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Matt Eastland [00:00:06] I'm Matt Eastland.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:00:07] And I'm Lukxmi Balathasan and welcome to The Food Fight podcast from EIT Food, Europe's leading innovation community, working hard to make the system more sustainable, healthy and trusted.

Matt Eastland [00:00:19] At EIT Food we're incredibly passionate about supporting entrepreneurs from all corners of the agrifood sector and from talented innovators launching their first ideas to scale-ups attempting big moves in the marketplace. EIT Food has built a number of programmes to help ventures of all shapes and sizes. So that journey as an entrepreneur. So launching a product or service and growing this like a really strong, resilient brand is something we really want to talk about today. And with us are three amazing guests from different EIT Food business creation programmes. So our first guest is Ying Shao, the co-founder of Plantik Biosciences, a company looking into new advancements in plant breeding. Plantik is part of our seabird incubator programme. Welcome to the show, Ying.

Ying Shao [00:01:07] Thanks. Very happy to join you here.

Matt Eastland [00:01:09] Lovely to have you.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:01:10] And next up, we have Lorenzo Conti. He's the founder and MD of Crover, a company that has developed a robotic grain monitoring solution that can swim through grain storage units to monitor the condition of what's inside. Really interesting technology. So Crover is an alumni of the Seedbed programme last year and is currently a member of the EIT Food Accelerator Network. So welcome to the podcast, Lorenzo.

Lorenzo Conti [00:01:35] Thank you for having me.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:01:36] It's great to have you.

Matt Eastland [00:01:38] And finally, someone we've met on this podcast before. So Solveiga Pakstaite, founder and director at Mimica. The company's first product, Mimica Touch, is a temperature sensitive label for food packaging that can tell you exactly when your food has gone off. And Mimica are also part of the EIT Food Rising Food Stars association. Great to have you with us, Solveiga.

Solveiga Pakstaite [00:02:02] Thanks for having me back. It's a pleasure to be here.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:02:04] Thanks all for being here. So we want to hear all about your stories of entrepreneurs today and hopefully share some great advice for our listeners. But one thing that really strikes us is that all of your companies start from incredibly disruptive ideas. So you're all challenged the status quo, the traditional methods of doing things. So to kick off, do you think you need to have a particularly good background in business or a huge wealth of experience to launch a company and disrupt the marketplace? Or is this all about the idea? So Ying, what do you think?

Ying Shao [00:02:33] I think that's a very interesting point because I myself come from a business background. My co-founder is the scientist, so we really complement each other.

I do think that the idea is very, very important. But I also think that the idea alone is not really going to work. You can have a bunch of really brilliant ideas, but whether they will work in the real markets, how to really take that stuff from laboratories to the market, I think there's a really long way to go. So I think it will really help to have the business part of things as well. So that's, you know, you know how to test your ideas, whether it will work, you know, which customers to speak to. So yeah, I would say, yeah, it would be very good to also have the business part of things.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:03:25] And Lorenzo, I think for you it's a different perspective. You're the scientist. So what do you think?

Lorenzo Conti [00:03:32] Indeed, I come from a scientific background. So it's been a learning curve. As I started off, the only business knowledge that I had was the equivalent of A-level's of economics. So it wasn't very much. But thanks to programmes like the EIT Food Seedbed and EIT Food Accelerator Networks, I've been through several what I consider mini MBAs that put me at the level of being able to run a Start-Up. So even though I didn't have it to begin with, I think it is required. And it took me a little bit of time to learn how to do the business side of things.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:04:08] And Solveiga. So you have also have a really interesting background, again, technical. But tell us about that because I find that story really interesting.

Solveiga Pakstaite [00:04:16] Yes, I'm actually quite jealous of Lorenzo for even having an A-level in this. So yeah, literally zero business economic background from my side. I went to university to study industrial design and technology and I never really had an idea to become an entrepreneur until it was actually a university project that got a lot of attention. So I always say that the business happened to me. So I think, no, you don't need experience because I definitely had absolutely like less than zero business experience when I started. But what you do really need is like the mindset to learn and accept help and be willing to say, enter a pretty big room sometimes and say, like, hey, guys, I'm completely new to this, I'm here to learn, so be really open to accepting mentors, listening really carefully to what your customers are telling you, like even though you want to hear them say, well, everything is wonderful and we love your product, you really need to listen to what they're telling you. And I really agree with Lorenzo about accelerator programmes being like mini MBAs and that's certainly the position that I now feel in as well. And I think overall, the thing that's going to pull you through is a bit of a naive enthusiasm that you need to put the energy into it and to be willing to learn things along the way.

Matt Eastland [00:05:38] Solveiga, so you mentioned something earlier, which is really interesting. You said that your business happened to you. So what was the moment when you realised that you said to yourself, I've got a business here, you know, what actually happened?

Solveiga Pakstaite [00:05:52] So as I mentioned, you know, the idea behind Mimica was my final major project at design school. You know, I well, it was very interesting what I was doing. I didn't really see it going further. And I was encouraged by the university to enter into something called the James Dyson Award, which is kind of a pretty prestigious design competition that is looking for the kind of problem being solved by design students that year, an international competition. Entered it forgot about it, started an internship, and then within the second week of my internship, I got a very interesting phone call telling me that

I'd won the UK competition. And it's a pretty big deal here in the U.K. So very quickly, it was all over the press. So front page of Wired website and in The Guardian and the time my surname was the answer for the Times crossword that weekend, which is pretty mad.

Matt Eastland [00:06:50] No way, that is amazing.

Solveiga Pakstaite [00:06:52] Life goals.

Matt Eastland [00:06:54] I was going to say, surely you've peaked then, there's no one else to go

Solveiga Pakstaite [00:06:59] That's it. And then I remember particularly that the Evening Standard ran double-page spread about the story with huge full picture of me holding the product of an early version of the product. And, you know, on the tube home, everyone reads the Evening Standard. So it was just this bizarre moment of like me also riding the tube and people looking down at the newspapers and looking up at me suspiciously and then down again. No one said anything. Silent carriage because it's London. That was a pretty surreal experience. So all of that was happening. And basically, because it was all over the press, food companies started hearing about it and retailer. So they were getting in touch. And I didn't quit my internship. I ended up kind of sneaking out, you know, lunchtime to hold meetings, you know, Coca Cola's head office and stuff. It was kind of mad and probably with six months after that, it only hit me that what I was doing was starting a company rather than, I was just seeing it as going to fun meetings where people just said nice things about what I'd created. But then I was like, no, this is actually like something that I should be doing and I doing my first accelerator programme.

Matt Eastland [00:08:08] Amazing. That sounds like every entrepreneur's dream start so congrats on that. And just on that note, Lorenzo, I mean, I imagine it may be a different story for you, but why did you start Crover?

Lorenzo Conti [00:08:22] Oh this is actually very interesting for me to hear Solveiga's story, because it's probably the first time that I go to a meeting and not everyone is saying, oh I always wanted to be an entrepreneur, which is what usually happens. And then I go, I never even thought of putting together a Start-Up and people look at me strangely because I find that most people think that you know, you need to fail several times before you can put together a successful Start-Up. In my case, I mean, the story is quite different. But also it kind of happened to me. It wasn't really something planned. I was just doing my Ph.D., the University of Edinburgh in the broad field of chronobiology, which is a bit like saying fluid dynamics, buffer systems made of solid discrete particles. Things like sand in the ground, grains, which is what we're focussing on right now, powder's and so on. And I just stopped to observe normal physical phenomenon that wasn't really known at the time, what we call now the crover effect.

Matt Eastland [00:09:19] Wow.

Lorenzo Conti [00:09:19] And I still didn't really know what to do with it. The time I start putting together, the start was still not the plan. I just started talking to people without really revealing what the technology was, but kind of describing very generally what it could do and eventually I just stop to meet one of the advisors from the university under suggestion from a friend who started giving me reading materials and things. I didn't really understand at the time that he was a Start-Up advisor. I was just like, oh, he's just the guy, you know, giving me advice and giving me, like, you know, useful reading material. So I really kind of

sympathise with Solveiga's story because also I didn't realise until a few months into it that what I was actually doing was putting together a start up, and so I was like, ok, you know, this is happening, this is the way we're going and it's the best way for our daughter and academic route to deliver the benefits that the technology could do to society and to the world.

Matt Eastland [00:10:19] Incredible.

Solveiga Pakstaite [00:10:20] I don't know about you, if you don't mind me asking. I really kind of did not identify with the word entrepreneur for a really long time because I'm just a designer with this thing and I'm going to these meetings and like, I was kind of in denial that I was even running a Start-Up and that I was becoming an entrepreneur. So I'm really pleased that at least someone else here had a similar experience.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:10:42] We have some accidental entrepreneurs here today. And what about you, Ying? So to explain a little bit about Plantik Biosciences. So what exactly do you do and what's your story? Your entrepreneurship story?

Ying Shao [00:10:55] Yeah. So Lorenzo, I think I'm one of those people that you will meet that will say that I always wanted to be an entrepreneur. Well, I guess it's just more like aspirational, I think, outcome for somebody coming from business. I remember that when I graduated from business school, most people were going to finance or strategy and I just was naturally attracted to start-ups, which was not yet a hot topic back then, I would say, because I think just at the back of my head, I always knew that I wanted to do something more or less myself one day. So I went to work in two start-ups just to see how things work. They were at different stages. And from there last year I heard about Entrepreneur First, which is a talent investor. They help you to find a co-founder. So I thought that that's great because I didn't want to do this myself and I wanted to have a tech co-founder so that we can build something that is kind of high barrier. So I went there and I met my co-founder, who is a plant scientist, and he has just done his Ph.D. So I searched his name and Antoine has had a patent on a gene-editing technique on plants. So he created a plant that stop sensing temperature change. We thought that that was really interesting. So we started looking into plant breeding because we realised that it is really something important. We have to do something about it because let's look at the food production, for example it's growing at half the speed that's needed and which means in thirty years time, theoretically, we will have more people starving than today. And for me, it's just a shocking scenario to enter. And you have two options. Either you increase the surface on which you grow crops or you have to increase the yield by hectare of the crops. There's another thing is that, yeah, people start to look at Alternative proteins source as well, more and more. So, yeah, generally, we wanted to start a company in plant breeding to bring the new technologies to plant breeding, which is essentially a quite old practise in agriculture. It takes years and hundreds of crossing to create a stable new plant. And we thought that, yeah, we could bring up a technology to make everything much faster because you bring the precision, the efficiency to that process. So what we are doing is, is that we want to be able to create technologies and a system where we can just accelerate the process of plant breeding. And then we decided to start with hemp, a.k.a. cannabis. It's from the same family because we were just amazed by how many applications this plant has. It's a really multipurpose, very versatile plant from, you know, treating patients to provide protein source. It's one of the richest seeds in nature and to sustainability, it's a very good material. People are researching for bioplastic, absorbing CO2, creating carbon-neutral farming etc, etc. So we were amazed by it. And then we saw that because of the historic prohibition on the plants, the research and knowledge around, it's really stopped for almost

a century, which means there's a lot to do with this plant. So we saw the opportunity there and we think that the newer technology has a higher chance of being applied to this plant compared to other bigger crops. So that's why we started the company focussed on hemp plants today.

Matt Eastland [00:14:28] Amazing. What an incredible set of varied stories there. So you've got like a dedicated entrepreneur committed to that cause. You've got that kind of eureka moment for Lorenzo, that sparked that and Solveiga rolling out of studies into this sort of accelerator programme, which has obviously just exploded. It's amazing. Just then talking a little bit about where you're all at then. So you're all in the first five years of running your companies. So in terms of like the learning curves, what have been some of the biggest challenges that have affected you as a company and maybe also personally, if you're happy to share that. So, Lorenzo, what about you?

Lorenzo Conti [00:15:11] I think the biggest challenge that we're still facing today, you know, when we were talking about the fact that we started with the technology rather than the market is the fact that there is a lot of noise around different start-ups doing multiple things and a lot of kind of buzzwords like robotics and so on, that we sort of somehow fit in. But it's hard always to deliver how innovative what we're doing is. So when we say that we built the first robotic device that can swim through both solids, so effectively the first ground drone, if you want to call it like that, we call it a Crover because there's no dictionary word for that. People don't tend to realise that there isn't anything else that can do that.

Matt Eastland [00:15:53] Right.

Lorenzo Conti [00:15:54] Unless they do the research. So, you know, often I get people that when they do the research and they're like, oh, I didn't realise that this actually didn't exist. So that's a little bit the challenge that we have that just, you know, the first impression from people is usually or, you know, yet another robotic solution that maybe is tackling a specific problem. But don't realise kind of the wider impact. So I would say that's the main challenge that we have. This is more of a kind of PR and marketing challenge. But with the limited resources that we have, it takes a little bit of time to get through it.

Matt Eastland [00:16:25] That's interesting. And Solveiga, did you go through this similar kind of thing for your product? And, you know, maybe is there any kind of tips that you can give, Lorenzo, in terms of getting that that marketing out there?

Solveiga Pakstaite [00:16:37] I think it's important to keep focussed on developing your technology, like while kind of thinking about, you know, at least every couple of weeks or maybe every couple of months at the minimum, you know, there should be something that the general world should be hearing about what you're doing. We're in a lucky position where we've never really done any press releases or anything like that, we just kind of make use of the inbound journalist enquiries that we get. And certainly I'm saying no to most of them that come in, because I think at the start I made the mistake of just saying yes to all of them because I thought every single one was going to be the last one. So I think that, you know, when you start making traction, you don't need to talk to every single publication because you need to think about who you are trying to reach. And I think I wasn't doing that so much at the start. But yeah, I think I also would kind of say on social media, don't do it unless you're willing to do it like often. There's no point in kind of doing it actively for a couple of weeks and then nothing. So I'd rather actually just be in stealth mode, to be honest, until you're willing to put the time and potential resources into it. So

but in terms of my challenge and for Mimica, I started as a sole founder with no business background, which I was doing my best to learn. But like, you can't replace experience for that. So my largest challenge was kind of not being sure of myself, whether I was making the right strategy decisions and that sort of thing. And every single decision just would take me three times longer than it might have taken someone else, because I was having to, like, talk to people or like or kind of really think it through myself. And just that even when I've made that decision, the anxiety of is this the right thing, I have literally no idea what I'm doing. You know, things to seem to be I mean, I'm kind of painting myself down, but like, I was doing an ok job, but like it was I was putting so much brain space into just making it ok. And I think that's when I realised I needed more experienced people to come on board and really help me with that so I can really focus on what I'm better at, which is maybe not being a CEO. So I actually made the decision a couple of years ago to step aside from the CEO role. And I brought into very experienced guys from the smart packaging field in the smart food industry around reducing food waste initially as consultants because, you know, you want to date around for a while before you marry. But I invited Laurence Kayson and Lawrie Matthews into the company as a CEO and CTO, and that's been the best decision for me. And I opened up my headspace to kind of just think about other things, because I, I hadn't realised until I made the change just how much of my headspace was full of just making one hundred decisions a day that I didn't feel very qualified to do. So the whole company has been running so much better. The team is happier ever since I made that change. So I don't feel like you are bound to being the CEO. Just because you founded the company is my advice.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:19:49] That's a really interesting point.

Matt Eastland [00:19:51] Yeah.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:19:52] And it kind of brings me back to what I was thinking about what Ying was saying, like most people think being an entrepreneur, a founder is a solo lonely job. And at what point is the right point to bring on a co-founder? Would you, from your experiences like Ying, it sounds like you did this with your co-founder from the beginning. Where Lorenzo and Solviega, you are technically strong and the business happened to you. So what advice would both of you, provide to our audience who are technical founders thinking that they need to do this alone?

Solveiga Pakstaite [00:20:24] I didn't want to do it alone. I actually was kind of looking for a co-founder, but I couldn't find the right person. And hearing some nightmare stories about some proper fallout's between co-founders. I decided that while I would like to do this with a co-founder, I think the wrong co-founder is much more harmful than being a sole founder. So that's what I was doing for a little while. But then when I got to meet both Laurence and Lawrie, it was actually an introduction from the head of packaging at Marks and Spencer that made that introduction because they were already working with them. And yeah, they kind of, Lawrie in particular mentored me for a while. And then when they sold up the business and did really well with their previous business, they got in touch with me saying, like, we like what you're doing at Mimica, can we help? You know, just the opportunity presented itself. And at the time when I kind of stepped aside, as CEO, a lot of people kind of got in touch with me, asking me if I'm okay to have something huge in my life happened, like have I burnt out like, no, but like, are you seeing who is willing to take the helm of this huge mission-led company that I frankly, I'm still learning. But, you know, I can't do the job that they can do in terms of delivering Mimica at the scale it needs to, to have the impact it needs to have. So I'm like, are you seeing who's taking over really? Like, why wouldn't I do this? I'm still involved in the company like full time. We change my

role to Founder and Director. And what that basically means is that I get to work on whatever I want to and still represent the company, you know at events. I think choosing that title is important, I was exploring some other titles, but this one really kind of allows me to speak at conferences and get all the right rooms, because I guess, honestly, people mix it up for the CEO title and that's ok. But I know that day to day that's not my role anymore.

Matt Eastland [00:22:18] Amazing and I can see Ying on the on our call here nodding away. It sounds like you're kind of agreeing with what Solveiga is saying. Given the stage, the early stage that you're at, are you seeing a lot of what you're going through and what Solveiga, you know, is explaining to us?

Ying Shao [00:22:34] I just really like resonate with what Solveiga said on like finding your spots in the mission. I mean, we're super early stage compared to you guys. We founded the company last year. But I also really think that, yeah, with time going, I really see, like, the spots that I'm occupying in the company could change and that wouldn't be something really, like, painful for me. I think what is really important is the mission. It is what we are trying to build. And as long as that's there, I think personally where I sit is not that important as long as I'm contributing to it. So even though I'm not there yet, but I just I think in terms of value, I really agree with that. And I really appreciate I think you sharing that. Back on like challenges. I mean, as a company, we've faced a lot of challenges. But today, I think the main thing is that our industry is a really young one. It's really growing. And the plant, as I said before, it has so many applications. So seemingly you have a abundance of choices to start somewhere. But it is also then a curse of choice because you really don't know where to start. You can change this plant or optimise this plant for so many things. And where do you start? And I used to kind of worry about this, but then the more I speak to other entrepreneurs who have been in their journey for many, many years, I realised that it's a constant thing that's you have to live with this fact that the market is changing. Your customers are also evolving. And this is a question you have to probably ask yourself all the time and re-evaluate and adapt to what is happening. So right now, our strategy is to, yeah, develop things in parallel with the resource that we have and try to smartly, you know, choose maybe one or two specific targets to start with. But what's really important in our mission is to build up this kind of system where you can just work on the target much faster compared to the traditional techniques. On the personal aspects, I've had so many challenges in this journey. But I think one of the most revealing things to me is that I had to accept the fact that I would just have lows like highs and lows, you know, in how I'm working. Maybe before when I was working in a setup where I had a team, I had a boss and all that, it was less evident. But as an entrepreneur, even if I had a co-founder from the beginning, it's still a quite lonely journey sometimes, especially during covid time. So you are in remote and you are really by yourself a lot of times, but I really learned to live with that and accept that as a journey of entrepreneur. And you just have to deal with things happening so fast and deal with all sorts of information and news happening in your day. And, you know, try to be Zen about it.

Matt Eastland [00:25:30] Yeah, Zen about it, I like that. And just on that point about Zen, I mean, Lorenzo, you obviously a little bit further along, does this get easier?

Lorenzo Conti [00:25:42] Well, I mean, we're not that much further ahead. We incorporated two years ago, but we didn't really have a team until last year. So we were just probably a few months ahead of Ying. So, yeah, it's still a lot of the problems that she was talking about, I totally sympathise with because we were still facing them now. But the main thing that has changed is that we've been able to put together a team. It was initially, it was just me having to handle everything. We've brought in some amazing people into

the team that can handle a lot of things much better than I do. And that's why we're able to be much more Zen, like you said about it, because I know that I can trust other people to handle certain things that I, I'm not experienced with myself. Which kind of links with what Solveiga was saying as well, bringing in more experienced people to take care of things so that you can focus on what you're good at.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:26:35] And Lorenzo, as an academic, I guess your network and your circles, I'm going to assume is predominantly other academics. So going from an academic to entrepreneur, what advice would you give to someone in a similar situation for going for help? Taking a lab idea, making it into a commercial proposition?

Lorenzo Conti [00:26:51] Well, I kind of already had decided before all of Crover that I was done with academia. It was not the environment for me, I would say. I mean, I very much enjoy doing scientific work, but just the environment itself, I didn't enjoy very much. And, yeah, it is a very radical change is an entirely different world. People are nicer, but at the same time, you know that they are more fake. So it's a bit of a balance in terms of interpreting what people actually mean. So I'm still learning how to handle the different environment, but I find it one that personally feels much more rewarding and I'm better suited for.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:27:38] Where do you go for help? Like in terms of, you know, how did you any advice for a listener in terms of finding mentors or advisors?

Lorenzo Conti [00:27:46] Well, we got some amazing mentors from EIT Food, so that definitely helped.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:27:52] Great.

Lorenzo Conti [00:27:52] Especially since, you know, we've had a couple of other mentors that were really experienced and super helpful. But when you go through most of the standard routes, especially in Scotland, the ecosystem is historically focussed on digital tech and biotech, primarily biotech. So it's really hard to find people that have had experience in the kind of things that we. Whilst through the EIT Food network we've been able to find people that add more grain storage specific experience, and that has been very helpful because also, it has helped us and is still helping us right now to realise some things that we were unable to see ourselves.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:28:36] Really great to hear that we are doing our job correctly. And Solveiga what about you? You're a little bit, you know, further along. And what advice would you give to entrepreneurs starting up in terms of asking for help and getting the help?

Solveiga Pakstaite [00:28:49] I've personally actually found that I have gotten a bit more value out of mentors that haven't been assigned to me through programmes. I mean, obviously, you get some help because you know that they're well qualified and that kind of thing. But I feel like you really get to the next level of getting valuable information from someone if you just genuinely have a spark with someone. And they can really kind of, they don't have to see themselves in you, but like, you know, they need to definitely like you and kind of want to go above and beyond the kind of outside of a programme, you know, when you've just got set hours to work with your mentor. And I found the most valuable mentors to be ones that we can't do that anymore. But like the networking events after the, you know, the talks and stuff, you've got a glass of wine and someone's listening

to your story and they're like, wow, how can I help? And then they talk about their background and it's like they've got some really useful experience to share with you. And you just kind of end up naturally following up and forming real friendships out of it. So I think you don't need to invite them to be your mentor. Like, you don't need to put a title on it, which is why I think people kind of get confused about it. Could just be someone that you bounce emails with or meet for coffee with and or take a call for. It's not just one person either. I'm a very promiscuous mentee and I also kind of see your peers as mentors as well.

Ying Shao [00:30:17] Yeah. Yeah.

Matt Eastland [00:30:19] And Ying, do you have one mentor, multiple mentors? Have you found that useful?

Ying Shao [00:30:24] Yeah, we've had multiple mentors as well. We've had great mentors through the EIT Food programme. Now we are also accelerated by Start Life, an adtec specialised accelerator in the Netherlands. So in my experience, sometimes we would naturally go for mentors. That seems to have the perfect fit on paper, whether it's, you know, technology or like the sectors. But it's not necessarily like all the time the best person to be on your project, because just as with Solveiga was saying, I actually feel like people who are just genuinely excited about your projects and they start to, you know, give you a thousand ideas all of a sudden, just like that. Those are the people that are really, like, excited about what you're doing. And they probably are going to be the most committed to help you. So, yeah, we started to shift from that kind of, you know, the perfect person on paper kind of thing to, you know, who is really genuinely passionate and excited about what we're doing. It's almost also like a dating process, like Solveiga was saying and it takes long and obviously we have the objective to, you know, onboard them more for a longer term as advisors. But you have to kind of spend the time and see how you work together before you can decide on that.

Matt Eastland [00:31:46] Yeah, I love that. So finding passionate mentors is a key thing, it seems, as well.

Ying Shao [00:31:51] Yeah.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:31:52] Picking up from what you said Ying, you know, you started off in Entrepreneur First and now you're on the EIT Food Seedbed programme. And just to give a little bit background to listeners, so EIT Food we offer various different Start-Up support programmes that really complement the different journeys of entrepreneurs go through from really early-stage ones, who are trying to validate their ideas. And then we have our Food Accelerator Network, which really focus on companies to establish relationships with partners and really build the company. And then Solveiga, who is part of our rising food stars, is an association that helps establish companies to really scale to think about growing internationally. So these are the three different programmes. So coming back to Ying, like how important is it to have support from accelerator support services and how do you go about picking the right one?

Ying Shao [00:32:39] I'm really thankful to EIT Food Seedbed programme because it came really in the middle of lockdown during covid 19, so it was April and we started to feel, you know, naturally worried about what's happening and our, like, lab operations had to halt all of a sudden. And I think it really came at a great time for us for this cohort. And we are always asking ourselves, like which sectors to enter, as I mentioned before. And

through the Seedbed programme, we had a chance to explore more sectors that we didn't necessarily have connections in. So we learned about, you know, plastics, how the bioplastics are developing in terms of technology and markets. We could also learn on the construction side of things because hempcrete is also a great material for building. But we didn't necessarily have connections in those sectors to speak to learn more about what they need. So I think the Seedbed programme has been really helpful in that regard for us to, you know, understand better what potential partners and customers would want.

Matt Eastland [00:33:48] Thanks Ying. And Lorenzo, is that connection piece obviously critical to what you've been going through with the FAN programme?

Lorenzo Conti [00:33:57] Yes, you mentioned earlier we are, we also, we've been in the Seedbed programme before, and the best thing about all the EIT Food programmes that we've experienced is that network of, you know, some of the top food companies across Europe that you can connect to that will also reach out to you once you're through the network about your technology and the possibilities of establishing partnerships with them. So I would say that's the top benefit. That is something that takes a lot of time and it's really hard to do without EIT Food support.

Matt Eastland [00:34:34] Thank you. It's kind of you to say. And Solveiga I guess back to you that I mean, is the Rising Food Stars programme, is that changing your focus or have your needs changed with the programme?

Solveiga Pakstaite [00:34:47] I think since joining the programme, we actually kind of developed our product to the point where we're ready to scale it. And so that's been an interesting change. And now our focus has shifted to, ok, who in the network and we do projects with. And, you know, some of these companies are within EIT Food, the corporates, we've been chatting to kind of on a casual basis, like we to kind of catch up every few months. So now, you know, we're like, hey, we're in this club together like we can maybe access some funding and do something really exciting together. So it really kind of provides that nudge and reason to do something together and within the kind of framework of EIT Food. That's really helpful. And I'm really excited to say that we're going to be doing a innovation project funded by EIT Food next year with some really exciting partners. And we also are doing what's called the traction project with one partner as well. I'm not going to say any names yet because I can't at this stage, but it's all because of EIT Food. So thank you very much.

Matt Eastland [00:35:53] That's amazing, look at that. I mean, for our listeners, apologies, this is that this is a shameless plug for, I think, EIT Food. But it's really great actually to see that, you know, we can help start-ups pretty much any stage of their journey all the way through some kind of first idea, all the way through to scaling up. So that's great to know and great to have you guys to explain that to everybody. Just talking about the growth piece then, as we move on. You know, so you've got all those big plans to grow. But I think Ying, you mentioned covid. I'm surprised it hasn't come up already. You know, resilience is a huge part of, you know, building and growing your business. So just looking back over the past year, maybe particularly as we've gone through covid pandemic, you know, what have been your experiences? Have things changed for you? Maybe you've sort of pivoted or, you know, maybe found opportunities actually through covid, maybe Solveiga, we can start with you? And the reason I'd like to start with you, because I remember on the last podcast which you were on, you were talking about values and being a purpose driven business. And I was just wondering, has being a purpose driven business helped you stay the course through the last year?

Solveiga Pakstaite [00:37:08] That's a really interesting question. So firstly, I think I'll start by saying that establishing our, I mean, we always had our mission, which is the reason we started, which is to radically reduce unnecessary food waste. But I realised it was pretty late in the project, I think. We only set up our values like established our values about a year and a half ago. And that was a really useful exercise because it really helped the team pull together and say, like, what makes us different? And like, you know, the things that we stand for and just having them written down and agreed by the team. And I think that also kind of helped me feel I had a tendency early on to kind of maybe micromanage a bit. And I think, you know, just coming from a business background, I thought that that's what I needed to do. But I think I actually establishing the values in place and writing them in a way that they should really kind of be your guiding principles for making decisions, even if, like, you know, someone from the management team hasn't told you to do that, like, what would I do if I was living the Mimica values? So whether that's making the impossible possible, so kind of thinking, long term thinking big, like not just thinking short term. So how would I make that decision based on that principle and being creatively efficient and efficiently creative so like kind of hustling to kind of get a prototype done and like if for the least cost possible in the quickest time. So they don't need me to tell the team those things. So I think generally in the business, like other than being able to talk about being a value lead company, which that's not the reason why we set them up, they should really be helping you out in terms of helping your team become more autonomous in everything that they do. So during coronavirus times, we've really lent into all kind of people focussed value. So we've always had health and family first, so kind of making it really clear that, you know, it's going to be a really challenging time and some of us have family members to look after or have some special care, too. And we don't hide the fact that, for example, Laurence our CEO every Monday afternoon, he hasn't been doing Mimica stuff because he has to go make sure that his mom has her shopping done. And that's something that we've been really clear that, you know, you need to do what you need to do. This is just your job. You're obviously using your job for good. But right now, we really need to be focussing on the things that really matter and kind of being a bit more patient with people understanding that this might be a difficult time, mental health wise, for some of our team members, but also in our partners. So I think, you know, especially as you're not getting that face time, it's it could be easier to get frustrated when you're not getting the response you need from a particular partner, but also recognising that they are human too. You know, kindness and respect is another one of our values. And just assuming good intentions is something we keep repeating at Mimica, like no one really is out there to kind of get you. I mean, obviously that's sometimes they are, but on the most part they're not. And just kind of treating people with, just kind of giving people the benefit of the doubt is something that we've been really leaning into over the last six months.

Matt Eastland [00:40:18] I love that, I really respect that. You know, its being solid on your values, which helps you sort of stay the course. And, you know, the autonomy piece, as you say, is sort so super important as an entrepreneur to help you grow as well. So thank you for sort of explaining that to everyone. So Ying, what about you? How has the, you know, I know you said that you kind of started through this process, so how has that affected you?

Ying Shao [00:40:41] I really resonate, again, with Solveiga, as she was saying that. Yeah, this crisis for us, I think it taught us to live with imperfection, which is very important, I think, for a start up. So at the beginning of the lockdown, we were in the course of sending the first plant DNA samples to a lab for getting data back. And all of a sudden that was not possible anymore. We had to wait a month or a little bit more than that. And when

we could do that again, we realised that the samples there were not so perfect anymore because they stayed in the fridge for too long. And then we had to make a choice between, you know, going through with it or not. And then we really made a call to say that having imperfect data is better than having no data. So let's just have something and work with that and see what that is. And so I'm really happy that we made that call because today we are using that to build up the groundwork of the data pipelines. But it was not an easy call to make because, you know, it was the first time you do that. You really want it to be perfect and you're spending money on that as well. So I think it's a hard call, but we really learnt that you have to just, you know, do something. Sometimes it doesn't need to be perfect and it just helps you to reach the learning that you need at this stage. And that's, I think, is what covid taught us. Apart from that, we stayed really close with our partners that are specialised in other parts of the supply chain, the value chain, to learn what they're going through. And we realised that covid also brought new opportunities to the industry. More people are thinking about changing their career or, you know, the course of life and looking to new opportunities. So, yeah, they actually had more like potential clients enquiring on, you know, hemp-based products. We had a partner that tried to respond to covid with chemical compounds off the plants that could contribute to some meaningful products people could use during covid. So I think that's great for us to know. And we could only know that because we stayed close to people and, you know, just keep updating each other and how we are going through this crisis together. So, yeah, it has been difficult, but some good learnings from it as well.

Matt Eastland [00:42:53] Thanks Ying. Living with imperfection and being people-centred. I love it.

Ying Shao [00:42:57] Yeah.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:42:57] That's very entrepreneurial. And Lorenzo, what about you? So what have been your experiences so far, navigating through covid?

Lorenzo Conti [00:43:07] Yeah, some stuff coming after because I think Ying and Solveiga put it very nicely and I resonate with a lot of the issues. I think from one side you have the economic opportunity and the market need, which if anything, with the two crises that we have at the moment, you know, the short term one, which is the covid pandemic and the long term ones, which is climate change and food security, demand for what we building has increased. Even before the pandemic we were in from the market, that they don't have the workforce to verify the condition of the grains as often and as well as they need to on top of not having the tools to do it. And also the fact that, you know, the food demand has increased and people are trying to increase production, whilst you have significant losses on the supply chain that you can actually reduce with a system like ours. So demand does increase, but obviously the, our part that's been lacking and Solveiga said that the internal operations, making sure that we can work as well as possible obviously is not as easy as before. But we find ways internally. The hardest thing is really dealing with our suppliers. If you need a certain piece of kit or a certain analysis, you've got to wait much longer right now. So planning has become much more important because you've got to plan much further ahead and it's no longer possible to get things done in a few days. So you got to have very good structures in place. And I think if anything, that has made us potentially more resilient for a normal situation because we are able to deal with problems that before they would have been catastrophic. And right now, because we are dealing with any sort of potential issues, we are ready for anything to happen.

Solveiga Pakstaite [00:45:02] Firefighting mode.

Matt Eastland [00:45:04] Yeah, that's right. It sounds like it's really helped you kind of strengthen yourselves, which is, you know, given all of the chaos that's been happening over the last six, six-ish months, that's really positive to hear. So thanks, Lorenzo.

Lukxmi Balathanan [00:45:17] So, guys, I think we've had a really good chat today, but I think we're nearly running out of time. So really quickly, roundtable, what's next for each of you? So Solveiga?

Solveiga Pakstaite [00:45:27] So we're really fortunate that are very intense grant writing efforts during the midst of lockdown have started to pay off. So we're delighted to have support from EIT for the big project next year. The really exciting thing is that we wrote in some of our prospective customers in, so this will be the first step that we're going to be taking with some of our potential customers formally and in doing some of these grant projects. So really excited to see what that will turn into.

Lukxmi Balathanan [00:45:58] Oh, well done. Congratulations.

Solveiga Pakstaite [00:46:01] Thank you.

Lukxmi Balathanan [00:46:01] And Ying, what about you? What's next for you and Plantik?

Ying Shao [00:46:03] Yeah, so we will also have our first research collaboration project quite soon. So yeah, we are really excited about that, with the university. And we are going to look into fundraising next year. It's going to be a big challenge as well. So yeah, we're preparing like really like writing our targets to see what we want to achieve before that and get some learning from there as well.

Lukxmi Balathanan [00:46:25] Brilliant, good luck. And Lorenzo?

Lorenzo Conti [00:46:28] Yeah, it's a really exciting time for us as well. After being in stealth mode for about two years and having to hide our robot from people, we have finally been able to reveal to the world at the TechCrunch disrupt battlefield stage two weeks ago. So finally, we can show it to people. People are getting much more excited because they can actually see what we working on. And we've also started to Innovate UK project in partnership with the Agri-EPT Centre in Scotland to work on grain sampling as well that started this month. And we are starting the first large scale trials in a few weeks.

Lukxmi Balathanan [00:47:05] Brilliant.

Matt Eastland [00:47:05] Huge congratulations!

Lukxmi Balathanan [00:47:07] Yeah.

Matt Eastland [00:47:07] Amazing guys. I have to admit, I really want to see this robot Lorenzo. I want to see a robot swim. Swimming through grain as well, I mean, come on. Amazing.

Lorenzo Conti [00:47:16] I'll send you the link.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:47:18] We'll have to make a video to go along with the podcast yeah. And again, really quickly. So where can people find out more about you and your company? So Solveiga?

Solveiga Pakstaite [00:47:27] The best place is to go to our website mimicalab.com but we're also pretty active across the main social media platforms. So particularly LinkedIn is a great place to connect with us and follow our updates.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:47:41] Brilliant. And Ying?

Ying Shao [00:47:43] We are revamping our website. So I think very soon it will be a good place to find more information on those. And also LinkedIn. Yeah, we are active on LinkedIn to share like more news.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:47:55] And Lorenzo?

Lorenzo Conti [00:47:57] Yeah, you can learn more about us on our website www.crover.tech and you're free to reach me at lorenzo.conti@crover.tech.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:48:09] Thank you all.

Matt Eastland [00:48:11] Amazing. Thank you very much. So yeah, just to say to finish this off, Ying, Lorenzo and Solveiga, thank you so very much for your time today. Another fascinating episode. Great to hear about all of your journeys. So I hope that's been super useful for our listeners. This has been The Food Fight podcast from EIT Food. If you'd like to check us out, please go to eitfood.eu/podcast or hit us up on Twitter @EITFood. And given the episode that we just had, please do make sure you also check out our entrepreneurship section of our website to find out more about applying to our start up programmes in 2021. So please keep fighting for a better future.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:48:53] Thanks everyone.

Solveiga Pakstaite [00:48:54] Thank you.

Ying Shao [00:48:54] Thank you.