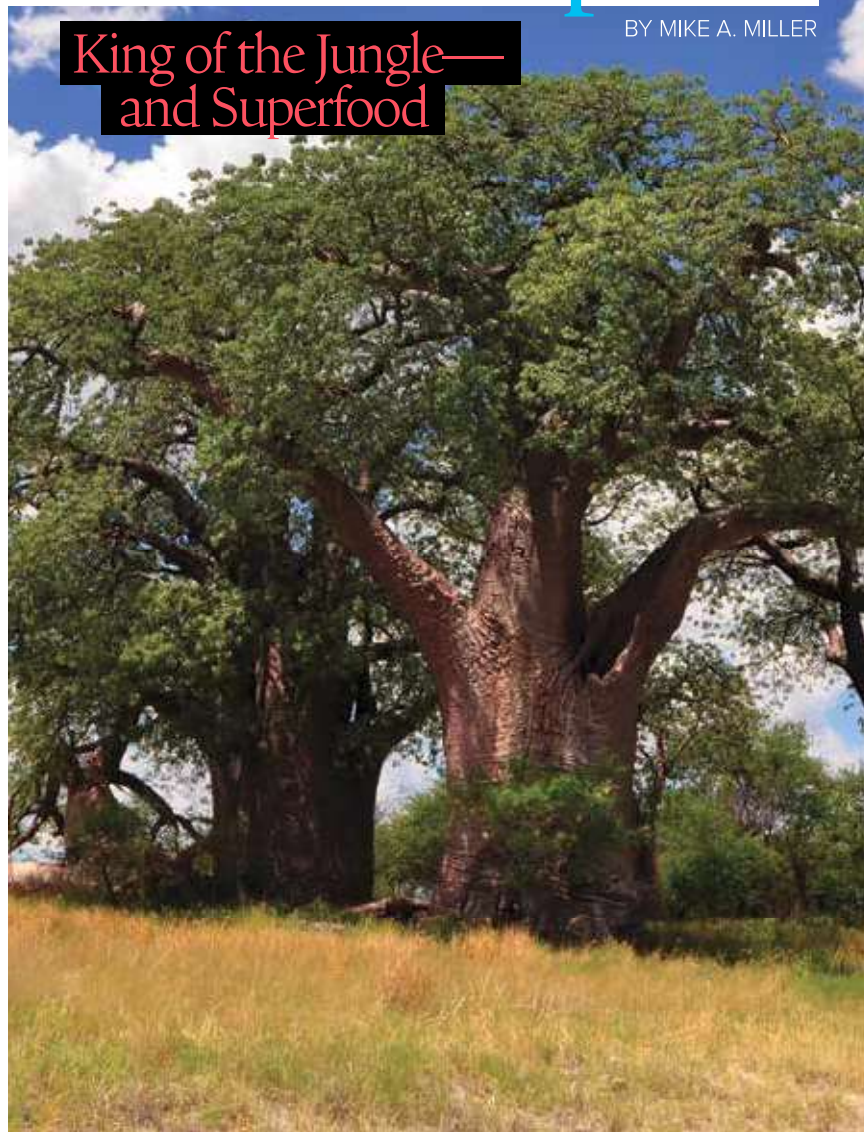


superfood: baobab fruit pulp

Africa's Export

BY MIKE A. MILLER

King of the Jungle—
and Superfood



Dare to pick its flowers, and you risk death by lion mauling; venture to drink water soaked in its seeds and you earn immunity from crocodile jaws. The baobab tree is said to offer these and other mystical properties.

The legend of the baobab varies, but often involves the god Thora tossing the baobab tree from the gates of paradise, where it lands upside down. Yet the resilient tree continues to grow, resembling the strength of the African people. And the true history of the baobab tree is as colorful as its mythos.

HISTORY

Use of the baobab tree as medicine hails from ancient times—as far back as ancient Egypt, where its seeds have been found in tombs. It is thought that they used the fruit to treat fevers, dysentery, and open wounds. The tree is not native to Egypt, however, and the Egyptians likely relied on trade routes to source the coveted fruit. Instead, the African baobab peppers dry, sandy sites south of the Sahara and Tanzania. It's safe to say that the baobab has been an integral part of the African landscape for millennia.

In 1749, French explorer Michel Adanson found the handy fruit tree during his stay in Senegal and brought samples back home. He was rewarded for “discovering” the baobab tree, and it took after his own name, under the genus *Adansonia*. Only one species, *Adansonia digitata*, is indigenous to Africa, with “digitata” referring to the tree’s hand-like shape. Other species of the baobab tree are native to Australia and Madagascar.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the oldest currently living baobab tree is 3,000 years old—but the species is generally thought to live for 1000 to 2000 years. The widest baobab tree is the gigantic Sunland Big Baobab, measuring 108 feet in diameter and carbon dated to be about 1,700 years old.

Africans have a long history of using the tree for its nutritional, medicinal, and practical benefits. Local elders come to large decisions under its spindly canopy and it is widely revered for its wisdom, according to Leslie Shages, African economic development and trade specialist, and natural foods researcher. Highly regarded as one of the most useful African trees, Africans not only eat the fruit, but use the seeds and leaves as medicine for ailments such as diarrhea, malaria, and microbial infections.

But baobab isn't out of tricks yet—its grey, fibrous bark is used for making clothes, rope, and baskets. Its mammoth, hollowed-out trunks have been trans-

formed into burial sites, grain siloes, water reservoirs, and even buildings, including a pub. It also stores massive volumes of water inside its trunk for use during dry seasons, giving residents a valuable supply of the otherwise scarce resource.

“It’s one of those few nutritional ‘superfoods’ that is good for you, good for our planet, and good for social welfare all at the same time,” said Jeffrey Grams, CEO of natural supplement company Garden of Life. Understandably appointed “the tree of life,” the baobab offers locals all of their basic needs: food, water, medicine, clothing, shelter, and now—money.

The fruit’s dried pulp and seed oil have become a lucrative export for rural producers in Africa. This is partly due to PhytoTrade Africa, a nonprofit trade organization that helped baobab dried fruit pulp gain its legs outside the continent. PhytoTrade championed the fruit to secure its approval as a novel food ingredient by the European Union in 2008 and as generally regarded as safe (GRAS) by the FDA in 2009. In recent years, demand for baobab has spilled into the cosmetic industry due to the high fatty acid composition of its seed oil, which helps maintain healthy skin. It also acts as a nourishing moisturizer.

“What created a passion for me with this ingredient was that on every level there was a meaningful story,” said Brams. According to him, organic baobab is lifting Africans out of poverty, helping them afford homes and put their children through school. According to research by the USDA, increasing popularity of the fruit generated enough income to support thousands of Africans in 2011.

A NUTRITIONAL POWERHOUSE

Although baobab is still relatively new to the US, researchers have already uncovered significant nutritional benefits. The velvety, coconut-like shell encases large seeds and white, dry pulp, which yields a tart, mango-esque flavor. This pulp teems with antioxidants such as ascorbic, citric, malic, and succinic acids, vitamin B, calcium, potassium, and an impressive dose of soluble and insoluble

fiber. In fact, baobab pulp powder beats out many other heavy hitters in most of its high-scoring nutrient categories. It contains 6 to 10 times more vitamin C than oranges, 6 times more potassium than bananas, twice the antioxidants found in goji berries, and more calcium than milk. This impressive cocktail of nutrients combines to repel disease, improve digestion, and more.

ABSOLUTELY ANTIOXIDIZING

According to Acta Phytotherapeutica, baobab pulp boasts a whopping 11.1 mmol/g integral antioxidant capacity (IAC)—leaving oranges in the dust with 10 times less than that. Its IAC was derived from the sum of its water- and lipid-soluble antioxidant capacities. As such, baobab dried fruit pulp is a stalwart warrior in the fight against oxidizing free radicals—molecules that steal electrons from proteins in your body and damage cells as a result. Free radicals are a major contributor to cancer, heart disease, and decline in brain function.

GUTSY PERFORMER

PhytoTrade suggests that more than 50 percent of the dried fruit pulp is fiber by weight—about 30 percent pectin (soluble dietary fiber) and 20 percent insoluble dietary fiber. To our guts’ delight, insoluble plant fibers are known to have prebiotic properties. Prebiotics nurture good bacteria in the gut and put the hurt on bad ones, making baobab an obvious choice for digestive benefits. Soluble fibers like pectin have a host of other healthful effects according to the USDA, including reduced risk of coronary heart disease, improved laxation, and increased sensation of fullness. Have a baobab smoothie if that last slice of pizza is staring you down!

DIABETES BE GONE

Bolstering the antioxidant powers of baobab’s vitamin C content are polyphenols like flavonoids and tannins, which may also have an effect in staving off type 2 diabetes. In addition to reducing oxidative stress, flavonoids have been shown to support healthy blood glucose levels. Indeed, a 2013

study showed that a drink containing polyphenol-rich baobab powder powered down the participants’ glycemic response.

Diets that trigger a low glycemic response can also promote weight loss by controlling the fat-storing hormone insulin and increasing satiety. This makes baobab dried fruit pulp a candidate for keeping your belly in check.

LIVER LIVENER

Today, toxins are everywhere. We try to avoid them but inevitably ingest them via cigarette smoke, alcohol, and chemicals in our food and the environment. Baobab may lend a hand to overworked livers that can’t keep up. Researchers have found water-based baobab extract to have significant protective effects against liver damage in rats. The fruit’s liver protective prowess may be linked to the triterpenoids, beta-sitosterol, beta-amyrin palmitate, and ursolic acid contained in its pulp.

With all these dietary benefits, baobab may not just be another superfruit, but one to lead them all in nutritional value. There’s just one catch: The fruit is largely unavailable in the US. Luckily, powdered pulp from the fruit is available, and it’s equal in taste and nutrients to Africa’s fresh fruit. Baobab fruit is naturally dry, so no heat is applied in the powdering process, and it retains all of its original nutritional value. It’s simply removed from the hard shell, crushed, and sieved before packaging. Store in a cool, dark, dry place, and enjoy in all your favorite recipes.

You—and your body—would do well to try this magnificent powder mixed into water or a smoothie, sprinkled on yogurt, or as a substitute for cream of Tartar in baking. But if you’re looking for a more covert baobab experience, you’re in luck. Its citrusy flavors can be added to almost anything without much change to the final flavor profile.

Vitamin C may still have a place in your immune system, but baobab might just steal your heart...liver, digestive system, and brain. [↗](#)