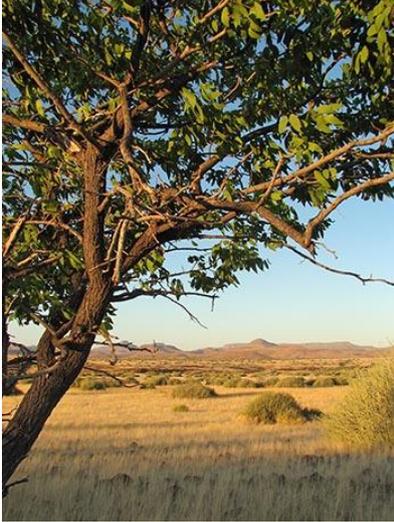


# Namibia's Indigenous Oils

**From Namibia come oils nutritious, delicious and a balm for body and soul...**

*Words and Pictures: Ron Swilling*



Liquid gold, I thought, as my host poured a dash of nutty marula oil over one of my favourite meals in Namibia's north-central region: ekaka, a wild spinach that is dried in patties on hut roofs. I scooped it up with chunks of mahango porridge, a millet-like grain that is a staple in the area, often accompanied by a crunchy residue of sand.

*"Best not to chew too hard,"* I was advised with a mischievous grin.

It was the delicious oil that caught my attention. I had watched women sit in the yard of their homestead, painstakingly removing kernels from marula nuts or stones, which were then pounded into this popular condiment.

The marula is a king of trees, often owned by the women in the family. It is of such value to the Owambo groups that their cultural life centres on its generous harvest in the early months of the year, when even the traditional court is suspended for the Marula Festival. The festival usually takes place after the marula harvest between March and May, and the date and venue change from year to year as it rotates between the seven Owambo groups in Namibia.

The fresh fruit is made into a juice, and a generous amount is fermented for the festivities. The nuts of the fruit are piled in homestead corners to dry until winter, when the mahango fields have been harvested and there's time for the women to pause from their many duties and start the laborious task of producing oil.

Another use for marula oil has been identified in the last two decades. Rich in fatty acids and high in antioxidants, the oil has been shown to improve skin hydration and elasticity, keeping it soft and supple. At a small processing facility in Ondangwa – the Eudafano Women's Cooperative – the kernels are manually cold-pressed to produce the high-quality oil, which is sought-after by skin care companies like the Body Shop.



Rural women carry out the kernel extraction at home, delivering bags of kernels to the cooperative. This provides them with a much-needed livelihood in areas where there is scant opportunity for employment. Eudafano also produces oil from the seeds of the Kalahari melon or tamma melon, one of the San/Bushmen's prime sources of food and moisture in the desert.

I was becoming better acquainted with these golden oils and sensational natural ingredients. While giving lifts in the Kunene region to the arrestingly beautiful Himba women – coated in ochre and clad in traditional wraps – I became familiar with the fragrant cloud that remained in the vehicle along, with the ladies' distinctive shade of red, after they had been dropped off at their destination.

It's a heady combination of fat, herbs and a strangely alluring and deeply organic, earthy smell. The women use pieces of Namibian myrrh or commiphora to infuse their traditional beauty mixtures with the intriguing scent. I had caught whiffs of a similar resin in the markets of Egypt and streets of Ethiopia, and it haunted me until I brought some home to throw onto the coals for the rich aroma.



Recently, when I was invited to the opening of the Commiphora Processing Factory in Opuwo, north-western Namibia, I discovered that an essential oil is produced from Namibian myrrh. Commiphora wildii had been recognised as the Himba woman's essential perfume ingredient, and a community project, managed by the local conservancies, was initiated to distil the oil for use in perfumes and body products. The Himba women collect the crystallised droplets of resin that fall to the ground and take it to collection points, from where it is transported to the processing plant to be steam-distilled to extract the earthy oil.

Although commiphora is the processing plant's main interest, they also distil mopane oil from the tiny beads of resin found on mopane seeds. One of Namibia's best-loved trees, the mopane, with its butterfly-shaped leaves, is the first tree to burst into green before the rains, when the earth is still brown and dry. Its wood is popular for building and its leaves are browsed by wildlife. The leaves are the preferred food of the fat, speckled mopane worm, a delicacy enjoyed by many people in Africa.

Mopane seeds, glistening with their golden treasure, lie scattered on the land and, until now, have been one of the only products of this hardy and friendly tree that has not been well-utilised.

More and more indigenous Namibian plant products are being identified, and are being discovered and used by those who recognise the abundant wealth lying at their fingertips. I met just such a person in Windhoek, who has developed her natural flair for combining Namibian oils and essential oils into a range of beauty products.

Through her I began to learn more about the properties of oils and subtleties of scent, which in ancient Egypt wasn't meant to accost the senses like many perfumes today, but to provide a more intimate experience, responding to body heat. I was just a novice. Sophia Snyman would teach me more.



Sophia grew up on a farm in Aus, south-western Namibia, bordering the Namib Desert, and was always aware of the unusual smells around her, especially after a winter rain when her nose would lead her to specific plants. When she learned more, she started a small distillery, distilling some of the natural flora that had caught her attention – and her senses. Over freshly squeezed juice at the Craft Centre in central Windhoek, she light-heartedly explained, *“I have always had a natural feel for scents. That’s my strong point.”* She was hooked. Over the years she attended various training courses, read up on oils and essential oils and experimented. In April 2013, she was presented with an opportunity that changed her life. She entered a competition set up by the Natural Resources Institute, University of Greenwich, with financial support from the Millennium Challenge Account-Namibia Indigenous Natural Products Innovatio Fund.



Participants were required to produce body-care products using Namib myrrh, *Commiphora wildii*. As one of the two finalists in the competition, Sophia received additional training as part of the prize, allowing her to refine her formulations. The finalists were required to launch their products at the Namibia Tourism Expo in Windhoek two months later.

In a remarkably short time, Sophia transformed her hobby into a small business, using marula and Kalahari melon-seed oils with mopane and Namibian myrrh essential oils. By

the end of the year she had given up her job at one of Namibia's top banks. "I had to pursue my dream, my passion," she told me enthusiastically, her eyes twinkling.



At first Sophia manufactured her Desert Secrets Natural Body Care Products in her kitchen until her husband complained that there was sticky beeswax everywhere. So she moved into the garage, until it proved too small for her creations – or the business grew too big for it. She eventually opened a small production facility where she could expand and perfect her range. She also sources Namibian olive oil and Atlantic sea salt for some of her products, and depends on local craftspeople for some of her innovative packaging, like the nut from the makalani palm tree, which makes a perfect Namibian gift box for her solid perfume and lip balm.

The indigenous Namibian plant products encapsulate the character and the essence of the land. They are intrinsically linked to the women who sit and laboriously extract 'gold' from oil-rich kernels, or walk the arid reaches of the Kunene region, collecting small globules of resin from the ground. And to the people further along the chain at the processing facilities, and those like Sophia, who have the talent for making these oils precisely combined, beautifully packaged and easily accessible.

#### **Handy Contacts**

- Desert Secrets Natural Body Care Products +264 (0)81 275 5283, [desertsecrets@afol.com.na](mailto:desertsecrets@afol.com.na), [www.desert-secrets.com](http://www.desert-secrets.com), [www.facebook.com/desertsecrets](https://www.facebook.com/desertsecrets)
- Opuwo Processing Facility & Visitors' Centre +264 (0)81 214 8448, [namibian.essential.oils@gmail.com](mailto:namibian.essential.oils@gmail.com)