

Fascinating desert-survivor plant shows great potential as rich Namibian food-oil resource

Stefanie Huemmer

Most of us that grew up in Namibia know the “botterpitte” from way back then, when as kids we used to sit for hours and one by one crack them between our teeth and enjoy the lovely creamy nutty flavor that is so typical of the !Nara nuts. This was made possible by a small group of !nara harvesters. For the rural Topnaar #Aonin living in the Kuiseb Delta the !Nara fruit and its nuts are a vital part of a healthy diet and the harvesting and processing of these nuts have become part of an actively lived cultural heritage that has been passed on from generation to generation.

The !Nara *Acanthosicyos horridus* is a large spiky desert-adapted bush that grows up to 10 m in diameter and about 1 m high. It is endemic to the Western Namib and grows most abundantly in the Kuiseb delta. The branches are leafless to avoid moisture loss in the harsh desert climate. The spiky, greenish-yellow pumpkin-like fruit weighing more than 1 kg and contain about 200 pips.

The Topnaar pastoralists and gatherers that live in the Kuiseb valley, seasonally move into the !Nara “fields” between the dunes on their donkey carts to harvest these valuable fruits. The !Nara are eaten fresh or as a porridge often mixed with maize meal – and are further processed to produce nuts and a spe-



*!Nara plants growing on the dunes
Photo: Stefanie Huemmer*

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cial sun-dried fruit roll sometimes referred to as “chocolate”, which dried, lasts for several months. The fruit pulp is an important source of vitamins, minerals and trace elements while the so called “botterpitte” which are eaten or sold as a snack are full of valuable oil and rich in amino acids.

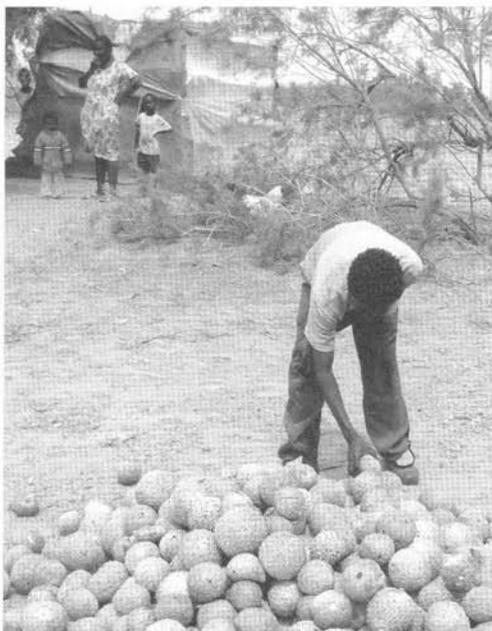
In an 8 000-year old tradition, the fruit are cut off the bushes with the sharp end of a digging stick, rolled down the dune hammocks and loaded on donkey carts to be transported to the process sites. Unripe fruit are buried for a couple of days in the warm desert sand to fully ripen. The fruit are then cut in half and the flesh scraped into a large drum. The pulp-filled drums are heated over low-burning fires under constant stirring, to slowly separate the seeds from the fruit.

Some years back Volker Huemmer, then a chef on his own lodge, bought the !Nara nuts from a trader in Walfish Bay, to serve this Namibian speciality to his guests. While preparing !Nara nut parfaits and other delicatessen he dreamed of how he would, one day, like to press an unusual food oil out of these desert gems.

A few years later, during conversations with the Topnaar harvesters, we were told that the “botterpitte” snack-sales had nearly diminished and that the fate of this valuable heritage was inevitable. It was clear that by adding value to the nuts by creating high value !nara products the harvesting could be re-activated and the harvesters in return could earn a much needed income for their families.

It was the right time for Volker to turn his dream of pressing !Nara oil, into a business.

After lots of trial-pressings, a specially patented press was ordered from Germany. The company “Desert Hills” was born with the mission to create really high value, healthy, truly Namibian !nara oil products, and the first !Nara food oil was produced. The nuts are cold-pressed without the use of solvents, chemicals or additives. This press-technique allows the oil to keep its valuable vitamins, pigments and



*Harvested !Nara fruits
Photo: Stefanie Huemmer*

flavors. Laboratory test conducted in Namibia and South Africa showed that the oil has over 80 % poly-unsaturated fatty acids of which 57 % are of the essential Omega-6- fatty acids.

The Desert Hills !Nara oil can be used where ever you want to use a high quality, wholesome and aromatic oil, salads; seafood; fish; risotto; cheese; pasta; vegetarian as well as sweet dishes all become inspiring new taste experiences. The oil can be heated and makes tasty marinades for meat, chicken or fish. Currently three different oils are available: “!Nara oil natural” enhances all dishes, “!Nara oil with vanilla” with its subtle sweetness of real vanilla is excellent for fish and seafood and all sweet dishes, “!Nara oil with organic espresso”, combines the roasted coffee aromas with the nutty flavor of the !Nara oil and enhances all meat, chicken and pasta dishes.

Further an all-natural !Nara oil body cream has been launched under the brand name “BodyfoodNamibia”. This rich, soothing cream is ideal for our harsh and dry Namibian climate.

We are still full of new ideas concerning this inspiring, truly Namibian, food oil resource and have teamed up with the Gobabeb Training and Research Station to monitor and work on vital issues regarding the sustainable use of the



The flesh of the !Nara fruit

Photo: Stefanie Huemmer

!Nara plant and on developing community projects, hoping to make our success the Topnaar communities success not only by generating more income to the harvesters, but by slowly creating more community participation.

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*Different products made from the !Nara seeds
Photo: Stefanie Huemmer*