

A sheltered workshop invested in organic lavender: Focus on Lavandia

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Lavandia: A family business and a sheltered workshop

Lavandia is a small family business established by Stanislav Biza in 2014 that started with 40,000 lavender plants. It is located in a small village called Starovický and it employs 14 workers; with more than half of them living with different physical or mental disabilities.



Lavandia is located in the Czech Republic, in an area where agriculture has strong roots especially in viticulture. The farm is surrounded by vines and dominated by the Pavloské vrchy mountains. However, Stanislav decided on a different path for his business and now harvests over 90,000 lavender plants and transforms it all with the help of his sheltered workshop.

Lavender: history, trade and international dynamics

A millennial medicinal plant...

Lavender (*lavendula stoechas*) is a millennial plant used in a variety of societies mostly for its medical advantages, its smell and cleaning purposes. Mentioned by Pliny the Elder, he considered it a precious plant but it was officially named

lavender¹ during the Middle Ages because of its affiliation in combating infectious diseases.

At first, lavender was found in monastery gardens and was associated with other medical aromatics but we have to wait until the fourteenth century before we have any proof of proper cultivation. With the development of the Faculty of Marseille and Montpellier, new studies and information made it possible to extract its active ingredients. During the plague, lavender essential oil was used.

... to the Development of a major trade

Between 1900 and 1950 lavender was at its peak with the development of cities and the perfumery sector. More demand led to more quantities which led to more people invested in this sector and the development of more practical tools like mobile stills and techniques making the plants more resilient and productive. Mechanisation efforts and modernisation followed paving the way for the cultivation of lavandin (*Lavandula x angustifolia latifolia*) with a priority given to yields leading to synthetic products being developed.

Evolution of lavender production in the world

The past thirty years a lot of countries have abandoned the cultivation of lavender, such as China, old Slavic Republics or even Moldova and Ukraine, which caused a shrinking market. Bulgaria, with a long history of cultivation plants for its essential oils, is now a world leader in the production and trade of lavender. Bulgaria produced - before stilling - 27 659T of lavender (2017) and only keeps 0,1% of its production. By 2025, lavender trade should reach 9 million dollars but the country still has to face some challenges: short harvest periods, lack of workforce, stills,

¹ from the latin word lavare, to clean.

irrigation, heat and dry weathers encouraging the development of leafhoppers and other pests...

However, some competitors have been developing their national sectors to counter the Bulgarian grip on aromatic and medicinal plants and their essential oils. Romania has seen its production multiplied by 13 between 2013 and 2017 while Türkiye is developing its production of roses but does not have any kind of labellings.

Two types of lavender can be found in Stanislav's farm, they are supported by the continuous sun but also the dry and sandy soils of the region. They offer a colorful spectacle to by-passers while being certified BIO organic quality and hand-made.

Employees in the sheltered workshop produce:

food products: lavender coffee, lemonade, chocolates, syrup

cosmetics products: essential oils, soaps, lavender mist

textile and other products: candles, handbags, pillows, lavender sachets and much more

In summer, the lavender field is available for tourists to visit. They can pick lavender, rest in the field on a deckchair, enjoy the scent of lavender and the sun with the Moravian scenery while drinking and tasting local lavender lemonade, coffee and dessert.

Sharing knowledge and Inclusion through agriculture

When Stanislav sold his family business, he wanted to create a new one for him and his family.

Because of his physical disability, it was crystal clear that he had to create a place where people with both physical and mental disabilities could find fair work. The idea of a sheltered workshop came from the help he got after the accident that put him in a wheelchair. Thanks to a variety of people that helped him get back to a normal life, he now wants to give back to others and make sure the kindness he received can help other people as well.

Why agriculture?

The Biza family has a history in working the land and Stanislav has been helping his grandfather in the fields. He followed the steps of this humble, hardworking and kind role model and went on creating his own farm to continue what he started. Even though agriculture is not an easy sector, they created a hybrid space where food security and a decent work environment for disabled people is available. And why lavender? In 2014, when the lavender farm started, nobody in this region (Moravia) grew lavender, and because of the climate in Moravia is good for this plant, he tried it (it was just as easy as this, without the vision of the business as it is now at first).



Stanislav Biza in his lavender fields - Photo Credits: Stanislav Biza

The first goal of the sheltered workshop is to employ people affected by mental or physical disabilities to provide them with a safe and pleasant place to work in fair conditions, an individual approach and understanding. Lavandia nurtures a strong family connection with its staff

and wishes to make everyone feel like they belong in the Lavandia family.

Lavandia's objective is to be financially independent that is why they constantly invest in the development of the company with the farm's resources and sales. Showing the customers and visitors that it's possible to produce high-quality organic products whilst employing physically or mentally disabled people is a first step but they stay a business and need to maintain a healthy sales balance.

Thanks to the Ministry of Labour's great support, sheltered workshops have access to different financial benefits for their development. Employers are helped by the regulatory framework and can have access to different incentives such as tax discounts, lowered staff costs and other financial benefits.



The sheltered workshop at Lavandia - Photo Credits: Stanislav Biza

Agriculture and generational dynamics in Czech Republic

Czechia, located in the heart of Central Europe, has been a parliamentary democracy since 1993 with a population of more than 10 million inhabitants. With economic growth and its GDP highly linked to its industry sector, agriculture is often overlooked even though it has a strong potential.

The sector represents 1,9% of the GDP and employs 2,7% of the overall population. The land is highly fragmented, with at least 90% of leased lands, and agriculture is highly subsidized (33 250 € per farm while the European average is 3896 €). The main output production is cereals such as (23%) and milk (19,7%) but Czech and Moravian agriculture still host a variety of cultures: wheat, rye, sugar beets, oil plants, maize, linen and even vines with Moravia concentrating 96% of the national production. In organic farming, the country is above the EU average with 15% of its lands dedicated to it.

In terms of age, farmers are following the global trends and are increasingly ageing while young farmers (>35 years old) represent only 4,4% since 2016. Only 3,1% (2016) of the UAA is managed by young farmers, complicating the generation renewal dynamics.

Czech farmers suffered recently with the increase in production input prices that evolved from a pandemic inflation to a war inflation. Just like the rest of the world, Czech farmers have to tackle the effects of climate change and international shake-ups in a country where farmland is excessively expensive and inherits pre-Velvet revolution communist management.

Creating synergies between the lavender field and the sheltered workshop

Lavandia has two main attributes: its Lavender fields and the sheltered workshops and both can't work without each other. The Lavender field is open solely in summer, between June and August, when it is the lavender bloom season. The harvested lavender is later used as the main element for the production of Lavandia's products.

In the sheltered workshop, Lavandia employs people with disabilities mainly as sewers or manufacturing assistants. The sewing department is the first employer of disabled employees in the company. The workplace is adjusted for the needs

of the employees and the new premises of the company are undergoing construction with the objective of making the workplace better and safer for the sewers.

What were the first steps to establishing the sheltered workshop?

In the beginning, the European Union funding helped Lavandia through the Young farmer scheme with 45 thousand euros. This was a huge and important milestone for Lavandia as they could afford to buy the necessary agricultural machinery. However, this was preceded by many unsuccessful applications for European Union funding, as even the slightest administration mistake caused a failed attempt. This has shown Lavandia that it is not possible to manage all the projects alone and that help is needed to prevent a very expensive and painful experience. Starting a business is always a hard moment for entrepreneurs and it was no different for Lavandia. However, they have broken through all the bureaucratic obstacles and now they are happy to see the business growing.

Towards high quality products made locally and ecologically

It may sound unexpected, but the objective is not to be known as a sheltered workplace but to produce high-quality eco-friendly and local products. The fact that these products are formed in a sheltered workshop is a nice social bonus which customers find positive. For example, during the 2020 HIT campaign Lavandia was able to collect more than 16,000 euros for their new production line to manufacture lavender lemonade. Another milestone for their business history which motivates the team to constantly work on improving the company.

Thanks to the company's growth, Lavandia can hire more people and it shows in their performance. Despite all the unfortunate events of the past years - covid, the war in Ukraine and the energetic crisis it created - the overall goal hasn't changed: create a great workplace for the employees to keep on growing organic lavender

while securing financial stability and resources for future development.



Lavender fields of Lavandia in Starovičky - Photo Credits: Stanislav Biza

To create opportunities, share experiences and learn from people's experiences:

Being a sheltered workshop employer has pros and cons, just like everything in life. In Lavandia, the team does not look for obstacles but are willing to create opportunities out of anything they encounter. That is why the business is independent and functional with a great enthusiastic team sharing the same goal: do what they love the best way possible. The advice Stanislav would give to anyone starting a business would be: listen to people around you and never hesitate to ask for advice!

*'Thank you all for reading and when you are in the Czech Republic, we will greet you at our farm in Starovičky. Don't forget: **Life is good!**' Stanislav Biza*

www.levandulezmoravy.cz - [@levandulezMoravy](https://www.instagram.com/levandulezMoravy)

Stanislav Biza was born in Hustopeče in 1981 and after graduating from primary school he started an apprenticeship in automobile mechanics that he successfully completed in 1999. He started working as a car mechanic in the family business Truck Centrum Bizovi before his paragliding accident that was caused by a technical failure during take-off. He was then paralyzed and went back home to start this new life in 2006 after months of stabilization operations and physical rehabilitation. In 2014, with his associate Marek Svoboda they planted 40,000 plants of lavender. Since then, he has been developing his sheltered workshop and growing new opportunities for people with special needs and his customers.