

"Cardamom needs a lot of shade, but because I'm perverse I put it in the sunshine." Lulu Sturdy laughs, her eyes full of defiant enthusiasm. Wearing tight jeans and a leather belt pulled tightly around her slim waist, she dispels all farmer stereotypes. A single woman, young, innovative and passionate, Lulu has carved out an imaginative career in western Uganda. Over the last seven years, she has transformed a 700-acre unruly estate into a successful African farm specialising in vanilla production. Lulu now grows, cures, exports and distributes premium bourbon-style vanilla beans for the gourmet market worldwide. Dedicated to developing local farming communities, Lulu also established a farming 'network' which enabled farming groups to achieve Fairtrade certification last year.

We all bend down closer to the cardamom as though waiting for the plants' affirmation of Lulu's technique. No answer. Yet the leaves are green, firm and look happily mottled in the sunshine that slips between the scissored leaves of nearby banana trees. Lulu picks a small cardamom leaf and crushes it between her fingers, smelling the fruits of her endeavour as we join the next cut pathway through Ndali Estate towards her vanilla plantation.

Before the sudden death of her uncle, the charismatic landowner of Ndali Estate and Lodge in the crater-lake region of Western Uganda, Lulu Sturdy was a furniture designer in Oxfordshire. Armed with hammer and chisel, she was approaching 30 and restless for change.

In 1998, Uganda was a reformed country. But with continued sporadic violence from opposition groups, Ndali was not far from danger. While her uncle was buried back in Yorkshire, Lulu took over the reins of her family's property with the company of 12 Ugandan army soldiers stationed in dugout trenches on Ndali's ridge, who spent most of their time drinking freshly squeezed banana gin and cosseting a resident family of baboons.

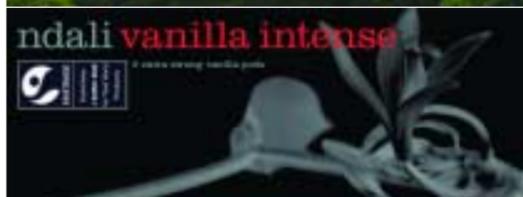
"The farm was wild. Every night I kept a black t-shirt, black jeans and a Leatherman at the end of my bed." I ask Lulu to elaborate on her plan. "At the sound of gunfire, the idea was to jump into my kit and roll down the hillside into the elephant grass." A curious idea when contemplating the faces of Ndali's 'hill'. The Lodge is built on a slice of ridge between a crater lake and plunging, telescopic views out towards Queen Elizabeth Park and the Virunga volcanoes icing the Uganda-Rwanda border. "I think the plan after that was to get away in an old LandRover called Snowdrop with half a steering box and a dying clutch..."

Lulu chose to inherit not only a traditional, mixed African farm of bananas, coffee, cattle and alcohol distillation but also 29 illegally squatting families. Along with these elusive tenants and the legitimate farm workers came Mr. B, the Farm Manager. An excommunicated priest, Mr. B's waistline expanded with the riches he carved out of the farm's resources. As he hosted extravagant parties for district police commissioners, Ndali Estate made huge losses. "I saw that he needed to go and I was the only person with the authority to do it," Lulu says. "All of this was quite by mistake. I'm actually people-shy and addicted to absolute personal freedom. In my head, this situation is one that, in any other circumstance, I would have actively fled from."

It is always strange to hear people discussing the intricacies of their own nature. I can certainly see Lulu has no fear of independence. Viewed from below on a gloomy night, the house she is constructing on an adjacent hill to Ndali Lodge looks solitary. There are no neighbours, just the occasional long-haired black and white colobus monkeys and investigative bats. However, when you stand on the wooden promontory from her house that overhangs the iridescent jade-coloured water below, her life of 'solitude' suddenly makes sense. On a clear day in the rainy season, it is even possible to see the snow-capped Rwenzori range, the Mountains of the Moon, in the distance. Her open-plan living room is empty but for a stove and kettle, loose planks, volumes of books on vanilla farming, a dart board, woodshavings and unfinished African teak doors.

Dreaming Vanilla

Ndali achieves Fairtrade and satisfies global market with top bourbon-style vanilla. *Emelia Jones* visits Uganda's Ndali Estate



The vanilla vines hide under ancient forest canopy, their roots buried in rich, loamy soil mulched with a mixture of leaves and grasses. They are quiet and luxurious, commanding reverence. The plantation air smells like earth after rain with a twist of an unknown, dangerous aphrodisiac. I ask Lulu if her chosen vocation appeals to her own sense of romance. She is unsure.

As an orchid vine, vanilla is the only one of 30,000 orchid species to produce an edible fruit. It requires a host: the plantation is filled with lines of slim, unsuspecting forest trees squeezed tight by lime-green tendrils. Lulu explains how in Uganda there are few, if any, insects capable of pollinating the intricate vanilla flower. Even in Mexico, the original home of vanilla, the tiny bees (*melapona*) able to pollinate the flower are not reliable. Every vanilla bean consumed today ➤



MAIN PICTURE:
Lulu Sturdy stands with Ndali Estate behind
INSET:
The new Fairtrade Ndali Vanilla brand *Intense*
BELOW:
Lulu in discussion with Ndali Estate workers
RIGHT TOP:
Mugisha working in the field
RIGHT CENTRE:
Lulu and Deo grade the vanilla

all things vanilla

- > Vanilla (*vanilla planifolia*) forms part of the orchid family
- > Vanilla is a tropical, herbaceous vine native to the humid coastal rainforest of Central America
- > Vanilla can grow up to 30-50 metres long in the wild
- > the Coca-Cola Corporation is the world's largest buyer of natural vanilla extract



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Where to stay

You can stay at Ndali Lodge amidst the Bunyaruguru crater-lake region of western Uganda, 24 kms south of Fort Portal.

The Lodge is perched on the rim of an extinct volcano, now full of water forming the breathtaking Lake Nyinambuga which covers an area of 250 acres and is 130m deep. The main thatched area has spacious sitting room and dining room flanked by eight stone and thatch cottages providing luxurious accommodation for 16 guests. All the cottages face west offering spectacular views towards the Mountains of the Moon.

Each cottage, large enough to accommodate a family, has en suite facilities and private verandah.

▶▶ www.ndali.net

has been 'conceived' by a pair of human hands. At Ndali, each employee has a safety pin to insert into the flower and press the stigma and stamen together. Once the flower is successfully pollinated, it must battle the vagaries of tropical weather to stay attached, if the bean is to grow to its full size. Lulu is excited. "From the time the flower opens we have eight hours to close the deal – after this the flower begins to shut and wither."

Lulu's latest venture is marked by her success in winning a contract with a British supermarket; *Ndali Vanilla Intense* (split bean vanilla) was launched on Waitroses' shelves across the UK just recently. Having previously experimented with rice, soya, maize, beans and pyrethrum, Lulu seems to have found her niche. "It's been quite amazing to learn as I go along. I really have grown emotionally and intellectually with each crop."

every vanilla bean consumed today has been 'conceived' by a pair of human hands. At Ndali, each employee has a safety pin to insert into the flower and press the stigma and stamen together

Lulu currently buys 10 tons a year of green vanilla from 600 small farmers, all processed on Ndali Estate. In May 2003 she completed Ndali's first heady-scented processing house, a simple brick building with oil lanterns hanging inside on long sticks. A shaft of low evening light illuminates the long wooden crates piled high containing the different graded beans of vanilla. Old-fashioned looking weighing machines sit like old men on nearby tables. As Lulu opens a box unlocking the extravagant, sweet aroma of the sticky, brown vanilla beans, they look strangely like treasure. Now that Ugandan farmers in the area are confident they will benefit from a Fairtrade vanilla price - one that allows cost of production, a fair profit margin, plus a premium which is put towards social development - Lulu feels that they will start to focus on the quality of their crop and their longer-term future.

Driving back from the farm to Kampala, Lulu talks of her future plans: it is clear that she believes Uganda has tremendous opportunity and resourcefulness. "Our next move is to sell our Grade B beans by developing further vanilla-related products under our brand. It's funny. I feel the urgency now to *make* money; I'm not satisfied any more with the break-even tightrope. I'm not just responsible for myself any more." I tell Lulu about Napoleon Hill's theory on money-making. First step is to go to bed with your burning desire. Lulu laughs. "Yes! That's me. I dream vanilla. First rung on the profit ladder, right?" ■

“ We have been using Ndali Vanilla in the River Cottage kitchen for some weeks now, and I can confidently say it is some of the best I have ever come across. The pods arrive beautifully supple and are bursting with tiny sticky seeds. The scent is rich and intense, and the flavour deep, long-lasting and absolutely true. ”

(Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, UK celebrity chef)



Log on to website www.ndalilodge.com to find out more.