

The Spices of Life

A once derelict Ugandan farm is flourishing under the Fairtrade scheme, bringing vanilla pods to the UK market. **Bel Jacobs** meets with the founder

In many respects, 2005 was a landmark year for Fairtrade. The Fairtrade Foundation launched Fairtrade cotton, with its potential to help 100 million smallholder cotton farmers around the world – and for demand to outstrip supply. And opinion polls showed that Fairtrade products are now recognised by a record 40 per cent of the public. That means more farmers than ever will be encouraged.

Now it's back to business as usual: raising the profile of Fairtrade and introducing more products to an increasingly excited public. Instead of the handful of teas, coffees, bananas and chocolate that once comprised the staple diet of the fairtrade shopper, consumers can now choose from up to 1,100 fairtrade goodies including wines and flowers. A completely Fairtrade lifestyle may not be far off the horizon.

It's not just a case of whacking another product group onto the menu, however. "Every product has its challenges," says Barbara Crowther, head of communications



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at the Fairtrade Foundation. "How do you decide a fairer price for that particular product? A lot of analysis goes into that, talking to producers, looking at costs of living, at how the markets are operating, at anything specific to that product. That's why it can take a while for standards to be agreed."

One of the most recently included have been spices. Since standards were agreed early last year, the UK has seen the introduction of Fairtrade peppercorns and two different vanilla brands.

Seven years ago, the Ndali Estate was a crumbling white elephant in Western Uganda until Lulu Sturdy, a young furniture designer from the UK arrived and transformed it, without previous farming experience, into a flourishing venture specialising in vanilla production. Sturdy buys, processes and distributes vanilla from over 600 small farmers scattered across the region to produce a luxurious bourbon-style vanilla bean.

The decision to go Fairtrade, says Sturdy, was easy. "I knew I wanted to market it as Uganda vanilla but no one had heard of it in the UK. I knew that, if I were going to approach the supermarkets, they'd ask me what's different about your vanilla? Fairtrade has an impetus of its own. It was a strong way to break into the market."

That impetus has other benefits: "Originally, my approach to dealing with the farmers was pretty much fair trading but making it official forces you to be more professional," laughs Sturdy. Vanilla, for example, resists being grown in large industrial-type conditions and, as a result, its guardians tend to be smallholder, living and working in relative isolation – without the benefits a single voice can give them.

Getting Fairtrade certification requires that farmers form organised co-operatives with the ability to manage and negotiate with clarity and transparency. Sturdy's farmers were already in loose individual associations but "they didn't work together," she says. "At the beginning, I was trying to go around and explain that they needed to form an adhesive unit –





HEATING UP ● The freshly picked vanilla pods are heated quickly to 'cure' the beans and preserve them before being put out in the hot Ugandan sun to dry.

mainly, to protect themselves from the peaks and dips of the market.”

She has nothing but praise for the Fairtrade process. “The ethical result of Fairtrade is that the farmers understand the process and become more involved,” says Sturdy. “We’re not an NGO, we’re trying to be commercial and that’s making the farmers more commercial. And, with Fairtrade, you’ve got such a good network, such good access to information and to ways of marketing. It’s helped phenomenally.”

Different issues arise when, instead of the smallholdings and co-operatives it is best known for helping, Fairtrade deals with larger farms. “Here, there are more stringent standards around hired labour, payment of minimum wages,” says Crowther. “It’s about making sure that Fairtrade is adding value but also delivering against the goal of empowering workers and



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improving their lives.”

The Foundation is no stranger to these issues; workers on tea estates and fruit farms have been involved in Fairtrade for over 10 years. But when Fairtrade roses from Kenya were introduced to the UK last March, they attracted outcry. The roses, said critics, were grown intensively; workers lived in shanty-style housing and remained vulnerable to excessive hours, casual contracts and sudden, compulsory overtime, particularly around periods of peak demand in the West, such as Mother’s Day.

This January, Sainsbury’s switched 75 per cent of its roses to Fairtrade Kenyan, with the aim of going to 100 per cent by Fairtrade Fortnight. Socially Responsible Sourcing Manager David Miller is confident about the standards set and the results for the workers. “There’s a set of rules,” he stresses. “Take overtime, for example. We know it

Sorting the fresh vanilla, prior to heating, into correct sized pods.



happens every year so we plan in advance. We consult the workers. Overtime has to be agreed, voluntary and paid at a rate above standard pay.”

Meanwhile, a nascent hope fizzles throughout the movement that developing world farmers themselves may one day begin to run these ventures on their own. Malet Azoulay is the UK-based importer and adviser to a group of lychee farmers in Mozambique, whose Fairtrade produce has been selling in Asda since December. Last year, their parent company, Katope, achieved “black empowered” Fairtrade status for its avocado farm.

Alan Forrester is Malet Azoulay’s business unit manager. “In South Africa, we’re working towards black empowerment on our Fairtrade farms,” he explains. “This means we’re trying to bring members of the African community into the management teams. The basis is that they own an amount of that business. That way, it is more than just Fairtrade. There are people



FOR NDALI VANILLA AND A RANGE OF NEW FAIRTRADE SPICES, VISIT THE NEW CONSUMER ONLINE SHOP
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★ The Tropical Wholefoods Ndali vanilla is priced £4.89 for two pods.

participating in the business itself.”

It is a concept that Sturdy is familiar with, albeit without the peculiarly South African tag. “I may be doing myself out of a job but what I’m trying to do is help the farmers stand on their own two feet so that they become a commercial operation in their own right and basically, get to a situation where they don’t need me to process their goods.”

But this, she concedes, is still a long term expectation. For now, she is at the helm of a thriving vanilla farm: “I’m not an NGO, I’m not a charity organisation. We’re trying to be commercial and you’ve got the knock on effect of making the farmers commercial. I live and work with them so closely on a daily basis and there’s enormous satisfaction of seeing them take a fair price home and doing something with it. As a group, at the beginning, they didn’t even know what vanilla could be used for. The ethical process of Fairtrade is that farmers understand the process.” **nc**