

A treasure: the African watermelon

Beref is its name in Senegal. In Central Africa it is called Egusi.↵

It's not the fruit itself that interests those who cultivate the African watermelon: its white flesh is not very tasty, however... when you're working in the fields in the blazing heat, what a refreshing thing it is!!!↵

It is cultivated for its seeds. Very rich in oil (containing nearly 35%!), they are used, ground into a powder, as a thickener for leaf sauces, which vary endlessly depending on the region, and are served with rice or couscous. These traditional dishes are not only delicious, but also very rich in plant-based protein and minerals (especially iron).

Seeds don't fall from the sky!

When the fruit has ripened, a good month after the end of the rainy season, there is still work to be done. It is mainly the women who take care of it: they have to open it, extract the seeds, remove the pulp, spread them on the ground to dry, then sift them to remove the sand and dust that has mixed in with them, and finally put them in bags.↵

In Fouta Toro, in the Senegal River valley, the first piles of seeds appear in the markets in mid-November. The marketing season is very short (it only lasts about a month), so you have to be vigilant and ready to buy! Even better, it's best to establish contact with the producers beforehand: if you pay them a good price and they can avoid having to transport their seeds to the market, they'll prefer it!

The long journey to the oil mill

Here, they don't weigh the seeds; they sell them by volume: the muudo, which takes the form of a large tomato paste container. The technique is simple: fill it as full as possible until the seeds form a small dome on top. It then contains about 4 kg.↵

The collectors negotiate the price, check the condition and cleanliness of the seeds, ensure the bags are full, and organize their transport by cart to the paved road. From there, they will be loaded onto a bus that will take them 600 km away to Dakar, to a bus station where we must be present to collect them, as there is no secure storage facility.↵

And that's not all : the oil mill is still 250 km away! The delivery vehicle, on its monthly round trips, will make the final transfer.

And at the end of the road, the oil

The seeds keep well, so we can process them year-round, according to customer demand.

The production of the oil itself takes time. It is pressed slowly to extract the maximum amount of oil, with the thermometer constantly monitored because if it heats up, its physical properties and composition, which make it unique, will be altered: on average, only about 4 liters are obtained per hour...↵

Oilseed cakes, compressed seed residues, are true concentrates of minerals and protein and will be used in feeding, for example, broiler chickens. Everything has value !

Finally, there it is, on the shelves of the point of sale sits an oil of a pale, luminous, yellow color.↵

Precious, because it is the result of the mobilization of an immense human chain, and of treasures of patience and multiple know-how.↵

And... she's now waiting for you !!!!