

Once upon a time... the baobab

This story begins many years before the first drop of baobab oil came out of SOPREEF's presses. And we discover that this oil, so rich, is ultimately just a byproduct of a tree with many uses.

Discovery

The image of the baobab is inseparable for me from that of Hamaduru. With him I travelled all the tracks between Sinthiou Amadou Mariam and Louggere Thiolli, passing through Guirvass, his village, and he taught me about the trees of the Sahel and the multiple uses that the Fulani make of them.

Baobab trees are few and scattered in Fouta, but in the arid region of the dieri, they offer a resource as precious as it is unexpected : their very fibrous bark is used to make strong ropes for drawing water from wells whose bottoms are sometimes impossible to see. And Hamaduru, at 95 years old and blind, continued to braid, his ear attuned to the life around him, thus earning enough to make the tea he so enjoyed sharing, a tea that had the power to stop time.

This gigantic tree is an integral part of daily life. Its leaves, ground into a powder (called laalo in Fulani) and mixed with millet flour, make couscous smooth and creamy, preventing it from being harsh on the throat. In small, isolated hamlets, it is often simply mixed with water and lightly salted for the evening meal: milk is sold ; meat, even if surrounded by dozens of head of cattle, is eaten only on special events or to honor a visitor. As for the fruit pulp, it is not used to make a drink, as it is today in the city (the most popular refreshment was curdled milk, tufam), but rather as a remedy for coughs or diarrhea : it is, in fact, a powerful antispasmodic.

Some twenty years later, I discovered veritable baobab forests in the Saloum Delta, surrounding certain villages. There, groups of women collect the fruit and extract the pulp. It's dry, which makes it easy to preserve, but it clings to the seeds, and a multitude of fibers are interwoven within it. Extracting it is no small task, but it's a treasure well worth the effort... Some of it is sold as is; dissolved in water and then filtered, it's used to make delicious drinks or ice creams (ah... the pleasure of a baobab and bissap cocktail, or soursop, or even ginger!), or that flavorful peanut butter sauce, *ngalakh*, which accompanies couscous among the Serer people. Another portion is ground into powder, finely sifted, and bagged before being sold on the market or exported.

And what about the oil in all of this?

Once the fruit pulp has been used up... remain the seeds. They are thrown away...↩

Peanut oil was well known, and before this crop was introduced to Senegal, so was the balanites oil, from the desert date, both used for preparing meals. But who would have imagined that baobab seeds contained also any oil ?

It must be said that it isn't abundant: 7% at most, and even then, you need a powerful press to achieve such an extraction rate. Fortunately, the seeds aren't very resistant and, being round, they slide easily into the feed chute that connects the hopper to the press, and the throughput is good: 25 kg of seeds per hour, on par with hibiscus, that's our best score!↩

The oil obtained clarifies quickly and appears after a few days, with a beautiful golden color, in all its splendor.

The properties of this oil live up to the baobab's reputation. Moisturizing, soothing, and regenerative, it's always good to keep a bottle on hand to treat minor wounds, calm insect bites, and restore suppleness to dry skin. For the Saint Laurent dispensary, located near our store, which uses it to treat severe burns, it's an effective and economical replacement for commercial paraffin gauze.

Finally, it provides an ideal base for making macerates with aromatic plants such as lavender, rosemary, basil or mint, which enrich it with antiseptic, anti-inflammatory or relaxing properties, and delicately perfume it.