

# Let's bloom together

One of the goals of the Dutch Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong is to facilitate business in Hong Kong. Through referrals in the Dutch community, three new entrepreneurs, **Kathelijn de Beer**, **Madelon van de Ven** and **Evan Horsman**, found each other and are now working together.

■ Interview by Zuba Adham-Bos, Photography by Rinske Kuiper, GM at SofaSale HK

**Madelon van de Ven** arrived in Hong Kong nine months ago. One of her first impressions was how green the city is, especially compared to Shanghai, where she lived before. "However, I noticed that the greenery was only outdoors. Hong Kong has a low score on well-being, so my mission is to improve citizens' well-being by bringing awareness about the positive effects of being surrounded by health beneficial plants indoors." In June, she set up **PLNTY**, a business focusing on both residential spaces with a curated online plant shop as well as commercial spaces. PLNTY offers monthly plant subscriptions which also includes bi-weekly plant care for offices, retailers and restaurants.

**Kathelijn de Beer** and her husband moved to Hong Kong about a year and a half ago. "The idea to become an entrepreneur was always present when I was in the Netherlands, but I felt that something was holding me back. Here in Hong Kong, I suddenly had carte blanche." Kathelijn has a background in e-commerce and marketing. This background and her love for flowers seemed like the ideal e-commerce concept. Inspired by a Dutch company that she used to buy flowers from, she conducted market research that showed there was room for

her business idea to bloom. She started **Sprouts & Sparkles**, a web shop that offers unconventional and stylish bouquets made with fresh seasonal Dutch flowers at competitive prices. With the subscription you can get Dutch flowers regularly or you can do a single purchase to flower up your home (office).

**Evan Horsman** has been in Hong Kong on and off since 2012. He has always worked in the food & beverage and hospitality industry, and lived and worked in several European countries before coming to Hong Kong. His Hong Kong journey started at Aqua, a renowned restaurant in Tsim Sha Tsui. Within a few months, he got an offer to work at The Peninsula. Hospitality is Evan's passion, so when he received an exciting offer from a restaurant in Beijing, he jumped at the opportunity. However, it was hard to combine the job with seeing his partner, who was still in Hong Kong. In July 2018, he moved back to Hong Kong and from that moment the idea to become an entrepreneur stayed in the back of his head. Following a move to Stanley, he noticed there was room for a place with wine and great cheeses. The idea to start his own wine room, **Bubbles & Wines**, was born.



### Who are your ideal clients?

Although she has an ideal client in mind, ultimately anyone could be Madelon's client. They range from individual consumers to art galleries and law firms. Her ambitious goal is to make every room in Hong Kong green as that benefits each person and every space.

Kathelijin focuses on consumers of all nationalities in Hong Kong. As her website is English, she has noticed that her clients are mostly international. However, during her 'Save The Tulips' action, her flowers reached deep into the New Territories as Hong Kong people were buying them for their parents too.

Evan: "My focus is mainly on residents of Stanley and Tai Tam to build up a network of regular customers. But I target everyone that is looking for a good glass of wine, nice cheese and charcuterie, and excellent hospitality in a relaxed living room-style ambience."

### How do you reach your clients?

For all three entrepreneurs, networking, referrals and social media are essential parts of their business development.

Madelon: "I offer my plant subscriptions usually to companies and retailers that I find via my network. I work with construction companies and interior designers so I can get connected to their networks as well. This year my goal is to become the number one service provider for architects and project developers, where I will become their plant expert and take care of biophilic design of the spaces they develop."

In the weeks prior to the opening of his restaurant, Evan started promoting Bubbles & Wines. Word of mouth is one way, but social media is also incredibly important to him. When he created his Facebook page, he had 75 followers within two days.

Kathelijin has experienced that Hong Kong is an excellent breeding ground for entrepreneurship. People are open and focused on networking, many are happy to make connections and refer you to others, also on social media.

They each noticed the power of social media in Hong Kong. "I am still getting sales from a Facebook post from four weeks ago", says Madelon. Evan has documented the road to his restaurant's opening on social media, to get customers involved from the beginning, and Kathelijin often gets referred to in Facebook groups.

### How has COVID-19 affected your business?

Kathelijin set up her company a month before COVID-19 hit Hong Kong, while Madelon and Evan started during the pandemic. Many entrepreneurs have been struggling during this time. Naturally, we were curious about their experiences during this challenging time.

For Kathelijin's Sprouts & Sparkles, the pandemic has given her a couple of opportunities that otherwise might not have happened. The global flower export market took a hard hit because of COVID-19 and many flowers had to be destroyed. Kathelijin set up a 'Save-the-Tulips' action: she offered tulips for an attractive price in Hong Kong. This action helped her reach a large audience. She was then approached by the Dutch Consulate in Hong Kong to offer tulips to hospital personnel in Hong Kong. "This was a project in the background, which did not necessarily create brand awareness, but helped me acquire experience and positive cooperation in the Dutch community. Also, many people are spending much time at home; they are looking for ways to brighten up their space and opt for flowers. The largest downside is the decreased number of flights and increased airfreight costs."

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Evan: "Early on I had my doubts, but then I thought if I don't go for it now, nothing will happen after. Luckily, rental prices have dropped and I was able to arrange a good agreement. Of course, it is still quite a risk and I have been more cautious with my budgeting. But I also believe that people are looking for an escape as soon as the government measures get more relaxed. People won't be travelling much or not at all this year – the wine room will be a new discovery and an escape from the ordinary."

Madelon had to make a choice for herself; looking for a job with an employer or make her entrepreneurial dream a reality. With her extensive network and knowledge in the horticulture/plant industry, she decided to set up PLNTY and has been ambitious and working hard ever since. The coronavirus pandemic has made people more aware of their health and well-being, which ties in perfectly with PLNTY's mission.



Kathelijn de Beer (left), Evan Horsman and Madelon van de Ven.

### How did you start your cooperation?

It started with the furniture for Bubbles & Wines. Evan got in touch with (board) member Rinske Kuiper, General Manager at SofaSale HK, who has custom made most of the furniture for the wine room. As Evan mentioned, he was also looking for plants, Rinske referred him to Madelon, who then introduced Kathelijn as well, to provide fresh flowers for the wine room.

Kathelijn and Madelon had been introduced to each other on the hockey field earlier this year. Since they are in a similar industry, they have been cooperating a lot and they offer each other's services at companies they are working with.

Madelon: "For Evan, it is a good concept that he can work with both of us. I'll be visiting Bubbles & Wines bi-weekly to take care of the plants. At the same time, I can deliver new bouquets from Kathelijn, which will save time and costs for all of us."

### Do you have tips for new entrepreneurs?

The learning curve is steep for starting entrepreneurs and tips are often welcome. The trio shares their tips.

Madelon: "You should be prepared and have a strategy. When you are goal oriented, you will achieve more. I have just been

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accepted into the accelerator program of Silicon Valley's Founder Institute, a program that focusses on all aspects of entrepreneurship. You should have enough flexibility in your plans to pivot if necessary and evaluate what works well and what doesn't."

Kathelijn: "Before I decided to start my own company, I was worried about all the potential pitfalls I would come across. But I went for it anyway. There will be hurdles, but you will find ways to overcome them along the way."

Evan kept it short and simple: "Just follow your dreams and make it happen!" ■