



Kim Ragaert has been professor of Circular Plastics at the Faculty of Science and Engineering since September 2021. Her background is in mechanical engineering and materials science. She obtained her PhD in Engineering Sciences at Ghent University, then worked as a researcher, assistant and associate professor and coordinator of projects such as C-PlaNeT. In 2020 she was awarded the prestigious title of European Plastics Recycling Ambassador of the Year.

“This gives people a ‘licence to litter’ by implying you can just use alternatives like bamboo straws or biodegradable soup cups once and then throw them out. That way they’re not recycled and we end up polluting the environment even more. I’d rather see a European Single Use Product Directive—let’s reuse all our products more often, taking plastic as an example. We should see it as a raw material rather than as waste.”

Valuable material

A stronger commitment to plastic recycling would require a different, more responsible mindset. “For starters, product developers will have to design products that take the recycling process into account. The government can encourage this through legislation and subsidies. In addition, we have to raise awareness; consumers need to know that plastic is a valuable material, that we can really do something with it as long as we reuse it properly. Then demand will eventually arise again automatically, and it will become easier for product developers and retailers to use plastic again. Often they shy away from it because consumer pressure is high and plastic has a bad image.”

Fishing nets

Recycling should result in less new waste, but what do we do with the plastic that is already polluting our oceans? “Plastic that has long been exposed to UV light and seawater can be even more difficult to process. Fortunately, there are innovative startups that have succeeded, for example, in turning discarded fishing nets—which make up a large part of marine litter—into new fishing nets. In any event, plastic waste has to be removed from the sea, of course, and we have to avoid creating more marine pollution. Globally, the Western world should take responsibility by helping to develop the collection and recycling infrastructure in countries where a great deal of litter is currently generated. That way, packaging will find its way into the circular economy there too.”

Unselfish

Ragaert would rather contribute to a better world than help companies turn a profit. “That’s why I chose academia; I want to do my part through my research.” But she also tries to set a good example in everyday life. “I sort my waste, reuse products wherever possible, drink from the tap or from a refillable bottle, buy products made from recycled plastic, replenish soap from large bottles instead of buying small ones. Every little bit helps, and if we all contribute, we can generate a critical mass for all materials. If people stop buying those cute little 0.15L soft-drink cans or 20g of pre-packaged nuts, they’ll soon disappear from the shelves.” <



Soul kitchen

A peek inside the kitchens of UM employees

Text
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Photography
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→
The
scientist,
the chef
and her
passions

Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience of Abnormal Eating
Anne Roefs and her daughters Meike en Elin

Even as an 11-year-old, she used to jump at the chance to cook for the entire family. Anne Roefs, professor of Psychology and Neuroscience of Abnormal Eating, was tossing up between a career as a scientist or a top chef. Now she is passionate about her research on topics such as obesity. Occasionally she fantasises about using her knowledge to promote sustainable weight loss: “There’s no reason healthy food can’t be tasty too. What if I were to write a cookbook with healthy recipes, combined with a meal box with the right ingredients—the ‘Lose Weight Box’—and an app with supporting advice?” First, however, she must await the verdict on her VICI grant application.

Many people don't seem to realise that healthy food can be tasty too.

Her scientific research has undoubtedly changed her view of food. “I’ve learned how hard it is to change an unhealthy lifestyle. I used to have this cavalier attitude: come on, you just have to do this, this and this. But for the people involved, it’s like elite sport. There’s so much room for improvement in how we can support people in transitioning to and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Some are very good at it; they just flip a switch. But for most people, it’s a very bumpy road. We mainly look at behavioural and psychological elements, but environmental and biological factors also play a role. That’s what my VICI project is about: can we develop profiles of people that can predict who will be able to change their lifestyle and lose weight sustainably, and who won’t? Obesity research tends to be based on averages and neglect individual aspects that can lead to overweight. These profiles could help us decide which intervention is most appropriate.” Roefs is now among the final 20 candidates; around 10 will eventually receive a grant.

Missed opportunity

Listening to her explain her research with such enthusiasm, it’s hard to imagine she ever had doubts about her profession. “When I finished my PhD, I said to Anita [Jansen, her supervisor]: now I’m going to quit and become a chef. ‘Think it over,’ she said. ‘Why not do that two days a week and work four days as a postdoc?’ So I did that for a year: I worked in the kitchen at Le Salonard in Maastricht and also gave cooking lessons. I was friends with the restaurant owner and learned a lot from him, from cutting five kilos of onions to experimenting with flavours. I realised that when you work for a boss you don’t have the freedom to do your own thing. But I found starting

for myself too risky—I’m actually risk averse,” she laughs. “And the days in the restaurant all started to look the same just as my postdoc research was becoming more and more interesting, so I decided to pursue my scientific career. I’ve never regretted that choice, not least because my research is on eating behaviour. Many people don’t seem to realise that healthy food can be tasty too—such a missed opportunity!”

Freedom of choice

Roefs hails from a baker’s family in Brabant, and both of her grandmothers were good cooks. “A love of food is definitely part of it, just not through my parents. Food was functional for us; my mother is definitely not your typical Burgundian. When I was 11 and suggested cooking for the family, she must have thought, great, that way I don’t have to do it, whereas I thought: now I’ll be able to make food that’s actually yummy.” She experimented with cookbooks and learned from an uncle who was into French cuisine. “Chocolate mousse and the perfect chips with homemade mayonnaise. He always made a party of it and let you go your own way, intervening only when you were really headed in the wrong direction. I see him doing the same thing with my daughters now, and it works.”

During high school she waited tables at a high-end restaurant, so the Hotel School in Maastricht seemed a logical choice. “But it was awful: completely focused on management, no cooking at all. I didn’t feel at home there. I quit after two years, much to the horror of my parents. My father’s a guidance counsellor, and he hadn’t seen it coming at all,” she laughs.



Anne Roefs, professor of Psychology and Neuroscience of Abnormal Eating, studied Psychology at Maastricht University. She succeeded Anita Jansen as chair of the Eating Lab, a research, education and treatment laboratory at UM. Her research focuses on obesity, weight loss and dieting, eating disorders, brain processes and interventions. In 2016 she received an NWO VIDI grant for her research on reward responses to food.



History repeats itself

At the time of the interview, Roefs, her husband and their two daughters (aged 10 and 12) are living elsewhere while renovating the ground floor of their house: a new kitchen was a must. “We thought long and hard about the layout. I need a good oven and lots of space, so we’ll have a very long countertop—almost to where the dining table is—because I like to cook with company. A good convection oven is enough for me; I don’t need fancy technology. If I want to steam something, I just do it with an aluminium steamer in a pan.”

Her favourite chef is Yotam Ottolenghi. “I use his books whenever I have time and am cooking for a group. Roasted aubergines, how special can they be? But if you use all those ingredients in his recipes, they become so exciting. My work has definitely led me to cook more healthily.” She is also keen to pass on her passion to her daughters. “The eldest, who’s just turned 12, enjoys cooking and can prepare a meal on her own. She’ll app me to say, ‘Mama, can I cook?’ So sweet.” History repeats itself. <