

Amarula Cream Liqueur

By Hope S. Philbrick

Animals can help drive sales: Americans are twice as likely to buy a new wine when an animal is on the label, according to the marketing information company ACNielsen. But in the case of Amarula Cream Liqueur, the African elephant depicted on the label is not just a marketing gimmick, it's a tribute.

At the heart of Amarula Cream Liqueur is marula, a juicy, thick-skinned fruit from the mango family that is about the size of an apricot. Marula trees grow only in the subequatorial open plains of Africa and elephants play a crucial role in their life cycle. From mid-January to mid-March the fruit ripens from olive green to pale yellow and emits a distinct perfume. During ripening season elephants are lured to marula trees by the fruit's intense, tropical aroma — sometimes walking for days to reach them — and gorge themselves on mass quantities of the fruit. In their zeal to gather fruit, elephants sometimes ram and uproot trees, acts that ultimately

The African elephant is the largest land mammal and plays a crucial role in the ecosystem, in part because each one consumes about 375 pounds of foliage and bark each day — along with as much marula fruit as they can seize during ripening season.



PHOTO BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK



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kill the trees. But because the fibrous marula passes straight through the animals' digestive tracts, elephant dung then incubates the marula so that its nut can germinate and grow into a sapling. Elephants aren't the only creatures attracted to the sweet, vitamin-rich fruit: the marula tree is highly regarded by African people and it holds a variety of roles in tribal cultures. Some tribes consider the marula an aphrodisiac, others use it as a medication while others perform wedding ceremonies under its gray-green branches. But its fruit is the main reason for the tree's popularity. People collect ripe marula for jellies, jams, a local "beer" and also to make a wine that is double distilled, aged in oak and blended with fresh cream for Amarula Cream Liqueur, which today is the second largest selling cream liqueur in the world.

Recognizing the marula tree's cultural significance, the producers of Amarula Cream Liqueur seek special permission to collect fruit from local tribal chiefs or kings who are considered the guardians of trees within their territories. A single tree can produce over 10,000 fruit, but it takes 200 pieces to make a single liter of alcohol. Local residents, typically women, gather the marula fruit that has fallen off the tree and ripened on the ground.

"Close to 6,000 ladies harvest fruit," says Etienne Bruwer, activation manager for Africa Amarula. "With an average of 10 family members per home, approxi-

mately 60,000 people are dependent on the income generated by selling fruit to the production plant." Payment for each kilogram of fruit delivered to the production plant is four times the minimum wage that can be earned in the area. The growth of the Amarula Cream Liqueur brand has provided jobs to many, but since the harvest season lasts only about six weeks, many families have been without income for the remainder of the year.

Margret Malatji has collected marula during ripening season for 10 years. She says that on average she spends seven hours a day doing the physical work. Since collection bags are heavy and difficult to carry once full, she typically delivers fruit every other day to the Amarula Lapa production facility to minimize the expense of hiring a car for transportation. As is often the case, the work that she does is her family's primary source of income.

The producers of Amarula Cream Liqueur have developed a range of programs to provide residents with alternate sources of income throughout the year, such as wire fence making, brick making and extracting oil from marula nuts. They've also supported training in basic business skills. People once desperate for jobs can now dream of a career. Virginia Malatji (no relation) harvested marula fruit for years before joining Amarula Lapa as a general worker where her duties include hosting tours for visitors.

In the efforts to help the community, animal residents are not overlooked. The producers of Amarula Cream Liqueur funnel funds into elephant research. After all, elephants are essential to the marula's future and serve as the brand icon.

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