

TANGY TWIST

THE MARULA FRUIT IS PROTECTED BY LAW AND IS LOVED BY MAN AND BEAST. IT'S ALSO THE BASIS OF ONE OF THE WORLD'S BEST-LOVED DRINKS CREATED IN THE HEART OF AFRICA

BY JABULILE NGWENYA

The marula fruit is no bigger than a golf ball, hanging green on the tree and turning yellow once it's ripened and fallen onto the ground. In the African bush, various creatures can't get enough of its thick, tangy pulp. My childhood was filled with stories about elephants which roam the bushlands getting drunk on the tons of marula fruit fermenting in their digestive systems.

"That's an urban legend," chuckles Ryan, a game ranger at Camp Jabulani, as he leads us through its beautiful foyers and out to the back, where the 14 resident elephants are bathing in the river or breaking off leaves and branches for a late lunch. It's a delightful way to start our visit to the Amarula harvest in Limpopo Province. As we enjoy sundowners, I spot young Jabulani – the first resident elephant, after whom the lodge is named – playing in the water. Later I meet Sebakwe, Camp Jabulani's largest bull, whose image appears on all Amarula packaging.

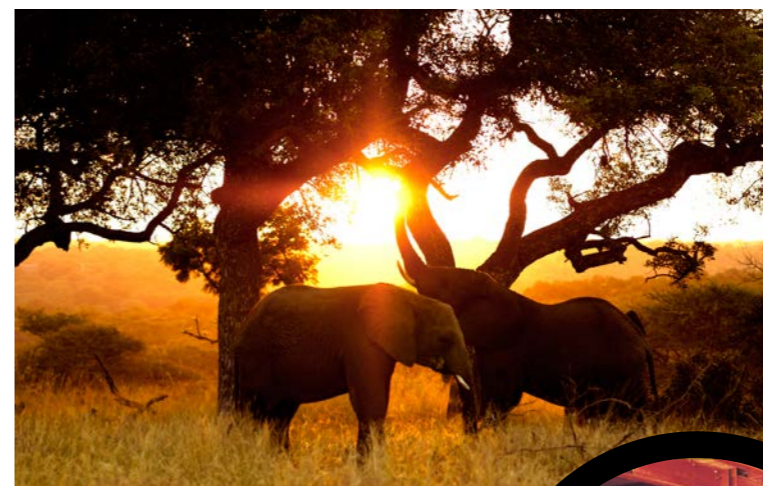
"There's a very strong link between Amarula and the elephants," says Christelle Bester, Amarula's South African Marketing Manager. Besides their love for the succulent fruit, elephants help with the pollination of marula tree, which grows wildly in sub-Saharan Africa. With no plantations, the Amarula brand depends on 25 local communities to harvest the fruit. The female tree can bear up to two tonnes of it, so like long-awaited rainfall, harvesting takes place during a short window period in summer (January-March, depending on the area) and offers employment for the local women.



When I try my hand at harvesting – slipping on gardening gloves and racing through the bush, avoiding tree thorns, insects, cow dung and an unrelenting sun while trying to fill a 50kg bag with the fruit as quickly as possible – my respect for these women grows incrementally. Gloveless and hatless, they laugh at our clumsy city ways, showing us which fruit's worth picking. What we manage to gather gets taken by them to various collection points. From there, it's transported to the production centre at Phalaborwa, where it's sorted, destoned and crushed.

The fruit pulp is then cooled to less than 6°C for transportation to the Distell distillery at Stellenbosch. All this work's done in a noisy environment, with large tanks containing frozen pulp covered partially in ice. We've arrived at the end of the harvesting season and men in the warehouse are preparing the last batches. I ask to taste the unfrozen thick, yellow pulp filling the vats that will make both the original Amarula Cream and the recent addition to the brand, Amarula Gold. It isn't sweet, but has a fragrant, tangy flavour.

"Approximately 10-15 marula fruits go into each bottle," says Dudley McKnight, Operations Manager at Phalaborwa. He explains that once the pulp arrives in Stellenbosch, it undergoes a double distillation process, first in column stills and then in traditional copper potstills.



The result is marula wine, which is then aged in French oak barrels for two years.

I try an Amarula milkshake which Andy, a member of our group, claims is the best he's ever had. I prefer my Amarula on ice, savouring the cream and spicy notes of this distinctive liqueur. No doubt everyone in the over 100 countries where it's sold prefers it their own way. I have a friend who spent an entire New Year's Eve eating Amarula-covered ice cream.

"Amarula Cream is the second-best-selling cream liqueur in the world. People share on Facebook how they enjoy it and are always posting their own recipes," says Christelle.

Back at Camp Jabulani, I decide to try Amarula Gold for the first time, with Appletiser and ice. Given the day's heat and the romance of the African bush, it's refreshing and I enjoy the woody, nutty, fruity flavours of the combination. However, if you don't like sweet drinks, stick to ice or soda with it.

I'm excited to hear that we're going on an elephant-back safari on the resident pachyderms. The trip was supposed to take place the previous day, but was cancelled because it was raining and the elephants were skittish.

As my friend Lucille and I climb onto Bubi, a gentle cow, we greet Josiah, one of the trainers. Riding through the bush this way, spotting wildlife, is a deeply moving



TURKISH DELIGHT

- 5ml (1 tsp) rose syrup
- 50ml Amarula Gold
- 125ml (1/4 cup) dry sparkling wine (JC Le Roux Brut is best)
- Maraschino cherries or fresh berries to garnish (optional)

Method:

Pour the rose syrup, followed by the Amarula Gold, into a champagne flute. Top with sparkling wine. Garnish with cherries or berries.



experience. We keep declaring our love for Bubi, to which she rumbles in reply.

The Amarula Trust, which is funded by the sale of its chocolates and other confectionery, supports a range of environmental and community projects, one of which is the Amarula Elephant Research Programme (AERP), run by Prof Rob Slotow of the School of Life Sciences of the University of KwaZulu-Natal's College of Agriculture, Engineering & Science. The programme studies elephant behaviour as the basis for developing management strategies in both private and public game reserves, one of which is Camp Jabulani.

Since 2002, the trust's provided R3,25 million to the AERP and last year it announced it would provide an additional R1 million for the next three years.

I'll raise a glass of Amarula to that!

- For more information about the Amarula Trust's corporate social initiatives, visit: www.amarula.co.za
- For information about Camp Jabulani, visit: www.campjabulani.co.za