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Baobab – superfood with a social conscience

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One of the latest superfoods to hit the organic food industry is baobab. The baobab tree (its generic name is *Adansonia*, after the French botanist Michel Adanson) is often called “monkey bread tree” since monkeys are said to consume its fruit.

Another name for the baobab is “upside down tree” which refers to the tree’s distinctive shape: a very broad, thick trunk and spindly branches that are reminiscent of roots. The baobab only grows leaves for

around four months per year, and its blossoms only bloom for 24 hours.

There are several different species of baobabs, which are primarily native to semi-arid regions in Western, Central, Southern and Eastern Africa. The most common baobab species is *adansonia digitata*, which grows across most of the African continent, in parts of the Arab Peninsula and the Penang area of Malaysia.

Depending on the species baobabs can be up to 25 m tall and its trunks can have a diameter of up to 10m. And although baobabs look dry and grey on the outside, their trunks store massive amounts of water. Traditionally each part of the tree is consumed: pulp, leaves and fruits in a broad range of foods, beverages and traditional African medicine; the fibres of the bark is used for clothing, ropes, nets, baskets, boxes and other household articles, and the roots produce a red dye. The pollen is a useful ingredient for a type of glue.

Baobab beauty

Baobab oil, pulp and leaf extracts are popular ingredients in cosmetics formulation, especially in anti-ageing and moisturizing beauty products. Baobab oil, in particular, is often used to stabilize oil blends or as a moisturizing substitute for plant butter in emulsions and lighter creams. Thanks to its very high percentage of fatty acids, especially palmitic, oleic and linoleic acid, baobab oil has superior moisturizing and anti-oxidant

properties, which makes it a popular skin care for dehydrated and matured skin and skin whose barrier function has been disturbed. And the leaf extract of the baobab tree, with high levels of flavonoids, tannic acid and catechins, is widely used in formulations for acne-prone, impure and sensitive skin.

Baobab ingredients are now increasingly turning up in cosmetics in Europe and the US. German salon brand Rosa Graf, for example, has a baobab product range that includes an ampoule, light cream and 24-hour cream. Natural beauty brand Burt's Bees from the US also sells a range of baobab products including a shampoo and conditioner, a hand cream and intensive body lotion. UK organic brand Akamuti sells a baobab face oil while Demeter-certified organic brand Martina Gebhardt from Germany has an attractive baobab foot care range.

Baobab beauty and food manufacturers often combine their business with a fair trade angle. US fair trade beauty brand Alaffia, for example, specializes in cosmetics made with ingredients sourced in West Africa, including baobab and shea butter. The company works with women's cooperatives, funding community projects in central Togo to help alleviate poverty and advance gender equality.

Social business brand Aduna from the UK is going one step further. The company says that it wants to make the baobab internationally famous so rural African communities can profit from a resulting boost in the global baobab trade.

According to Aduna, some 70% of Africans live in rural areas, and around 90% of these communities depend on small-scale agriculture, which usually includes baobab trees. Each tree is community owned and wild-harvested, primarily by women, and up to 10 million African households could directly benefit from an increase in the international demand for baobab products.

To this end, Aduna has built an entire social media and advertising campaign around the hash tag #make-baobabfamous. The company, founded by Nick Salter and Andrew Hunt from the UK, successfully pitched its business plan in the Virgin Pitch to the Rich competition, winning 100,000 GBP to support their campaign.

Aduna is working together with a grass-roots organization to harvest the baobab fruit from women's cooperatives in rural areas of the Western Africa countries of Ghana and Senegal. Currently, there are eleven women's communities that supply Aduna with baobab.

The company buys the baobab fruits at a fair price from these local farmers and markets the products in the UK and internationally. The products are packaged in eye-catching containers that are decorated with a classic African wax print pattern. Besides baobab, Aduna's online store also sells moringa powder, which is also sourced from local African communities.

Every year, ten percent of Aduna's profits go to the Aduna Foundation. The Foundation exists to support small-scale African producers in marketing their products internationally. It focuses on social innovation, capacity building and regulatory issues. According to a company's release "the EU has very strict laws for natural products, many of which have the effect of excluding producers from developing countries. Punching through the red tape requires major investment that goes beyond the reach of small-scale producers".

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