

With love from...

# UGANDA

Deep in the 'Pearl of Africa', Kevin Gould tracks down a dedicated Englishwoman who is transforming the lives of local farmers through Fairtrade vanilla production



IN THE KINGDOM OF TORO, NEAR the Mountains of the Moon, grows a vanilla named Ndali. The love-child of an Englishwoman called Sturdy, Ndali is nurtured by 629 Ugandan farmers and grown along 200 miles of unmade roads, from the Congolese border to the Great Rift Valley. This is Uganda, Churchill's 'Pearl of Africa', and

Lulu Sturdy is wrestling her battered Land Rover along a ribbon of rutted track that spools down deep mountainsides.

Lulu is a young woman with a striking, old-fashioned face who spends her days knee-deep in African mud, stripping carburettors, dealing with tropical diseases and negotiating the mind-boggling bureaucracy required to be a Fairtrade farmer in Uganda. In 1999, when in her late 20s, Lulu inherited 1,000 acres of unkempt western Ugandan estate. The Ndali estate was established by her grandfather, and in its time had been used for tea, coffee and dairy farming. When Lulu arrived, the land was being illegally squatted and was losing a fortune.

"Thought I might stay a year, see how I liked it," she says. Lulu is ever the well-bred understater, a no-nonsense type fallen rather in love: "It's pretty good here, once you've caught the bug. You must come to terms with the witch doctors, learn about farming, get inside the heads of the villagers, see what they think about love... it's sort of the best thing in the world."

From Lulu's hilltop lair, the endless view is of lush woodland and steep green fields lying beneath the snow-capped Rwenzori, or Mountains of the Moon. Behind her, acacia trees lead to dramatic lakes in ancient volcanoes. On another side lie the forests of Kibale, home to the world's largest concentration of primates.

On the way to one of Lulu's vanilla projects, there's been a deluge of biblical proportions, and the tracks of red murrum earth have turned into condensed cream of tomato soup. Two slow hours from Ndali, the signs of the missionary are everywhere – evangelical churches housed in rude huts, a farm called Gethsemane, a bus called Gilead. At Karugutu, we meet a delegation of vanilla farmers led by Mr Israel Maate. Is he Jewish, by chance? "No," he says. "I am a Ugandan by trade."

Driven by the need to make a genuine difference to the lives of dirt-poor farmers, Lulu has set up dozens of Fairtrade groups

such as this; the farmers receive a premium price for their very best vanilla, plus extra annual payments into a community fund. Each group requires her to expend superhuman effort in persuasion, education and encouragement.

Outside the pharmacy, built exclusively from sales of Ndali vanilla through Waitrose stores, 'Madam' Lulu is addressed by Israel. "We thank you from under the bottom of our hearts," he says, "for your effort to lift alarming conditions."

We then head off to inspect Israel's farm, some of his 14 children running barefoot between us. Israel's acre is close-grown, immaculately cared for and organically farmed. "The soil is good," he states. "If it weakens, we only mulch it." Banana palms, guava, avocado, *Prunus africanus* and mango trees all have vanilla vines trained up their trunks.

In the hot fug of his mini forest, Israel slits open a voluptuous vanilla flower with his safety pin, exposing the male anther and female stigma. He squeezes the two parts together. "If the flower is still here in two days," he says, "a bean will grow." After nine months of gestation, the hands of long green beans are harvested.

Back at Ndali, Lulu has built a tiny factory next to Rukwanzi Lake. You smell the vanilla before you see it – nearly sweet, musky, subtly strong. It is tended expertly by Mr Kato and his team, who wear sombrero-style hats and wide grins and lay the beans on outside tables. Vanilla is cured in about six weeks with a daily hour or so in the sun, another wrapped in blankets, then the balance of each day in large wooden sweat boxes. Open a box, and the mass of dark glossy vanilla is heady, lingering, narcotic. The best quality, extra-long beans have the highest vanillin content and thus the strongest, richest aroma, so are hand-selected as Ndali Intense. Your glamorous queen of kitchen spices, Ndali Intense is the result of one woman's dedication.

Cox & Kings offers a six-day package to Uganda, including British Airways flights, three nights' full board at Bwindi Forest Lodge, guided gorilla-seeking excursions and permits, from £3,895 per person. Call 020 7873 5000 or visit [coxandkings.co.uk](http://coxandkings.co.uk).

Kevin

YOU CAN SMELL THE VANILLA BEFORE YOU SEE IT: NEARLY SWEET, AND MUSKY

Uganda's lush land is perfect for growing vanilla, above left, but the flowers have to be carefully opened, opposite, bottom right. Lulu, opposite, top, helps locals such as Mr Kato, opposite, bottom middle, via the Fairtrade scheme

## HOW TO USE VANILLA

As with all the best vanillas, Ndali Intense is not itself sweet, but accents sweetness in other foods. The flavour lies in its sticky seeds and pod. Get at the seeds by splitting the bean lengthways, then scraping them out. Ndali Intense's dark, sticky seeds are luxuriously delicious when added to:

- Dishes that use milk and cream: add the seeds, heat to below boiling, then leave to infuse for 10 minutes. *Et voilà!* The secret to perfect crème brûlées, soufflés and custards.
  - Melted chocolate: for my favourite chocolate sauce of the moment, I slowly melt a bar of exceptional dark chocolate with a coffee cup of boiling water, together with the seeds of Ndali Intense. I whisk this to silk, then serve over preserved cherries, or the best ice cream.
- Retain the empty pod, which can be used as follows:**
- To flavour sugar – bury the pod in a jar of granulated sugar and leave it for a fortnight. This tastes great in crumbles.
  - Similarly, to flavour sea salt – vanilla salt complements the flavour of scallop and mussel dishes, and adds an element of luxury to grilled chicken and pork dishes.
  - As a skewer for a kebab of tropical fruits such as pineapple, pawpaw and mango.
  - Stir your tea, coffee or hot chocolate with a spent pod to add a subtle taste.
  - Mulled wine is even more warming for the sultry flavour of Ndali Intense.

Lulu Sturdy has just perfected Ndali Vanilla Extract, which comes in a chic aluminium flask. It's the perfect kitchen standby and I use it frequently, especially when making cocktails. A few drops and my caipirinhas are better than ever, and it makes a White Russian even more dashing.

