

ONE ENCOUNTER, ONE OPPORTUNITY Ichi-go ichi-e

I'd bought some Ndali vanilla from a supermarket near where I live, and with my usual inquisitive nature, wanted to find out a little more about what they were doing. So I wrote to Ndali; and out of this came an invitation to see the 2012 harvest at their plantation in western Uganda. I thought that this might make an interesting feature for a radio programme, so, packing my flip flops and tape recorder, I set out for East Africa.

The first things that struck me when I met Ndali's owner, Lulu Sturdy, were the intense blue of her eyes and her smile. Lulu is petite but wiry, with a quiet determination she must have needed when, still in her twenties, she inherited this 800-acre estate near the Rwenzori Mountains. She explained how she had started the Ndali fair trade vanilla company; easy words to write now, but at that point, I hadn't begun to understand what was involved in growing vanilla in Uganda, let alone getting it from there to the UK and on sale in a supermarket. Ndali is like a family to Lulu: she runs the business as their mother. She is nurturing, loving and fair, and she has an instinct, not to do things for people, but to enable them to do the best for themselves. She is strict sometimes and seriously fun at others. Things have not always been straightforward for her, and many of the challenges that she has faced over the past 15 years would have sent most people scurrying back to the safety of the UK. But Lulu is an extraordinary person. I found out just how extraordinary as I went with her, meeting the farmers and finding out more about the production of vanilla.

What I saw was that Lulu had changed lives, not just by encouraging farmers to adopt sustainable methods, but also by creating a structure that meant they were now being paid a fairer price for the crop they cultivated: often two to three times what the free market offered. Formerly, individual farmers were often exploited by middlemen who would pay them the lowest possible price for their vanilla, but as their co-op grew from 50 to 600 and then 1,200 farmers, selling through Ndali at fair trade prices, more of the value could be secured for the local community. It was then that I asked a question that changed my life forever.

“What, I asked one of the growers, did getting a fair price mean to him? The question was almost a throwaway one.”

He paused for a moment, called his two daughters to him, and replied in a quiet and matter-of-fact way, that a fair price meant that when both his girls were ill he did not have to choose which of them was most likely to survive, because he had enough money to pay for medical treatment for both. I looked down to see two happy smiling children aged perhaps six and ten. They were almost exactly the same age as my own two girls. In that moment my world changed forever. I was completely humbled and the reality of his words left me weak. The price I pay for the vanilla I buy can decide if children on the

other side of the world live or die. Nothing has ever been the same since.

I arrived home in turmoil. The people around me were oblivious to the reality that what we choose to buy and eat has consequences. For months I was at a loss about what to do. I felt powerless and angry with the world.

In spring 2013 I was invited to Grenada to meet chocolatier Mott Green. I had first heard of him in 2010, and the man I met was a shrewd 46-year-old New Yorker with a clear vision of what is right, achievable and fair. The combination of Grenada's perfect growing conditions and Mott's inexhaustible energy and ability to get things done had resulted in The Grenada Chocolate Company, making some of the most delicious chocolate you could wish for.

Just to explain: the largest producer of cocoa in the world is an ocean away from Grenada: the Ivory Coast. It's also grown in Ghana, Nigeria and Cameroon, as well as Indonesia and Latin America, mostly on small family farms, and often by some of the poorest people in the world, frequently relying on child labour and sometimes, effectively, slavery. A recent report by the Fairtrade Foundation found that over fifty million people who depend on growing cocoa for their livelihoods, particularly in West Africa, survive on no more than \$2 a day, and most cocoa farmers never get a fair price for what they grow. The business model for the majority of the chocolate that we eat means that most of the value from the cocoa trade is attached to the

processing of cocoa in the West, and cocoa farmers typically receive just a fraction of the retail price paid by consumers.

Even in Grenada, cocoa farming is still a small and unsophisticated business, as the way cocoa trees grow makes any kind of mechanisation impossible. The difference lies in the business model that Mott Green created, which turned everything on its head. It was more than fair trade: an organic cocoa farmers', processors' and chocolate-makers' cooperative. The beautiful deep burgundy through to banana-yellow pods are grown organically then transported across the river to be fermented; and finally, processed and made into chocolate just a mile from where they were grown. This has made it possible to transfer much of the 'added value' back from multinational processors and retailers to the growers.

It's rare to find people who live by their convictions, and yet Mott managed to draw together others who shared his passion, connecting the chocolate company with a movement called Fair Transport. The Tres Hombres sailing ship under Captain Arjen van der Veen is a beautiful, 32-metre brigantine which uses wind power to carry up to 35 tonnes of cargo over the 6,600km from Grenada to the UK.

The night before the ship left Grenada, with over 50,000 bars from the Grenada Chocolate Company in the hold, it was moored in St Georges Bay, with me on board for a last visit. As one of the crew played a guitar and we sipped rum, I explained my feelings of frustration about

how little power we, as consumers, seemed to have over what happens in the world.

When I asked Arjen and Mott how they had realised their dreams of making the world a better place through fair food and fair transport, Arjen pointed out the obvious: 'This is not how it could be. This is how it is. We are doing it right now. This is my life and it's real.'

Arjen then challenged me. Why did I feel so helpless? What could I do to change things? And something I really wasn't expecting: 'So what are you going to do with your convictions? If you really believe that the world can change, then you just do it. You live it.' In that moment I felt as though I'd been handed the picture of a puzzle I'd long had the pieces for, but with no idea how to put them together. I didn't have a vanilla plantation in Uganda, or a chocolate company in Grenada, or even an ocean-going ship, but I could teach people to make sourdough bread and I could write. I'd found out something about who I was, and realised something I could do. I came home from Grenada a different person: trusting more fully in my beliefs, without questioning, without hesitation. With a new purpose. Seeing this view of the world through other peoples' eyes, I felt that I saw my own place properly. I realised that we can all make a difference.

Thinking back on those feelings: before I started this journey, I felt trapped, in a job I no longer wanted to do, with three young children demanding every ounce of my energy and worrying about the world they were going to grow up in. But I was

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expecting someone else to come along and save their world. Now I felt that it was down to me to make my own changes. Sitting around waiting for someone else to make a difference is a miserable way to live. In meeting Lulu, Mott and Arjen, I realised that a life with principles is at the heart of true happiness. We all have that opportunity: to put the ideas of an ethical and sustainable lifestyle into practice in so many small ways, and to incorporate these core values into our daily lives in how to eat, grow and buy food that starts to change the world, one meal at a time.

On 2nd June 2013, only months after I'd met him, Mott Green died. It is with the deepest sadness that I write this. Along with so many of his friends and family, I feel the loss of this utterly extraordinary man, but his words, principles and spirit live on in so many of us. Which brings us back to the Japanese words, Ichi-go ichi-e: one encounter, one opportunity. A lesson that we should cherish every meeting, for the inspiration we may draw from it; because it will never happen in quite the same way again.



RECLAIM CONTROL CARROT CAKE

I almost bought a carrot cake in my local supermarket last week. It was in a pretty box, and it looked very tempting. I wondered though, what went on behind the carefully designed packaging and the wording meant to convince me to buy it.

I'll be honest: for a product that said it was 'made with the finest organic ingredients', I was surprised to see that it included margarine, coconut, palm oil, palm stearin and palm kernel oil. I have a bee in my bonnet about coconut being used as a cheap 'filler' in many supermarket cakes and desserts. I've even found it in a tiramisu, ruining the flavour. For me, it's just wrong, there or in a carrot cake. And I remembered two reasons why I try not to buy mass-produced cakes.

The first is that, while they have a 'best before' or 'sell by' date, they never show the date they were made. All too often, supermarket cakes are what I call 'soft but stale': not fresh, in fact days or possibly weeks old, but made with emulsifiers, humectants and 'modified' ingredients, included to give that long-lasting softness. And secondly: if there was ever a time in my life when I didn't care about what was in the food I ate, I'm over it now. I want to know what I'm eating, and when it comes to cakes, the best way is to make it myself. That also means I'm not sending unrecyclable packaging to landfill, or spending my money on something that leaves me disappointed. Most of all, choosing the ingredients means I can take another step towards supporting sustainable farming and fair trade products. There are hidden costs in so much 'cheap' food, and the only way to avoid this trap is to look beyond the marketing and hype, and reclaim power over what you eat.

SERVES » 8

100g unrefreshed 1-week-old
sourdough starter (see page 41
and page 192)
145ml sunflower oil
4 tablespoons golden syrup
finely grated zest of 3 oranges,
plus 100ml juice
225g light soft brown sugar
3 medium eggs
200g carrots, grated
100g pistachios, finely chopped
225g plain flour
3 teaspoons baking powder
2 teaspoons Ndali vanilla powder
1 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
For the cream cheese frosting
75g unsalted butter, at room
temperature
150g icing sugar
525g full-fat cream cheese, at room
temperature
1½ teaspoons Ndali vanilla extract
zest of 2 oranges
To decorate
50g pistachios, chopped
1½ teaspoons pink peppercorns, crushed

Line the bases of three 20cm round cake tins with non-stick baking paper. Preheat the oven to 180°C/160°C fan/gas 4.

In a large mixing bowl, beat the sourdough starter, oil, golden syrup, orange zest and sugar together until smooth.

In a separate bowl, beat the eggs until pale and frothy, and fold them into the oil and sugar mixture, then stir in the orange juice, carrots and pistachios.

Sift the flour, baking powder, vanilla powder and nutmeg together. Fold the dry mixture into the wet mixture, ensuring it is fully incorporated. Divide the mixture evenly between the tins and bake for 18–25 minutes or until a light golden colour and a skewer inserted into each cake comes out clean. Remove from the oven and leave to cool in the tins.

While the cakes are cooling, make the frosting. Put the butter, icing sugar, cream cheese, vanilla and orange zest into a bowl and stir with

a wooden spoon until the mixture becomes a paste. Then whisk using a hand-held or electric whisk until smooth and thoroughly blended.

When the cakes are completely cool, place one layer on a serving plate and spread with one-third of the icing. Then place the second layer of sponge on this, and spread with another third of the frosting. Finally, put the final layer in place, and spread the remaining frosting over the top. Decorate the cake with a scattering of pistachios and pink peppercorns.