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## Dutch Treat



**Stephanie & Gert van Manen have built a striking new headquarters in Lawrenceville for their fruit importing company.**

# A Touch of Dutch in Lawrenceville



by Kathleen McGinn Spring

**G**ert van Manen recalls that as a young man growing up in Holland he stopped at the flower stand every day. “Everyone did,” he says. “You bought big armfuls of flowers for your house, and you took flowers to your mother and to your friends. You wouldn’t show up at anyone’s house without flowers.”

Van Manen, president of iTi Tropicals, the world’s leading importer of exotic fruit concentrates, has just moved into his newly built headquarters, at 30 Gordon Avenue in Lawrenceville. He built the striking 3,000-square-foot building — and its twin next door — in the style of a 16th century Dutch canal house, and he has decorated it with flowers. His wife, Stephanie van Manen, a Lawrenceville native, has filled the company’s 10 employees’ vases with tulips — red or yellow. Van Manen has placed his desk, a French antique purchased in Holland, in front of a large, sunny painting of tulips.

He sits there against a deep blue wall — “captain of the ship blue,” he calls it, and looks into the attached homework room he has built for his two daughters, 12-year-old Adriana and 9-year old Nicola. Bright white French doors lead out to a large courtyard, where he plans to create an elaborately landscaped outdoor work and relaxation space. There are almost too many windows to count — three levels of narrow windows, many open to let in the spring breezes. He says that, having built a successful company

from scratch, and having moved it into a headquarters redolent of his homeland and within walking distance of his home, “I live in la la land. It is a dream.”

Van Manen’s company, with revenue of \$30 million for fiscal 2006, is growing at a rate of 30 percent a year, in part because it is surfing in synch with everything from taste trends to demographics. iTi is riding the wave of a native population, raised on orange juice, that is eager to try new tastes, and of a fast-growing immigrant population nostalgic for the tastes of home.

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It is also profiting from an increased — and sometimes simplistic — concern over health. Out of a concern over childhood obesity, soda machines are being yanked from school cafeterias all around the country. Juice is good, and, despite the fact that it may contain more calories than the soda it replaces, it is in vogue. Juice does have a number of redeeming qualities, including vitamins and



**Amsterdam in Lawrenceville:** *The Dutch-styled iTi Tropicals buildings are the new home of Gert and Stephanie van Manen’s successful company.*

saw no dip in demand for exotic juices. He says that maybe the juice of choice for those embracing the no-carb diet had been orange juice. “Maybe meat eaters also like orange juice,” he guesses.

Speaking of orange juice, van Manen says that Americans tend to assume that oranges are the most popular fruit worldwide. Not so. “The banana is number one,” he says. “Mango is number two.”

Americans are catching up, and having a love affair with the mango. The sweet fruit is now appearing in juice, sorbet, salads, and all sorts of chicken and pork dishes, but this was not always so. “In 1990 we bought two 20-foot containers of mango,” says van Manen. “It took us two years to sell it. Now we sell two loads a day.”

## Dutch Touch On Nassau Street

Long before the iTi building in Lawrenceville, Princeton may have come close to resembling a Dutch canal town. “This building was a prototype,” says Julie Howson, director of research at Gund Investments, of 12 Nassau Street, the Dutch Revival building her company has owned since 1968.

The gabled building with the generous windows and yellow stucco facade is familiar to anyone who has ever spent time waiting for the light at the intersection of University Place and Nassau Street. It was built in 1896 “when Amsterdam was a big financial center,” says Howson. There was some thought of continuing the style all the way down Nassau Street, she recounts, but then the Amsterdam markets collapsed, and the idea was abandoned.

Constance Grieff wrote about the building in her 1967 book “Princeton Architecture: A Pictorial History of Town and Campus.” It was designed by William Stone, a New York architect with a lesser reputation than Stanford White, William Mead, or Charles Follen McKim, whose firm designed Princeton University’s Cottage Club. Stone, however, “was a favored architect for people about to move into the new streets behind Morven,” she writes.

“Princeton has one unusual and outstanding example of Dutch Revival by Stone,” she continues, “the old Princeton Bank and Trust Company building at 12 Nassau Street. Of this building Montgomery Schuyler wrote, ‘Of the many buildings which have been suggested by that famous and fantastic old 16th-century meat market of Haarlem, none is more successful of seems more in place than this.’”

While there are dream-like elements in how unbelievably well van Manen’s business has meshed with fickle American taste buds and health priorities, there is also a bit of a fairy-tale feel to how he found land for his new headquarters, even if, as is so often the case with a building project, going from ground breaking to move-in has been a nightmare.

iTi Tropicals, founded in 1988, had been located in offices at the Mercer Mall. “I wanted to move it to an old house,” says van Manen. “I looked off and on for 10 years. I

looked at the Lawrenceville Inn. I looked at Pennington. I looked at many places, but never found it.”

He was still looking when he noticed that a parcel of land just up the street from the Lawrenceville bakery was for sale. He discovered that it was owned by a woman who had lived in a house on the northern edge of the property for some 40 years. She was ready to move, but wanted to keep a large portion of her land green, in keeping with her late husband’s wishes.

“She had considered selling it to the D & R Greenway, but they don’t pay anything,” says van Manen. He went to talk with the woman, and told her that he only needed a small part of the land for his buildings. He would leave the rest of the 1.6 acre parcel green. The homeowner had been courted by many builders with plans to develop every inch, and she was so happy with van Manen’s offer that she gave him six months to get the residential lot re-zoned for mixed use — commercial, retail, and residential.

“I went first to the Lawrenceville Main Street,” he says, “to see if they were behind me.” They were. “They loved it,” he says. “Then I went to the township. They were receptive. No problem.”

The problems began after ground-breaking — and are ongoing. Van Manen doesn’t want to go into too many details, saying that he is still hoping that his architect and contractor will make good on the fixes he has requested. The building project, at a cost of about \$1.5 million, including the purchase of the land, and took two-and-a-half-years to complete. “Twice as long as we thought,” says van Manen.

The stress was such that “many couples would have been divorced,” says Stephanie van Manen.

“And we’re not even in counseling!” says her husband of 17 years.

“I think it’s because we were both completely immersed in it,” says Stephanie van Manen, a lawyer by training, who is secretary of the board of iTi Tropicals and general manager of Hedra, the holding company for the buildings. “Neither of us could blame the other, could say ‘why did you do that?’” she says. But both soberly agree that the push and pull took a toll on the family, and that their daughters are a lot more calm now that the process is largely over.

Throughout construction, through all of the inspections, the township was nothing but helpful, they say. “At one point, they even pitied us,” says Stephanie van Manen.

Another unwavering source of help throughout was Jan-Willem Toering, the owner of a Dutch furniture store and interior decorating business, In De Nije Poorte. Van Manen found Toering’s store by chance on one of his many visits to the Netherlands, where his parents and many of his relatives still live, and where he owns “a little house in the woods” to which his wife and children retreat for five weeks each summer. He was taken by the quality and reasonable prices of the antiques Toering sells, and had him come over to Lawrenceville, not only to fill the offices with one-of-a-kind credenzas, desks, and cabinets — including three massive Chinese wedding chests at the entry — but also to consult on materials and colors.

Classic Dutch elements of the buildings, says van Manen, include the gabled facades and the narrow windows. “Holland is a small country with a lot of people,” he says, “everything is narrow.” Tall, narrow buildings tend to have tight staircases, so many Dutch houses have a hoist jutting out from the second story. It is used to lift large pieces of furniture and swing them inside. iTi Tropicals’s staircase is of ample size, but its building sports a hoist anyway. “And soon it will have a hook, too,” says van Manen.

Another classic Dutch element is the set of barely noticeable thin, black strips of black iron centered on the front door. “In Holland they are used to pull the buildings together,” he explains. Here they are merely decorative, as the new brick and stucco structures, though they still have construction issues to be corrected, are stable.

Tenants will soon move into the second building. The second floor of the building is being fitted out for Customs and Trade Solutions, a customs compliance and trade security specialist. The first floor is to be the home of the marketing and sales office of Rosecliff, a new Lawrenceville retirement community sponsored by St. Lawrence Rehab and Morris Hall.

iTi, to a large degree, is rooted in Lawrenceville — where the idea for it was born, and where a loose confederation of investors, all pals of Stephanie van Manen’s late father, Tony Vocolo, a town politician and English teacher at Lawrence Junior High School, provided the cash to get it up and running.

Van Manen was a reluctant entrepreneur who was persuaded by Vocolo to start a company. The son of a high school administrator and a homemaker, he did have one entrepreneur in his family. “My

grandfather had a grocery store,” he says. “I was named after him. He wanted to come to America, but it never happened. He never knew I went.” And, in fact, he almost didn’t. The decision to come to America was not his, but rather was made for him by his employer at a time when he was all set to move to Chile.

After graduating from a Dutch school with the equivalent of a cross between an American B.S. and MBA, he went into the import/export business in 1983 with Ceco, one of the oldest trading companies in the world. “We would trade anything in Angola, Mozambique, Central America. We would find out what they needed and what they could provide,” he says. “It could be canned margarine, anything.” Mostly assigned to African countries, van Manen, worn down by the extreme poverty he saw, asked to be transferred to Chile. His bosses, however, asked him to go to the United States, and more specifically to 3 Independence Way, instead.

“I thought it sounded like a great adventure,” he says. “I thought I would do it for three years.” His employer was acquired by a shipping company within a couple of years. The new company was interested in trading and transporting big commodities such as chemicals, while he was becoming more interested in importing exotic fruits.

At just about this time van Manen dropped into Winberie’s for dinner, and Stephanie, who was waitressing there, noticed him.

“She sent me a free Heineken,” says the Dutch immigrant. It was love at first sight. “Three days later she moved to Miami for law school, at the University of Miami,” he recounts, “but I kept on visiting her parents.” Her mother, Barbara Vocolo, a nurse now living in Florida, was a fabulous Italian cook, he recalls. After dinner he and Tony Vocolo would “talk for hours.” For a year, before Stephanie transferred to Widener to finish law school, and while van Manen kept up a long-distance relationship by convincing his boss that there was important business to be done in Miami, he and Stephanie’s father talked.

“He liked me right away,” van Manen says with a smile.

“No, he was wary of you,” says his wife. “He thought you were a slick guy, a European. He was Catholic and you were Protestant. And you wore those baggy suits.”

“And I was seven years older,” adds van Manen.



**The iTi Staff:** Seated (left to right) are Maria Bonilla, Don Giampetro, Eva Rodriguez-Szewczyk, and Tony Cantu. Standing (left to right) are Irina Belovsky, Amy Lintz, Gert van Manen, Stephanie van Manen, Brian Checkett, Rosalia Candela-Sponsel, and Pete Coiante.

In any case, Vocolo, listening to van Manen talk about his interest in importing mango, guavas, and all manner of exotic fruit, suggested that he start his own company. Van Manen was taken aback. It was not something he had thought about doing. “He asked me questions, and said I was not ready yet,” he says. But the seed was planted, and soon he was meeting with Vocolo’s friends in diners on Route 1 to discuss financing.

**‘In 1990 we bought two 20-foot containers of mango,’ says van Manen. ‘It took us two years to sell it. Now we sell two loads a day.’**

“I took on five partners,” he says, “but along the way I have bought all of them out.”

iTi’s first customer was Dole, which used his exotic fruit to create a pineapple, orange, banana juice. “I still see it on shelves today,” says van Manen with a fond smile.

His cornerstone business philosophy is loyalty to his vendors. “My first banana supplier is still the same,” he says. “You can’t make a quick buck. You have to be reliable.”

He says that he sticks with his suppliers, even when others are offering cheaper fruit.

His customers are giant food manufacturers. They use his purees, concentrates, and QFP (quick frozen pieces of fruit pieces) in yogurt, baked goods, juices, smoothies, and even restaurant salads and entrees. Given the big names attached to his stable customers, van Manen says, “the banks love us.” That’s a good thing, because, he says, “in this business you need financing.”

He is, after all, involved in agriculture. He business variables include drought and floods, and what’s more, many of his suppliers tend crops in poor countries, where, he points out, “a flood will completely wipe out the infrastructure.”

Closely tracking a number of worldwide weather services, he sometimes sees that a prolonged period of drought appears likely. He then goes to his customers and suggests that they stock up on the exotic fruit they need for their products. He will buy more, and sell them more, in anticipation of curtailed supply in the future. Making the unusually large purchases requires financing. It has been forthcoming, and is one of the reasons for

iTi's growth. Last year it imported 1,500 shipping containers, a total of 15 million pounds of exotic fruit.

Many of those containers are chock full of mango products. Mango juice has become an easy sell in the United States, says van Manen, "because people see the whole fruit, so they see the connection." This is not true for guava juice, or for passionfruit juice. People are most comfortable with juice if they are thoroughly familiar with the fruit from which it comes. Educating the giant food manufacturers from which consumers buy is part of iTi Tropical's mission

Down the hall from van Manen's office — a gorgeous hall tiled in distressed marble that looks like lime, and decorated with riotously-colored paintings of exotic fruit — is a steel kitchen that doubles as an R & D lab. The company does not actually develop new juice combinations, van Manen explains, but rather uses the room to test samples of the fruit purees it imports. Off to the right is a large walk-in freezer, kept at minus 20 degrees Celsius, that is filled with hundreds of samples in clear-plastic containers with labels reading "frozen mangosteen, Taiwan," or "white guava, India." For mango alone, there are 15 varieties, with a range of colors and sweetness.

Many of the samples, says van Manen, will be sent to customers and potential customers with suggestions on how they could be used to enhance flavor. The company manufactures its own dry ice to keep the fruit purees frozen, and spends \$70,000 a year for expedited shipment via FedEx. "In this business you have to be fast," he says. "If you don't get it to customers right away, they will move on to the next thing."

iTi's sales department, whose new offices have bright red accent walls to keep them charged up, talks to customers about new uses for exotic fruits. "I think there is a market for salad dressings," van Manen gives as an example. Exotic fruits are not commonly being used to perk up salads, but he sees no reason why they shouldn't be, and, again

thinking of the potential of health concerns to drive business, he adds that many currently popular dressings are very fatty.

Constantly working to expand his customer base, van Manen also keeps adding new suppliers that can provide different kinds of exotic fruit. A somewhat promising candidate is the mangosteen, which is said to have disease-fighting properties that go even beyond the antioxidants found in some other fruits. "But they take 10 years to grow," he says, pinpointing a significant problem. Most fruit, he says, go from seed to harvest in just 90 days. Some, like the popular mango, take two years.

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**The next big thing could be the mangosteen, which is said to have disease-fighting properties that go even beyond the antioxidants found in some other fruits.**

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Given the vagaries of weather, it can take good luck to get a 10-year crop to harvest. Van Manen says that weather has been his business' greatest challenge. Any near-crises it has had have involved crop failure due to extreme drought or rainfall. "The weather around the world has been unusually erratic for the past several years," he says. "I think we are in for a rough time in the next five years."

His other fear involves Wal-Mart. "When I heard they were getting into organics, I said 'Oh, great!'" He has never gone for the cheapest price in sourcing his products, and doesn't even think that such a strategy would work very well. Mangos, for example, cannot be considered an "apples to apples" product. A cut-rate supplier might offer mangos for less, but they probably would not be a close match to the color or flavor a client had been counting on for its drinkable yogurt, premium sorbet, or muffins. He is hoping that Wal-Mart, with its drive for the absolutely

cheapest price, will stay away from exotic fruit products.

Continuing his tour past accounting ("Green walls, of course," he says.), van Manen leads the way to logistics, which he describes as the busiest department in the company. It is there that shipments from around the world are tracked through ports and into public warehouses, where they wait to be shipped to customers. Most of the fruit travels in sealed bags that will keep it fresh indefinitely.

Van Manen himself does a fair amount of traveling. "In December I was two weeks in India," he says. "Then, April, one week in Ecuador. May, I will be one week in Colombia. Then all of us in Italy, but that is vacation."

When he is at home, though, van Manen enjoys his comfortable, beautiful surroundings. His new offices, so flooded with light that there is never a need to turn on a lamp, do feel like a home. There is a miniature wicker chaise with a striped cushion in his daughters' study. There is warm, distressed wood in wide planks on the floors. His wife has collected artwork by employees' children, and has had it enlarged, printed on canvas, and hung in a number of offices.

Van Manen attained dual citizenship when he became a United States citizen last summer, but the offices and the life he has created bear a European stamp. He delights in walking to and from work, and down the hill to main street for lunch, and is surrounded by reminders of his homeland, a country with a rich tradition of trade — and an exuberant fondness for flowers.

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