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The excessive monoculture cultivation of oil palm, the associated environmental damage and the precarious working conditions in the producing countries are rightly criticized.

HUOBER BREZEL also strongly opposes this development.

However, fundamentally rejecting the use of palm oil in food ignores the actual circumstances, the global context and leaves the people in the producing countries alone in their situation. It is important to develop alternatives and find ways to encourage people with our demand and support to cultivate responsibly. We are intensively studying the conditions of palm oil cultivation and source our palm fat directly from our cultivation partner in Colombia, whom we last visited in 2023, without any middlemen. (Read more under point 3).

The sustainably produced organic palm oil we use is certified at the highest RSPO level (RSPO IP) and in accordance with the guidelines of the EU organic regulation. So for a better understanding of our decision to consciously use palm oil in our products, we have summarized the key points below:



An opened oil palm fruit shows the fatty core.

1) What is palm oil?

Palm oil is a vegetable oil that is extracted from the fruit of the African oil palm. The oil palm, which originally comes from West Africa, can grow up to 30 meters tall and live up to 200 years. It bears fruit after about three years. The fruits take six to nine months to ripen. The fruit clusters of the oil palm consist of several hundred fruits and can weigh up to 50 kilograms. They are harvested several times a year.

Due to its properties and uses, palm oil is the most important vegetable oil in the world and is contained in every second product in the supermarket. It is mainly used to make food, but also cosmetics and cleaning products. In addition, around half of the palm oil imported into Germany is already used for energy. Today, around 80 million tons of palm oil are produced worldwide on an area of 20 million hectares (almost 90% in Southeast Asia, around one percent in Colombia).

(Source: <https://www.bmel.de/DE/themen/ernaehrung/nachhaltiger-konsum/nachhaltiges-palmoel-fonap.html>)

2) Why do we use palm oil?

Palmfat has qualitative properties that are very suitable for our long-life baked goods. It is heat-resistant, oxidation-stable, tasteless and odourless and gives our products a long shelf life. Baking experiments with domestic oils have not yet shown comparable stability.

As an organic manufacturer, we do not use preservatives, flavour enhancers or other chemical additives. Our baking tests have shown that these additives currently would be necessary to meet our quality standards.



Manual weighing of palm fat in the HUOBER production.

The palm oil has a solid structure at room temperature and does not need to be hardened during processing. This is what makes it significantly different from other vegetable oils.

„There are often calls to replace palm oil with other (vegetable) oils. From the BMEL's point of view, substituting palm oil with other vegetable oils and fats such as coconut or soy is not a suitable answer to the challenges, as this could simply shift the problems or, depending on the respective production standards, even exacerbate them.

With 4 tonnes of oil per hectare, the oil palm is the most productive oil crop and therefore the most land-efficient. Rapeseed, coconut, sunflower or soy produce significantly lower oil yields per hectare on average.

The existing demand on the world market for vegetable oils can therefore be satisfied with the oil palm with comparatively smaller land use.“

(Source: <https://www.bmel.de/DE/themen/ernaehrung/nachhaltiger-konsum/nachhaltiges-palmoel-fonap.html>)

The oil palm has the highest yield of all oil plants. To produce the same amount of oil from the domestic sunflower, four to six times the area of land would be needed.

In the case of Germany, this would correspond to 1.64 million hectares.

(Source: „Auf der Ölspur, WWF 2016“)

The cultivation of oil palms is the livelihood of many small farmers and is not necessarily linked to deforestation, excessive monoculture and exploitation.

We take our responsibility seriously by supporting sustainable and ecological cultivation. Just as we are committed to organic farming on our home soil, we also want to support organic farming worldwide and maintain established relationships. Last but not least, cultivation was driven forward by strong demand from Europe.



Felipe Guerrero (Daabon) with Arlend Huober in front of the Tequendama oil mill.

In order to develop alternatives to palm oil, HUOBER BREZEL supported the breeding efforts of high-oleic organic sunflowers through Peter Kunz Seed Breeding for over 10 years.

3) Report on our palm oil producers

Our sustainable organic palm oil comes exclusively from Colombia. We last visited our cultivation partner in August 2023 to get a precise picture of the cultivation and working conditions on site.

The region

The main growing area is in the north of Colombia, not far from the Caribbean coast, near the village of Aracataca. A second plantation is located in the metropolitan region of Bucaramanga.

In the 19th century, the United Fruit Company (now Chiquita Banana) exploited the area by growing tropical fruits for export without the local people benefiting from them. Guerrilla groups then destabilised the area for many years. Today, the region is developing positively. The cultivation of bananas, citrus fruits and oil palms provides many local people with a livelihood and contributes to the development of the region.

Our palm oil producer Daabon has had a positive influence on development over the last three decades.

The producer

The Daabon company is a family business that is now in its third generation. The company began growing bananas in 1914. In the early 1990s, the company began organic production, inspired by the cultivation methods of a Demeter farm in Europe. In addition to the Tequendama farm, Daabon maintains other cultivation areas and works with several hundred small farmers. In addition to producing palm oil, the company grows organic bananas and organic coffee and also offers logistics services. Today, the company has over 3,800 employees, all of whom enjoy the benefits of registered work - health, pension and unemployment insurance - just like we do.

The plantations

Daabon produces palm oil mainly on its own plantations (70%) and obtains 20 percent from the so-called „Alianzas“ and buys about 10 percent from independent producers as needed.

„Alianzas“ is an association of several hundred small farmers who cooperate with Daabon. Daabon guarantees a fixed price, the purchase of the harvest and social security. In addition, the company supports the small farmers in their independence by providing cultivation and economic advice. The organic share is around 80 percent, according to Daabon.

The plantations are around 1,500 hectares in size, which is significantly smaller than monoculture cultivation in Southeast Asia, and is characterized by natural undergrowth. In addition, around ten percent is left unused to nature in order to preserve the ecosystem and provide a place of refuge for animals (frogs, birds, rodents and monkeys).

No clearing is carried out for new areas; only disused cultivation areas or pasture land are considered. In 2007, the company was criticised for buying up land that farmers later claimed ownership of.

The situation was very non-transparent and because the conflict could not be resolved, the company withdrew from the area in 2010. Today, it checks purchases of areas according to strict criteria (Clinton list, indigenous population, nature conservation, etc.) in order to avoid such situations.



Felipe Guerrero (Daabon) talking to Arlend Huober, in the middle of one of the plantations.

The cultivation

There are 142 oil palms per hectare on the plantations. This ensures the healthy development of the trees and leaves sufficient space for transportation. The oil palms can be harvested over a period of 35 years, after which new trees are planted. The fruit is cut from the treetops with long hand saws and then brought from the forest to the roadside by buffaloes.

From there they are transported to the oil mill by truck. Instead of artificial fertilizer, compost from the company's own composting plant is used. This is made from buffalo dung and other by-products such as leaves, fruit clusters, shells, ash and sand. To improve the quality, the company breeds earthworms and adds them to the compost. This gives the compost nitrogen, which is particularly beneficial for the young plants.

Observing natural processes is also used in pest control. Infestation of the oil palm by bugs and caterpillars is contained by spraying native fungal cultures. The fungus is specially cultivated in the laboratory for this purpose and applied to the trees with water.

Processing

The fruit clusters are processed quickly after harvest. The oil mill is located directly on site. First, the orange-red fruits are grated from the fruit cluster and then steamed. Only then is the reddish oil pressed from the fruit and filtered. Whereas previously the crude palm oil was sent to Germany for further refining.

Since 2024, it has been refined directly in Colombia and processed into fat blocks. This takes place in their own photovoltaic-based refining plant in Santa Marta. From there, the fat blocks are delivered by ship to Rotterdam and from there to us by truck. Anchoring further stages of the value chain in the country of origin, Colombia, was a particular concern for us.



Employees of the palm oil refinery in Santa Marta during the tour with Felipe Guerrero and Arlend Huober.



Sustainability

Daabon regularly monitors the diversity of animal species on their plantations, because this allows changes in the ecosystem to be detected at an early stage. Their principle is: If the earth is healthy, the plants are healthy. If the plants are healthy, the animals are healthy too. Daabon also endeavours to use the available resources sparingly when it comes to energy supply. To this end, the company has built a biogas plant in which methane gas is produced from production residues, which in turn leads to a self-sufficient energy supply to the oil mill.

In addition, the transport vehicles can be operated with it. The brewing water from the oil mill is treated and also recycled. Daabon has formed the „Palm Oil Innovation Group“ (poig.org) with other companies to promote sustainable cultivation.



Karen (left) and Arlend Huober with Felipe Guerrero (middle) in front of freshly harvested oil palm fruit stands.

Social commitment

The company supports people in the region on their way to self-employment through so-called microcredits and accompanies the founders on their way to self-employment through further training.

For example, a seamstress was supported in this way and now makes work clothes for employees. In addition, Daabon is involved in various infrastructure projects, builds employee housing and supports school projects.

During our visits in 2016 and 2023, we were able to see many examples of the consistency with which the Daabon company takes on ecological and social responsibility.

The visit in 2023 in particular encourages us to continue working together and makes it clear that sustainable palm oil production is possible.

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Arlend Huober, 2024*

HUOBER BREZEL GmbH & Co.
Riedstraße 1 · DE-71729 Erdmannhausen
Phone +49(0)7144/338-0 · www.huoberbrezel.de

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