

# Pitches, meetings and fun in the Champions League of innovation

**“We hope to bring some of the American mindset to our work and lives in the Netherlands.” Lisanne Peters and Auke Bleij won the ‘Innovatiefste Student van Nederland’ (in English: The most innovative student of the Netherlands) competition in 2023 and 2022 respectively. The grand prize: a trip through Silicon Valley. We spoke to them about their experiences in San Francisco, where they spent seven days in the American capital of tech, entrepreneurship and innovation. We look back with them on their trip and talk to them about their participation in the ‘Innovatiefste Student van Nederland.’**

Lisanne and Auke have just returned, still impressed by the trip. “We look back on an inspiring and, at the same time, intense experience. We experienced and learned a lot – from each other and the other entrepreneurs we met there.

And we made a lot of new connections, during this trip and with the whole experience surrounding the ‘Innovatiefste Student van Nederland’. These new connections had the biggest impact on us.”

## The ‘Pay It Forward’ mentality

*What impressed you the most?*

**Lisanne:** “The meetings with other founders in America. We joined ‘Ask-me-anything’ sessions with entrepreneurs who are already CEOs of companies in Silicon Valley. This also gives you an idea of what’s ahead of us and what our future might look like. They shared so much knowledge and wisdom about where you want to be someday, they advised about the stage we’re already in as a start-up and for my role as CEO and entrepreneur. That’s super valuable.”



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**More about Lisanne’s startup via [www.symbiomatter.com](http://www.symbiomatter.com) or visit [www.goespyre.com](http://www.goespyre.com) if you want to learn more about Respyre.**

**Auke:** “I totally agree with that. I would even go as far as to say that this experience was life-changing. That may sound a bit ‘American’ to us, and maybe it is, but that’s how I experienced it. I went in with fairly low expectations, but the whole experience blew me away. From the first moment in San Francisco, you feel like you are in the Champions League of entrepreneurship.”

*What is the biggest difference between the US and Europe?*

**Lisanne:** “I’d say it’s the ‘Pay It Forward’ mentality. Entrepreneurs in the US are very open and willing to share knowledge, information and advice without expecting anything in return. In Europe, companies and people appear to be more closed – or end up in a negotiation more quickly. I learned in the US that the more you share, the greater your chances of success. In the Netherlands, I also have mentors and other entrepreneurs around me, who also share this mindset, but it is scarcer here than in the US. Having a mentor who can guide you through the business world is very important – that’s the best accelerator you can have.”

## Pitching and eating

*What did your meetings with other founders look like?*

**Auke:** “Mostly, if we had dinner with the other founders, investors would also be invited, so then you know that you’re going to have to pitch that evening. This created a certain tension in the group throughout the day – you see people working on their pitch all the time. Once we got to the restaurant, everyone did their pitch. And then it’s: take a seat and have fun. So, suddenly you’re sitting next to all these serial entrepreneurs, talking about their lessons and experiences. That gave a really nice dynamic of keeping the excitement in with the pitches, and at the same time, it’s a candy store of inspiring conversations and encounters with other entrepreneurs.”

*What did you learn from other founders?*

**Lisanne:** “Being a CEO can be quite a lonely profession. You are very conscious of what you share and what

you don’t. On this journey, we were not in competition with each other, but rather formed a cohort with the other entrepreneurs and wanted to boost our companies. I recognised myself in the stories of others, which created a togetherness that made me realise that I’m not alone.”

**Auke:** “There is no playbook for starting and running a business. Of course there are tips and tricks, but you also run into your own limitations, and you will have to overcome them to become a good entrepreneur. Everything is new and that is why entrepreneurship can also be quite confronting.”

## Champions don’t ask for permission

*How did this trip help you deal with that?*

**Auke:** “When looking at others, it always seems like everything is going well for them, like it comes naturally. But through our meetings with other entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley, I realised it’s not always true and that it’s often a sugar-coated version of reality.”



“This experience was life-changing for me.”

So this brings you back to reality. Without that mirror, you can wander around for quite a long time thinking that you are the 'alien'; that maybe you should just stop being an entrepreneur and do something else."

*What has this meant for your doubts and insecurities as entrepreneurs?*

**Auke:** "On the one hand, it took away some of my doubts. I am more confident about who I am and myself as an entrepreneur. But it has also broadened my perspective and showed me that I still have a shitload to learn. You meet people who have already achieved great things at a certain level, which also makes you think about your own ambitions and the long road ahead."

**"I still have a shitload to learn."**

**Lisanne:** "But it's also unfair to compare yourself to others, especially if they've been at it for a couple of decades. It helped me to see how they dealt with certain practical issues. One of the founders gave me the quote, 'Champions don't ask for permission.' So now whenever I hesitate, I try to remind myself of this."

## EU vs US

*Are there any drawbacks to the "American way" of doing business?*

**Auke:** "I was shocked by the work-life balance there. Some of the founders we met there worked over sixteen hours a day, seven days a week. I don't have that ambition and I doubt whether I could keep up with this. I find that entrepreneurship brings a lot of stress, and I want to deal with that in a healthy way."



*What's their opinion about Europe in Silicon Valley?*

**Lisanne:** "Europe still has a huge position when it comes to innovation. We were able to talk to 'important' people there, and they all made time for us. Part of it had to do with us being Europeans. A lot of innovation and knowledge comes from Europe, and the development facilities are also often better in the EU than in the US. So that again puts into perspective where our strengths lie."

**"Europe still has a huge position when it comes to innovation."**

## Back in NL

*What's your main takeaway from this trip?*

**Lisanne:** "Especially the perspective on entrepreneurship in the US. It's allowed to dream big, and you don't have to keep your head down. But also what I learned about pitching and communicating about my business helped me get my story much sharper here."

**Auke:** "I learned that I should be proud of my entrepreneurship. In the Netherlands, I tend to be the biggest critic of my company and my story. There I discovered that I can be proud of my actions and where I stand. Entrepreneurship is cool there, you have something to say, and you feel like you're part of something."

*And now, what are the next steps Symbiomatter and Respyre?*

**Lisanne:** "Symbiomatter is in the process of validating the product itself. The material that I invented at the time has to become a product, so for that we are now setting everything up and looking at how we can do this on a larger scale, for example with a factory. And, like most startups, we are raising additional funding, and want to start expanding our team soon."

**Auke:** "We are now in the final large-scale validation battle. If we can show



that this solution works, we can go big and scale up with Respyre. That means we can become more professional, and also scale up in the literal sense: hardware investments in machines, packaging and materials. And we also want to start expanding our team. All in all: we're starting to really become a company."

*What would you like to share with the future candidates for the 'Innovatiefste Student van Nederland'?*

**Auke:** "That this is really a prize worth fighting for. It's one of the top competitions in the Netherlands, similar to a Philips Innovation Award, and this is by far the most valuable prize I have ever had the pleasure of receiving. This award brings you, as they would say in the US, 'stuff that money can't buy'. The experiences, the connections and the introductions to other innovators and entrepreneurs – that's priceless."

**"This journey is a prize worth fighting for."**

**Lisanne:** "When I applied for this competition, my company wasn't even registered with the Chamber of Commerce yet. So I was thrown into the deep end, and I was impressed by the competition. But participating, and of course winning, did a lot for my company. I suddenly got media attention, developed business skills and was also able to increase my sales because of the interest in my product. I actually had no idea there was a prize when I entered the competition, but this event – and this trip in particular – offers a unique opportunity to meet so many other entrepreneurs and learn from each other."