

A Taste of the Wild

Text and Photographs by Aaron French



Wild nutmeg (above left) and a fruit of a raffia palm (above right).

While there are tens of thousands of edible plants in the world, people in the United States typically consume fewer than fifty. That held true for me, too, until I moved to the jungles of southern Cameroon for my master's-degree research on how birds, squirrels, and primates help to disperse seeds. My investigation was part of a larger project on rainforest dynamics. For nearly two years I lived in a camp with a number of Baka—"pygmy" hunter-gatherers native to the central African rainforest—whom I relied upon as guides. The camp was a twenty-mile walk into the forest from the nearest village, itself a full day's drive from the capital city of Yaounde. Under the circumstances, my colleagues and I limited our infrequent shopping to staples like rice, pasta, flour, and some canned goods. The surrounding forest compensated with an amazing treasure trove of things to eat.

As I walked our nearly twenty-mile network of forest trails, observing the frugivorous wildlife for my research, my Baka guides would collect wild fruits, harvest wild tu-

bers and roots, search for wild honey in the rainforest canopy, and capture flying termites to roast over the fire. Luckily for me, I had become a professional cook to support myself through my undergraduate education, and I was open to experimentation with new ingredients. For cooking we used a two-burner propane stove and an "outback oven" that could be placed on top of the stove to bake breads and cakes.

I loved all the exotic fare, but the fruits quickly became my favorites. My research subjects, such as the large hornbills, chimpanzees, and gray-cheeked mangabeys, sought out some of the same bounty. During the two rainy seasons, from March through May and again in August through October, the noise of feeding birds and monkeys echoed for miles around fruiting trees of wild nutmeg—*Staudtia kamerunensis*, *Pycnanthus angolensis*, and others. The Baka prize the waxy seed covering (called an *aril*) as a flavoring for sauces, and use the pungent oils from the seed itself as a disinfectant and painkiller.

One of the most popular delicacies in the Congo basin is the large green fruit of the moabi tree (*Baillonella toxisperma*). Its pulpy, yellow flesh has a creamy taste. The large, dark nuts inside the fruit can be pressed for high-quality oil. Unfortunately, moabi trees—with their ramrod-straight, towering trunks and dense wood—are a prized source of lumber in African forests. Even immature ones get cut down, a particular problem because a moabi tree doesn't begin to reproduce until it is almost a century old.

When I first started eating the wild forest fruits, I was amazed at how deeply they tasted. A small tree the Baka call *ngoyo* (*Trichoscypha acuminata*) produces golf-ball-size red fruits that grow directly off the trunk in what are known as cauliflorous bunches. Those juicy fruits seem like a vitamin-C bomb in the mouth, and their flavor lasts longer than anything promised in a gum commercial. The fruit and nuts of the wild mango (*Irvingia gabonensis*) have a complexity of flavor that leaves true mangoes (*Mangifera* sp.) flat by comparison. Wild mango is less sweet and more nutty; the flesh is eaten raw, while the seeds are hulled, cooked, and used for a rich creamy sauce.

Living with the Baka and learning to appreciate their foods forever changed my perception of how to eat. As one of the last surviving hunter-gatherer groups in the world, they are true seasonal eaters. They enjoy every bite, not knowing what might be gathered tomorrow.

In addition, I saw how quickly indigenous knowledge could be lost. With the influx of cash from logging and bushmeat sales, the Baka were obtaining foreign goods—packaged candy, sodas, and other processed foods. Those quickly became the sweets of choice among the younger Baka, as they spent less time in the forest. I fear that in another generation much of the knowledge that I was taught will become as scarce as the majestic moabi.

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Baka man eats a wild mango.

