

By Trisha Gura

Brewing a career

Protein engineer Jasper Akerboom left his job as a research specialist at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's (HHMI's) Janelia Farm Research Campus in Virginia to pursue a career as a brewmeister. In this interview (edited for brevity and clarity), Akerboom discusses the Janelia Farm experience, yeast, and what it's like to follow one's microbiological bliss.

Q: What brought you to Janelia Farm?

A: I was doing my Ph.D. in microbiology at Wageningen University in the Netherlands. The focus was on extreme life, organisms living in very hot locations. I was studying the molecular biology and biochemistry of these organisms because their proteins had to be very stable to withstand very high temperatures and salt concentrations. We were collaborating with a postdoc at Stanford, who later moved to HHMI. He asked me if I wanted to postdoc in his lab.

Q: Tell us about Janelia Farm.

A: It's a pretty incredible institution. Principal investigators come in for short-term contracts. They can hire people—but not too many, so the groups are small. After 5 or 6 years, these group leaders are reviewed, and they might not be renewed, so new people come in. There is no teaching. Every year, there is a large amount of funding available, so it is a nice place to be.

Q: How did you get from tracking neurons to brewing beer?

A: I started home brewing in the Netherlands. Lots of us were doing yeast research. When I came to the United States, I began isolating strains from the local area. In 2007, I approached these guys who had just started a local brewery, Lost Rhino Brewing Company, and I said, "I have these local yeast strains. It would be great to collaborate." I gave them a few tasters of my test batches. They were super excited, and so we did this together. It was a great success.

Q: What made you decide to go from brewing as a hobby to brewmeister as a career?

A: Eventually, every postdoc has to decide, "What are you going to do?" Janelia Farm is a very prestigious institution, so people often get very good jobs afterward. But I wanted to do something else. I saw people around me who were all



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very stressed. It was just very hard for them to get these papers published, as it was for me. I had been scooped many times, competing with people outside and maybe even inside the institution. And I was like, "This is not something I would like to do forever." I thought, "Maybe I can just take my success with yeast and get some experience at this brewery, and then take that experience and maybe move somewhere else in the future."

Q: Would you say the demands at Janelia Farm are too high?

A: This is of course the top. I would compare it to doing a postdoc at Harvard or Stanford. Some people thrive in that environment. The good side is that Janelia pushes people to the limit. You will enrich a whole group of people who are very smart. But the downside is that it can be a very hard environment.

Q: Do you have any regrets about leaving?

A: At first, I felt like I let myself down. When you deviate from the path, you are breaking with what you were always planning on doing. But if I can say one thing that may be of interest to your readers, it is that they shouldn't feel bad about themselves if they make the decision to step off the path, because it might be the right decision, although it might not feel right at the time.

Q: Any other advice for scientists who want to pursue an alternate career path?

A: Take advantage of the freedom that comes with being a postdoc. Use that period to think about what you want. Everyone congratulates the person who gets the professorship at a big-name university or a huge grant. But that is not for everybody, and there is nothing wrong with that.

Trisha Gura is a freelance writer in Boston. For more on life and career issues, visit <http://www.sciencecareers.org>.

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Science **344** (6191), 1534.

DOI: 10.1126/science.344.6191.1534

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