

EPISODE #10 Gus le Breton, Chair: African Baobab Alliance

OPENING QUOTE

[00:00:00] **Gus le Breton:** I mean, different people had different responses, but I think the one fairly universal was that they all thought I was completely nuts. I mean, first of all, rural people. So I'd say to rural people, you know, there's these trees, you have eaten the fruit your whole life, what about selling it? And they would just laugh at me and it was like, who's ever gonna buy this? I mean, they're free. You can pick them up off the ground. Why would anyone pay money for that? And they just couldn't imagine that anyone else would ever have any interest in eating these. And in fact, that was true...

PODCAST INTRO

[00:00:38] **Sanja Gohre:** Welcome to the African Optimist podcast. I'm Sanja Gohre, and today I explore the wealth of opportunities that exist across the continent and speak to the many inspiring people who are shaping its future.

They are the giants of Africa and the oldest fruit-bearing trees in the world. Of course, I'm talking about the baobab. Over a million years ago, they were the only ones around. To this day, few trees grow as old as they do, the oldest recorded lasting 2,450 years. They can be biiiiig. 20 to 30 metres high, and in some cases equally wide. Humans have used the hollowed-out trunk to live in, as a pub, barn, dairy, gravesite, water tank and even a prison.

But it's their funny looks that make them famous. With a squat body and branches that look like roots, they are fondly called the Upside-Down Trees. These giants of the savannah, these trees can store up to a 100,000 litres of water in their trunks and create a highly nutritious fruit.

We focus on the harvesting of this fruit today.

The baobab fruit has a hard shell that protects a handful of seeds in a whitish powdery yellow-flavoured pulp. This pulp has more vitamin C than oranges, more calcium than milk, more magnesium than avocados and is high in iron and immune-boosting prebiotics. Its healing properties are so legendary that it is called the Pharmacy Tree.

Enter Gus le Breton. A man who has a story to tell about baobabs. Gus joins me to describe the long journey from the early days of processing the baobab's fruit, to getting it sold on the international market.

INTERVIEW BEGINS

[00:00:38] **Sanja Gohre:** So Gus, I'm literally just going to start right off the bat with asking how it came to be that you called your fantastic YouTube channel, the African Plant Hunter?

[00:02:31] **Gus le Breton:** Well, that was a relatively recent iteration in my life, I think 2018. I just realized having been through various stages of my career, I felt that I had something to give to other people, in terms of educating and inspiring them about indigenous plants and 'African Plant Hunter' was a nice, catchy name that I felt people might listen to.

So, um, yeah, so basically the idea was to use YouTube as a platform to make videos about indigenous plants, to educate people, mostly people here within Africa and southern Africa, but also internationally, because a big part of my work for the last 30 years or so has been to try to create demand for, and interest in, the products that are derived from indigenous plants on the basis that that would then lead to their improved conservation and sustainable management.

So I guess the 'African Plant Hunter' was just another tool that I hope might help to raise awareness and shine a spotlight on some of these plants with ultimately conservation and sustainable use benefits, as a result.

[00:03:50] **Sanja Gohre:** But one question I had when I was looking at everything, was, given your exposure to so many plants, how did you come to rest on the baobab?

[00:03:59] **Gus le Breton:** Well, I wouldn't say I rested on the baobab, but it has been a very big yeah, focus. I guess it's kind of hard to miss a baobab. It's like, it is one of the biggest plants out there! And I think when I started on this journey of trying to develop commercial opportunities around indigenous plants that would benefit small-scale rural harvesters across Africa, the baobab tree was one of the proverbial low-hanging fruit. It already has a story. It already has a long history of traditional use. You could see that it would be one that would be relatively easily marketed to an outside world that had never heard of it. I think I thought it was gonna be easier than it actually turned out to be, but that's another story.

But you know, I grew up with baobab trees. Everyone who's ever seen a baobab tree loves them and they are the most amazing plant. So, I mean, there's a personal, very personal side as well to my desire to work with it. But yeah, I mean, it was, from a commercial point of view, it was an obvious opportunity that, to my surprise, nobody seemed to, at the time, to have recognized. So, I guess kind of spotted an opportunity and went for it.

[00:05:22] **Sanja Gohre:** Where were you when you spotted this opportunity?

[00:05:24] **Gus le Breton:** I was, yeah, no, I was in Zimbabwe, I came to Zimbabwe straight out of university. I had just graduated, 1990, and initially I was working in the Mozambican refugee programme. This war was still on in Mozambique, there were a lot of refugees from Mozambique, they were being hosted in Zimbabwe in these very large camps. And they had very significant environmental problems because those refugees were given dry rations, so maize meal and beans, which they had to cook themselves and they had to find the fuel. And so they were cutting down trees as firewood and they were completely denuding the areas around the camps, which was obviously upsetting the local communities. So I set up an initiative that was trying to work on promoting sustainable harvesting of these indigenous trees rather than clear felling

them, and after the end of the refugee programme, Mozambican refugees went back to Mozambique, but now the Zimbabwean host communities were still trying to pick up the pieces. Their whole landscape had been completely denuded.

And so, I set up an organisation that was working with local communities to improve the management of their indigenous forests, indigenous woodland. And it became very clear to me very quickly that the obvious way to do that was to create economic value for indigenous trees and plants. Because if it's an economically optimal land use for a rural person, then it's a no brainer. They will protect them and look after them, but, if it's not, then they won't. So I mean... well, let me just expand on that a little bit because that's really important. It's basically fundamental to everything I've done.

[00:07:07] **Sanja Gohre:** Please, was just going to ask that, so...

[00:07:08] **Gus le Breton:** So I mean, if you look at a rural farmer, they live in, mostly in southern Africa, it's usually a pretty dry, very drought-prone area. They've got a little piece of land, which is theirs and on which they can do anything; and what they wanna do is to have some money so that they can buy some food, buy school uniforms for their kids, send their kids to school, and all that kind of stuff. And they have got to find the optimal economic return from this piece of land.

Now historically, they would've used that land to provide them with a whole lot of materials - building materials, medicines, foods, all kind of stuff that would've come from that land, from the indigenous trees and plants. But they didn't need cash and it didn't provide them with cash. Nowadays they need cash, and when it comes to cash, they look at this indigenous wood and it doesn't really offer them cash.

It does offer them a lot of services, which save them money, but it doesn't actually offer them money. And at the end of the day, you can't pay your school fees with some traditional muti. You actually need cash to pay your school fees, for example. So, uh, what the small-scale farmer is inevitably obliged to do is to clear this indigenous woodland, indigenous plants, and replace it with a cash crop.

And the cash crop is usually not a plant that originates in, indeed, even in Africa, because I mean, the most commonly used cash crop in this part of the world is maize, which obviously comes from Central America, isn't suited to our climate, doesn't do particularly well, especially in a dry year.

So you have this ridiculous situation where a small-scale farmer who's really living on the very, very edge, clears all of these indigenous plants. Plants which have evolved and adapted over thousands and tens of thousands of years, to be in exactly the right place, fulfilling the exactly correct ecological niche, providing a range of ecosystem services and material services and benefits, and removed them, and then plant, in long straight lines, using seed that they bought from a seed company, which is probably international, and using agrochemicals to keep the pests away, which wouldn't be there if it wasn't for the fact that they planted this. And then fertilizer to help make it grow, because it's not really suited for this environment. So spending lots of money on other things just so that they can support this.

And then, because the rain doesn't come, because the climate is changing and it's drought-prone and whatever, and then this crop dies and they stand there scratching their head and they've got nothing, because all those indigenous plants are now gone. This crop that they planted in its place has also done

nothing. And now guess what? A little bit of wind, a little bit of rain, and the top soil that they had is also gone, and they're literally left with a desert.

And that was what I've seen, and we've all seen it all over southern Africa, all over Africa, I'm sure this is the same all over the rest of the world as well in many cases, that this kind of model of industrial agriculture has just killed the environment and ultimately the livelihoods of small-scale farmers all over the world. And that's where I started looking at plants that were particularly productive in terms of well, mostly fruit, because fruit is the easy one.

And then trying to figure out how to turn something that may have a long history of traditional use into something with actual commercial use. And that then led me to not just the baobab, but the baobab was one of them, because baobab trees grow all over Africa. They grow in very dry areas. They're incredibly resilient to changing climatic conditions. These things are survivors. The reason they're there is because they're incredibly good at drawing moisture from very, very, very dry soil and actually surviving even when there's no moisture around and producing fruit year in year out, which people historically consumed, but which was not something they had ever seen any commercial opportunity in.

And indeed there was no commercial opportunity 'cause there was no one commercially buying baobab fruit at that time. So what could I do to help create a commercial opportunity around this? And that's where I started on the baobab journey. I'm talking, well it's almost 30 years ago, I think 1995 was the first time I did anything commercially with baobab. Yeah.

[00:11:49] **Sanja Gohre:** Gus, just for my understanding, when you say 1995, you know, that's the beginning of your journey, was nobody producing or processing baobab into baobab powder? Nobody in the world? Was it just being used locally?

[00:12:06] **Gus le Breton:** When I started in 1995, there was a lot of traditional use of baobab powder. The traditional use generally involved cracking open the fruit, taking out the dry pulp and seed, and then separating them using a pestle and mortar, which is, yeah, pretty much the same all across Africa.

And then producing this powder, which would then usually be mixed into water or milk as a drink or sometimes scattered into porridge as a kind of additional flavour to the porridge. So that's the kind of most common traditional use. I mean, there's a lot of different traditional uses, but those were the most common ones.

But no, there was at that time nothing commercial going on. And by the way, when I started working with baobab, we didn't start on the powder at all. We actually started on the oil, the oil from the seeds. And the reason for that was that we weren't sure that we could immediately master the kind of hygiene issues required to ensure, you know, a safe food product, working at a grassroots community level. But producing an oil was a much more straightforward process. So our original initial work with baobab was actually working with some communities in the northeast of Zimbabwe, taking the seed and putting it into an oil press and then producing an oil, which we were then trying with - I regret to say not a lot of success - but we were then trying to sell to cosmetics companies.

[00:13:50] **Sanja Gohre:** Why do you think at that stage there was no success in selling this oil?

[00:13:55] **Gus le Breton:** It was a question of scale. So basically we were producing very small amounts. The quality was very unpredictable, you know, it was a natural product. Each batch that we produced looked a bit different, no significant-sized cosmetic buyer was ever gonna buy an ingredient that was basically being - it doesn't matter how good the ingredient was - it was basically being produced in such a kind of small-scale and slightly rinky dink approach.

And in fact, throughout the late 1990s, I battled with this.

At the time I had set up an NGO in Zimbabwe called Safire, which still exists to this day. Safire stands for the Southern Alliance for Indigenous Resources, and we were working with several different rural communities trying to help them commercialize indigenous plant products.

Baobab was one, another one was marula, marula oil, which we could already see had huge potential because it was so functionally active. But again, we had the same problem. The scale was very small and the quality was very inconsistent and unreliable. And yeah, so eventually what happened was I realized that we were gonna need to team up with some others to try to achieve the scale that we needed to attract, you know, a serious buyer.

So I jumped into a car with a bunch of my colleagues from Safire and we went on a road trip. We drove up to Victoria Falls, into Botswana, into Namibia and we met in Namibia an organisation called CRIAA, who are based in Windhoek which is also a little NGO that was working with rural communities there, also trying to commercialize marula oil. And we then went to Botswana and we met an organisation there called Veld Products that were also trying to commercialize marula oil. And we all said to each other, listen, let's try to do this together, and then maybe we can actually get to the scale where, you know, a serious cosmetics company might want to buy our ingredients. So, that was how it started. And in fact our first organisation that we created was called the Southern African Marula Oil Producers Network. And we had a member in Zimbabwe, which was us, a member in Namibia, one in Botswana, and one in South Africa, which was a company called Marula Natural Products, I think.

And so the four of us, four sort of companies or organisations together, we tried to standardize the way that we produce marula oil and pool our resources in order to market it. And eventually we got it right and the Body Shop, who of course was a very significant player in the cosmetics industry at that time, started to buy marula oil and to use it in one of their makeup products.

And yeah, I mean, we're not talking about marula oil now, that's another story. But marula oil demand has grown very significantly since then, and it's now a really well known and well established product in the cosmetics industry.

And it all started from those little sort of prototypical, fledgling activities of a bunch of um, I would call us enthusiastic amateurs at that time. But somehow we got it right.

[00:17:27] **Sanja Gohre:** You know, I'm just trying to take myself back to that time, where I think the only thing that was known about the marula, was it the 'Gods Must Be Crazy' the movie? And I'm just thinking, can you paint a picture of when you approached people and spoke about marula or if you spoke about baobab, you know, what was the response? People didn't really know what these things were. It's all very

recent that it's become part of a more mainstream uh, language. But uh, when you did try and speak to people about it, what were their responses?

[00:18:01] **Gus le Breton:** Well, it depends. I mean, different people had different responses, but I think the one fairly universal was that they all thought I was completely nuts. I mean, first of all, rural people. So I'd say to rural people, you know, there's these trees, you have eaten the fruit your whole life, what about selling it? And they would just laugh at me and it was like, who's ever gonna buy this? I mean, they're free. You can pick them up off the ground. Why would anyone pay money for that? And they just couldn't imagine that anyone else would ever have any interest in eating these.

And in fact, that was true because when I went to urban consumers in Zimbabwe and other countries in southern Africa, and talked to them about buying baobab, they would also laugh. They would say, I mean, most people in urban areas in southern Africa are only one or two generations removed from a rural setting and they would say, you know, when we were kids or when our parents were kids, they used to eat these things all the time for free. They would just pick em up off the ground and eat them. And now we've progressed from then, we've moved into the city, the last thing we want do is go into a supermarket and pay money to eat this, we want to go and eat Kentucky Fried Chicken and McDonald's hamburgers. That's what we wanna do. We don't want to eat baobab. That's what our grandparents did. So that was the kind of, the real serious negative kind of stigma that we had to overcome from this side, at the sort of production side and the domestic market, and then of course internationally, well, no one had even heard of it.

So, it was a non-starter. You're gonna come to me, with an African fruit, whose name I can't even pronounce and convince me that I should somehow... and where's the science to substantiate that? Like you say, it's good for me. How do I even know it's safe?

And in fact, that was the very first problem that we faced with baobab, was that, not only do we have to convince consumers that it was safe, but we had to convince regulators - and regulators are a little bit different from consumers.

And there was a group of regulations which still exist to this day around food safety in the EU that basically said it was illegal to sell a food ingredient on the European market without first demonstrating convincingly that it was safe, which means putting it through toxicological trials, which I understand if it's a food ingredient that's just been cooked up in a laboratory, but this is a traditional food ingredient that people have literally consumed safely for thousands of years. But, unfortunately, the regulators didn't see it that way.

[00:20:52] **Sanja Gohre:** But in a way, from my understanding of what a novel food is, which is the route you then took to try and break into an export market, a novel food is only something that - maybe you can explain it - there has to be a kind of a historic precedent that people have eaten this food. It doesn't just all of a sudden pop up in local markets. There has to be some kind of history, if you can just explain that novel food regulatory framework.

[00:21:19] **Gus le Breton:** The EU Novel Foods Regulatory Framework was established in the 1990s when they started to develop genetically modified food crops. And there were a lot of concerns and there

continue to be a lot of concerns, about the safety of these GMOs. And so the EU Novel Foods regulations were specifically established in order to ensure that no food that was derived from a genetically modified source could be launched on the market without first being proven to be safe. So what they did was they picked a date, which I think was the date that the EU Novel Foods Regulations were promulgated, which I think it was 1995. And they said if a food ingredient was not already on the market by whatever it was, let's say the 1st of July and it was gonna be launched onto the market after then, then it had to go through toxicological, full toxicological assessment to prove that it was safe, irrespective of whether or not it had been consumed anywhere else in the world safely prior to that.

So the regulation said it must have been on the market in the European Union. So that was the rule. And it wasn't, as I said, it wasn't intended to prevent an indigenous fruit from being launched. It was intended to prevent a genetically modified organism, but unfortunately, indigenous fruits got caught up in the crossfire. And so yeah, that was the rule. And we had to comply with it.

[00:23:00] **Sanja Gohre:** Gus, I mean, so there you are. First of all, you're dealing with people who are saying locally, we are not interested in buying baobab. You've got a potential export market that has never heard of it and doesn't really want to hear about anything at that stage from Africa or African foods.

You've got a market that is saying it's illegal to even import it.

How do you then have the guts or the gumption to go, okay, despite all of this, we are gonna go for this and we are gonna aim to put baobab on the market or into the EU market?

[00:23:38] **Gus le Breton:** That's a great question. Luckily I don't think I ever saw it that way. 'Cause if I had seen it that way, I probably would've just thrown my hands up in the air and gone, oh my goodness. But no. I think the truth is that I just knew, I knew. I had the courage of my convictions. I knew that this thing could work, and I knew that if it did work, the benefits would be really, really, really significant for a lot of people and for a lot of trees as well, you know, for the ecosystem and uh for biodiversity. So I knew, I felt that it could work and I felt that it could be made to work if we could overcome all these, and you know, of course, the deeper you get into it, when another obstacle appears, well, I'm already in this, I've gotta get over the next one.

I mean, by the way, that wasn't all, there were more hurdles that we also had to overcome and we're still overcoming them. But, it is working now. And I can look back on it and say, yeah, okay, I think we probably were justified. But you're right. It was a pretty daunting set of negatives that we had to overcome in order to make it happen.

And I mean, it's a cliché, but it's a cliché for a reason. That when you have, I can't remember what the saying is, but when you have to eat a monster apple, how do you eat it? It's one bite at a time. And that's what we did. We just started with what we could control and what we could start to achieve and slowly, slowly move it forward. And I think the Novel Foods was the big one. That was the big one because without that, all the rest didn't matter. If we couldn't get it legally approved for sale on an export market, then yeah, then we were never really gonna, we were always gonna be fighting against the wind.

But if we could overcome that, then we felt that the others, the other bits of the puzzle would fall into place quicker. So we concentrated our efforts on that, and the first thing we had to do was to raise the finance for it. So by the early two thousands, our little Marula Oil Producers Network had mutated into a much bigger organisation called Phytotrade Africa. Phyto, spelled with a pH as in the Greek word plant.

And we were trying to, you know, we were an organisation or an association of different companies and NGOs trying to promote trade in indigenous plant products from southern Africa. And we were raising money from the public sector, sort of donor money. And, one of the things that we used that money for was to put the baobab powder through the extensive toxicological testing and then assemble a dossier, and then submit that dossier to the European Food Safety Authority and eventually get baobab approved as a safe ingredient, which we finally did in 2008.

I think we started the process in 2004, when we first started doing the toxicological testing. I mean, we started the process even before that, 'cause we had to first of all raise the funds to do all of that, which cost us about half a million US dollars to prepare and submit this application. So it was an expensive process. And that doesn't include our time. That was actual cash, to do the toxicological testing, So it was a big job, but we did it. We did it.

[00:27:13] **Sanja Gohre:** Who did you do this toxicological testing through. Who was doing that at the time?

[00:27:18] **Gus le Breton:** At that time you had to uh, we couldn't, not that we couldn't find labs to do it in Africa, we could, but the European Food Safety Authority regulators are pretty sort of finicky about the quality of the research. And so we were advised that we would be better off using European labs to do the work rather than African labs on the basis that the results would be more credible. I was incensed about that, of course, because some of the laboratories in Africa are extremely high quality, and it was absolutely... but anyway, you know, it was, you have to pick your battles and that was not a battle worth us trying to fight. So we just said, okay, fine. We'll do it that way.

[00:28:07] **Sanja Gohre:** And has that changed since then? If you were to do an application today, would that be a different story or is it still the same?

[00:28:13] **Gus le Breton:** Yes, it has changed actually as a direct result of the work that we did. So we were the first people to highlight the fact that these regulations were set up to prevent genetically modified organisms from being launched, not to prevent indigenous foods. And as a result of that, the pressure that we brought to bear, the European Food Safety Authority introduced a separate category of Novel Foods based on a traditional food, which does not require the same depth of toxicological testing as the GM foods do.

So now I'm actually working on three different uh, Novel Foods applications for different traditional or indigenous foods from southern Africa. So ja, it's now a lot cheaper. And somewhat quicker. I mean, it's still EU bureaucracy, so it's not lightning fast, you can appreciate, but we are somehow now making progress. So, it has changed, ja.

[00:29:15] **Sanja Gohre:** And Gus, where did you get that kind of money from? Half a million rand is one thing. Half a million dollars is quite another, especially in the 2000s.

[00:29:25] **Gus le Breton:** I begged and bullied and cajoled and I mean, you know, you're right, half a million US dollars is a lot of money but when you think about it this way, think of the tens of millions of US dollars that get spent or even hundreds of millions of US dollars, that get spent every year on food aid in Africa, and on agricultural projects that are almost inevitably destined to fail because they basically require unsustainable levels of inputs, unsustainable levels of water and ultimately those crops are just not gonna work.

So those tens of millions, hundreds of millions all aimed at achieving food security in Africa, and here we are talking about half a million US dollars, which is gonna unlock an opportunity from which tens of thousands of small-scale rural harvesters across Africa will ultimately be able to benefit, by entering the market for baobab, the international export market for baobab, which is in fact exactly what has happened. I mean, I think if you look now at that half a million dollars and you look at the impact it's had, that was a hell of a good investment that somebody made somewhere. Really, in terms of impact I just, I can't think of many other ways that you could have had the same impact with that little amount of money.

Ja, it was hard to raise it and we had to work hard and do a lot of convincing, but I think the proof is in the pudding and I think if you look back at it now, just say, ja, that was actually pretty well worth doing.

[00:31:11] **Sanja Gohre:** Mm. What's also interesting is that I think it was a milestone, it wasn't just that the application was successful for indigenous foods or an African indigenous food, but for wild harvested indigenous food, which has its own set of challenges. So I think it also paved the way for a completely different kind of African indigenous food. Was that, was that a very big thing at the time?

[00:31:34] **Gus le Breton:** Now it's a very big thing. I don't think it was recognized at the time, wild food, I mean for me it was because it was obviously a big part of it. When I talk about wild food, I mean food that's been sustainably harvested from native biodiversity, which is historically how all our food was derived. That's what we did, as homo sapiens, when we started out on this planet, everything was wild. We didn't grow anything. It was all wild harvested and it was all pretty sustainable.

Then we started farming and everything changed. Don't get me started on that topic, 'cause it's a very long topic and we could talk forever, but, but yeah, I now sit on the board of an international organisation that's involved in certifying the sustainability, be it the ecological and also the social sustainability, of wild harvested. It's called Fair Wild. Fair Wild is a certification standard, a bit like an organic standard, that specifically looks at wild harvested ingredients. And Fair Wild is growing really quickly because more and more companies are recognizing the opportunities and the benefits of using wild harvested ingredients. I mean, wild harvested ingredients certainly bring their own challenges because, you know, when you grow something in a farm you can standardize it and you can more or less predict the yields that you're gonna get, whereas wild harvesting yields can vary significantly from year to year, and the quality can vary significantly from year to year.

So it's a bit more unpredictable, but then ultimately from a biodiversity point of view, it's way, way, way more sustainable. I mean, of course you can over-harvest plants, and that certainly has happened throughout history and that's why the Fair Wild Standard exists, in order to give customers the assurance that this is not being over-harvested and is in fact being harvested sustainably.

But it is a big thing now, and I think, you know, I like to think that our little EU Novel Foods application for baobab back in its day has played some part in driving forward the overall agenda for wild harvested ingredients.

[00:33:46] **Sanja Gohre:** I'm intrigued that you say it comes with its own challenges. I think I only appreciated how difficult it is to process wild harvested fruit when I watched your three videos, and I'll put a link in the show notes, the three videos where you say, 'So You Wanna Be a Baobab Processor?'

And then you've got some very short but extremely interesting clips on how you process baobab. And when you look at it as a lay person like myself, you really only understand when people say the hygiene standards of the EU or any export market, or even the local market, is so difficult, I really for the first time understood it.

For example, the beauty of baobab, from what I understand, is that it dries on the tree and then it drops when it's ripe and you don't really need to do anything in terms of making it dry, which is quite fantastic. You don't freeze-dry it or anything, but then almost your problems do start, it drops to the floor, then what?

[00:34:44] **Gus le Breton:** I mean, the thing with any fruit is that by and large most fruits that are consumed as a fruit are consumed raw. Which means you need to ensure that one way or another, that they don't carry any pathogens that might harm people.

So, how do we do that with an apple? Regrets to say and I don't wanna burst your bubble, but I think most apple consumers fundamentally know this. You drench it in pesticide and drenching it in a pesticide means you're not gonna get any pathogens on it. But let me tell you that those pesticides aren't that good for you either. So, of course, that's not really what we want to be doing, and that's why the world is moving towards organic. Because organic essentially means that we don't drench in pesticides.

When we started with baobab, we said well, this is a fruit that grows naturally. There's no pesticides used in its production, it just grows naturally. So let's speak to that natural advantage that it has, which is completely natural and organic and let's market it that way, let's position it that way. So let's not use any pesticides at all in its production or its processing or any of the other things that would violate organic standards.

What that means is we need to make sure that it is kept clean. Because what you can do with a fruit, where you're gonna use pesticides and you're gonna use other kind of sterilization techniques, is you can make it as dirty as you want and then you sterilize it. And one of the ways that you sterilize fruit is you irradiate them with radiation that will kill every pathogen. But also unfortunately denatures a lot of the goodness in a fruit, so that's not allowed under organic standards. Or you drench it in some chemicals that will also kill pathogens, which again, is not allowed in organic standards. So we said with the baobab, let's try to position this as an organic product. But that does mean we now have to keep it very clean.

Now the nice thing with the baobab is, unlike an apple, I mean an apple, as you pick it off the tree, that's how you eat it and generally you eat the skin of the apple as well. So whatever pathogens are on there, you will consume.

Baobab's a bit different 'cause it's got a hard wooden shell around it and what you are eating is inside and is naturally protected from any pathogens. So if you take a baobab fruit, take it off the tree and crack it

open, it's completely sterile inside, you will have absolutely no problems. You can eat it straight away. There's nothing that could go wrong. The only thing that would go wrong is if you cracked it open and then you left it outside and exposed, and pathogens, you know, just airborne pathogens, got onto it or maybe in the processing you got a bit of dirt somewhere and then you get some bacteria and then they would get onto it.

So that is where we have really had to focus our attention for rural processes, is just to try to manage the food safety risks and to ensure that the likelihood of us - the time, for example, between cracking open the fruit, 'cause when the fruit is whole, it's completely clean, as soon as you crack it open, you expose it to pathogens. So you need to process it and pack it away as quickly as possible. And ideally in a very sterile environment where there are no pathogens.

Of course in a traditional rural home that doesn't necessarily work. It's actually really not possible to produce export quality baobab that's been cracked open and processed in somebody's home. Because you just, you don't know. You don't know whether that person has washed their hands. You don't know if they're cracking it open on a surface that's clean. You just don't know.

So we have had to learn the hard way that this has to be done in a kind of sterile, semi-industrial setting in order to minimize any risk of bacterial contamination and whatever, and make sure we produce a sterile product. I'm proud to say that we do. I mean, if you take the average baobab powder and you look at the bacteria in it, it is far, far, far less than the bacteria you would get in just about any tomato, for example, that you could eat from any supermarket. If you open a tomato and ate it, the bacterial loads are way higher. So actually baobab's really, really, really clean.

But we have to protect that and preserve it because we're trying to sell it as organic and we need to preserve our reputation. So yes, in later years, having addressed the regulatory side and having started to make progress on the marketing side, what I've really been focusing on for the last few years is the quality side. Because now baobab is coming out of more and more countries in Africa and there are different conditions, you know, the conditions in Zimbabwe are different from those in South Africa, are different from those in Angola, from those in Senegal, from those in Sudan. And we're trying to produce a product that ultimately is standardized and is the same. So yeah, so now I'm trying to really encourage producers all across Africa to use the same techniques in order to produce a standardized product that I can be sure is always gonna be clean and hygienic and of a consistent and reliable quality.

[00:40:17] **Sanja Gohre:** Is that why the ABA, the African Baobab Association, is that why that came into being in 2018?

[00:40:25] **Gus le Breton:** The African Baobab Alliance, yeah.

[00:40:29] **Sanja Gohre:** Alliance, sorry! Yes...

[00:40:32] **Gus le Breton:** Yes. I would say so, yes. So basically again, that was largely my initiative. I got together a few of the other producers and said, hey guys, we are struggling to get baobab onto the kind of next level. And we are battling a few issues and one of the issues that we're battling is quality.

The other ones that we are battling is the fact that there's not enough scientific research around the health benefits of baobab, which is something that's really, really important. And also just more generally, not enough marketing awareness around baobab.

So those are the other two key problems, but the quality was, I'd say the biggest one. And so yes, forming the alliance was a specific attempt to get ourselves organised as baobab producers around Africa and to try to agree on and then collectively move towards achieving a unified quality standard that would ensure that any consumer anywhere in the world buying baobab from anywhere in Africa would always be buying basically the same standard, the same quality of product.

[00:41:49] **Sanja Gohre:** You know, partnerships are notoriously difficult. How easy has it been to get people on board in terms of the alliance and to work together? It's a competitive environment um you know, it comes down to economics. Did you struggle to get people to buy into an alliance? Or was it easier than you thought?

[00:42:10] **Gus le Breton:** I personally have always believed that collaboration makes more rational business sense than competition and that we are stronger together, maybe I'm just a kind of old-fashioned type, maybe I'm an idealist. But I think throughout my career, the evidence has supported that conclusion, that if we all pull together in the same direction, we can all win.

Because it's not a limited pie, where we're all fighting for a slice of it. There's no limit to the size of the pie and if we all work together, we can actually grow it for all of us, and we each get a bigger slice of a bigger pie.

And I think a lot of producers were skeptical about that initially. And so yeah, certainly when I started talking there was a lot of suspicion and what's his ulterior motive and what are we gonna get out of it and why would we want to share our secrets with our competitors? But I think that's changed. I think people are starting to understand, no, you know what, we actually do achieve a lot more if we work together and if we all pull in the same direction.

And I think it's really, it's a philosophy of abundance versus a philosophy of scarcity. And just everything I do in life is driven by this philosophy of abundance. I think there's more than enough to go around for all of us, and we don't need to be fighting each other for it.

[00:43:35] **Sanja Gohre:** Well, just looking at um your theory of abundance, I'm thinking, you know, after the Novel Food application is approved and you are cracking the production side of things, it's all fine and well to produce something. But of course everybody knows the big question is, is there a demand? How did you go about creating a demand for, as you said, this word that nobody really knows how to pronounce, who lives outside of Africa? How did you create a demand for baobab?

[00:44:05] **Gus le Breton:** With great difficulty Mostly because... well no, not mostly because, but significantly because our timing was lousy. Um, 2008 is a long time ago, now, but if you can remember back that far, 2008 was the last time we had a global financial meltdown, and it was a proper one. And yeah, that was exactly the time when the EU Novel Foods approval came through.

So just at the moment when we had finally got a legal approval to start selling baobab in the bigger world, the bigger world was not doing any new product development. And I can give you a very tangible, specific example from South Africa, which was just excruciatingly painful for all of us involved:

So, you know the product Amarula, of course, produced by a company called Distell. And it's made from the marula fruit and it's got a great story. You actually referenced 'The God's must be Crazy' earlier, I mean, that's the kind of the basis of that story. And, yeah, I mean, it's one of South Africa's consistently, most reliable and best known exports over many, many years.

[00:45:19] **Gus le Breton:** So in 2006 South Africa started working towards the 2010 Soccer World Cup. We did not at that time yet have the EU Novel Foods approval, but the process was underway and we were hopeful it would be achieved by then. So we went to Distell and said to them, hey, imagine in 2010 you're gonna get a whole bunch of people from all around the world coming to South Africa. Wouldn't it be cool if you could offer them not just your Amarula drink, but another drink made from this incredible African fruit, the baobab? So they said, oh, that sounds like a great idea. Let's see if we can produce something. So their R&D department got busy and they started developing a baobab, whatever it was, beverage, liqueur or whatever.

And it took them a while, it's not the easiest ingredient to work with and they, you know, they had to overcome a few technical challenges, and then they finally got it and they said, yes, we have a baobab drink, which we're really happy with. It tastes really nice. We think people are gonna go for it.

The marketing department were frothing at the mouth ready to go with this, because obviously for the marketing guys, it's a dream. The baobab, it's just the most beautiful tree - like this is, you get asked to try and sell really boring stuff and then someone says to you, now we want you to sell a baobab product. They're like, yes, thank you. And so they were excited about it and the whole company was excited about it.

And then 2008, they had a kind of financial wobbly like everyone else, and they canceled all new product development. And literally overnight the word came through from the head office, nope, we're not doing this. We're not doing any new product launches, we're pulling in our horns, we just need to ride through this crisis. And so that was the end of it.

And all that work was lost.

And the saddest thing was that in about 2012 when, you know, the financial crisis had been and gone and everyone was recovered and whatever, we went back to Distell and said to them, hey guys, you remember that baobab drink that you developed way back in 2008? Don't you think it would be cool to resuscitate it? And they said, what? What baobab drink and literally not a single person that had worked on that drink was still employed in Distell, every single one of them had moved on and there was no institutional knowledge and memory of that beverage. And it was just heartbreaking. All that work that we did, and it's just all gone.

So, I mean, that was the starting problem. The starting problem was that it was 2008 and no one was doing anything.

And in fact, the very first company to buy baobab, and I will always celebrate them for this, was a gin company, a small startup gin brand in the UK called Whitley Neill. And Whitley Neill is now produced in

South Africa and marketed all over Africa. And if you look at their logo, it is the baobab tree, that is actually the Whitley Neill logo. It's quite a big brand. I think they became the most successful craft gin in the UK. And baobab was their starting signature ingredient.

And then you know, slowly, slowly it picked up over the years. I guess more companies started to have confidence in the, you know, the supply chain, like I said, at the beginning when we were starting, there just wasn't the reliability of supply. So even if you liked the story, you still were nervous about whether you would be able to get it.

So we had to overcome that and, of course brands don't tend to innovate, they more rely on their consumers to be the innovators and the consumers had never heard of baobab. So our first thing was to get the word out to consumers in the hope that consumers would then turn to their brands and say to them, hey guys, we want a baobab product.

You know, we used to go to trade shows around Europe, around North America, in Asia; and we would talk to a lot of brands, talk to a lot of consumers. We managed to get some advertising agencies to give us pro bono work where they would run marketing campaigns for baobab. In the UK we had a thing called 'The Better Breakfast Week', which was a campaign aimed at improving the quality of people's breakfast, which was actually, stealthily, a campaign to promote baobab.

But we were packaging it as 'Better Breakfast Week', not just baobab. And basically, every dish that we promoted had, guess what, baobab in it. What we never got, which is what we really wanted, was everyone said to us, basically if you can get baobab on Oprah, then you're done, that's it, game over, everyone's gonna buy it. And, eh, we tried, we tried this strategy and that strategy... how could we find our way to Oprah? But, it turns out that every single person who's marketing any product anywhere in the world is also trying to get to...

[00:50:19] **Sanja Gohre:** Asks Oprah. Yes, exactly.

[00:50:21] **Gus le Breton:** So we never got through the clutter.

[00:50:23] **Sanja Gohre:** But you've had quite a few successes. I mean, Pepsi did something that was flavored, I think with baobab. So did Coca-Cola, am I correct?

[00:50:31] **Gus le Breton:** Yeah, we have, we have and our very biggest success, which unfortunately was a bit of a flash in the pan, but it was great, was in the US, a company called Costco. Costco is a supermarket, it's like a hypermarket and they have in every supermarket in the country of which there are several thousand, they have their own fast food brand.

And the fast food outlet was famous for having the cheapest, nastiest fast food in the USA. It was most famous for their 99 cents hotdog which was just, yeah, absolute junk. And eventually they came in quite a lot of criticism for how unhealthy the fast food was that they were offering, so they decided they needed to clean up their act to get some healthier food. And they designed a breakfast bowl that was made with an Amazonian ingredient called Acai and baobab, and they put it into every single Costco in the country. And suddenly the demand for baobab went through the roof and we were all running around frantically, it was amazing. And they did it for about a year or two years. And then you know, someone else in the marketing

department decided they needed to change the recipe, and then, that was the end, and suddenly there was no more baobab. So that was a bit of a flash in the pan, but it was for a time, it was very successful.

Then, I think more recently, the biggest ones that I'm personally involved in, that's certainly not necessarily the biggest ones, but, uh, is a Coca-Cola owned brand of ready to drink smoothies that's based in Europe, a few European countries, and the UK, called Innocent Smoothies.

And if you go into a supermarket in whatever, Germany, Netherlands, France, the UK, you'll see a whole section of ready to drink smoothies and Innocent is one of the biggest brands there, and they put baobab into one of their products. And that's quite a significant demand.

We've also got into a herbal tea, a very significant herbal tea brand called Twinings, a British brand, and they're putting it into one of their products. That's really good, 'cause that's also opening the eyes of other herbal tea companies, as to the opportunity.

I think what's changed really with baobab is that we finally figured out - the thing with baobab is it's so good for you on so many different levels, but that's a very hard marketing message because you can't just tell someone 'it's all good for you'. People need to know specifically and exactly what is it good for. And when we started marketing baobab, we would always talk about the vitamin C content 'cause it has exceptionally high vitamin C content, but of course, you know, I mean there's lots of other ways to get vitamin C. And a lot of the other ways are cheaper than baobab. So we were like setting ourselves up to fail there really. But now what we focus on is gut health and gut health I think is one thing where baobab has incontestably extremely high benefits, both in terms of the sort of prebiotic nature of the very high fibre content in it, but also because of some of the polyphenol, some of the compounds that are found in baobab that actually really aid the intestinal microbiome in different ways. Um, that has been a big selling point for us, and encouraged a lot of food manufacturers to start incorporating into their products with the aim of being able to market the gut health benefits of baobab.

[00:54:18] **Sanja Gohre:** Just explain the superfood thing to me, 'cause there are so many sceptical people who regard 'superfood' as just a marketing ploy or a made-up thing.

So what is your approach in terms of marketing baobab as a superfood? For example, microbiome and gut health, that's the most recent buzzword, and now baobab is being marketed as that. So it just reinforces a skepticism, like, whatever the latest buzzword is, people then jump on board for that. How are we to understand this superfood thing and maybe also the relationship to the research that's missing, because it is a superfood, you know, whether it's a marketing ploy or not, if you look at what baobab has got in it, you can't deny it.

[00:54:59] **Gus le Breton:** Yeah, that is absolutely true. I mean, I think the scepticism is not so much on the fact that there are superfoods, because that's incontestably true. There are superfoods meaning foods that are exceptionally high in quite a number of different really important nutrients. And baobab is certainly one of those.

I think the scepticism comes from the marketers who then try to convince consumers that they can continue to live a fundamentally really unhealthy lifestyle, but consume one or two superfoods and that will like compensate for all the other things that they're doing wrong to themselves.

And of course, we know that's not true. I mean, if you're going to consume a very high sugar diet, it doesn't matter how many superfoods you eat, you're still not gonna be well. High sugar, high refined carbohydrates, high processed foods. Yeah, and I mean that's, you know, the marketers have tried to promote superfoods as a kind of panacea cure-all that's gonna somehow allow you to still eat high sugar, high refined carbohydrate diet and get away with it, which is just not true. That just can't happen.

So yes, baobab is a superfood. And it's a pretty remarkable superfood and it's, there aren't so many, after you've looked at all the superfoods around the world, and I don't know how many there are, I mean there must be a hundred or more that kind of fit the broad category.

I mean, superfood's not a legal term, so it's more of a marketing term, but generally it means you are high in at least three essential nutrients, and up to six or so. And, yeah, I mean baobab is definitely one of them. There's just no two ways about that.

[00:56:48] **Sanja Gohre:** But Gus, if we know that baobab is such a superfood, why do we need more research? Why the importance and emphasis on research and why hasn't it been done up until now?

[00:56:59] **Gus le Breton:** Okay, those are two different questions. Why do we need it? Consumers now are, they are becoming more aware and they are becoming more sceptical, and they want to really know, and I'm in favour of that, I mean, we need better educated consumers. The reason our diets have gone just so horrifically off track in the last 60 to 70 years is basically because consumers haven't understood what's been happening and have allowed this to happen.

I mean, it is utterly horrific, some of the stuff that we feed our children, believing it's good for them, because basically we just don't know any better. And that is changing and consumers are becoming much more informed, much more sceptical, much more knowledgeable, and understanding that we have actually been poisoning ourselves over the last few years with some of the foods that we've been eating and that needs to change.

So I think the research is needed in order to enable consumers to make more accurate decisions that are based on good science, not just on marketing spiel. So I don't think there's any question about the need for research... why the research hasn't happened in the past in baobab is just simply because baobab was never really recognized as a commercial opportunity, therefore it didn't justify having any research into it, so now what I'm hoping is that now we're all starting to see that this is a real serious heavyweight ingredient in the food industry, or particularly in the kind of health food sector, that there will be researchers putting their own time and effort into it and universities putting money into it and private companies putting money into it. And the research will be done. I think we can move from this current lack of information to an abundance of information within a fairly short space of time, within the next decade. And obviously I am doing everything I can to try and accelerate that process.

[00:58:56] **Sanja Gohre:** We'll look just now at the future of baobab in the next decade, but Gus, I just wanna ask you something, a little bit of a different question. This question of how much of the value goes back to the actual people who are harvesting. You understand all the dynamics about exploitation in southern Africa, across Africa. You've got this wild harvested fruit. It wasn't commercialized before. Now you are coming in, you are convincing people to sell you the fruit. From what I've been reading, a lot of traders buy the fruit very cheaply and then sell it at a much higher price.

How are we ensuring that that doesn't continue? How are you ensuring that there's a fair price at the end of the day? Because the amount of money that harvesters got I think in 2012 compared to 2020, that figure has gone down, whereas the global value of baobab powder, for example, in this case, has gone up. So how does that work?

[00:59:59] **Gus le Breton:** Well, this is a very complex and uh, loaded question. And I think I need to address it on several different levels. I mean fundamentally the problem that we face globally in terms of the global food system is that consumers do not understand the value of food and are not prepared to pay the real cost of food.

And that is because governments have historically subsidized food in order to make it cheaper to consumers. To win votes. And that unfortunately has had very negative effects. Because what happens is that they subsidize certain foods, which are the foods that are cheap for them to produce, which are often the least environmentally friendly and the least healthy foods.

What happens is that consumers are used to paying a relatively low price for a particular food, and then when you get a wild harvested natural ingredient that comes in, they expect to pay a low price for it. So there's a lot of downward pressure from consumers, because you are comparing baobab with things that are farm grown at an industrial scale.

To give you a direct tangible example: obviously we know that orange juice is the source of vitamin C. So when you're trying to sell baobab as a source of vitamin C, consumers are gonna expect to pay the same as they pay for orange juice. And orange juice is grown at a massive industrial scale, and at cheap, cheap, cheap. I mean, there are oil tankers carrying orange juice across from Brazil to Europe and then we just can't compete.

So firstly the price that is paid by consumers is far lower than it should be. So that squeezes everyone in the chain.

Then of course, yes, there's always people, everyone's trying to maximize their own piece of the action. So there's lots of middlemen. I mean, there always have been through history, and there always will be. They will buy something, they're traders, that's what they do. They'll buy something at the lowest possible price, and they'll sell it at the highest possible price. And that's you know, that's normal.

And these are two factors that conspire against rural harvesters, but there are two things that are very much in their favour, and this is where I think baobab has such big potential.

The first thing that's very much in their favour is the fact that they control the resource because this is not a farm-grown product, it's a wild harvested product. And baobab trees take so long to grow, a very slow

growing tree. I mean, that's part of the beauty of them and the wondrousness of them, but they do take a long time to grow. So where they are now is where all the baobab that's consumed in the next few years is gonna come from.

And where most of those trees are, is very firmly in the control of rural people across Africa. That's where baobab trees are. There aren't really any large-scale corporates that are involved in processing baobab fruit. It's all rural people, so they control the resource. Which means ultimately they are in quite a strong position to ensure that they get their fair share of the benefits.

So that's the first thing that's a bit of a game changer.

The second thing is that international rules and regulations around benefit sharing are increasingly requiring, particularly related to products derived from biodiversity, from native biodiversity, that these rules and regulations, which fall within a framework called the Nagoya Protocol, which is complex international legal terminology that I'm not gonna go into. But the bottom line is that there is a legal responsibility on a, let's say I talked to you about Twinings tea, let's say Twinings tea in the UK, there is a legal responsibility on them to ensure that when they purchase baobab, that they know that the suppliers of the raw material got a fair deal and they got their share, their rightful share of benefits from the whole market chain. Meaning that those companies that are involved in the production side, the baobab, so my, like my company that's buying fruit from rural people, the onus is on us to be able to prove to Twinings, which is our customer, that we are paying the harvesters a fair price and that they're getting a fair deal out of it.

And then the third element is that there are now independent certification systems that come and verify that. And I mentioned earlier on, this certification system in which I've been somehow involved called Fair Wild. And what happens with Fair Wild is that once a year an auditor from outside comes in and actually interviews the harvesters and basically says to 'em, are you guys getting a fair deal? Blah, blah, blah. And they really looking through the cost structures.

I mean, don't get me wrong, every single harvester, or every single farmer, or every single producer of every single primary raw material in the world thinks that they are not getting a fair deal out of it. That's, almost inevitable, everyone... because you know, when you look at the price, the value that gets added further up the chain, it's easy to think that you are being ripped off.

But nevertheless, this is being independently inspected and look, actually they are getting a fair price. This is a fair price, and this is a fair price at the next level, and this is a fair price at the next level. I think fundamentally I can feel very optimistic with baobab and with other wild harvested ingredients that ultimately I think the harvesters will do very well out of it.

That doesn't happen at the beginning, it takes time.

It takes time for the ingredient to be established. But I mean, the cool thing with baobab is that there is a limited amount of baobab. It's not an unlimited amount because we don't farm grow it. So, we wild harvest it. At the moment, we are probably only consuming 10% of the wild harvested production potential from Africa. So at the moment, we're only scratching the surface, but one day we will get to the point where we are actually using all that there is that we can sustainably use. At which point, if the demand continues to

outstrip the supply, what will happen? The price will go up. What happens then? Then the harvesters benefit.

So like, you know, to me if I look at it, it's a win-win-win. Right now it's a win because harvesters are able to sell their fruit and earn some money from it. And in future what might happen is that it becomes scarce and they will earn even more money from it and that will actually become a really valuable commodity. That would be amazing.

[01:07:08] **Sanja Gohre:** You said at the beginning that you were working on, I think, three other products to get them ready for Novel Food application approval. What lessons, if you look back, what would you tell yourself now as you make these applications? It's been a long road for you since 2004. What advice would you give yourself in terms of these three next applications?

[01:07:29] **Gus le Breton:** I think I would uh, I would say to myself, you know this is gonna work. It's gonna be a struggle, it's gonna take a lot of energy, but you know ultimately it's gonna pay off, so stick with it. Have courage, my son, uh, courage of your convictions, perseverance, fortitude and you'll get there.

I mean, when I started I was considered to be a bit of a nutcase, out there, right on the edge. And now, you know, this stuff is becoming quite mainstream. So I take quite a bit of satisfaction from that and I would look back at myself and say, come on son, it's gonna work out. Stick with it. And I'm glad I did.

[01:08:15] **Sanja Gohre:** Awesome. Gus, I think that's such a great place to end. I don't know if you feel there's something you've left out. I think we've covered a lot of territory. I dunno if there's anything that you feel that is missing that needs to be emphasized.

[01:08:30] **Gus le Breton:** I think I would just say that um one of the challenges that we face with baobab, which you alluded to earlier, is the fact that it's relatively easy to access if, you know, if you happen to live in an area where there is baobab, it's relatively easy to access the fruit, and it's relatively easy to produce a really poor quality baobab product. But it's relatively difficult to produce a good quality baobab product. And I would just say that you know, anyone who's thinking, that they would also like to try to get involved in a production and processing of baobab or indeed any other wild-harvested natural ingredient, I'd really encourage them to try and, in the case of baobab, to join the African Baobab Alliance.

And in the case of other ingredients to look around and see who else is doing what out there, and to learn from them, to try and produce the best quality product that you can. Because ultimately that's what we all need in order to help grow the industry and grow the opportunities. And if you're gonna produce a poor quality product, you are not only *not* doing yourself a favour, you are actually doing everyone a disservice. But if you can produce a really good quality product, you're gonna benefit not only yourself, but hopefully many, many, many other people.

[01:09:54] **Sanja Gohre:** And Gus, for people looking to invest, you know, a lot of people, a lot of people think, I think there was one article that said, you operate in Zimbabwe, and somebody said, investors do not wanna touch the country because it's so difficult, um, never mind internal infrastructural problems, etcetera, you've got climate change, you've got, the hurricanes that run through Zambia, Mozambique, Zimbabwe.

There just seem to be so many challenges at the tip of Africa. What would your words of wisdom be for the investors coming in?

[01:10:27] **Gus le Breton:** If an investor is coming in and their sole objective is to get rich quick, then yeah, I think that they can probably go and find something else and go somewhere else. But if they are looking at broader social impact, I don't think there's many areas where you can get such a high social impact return as you can with wild harvested ingredients.

And I think the reason for that is pretty simple and pretty straightforward. You know, most investment opportunities will inevitably, when you're looking at - let's talk about in the rural economies in Africa, because I mean most people in Africa live in rural areas, that's where the greatest levels of poverty are. If you wanna have serious social impact in Africa, you need to invest in growing the rural economies.

Most of the opportunities that come in rural areas will preferentially benefit those people that are already slightly better off. If you want to promote, for example I mean, I'll give you... in Zimbabwe, the one big growth area for um small-scale farmers in the last few years has been tobacco. Tobacco, there's lots of continuing growing demand around the world for tobacco. It's a quite valuable crop and small-holders can do pretty well, but you can only get into tobacco if you've already got some resources. Not only do you need to have the land, but you need to have the money to buy the inputs. You need to have access to the fuel that's used to cure the tobacco. You need to be able to build the barns that are used for curing the tobacco.

You need to have money.

So when you are investing in supporting small-scale farmers to grow tobacco, you must be aware of the fact that you are not reaching the very poorest in the community. You are reaching the better off in the community.

Now, baobab is different. Baobab is something where the very, very poorest people in the community can benefit from selling baobab, and in fact, almost preferentially do because there's no raw material that's required. There's no inputs that are required. You don't need fertilizer, you don't need seed, you don't need anything to harvest a baobab fruit. You literally, if you've got two arms and two legs, you can harvest a baobab fruit. And so really, really, really poor people living in rural areas that don't have access to the other investment opportunities that come their way can benefit from this.

So if you are an impact investor and you are looking at some sort of business opportunity that is gonna benefit really, really, really bottom of the pyramid people, you could not get better than this. And yeah, okay, so the macroeconomic environment in Zimbabwe is not particularly enabling, but I mean, come on guys. The macroeconomic environment anywhere in the world is not particularly enabling. It's not like you are dealing with higher level political issues, you are just dealing with rural people and a business. I think people just need to get over that and get on with it because this is where the impact is gonna be felt.

And I think anyone who had invested 10 or 15 years ago, for example, in the baobab value chain in Zimbabwe, would be looking at it now and thinking, wow, we actually really, really achieved something

significant. I mean, my company, we've got over 5,000 rural harvesters that are involved in the supply chain for baobab.

And each one of those rural harvesters represents a family of four, five people, let's say 20, 25,000 people that are benefiting from the production of and sale of baobab fruit. That's really, really significant. And if I was an impact investor, I'd be very, very chuffed with statistics like that. So I think they should recognize the real value in this and uh, not get stuck on some of the politics.

[01:14:33] **Sanja Gohre:** That was an interview with entrepreneur and conservationist Gus le Breton. For more on him and baobabs, for the show notes and a transcript of this episode, visit africanoptimist.co.za where you can also sign up for our newsletter. Subscribe to us on your favourite podcast platforms or listen via our website. Thank you for spending time with us.

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