

# superfood: **moringa**



## Super in More Ways Than One

**How Moringa  
could save  
millions of lives**

BY MICHAEL A. MILLER

Americans love superfoods. Gander down the grocery aisle and it's easy to see: açai, kale, and avocado proliferate on store shelves. Even so, you've probably never heard of Moringa tree leaves, a superfood that is beginning to gain traction in the US. It's an underdog leafy green that has huge potential not only on your plate but also as a savior of the malnourished.

Ancient Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians used Moringa oil for skin lotion and perfumes, and to purify their drinking water. The most common variety, *Moringa oleifera*, was used up to 5,000 years ago in northern India and its therapeutic uses are documented in ancient Indian writings. Moringa has been used in many cultures as a traditional therapy for infection, diabetes, and even cancer. Despite this rich oral history of disease prevention, most of the available research is observational and in its preliminary stages, according to Jed Fahey, a biochemist at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

But don't mistake this superfood for a super fad. Scientists are already substantiating these ancient claims, starting with its nutritious value. The peppery-tasting leaves pack especially high amounts of vitamins C and A, calcium, potassium, iron, and phytochemicals, which double as powerful antioxidants. It is unique in that it sports a complete protein, 18 amino acids in total, including arginine and histidine, which are crucial for a baby's health. With a nutritional resume like that, Moringa is poised to alleviate malnutrition in the tropics and sub-tropics, regions which almost perfectly overlap the areas where Moringa grows best.

Haiti, for example, is the poorest country in the western hemisphere and has one of the highest rates of malnutrition in the world. Moringa prefers Haiti's dry, sandy soil and turns over a new crop of leaves every 60-90 days, providing Haitian farmers with an inexpensive goldmine of nutrition year-round. Yet, in this locale, Moringa is traditionally thought of as goat feed, or worse, fodder to burn and sell as charcoal. The locals would never consider spending precious money on it; not when they could

buy more satiating rice or beans for their families instead. But with some assistance, many farmers are turning over a new leaf.

Dozens of humanitarian outfits promote the use of the fast-growing, drought-resistant tree to end malnutrition in tropical countries. One Moringa company, Kuli Kuli, is educating Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Ghanaians on the healthful values of the "miracle tree." They're helping to start women-led cooperatives to grow Moringa and paying fair prices to sell it to superfood-crazed Americans, which, in turn, boosts local economies. "We want to work directly with the farmers and women-led cooperatives whenever possible, and find local non-profits who can help us promote Moringa as a tool that people should be eating and knowing more about locally," said Lisa Curtis, CEO of Kuli Kuli.

And it's working. After returning from a trip to Haiti, Curtis said, "[she's] been talking to women and many of them are like 'yeah, now I eat Moringa, I told everyone else to eat it, and I feed it to my kids.'"

Curtis wants to set one thing straight with ethics-bound consumers: Eating Moringa sourced from these countries doesn't deprive their inhabitants of newfound nutrition, instead it provides them with much-needed income and a reason to grow Moringa in the first place. "It grows really all over the world in so many hot places and it's so easy to grow that nobody's worried about there ever being a global Moringa shortage," said Curtis.

The tropical miracle called Moringa comes in a variety of forms such as leaves, which can be steamed or sautéed, as an oil, and as a powder, which is used in soups and cooked grains and added into energy bars, drinks, and many other products. Don't hesitate to try steeping Moringa leaves in hot water for an energizing tea or whip up a batch of super guacamole instead. Any way you make it, you'll most likely encounter powder or dried leaves, but they can easily be substituted in recipes calling for fresh ones.