



## Interview: Selma Seddik

Co-founder of Instock Amsterdam

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**Instock** is a non-profit organization that now owns three restaurants that serve meals made entirely out of surplus food, coming for the most part from the Dutch supermarket chain Albert Heijn. Instock taps into a growing global concern over food waste: **one-third** of all food produced for human consumption is lost or wasted. Finding valuable use for rest streams is one of the important goals in a circular economy. In this respect Instock fits the RUMORE stakeholder group in Amsterdam perfectly. This group consists of entrepreneurs, knowledge institutes and local governments collaborating on the transition to a more circular Agri-Food chain. Selma Seddik, one of the four co-founders of Instock, is actively involved in the stakeholder group since the inception of RUMORE in early 2017. In an interview, she tells about the Instock idea and activities and shares her hitherto experiences in the RUMORE project work.

*“Every morning, we pick up food that would otherwise be tossed. The reasons are various: products may be overstocked, have aesthetic flaws (this can vary from having a small brown spot to having a ‘weird form’) or are nearing expiration. For our restaurant chefs, every day is a challenge: never knowing in the morning what exactly their ingredients will be, they always manage to serve a three-course ‘menu of the day’ by lunchtime. The RUMORE partners have tasted and experienced it at the Amsterdam partner-meeting in November 2018, when the whole group had lunch at our restaurant.” (Selma Seddik)*



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## 1) Selma, can you shortly present the main idea and activities of Instock?

The first Instock restaurant started as a pop-up in 2014 by myself and three co-workers at the Dutch supermarket chain Albert Heijn after winning a contest. Frustrated by the amount of food that was thrown away every day, the four of us pitched the idea of starting a surplus food restaurant at a business competition the company was running to find innovative ideas. We won.

Now, in 2019, Instock is a social enterprise that collects surplus food from many parties across the Netherlands, has three of its own successful, permanent restaurants in Amsterdam, The Hague and Utrecht, and an online shop that sells surplus food to other

catering companies and chefs. It also runs a school food waste program that offers resources and lesson plans to help teach children and youngsters where food comes from, why food waste is bad and how it can be prevented. Next to running a free collection service to “rescue” leftover fruit, veggies, bread and dried food from Albert Heijn supermarkets, packaging companies and farmers, Instock collects surplus fresh fish and meat directly from suppliers. This helps to find a home for fish that does not meet other restaurants’ sizing requirements or excess meat from a supermarket order.

## 2) Instock & RUMORE: the start of a new project?

After a brainstorm in the RUMORE stakeholder group we had a match with two other local stakeholders: Dutch Cuisine, a movement of chefs that want to cook in a sustainable way, and Jessica van Bossum, a ‘big data’ researcher of the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. The idea that popped up was that if we worked together we could set up a system in which we could provide chefs with surplus food in a somewhat predictable way. Jessica van Bossum is working on a data system that finds ways to predict which types of food can be expected to become ‘surplus’ at what date and time. This is valuable information because most cooks love structure and predictability, and find it a basic need for a good menu. Next to this, they may have mixed feelings about using

food waste, because they want to use only the highest quality ingredients. Happily, the chefs of Dutch Cuisine, who feel a responsibility to cook meals that are both delicious and sustainable, are open to using the surplus food from Instock. They also see the advantages of this: some products are better when they are riper, and in some cases the surplus food can be obtained at extremely low prices. Additionally, the three of us, all stakeholders from RUMORE, want to create awareness on the topic of food waste. Together we are now working on a project plan for a predictable surplus food distribution system for restaurant chefs. We aim to get funding by the Operational Programme of the western Netherlands (Kansen voor West).

### 3) The RUMORE project aims at strengthening innovation capacities through rural-urban cooperation and partnerships. What is the significance of this topic for Instock?

Instock works with the supermarket chain Albert Heijn in the whole Region and we use their reverse logistics. They have a system of collecting all leftovers from the stores and bring it to their return center. They put all products apart that can be useful for us, meaning those products that may still be sold by law (they may not be sold when they are past the date, only fresh fruits and vegetables have no regulations). We pick it up at their return center and take it to our own sorting factory, the place where we separate still useful products from the rest. We have tried to also get in touch with the large scale

farmers and producers from the region, but we found that their 'leftovers' concern such huge amounts, that they highly exceed our (Instock) scale level. Also, for them it is not efficient to get involved with small parties like us, they want a 'total solution', so they do not have to get into a dialogue with all the small initiatives separately. In the end, we as Instock hope to grow and reach a scale size that is needed to become an intermediate party, large enough to collect their surplus and – through our sorting factory – distribute it to smaller parties.

### 4) What advantages could improved rural-urban partnerships have in your region?

We believe that it is important to create a local food culture, something like slow food, where good quality local products are valued. To achieve this we need more local exchange, more circularity in our food chain, that people

enjoy fresh products from their own environment. More artisanal, more respect for soil, landscape and biodiversity, more appreciation of taste and willingness to pay for it.

### 5) Can you name some example projects or initiatives for knowledge transfer between regional actors?

Our Instock online study manual for schools is very successful. Primary and secondary schools, but also schools for chefs, both in the city and in the Region, download [our study program](#). There is even a Hotelschool that introduced their own circular cooking module based on the principles from our cooking book.

We give many guest lectures, also to large companies (we find that food waste is really a theme for them), and find that this has a lot of spin off. People tell us they are inspired by our story. We also find new employees, with fresh ideas, this way.

## 6) You are currently doing a preliminary application for funding by Operational Programme Kansen voor West, what is your experience so far?

It is great that a programme like Kansen voor West exists. However, we find that it requires so much preparation, it takes so much time. We have to do this besides our normal business; it was actually not possible so we appointed someone specially for this. Creating

a business plan is a good thing, but the amount of details that are asked makes it difficult. When you have an innovative new idea, you do not know every financial detail yet. Doing something completely new means that it is not completely predictable.

## 7) RUMORE supports the exchange of good practices between European regions, which ones could inspire you?

When we started our restaurant we had a lot of contact with other pioneers on food waste, especially in the UK and Scandinavia. This was really inspiring. Now we are generally so consumed by keeping the business running that we do not make time for this. But when I look at the partners in RUMORE now, I feel that the Southern European countries may still have something that we lost: a local food culture, pride in local products, valuing quality and taste. This is where we want to go back to, our price-

driven, large-scale export- and import oriented food system made us forget about this.

We did not join a partner meeting though as a stakeholder/entrepreneur – although it is certainly interesting to exchange knowledge – because we are so busy keeping our business going that it is not possible to make time for this. And we have the advantage that many people from abroad come to the Netherlands and visit us!