

Liquid Gold

Milwaukee's hot new product is no desert mirage. by Leah Dobkin

Tuesday 4/1/2008

From an ancient tree in the western Sahara desert comes an age-defying, health-promoting uber-oil. And now it's calling Milwaukee home.

Argan oil is extracted from the fruits of the argan tree, one of the world's oldest and rarest trees. It's been produced for hundreds of years by women from the Berber tribe in southwestern Morocco.

Stefan Hauke first heard of it five years ago when he and his wife were in Casablanca.

"I had a friend named Isha, and he mentioned that there is this mystical oil that only Moroccans would know, but I didn't believe him," says Hauke, who was born in Germany. He and his wife set out on a quest for the oil but ultimately came up short.

Two years later, after Hauke relocated to Milwaukee, a German company that imports the oil contacted him and asked for help with finding a distributor in the U.S. "I was so fascinated with the whole story behind argan oil, I decided to import the product myself," he says. In 2006, Hauke started World Artisan Guild, which he says is the only U.S. distributor of handcrafted argan oil.

The organic oil is considered a "healthy super food" because it boasts numerous health benefits. It has more than twice the level of antioxidants than olive oil and a unique combination of cholesterol-fighting sterols. While gourmet chefs worldwide covet this valuable oil, it's not just for cooking. It can be found in cosmetic products as well.

Argan oil is handcrafted by a select group of Berber women who control production – everything from the harvesting of the fruit to the extraction of the oil from the nuts of the dried fruit. After decanting and filtering, the oil is ready for consumption.

"The first time I tried it, I drizzled the oil over couscous, and it quadrupled the flavor," says Jacques Chaumet, owner of Chez Jacques. "You put it in your mouth and it has an unbelievable flavor that I had never tasted before. With argan oil, less is more. You only need a few drops."

That's good, because due to the time-consuming production process (it can take up to eight hours to produce one bottle), argan oil is the most expensive oil on the market at \$49 for 8.5 ounces. High-end olive oils run around \$12 for 8.5 ounces.

Other than Chez Jacques, only Sanford Restaurant is currently using argan oil locally, while the cosmetic oil is at Crème Boutique and Future Green. Hauke thinks that will all quickly change.

"There's no reason Americans won't like this product," says Hauke. "They just need to understand the benefits of it and the story behind it."