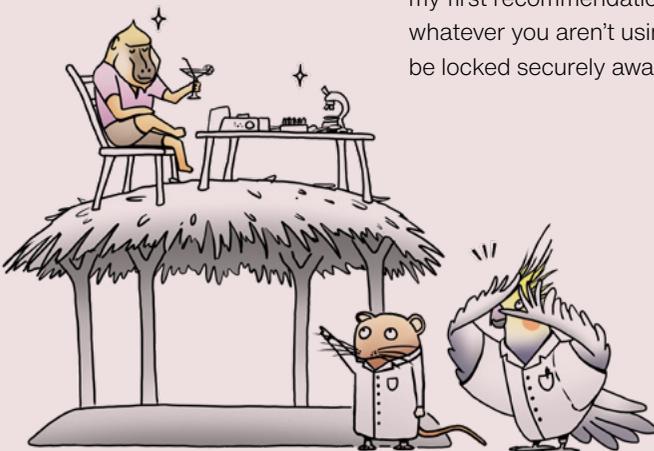
Illustration Mathijs Megens/SeaBleuBird Studio

'Last year, I went to a remote research station in Kenya for my graduation project to analyse the diet of hyenas. Together with four other students, I worked in an improvised lab consisting of a single-room wooden building with posts and a thatched roof, where we were surrounded by baboons. A large table was used as a lab table. There were no materials, so I brought a suitcase with me from the Netherlands with a portable PCR lab, pipettes and test tubes. I'd calculated precisely how much I would need of each material. Everything was neatly arranged in bags. 'Towards the end of my research, my fellow students and I skipped a couple of hours of fieldwork to watch a local football match. When we got back, I found "my" lab in complete disarray. The books and papers that had been on the top shelves were now on the floor, my bags of materials had been opened and the contents scattered over the floor. I looked at my fellow students in amaze-

ment. Who'd been at our things? The station was so remote that normally there would be nobody around. It was only when we saw one bag high up on a post that it twigged: the baboons had been inside and played with our things.

'When we got back, I found "my" lab in complete disarray'

'Fortunately, 70 of my DNA samples were stored away safely, but the equipment the monkeys had got hold of was no longer sterile and therefore unusable. Even though it cost me some of my analyses, we could still laugh about it. It was also a valuable lesson in fieldwork practice. A thatched roof doesn't provide enough protection in the African wilderness and inquisitive animals are simply part and parcel of the work. A new group of students will be going to the same research site in March and I'm helping them prepare. I already know what my first recommendation will be: whatever you aren't using should be locked securely away.'



Looking for oddballs

There is no place on Earth without life in some form. Microorganisms can survive the most extreme conditions. Scientists call these microorganisms extremophiles. WUR heads a consortium that will be searching in Europe, the Arctic and Antarctic for such life forms — to learn from them.

'We want to know how the microalgae manage it,' says the research manager Iago Teles. 'These organisms are unique because most other organisms can't survive in such conditions. What substances and mechanisms let them do that? Once you have that fundamental knowledge, you discover new applications.' The consortium is called Xtremolife. The European Union is funding the research to the tune of 4.5 million euros. WUR is coordinating the research. The researchers will be looking for examples in the Tabernas desert in Spain, in volcanic environments on the Canary Islands and in the Arctic and Antarctic.

Viking Cruises

The microorganisms that survive in those environments are able to cope with extreme temperatures, high salinity or acidity, or very dry conditions. Those extreme conditions are also the reason why relatively little is known about this life: it is hard and therefore expensive to collect specimens. Xtremolife is dealing with this by making use of the existing infrastructure, says Teles. That includes the ships of the company Viking Cruises, where Norwegian scientists

'These organisms are unique because most other organisms can't survive there'

have access to a laboratory. 'They have a FerryBox for transporting water samples. We are adapting that for use in the

extreme locations. Some of the work on board can be done by passengers who lend a helping hand.' Teles hopes to join the expedition to the Spanish desert. 'And perhaps to Antarctica. As well as coordinating everything, our main role is in discovering new metabolic mechanisms and how we can use them and scale them up at AlgaePARC, Wageningen.' RK