



## Beauty industry wakes up to the benefits of marula oil

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**Future looks bright for producers as list of retailers alive to the potential of this cosmetics 'wonder product' continues to grow**

The Body Shop was the first large retailer to realise the benefits of marula oil. It launched a cosmetic range containing it in 2002, and by 2012 marula oil featured in more than 140 of its products. But few of them shouted about it on the label: the Body Shop understood marula's powers, but wasn't confident consumers did.

Now marula oil has made a dramatic late entrance to the beauty industry's infatuation with oils, following jojoba, coconut and argan, and now billed as more effective and multi-functional than any of them. In 2015, it featured in *Marie Claire* and *Cosmopolitan* – who quoted the enthusiasm of Rihanna's stylist – while ROK Stars' Marula Pure Beauty Oil won a beauty Oscar, the Cosmetic Executive Women (CEW) Eco Beauty Award.

Marula oil's main selling points are its small, easily absorbed molecules, copious antioxidants (60% more than argan), essential fatty acids, non-comedogenic properties (it's ok for acne sufferers), and non-greasiness. Chiefly a skincare product, it hydrates, combats wrinkles and environmental aggressors, reduces blemishes, and is anti-microbial. It also promotes healthy nails and sleek, frizz-free hair.

The marula tree (pictured) is drought resistant and grows across southern Africa, notably in north-central Namibia. Its fruit is put to multiple uses, including skincare. A 2014 profile by Namibia's National Botanical Research Institute (NBRI) pointed to its sustainability, recording 10 times as many young trees as old. Most trees grow on private property, with women the custodians of the fruit and its products. The most notable producer is Namibia's Eudafano Women's Cooperative (EWC), which in 2013 comprised 2,051 women from 24 associations, and produced 11 tonnes of virgin oil, mostly for European export, chiefly for the Body Shop.

The brand Marula Pure Beauty Oil promotes itself as "a connection between the American consumer and the rural women of Africa". This fairtrade retailer emphasises that it uses less than 1% of Namibia and Swaziland's marula resources. "We have created a supply chain involving over 1,300 rural women in 2014," said the brand's June 2015 statement. "And we target to increase rural women harvesters to 10,000 by 2020."

Kenyan farmers Philip and Katy Leakey are trying a different production model, adding 50,000 marula trees to the 6,000 growing naturally on their farm. They employ 800 mostly female workers on generous terms, and sell the oil through the fairtrade Leakey Collection. The Leakeys produced 6,000 litres of oil by the end of 2014, and believe their business could create work for 10,000 people.

Marula harvesting involves gathering ripe marula fruit from the ground and piercing the skin. The woody stone is then dried in the sun for a few months, before being cracked open with an axe to extract the kernels. These are processed into oil. France-based Aldivia is the main importer of semi-processed marula oil for filtration and sale to the cosmetic industry. The NBRI notes that "processing probably needs to be upgraded from its present artisanal form so as to resist any price erosion, improve quality, move up the value chain and diversify market access."

Supply has not kept pace with the demand for marula oil. The NBRI foresees its possible commoditisation due to pricing pressures, and believes, "This could represent a threat (and perhaps a new but very challenging opportunity) to community-based producers and processors such as Eudafano, who are basing their marula oil business on quality, ethical trade, community benefits and respect for the heritage represented by the marula culture."

The list of retailers selling marula oil now includes the likes of Nordstrom and cosmetics giant Sephora, and Marula Pure Beauty Oil is expanding beyond Europe, with launches planned in six Asian countries. Meanwhile Philip Leakey is forecasting marula oil will grow into a multi-billion dollar industry. And all this is without even touching on the marula fruit's various other uses, which include culinary oil and the already well-commercialised Amarula liqueur.

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