

Out of Africa

This U.S.-based company taps into African resources to offer unrefined shea butter products that are out of this world.

VICTOR LULLA CONDUCTS DAILY BUSINESS from a building in Southern California, but his heart is halfway around the world in the tiny West African country of Benin. It's an economically underdeveloped country according to the Central Intelligence Agency's *The World Factbook*. Benin's primary means of economic growth comes through subsistence agriculture, cotton supply and regional trading. Its adult literacy rate is a mere 34.7%.

Lulla hopes to improve these statistics. It's a tough battle, but his well-stocked arsenal includes unusual—yet effective—weapons. Among his battle gear are soap and body washes.

A self-described serial entrepreneur, Lulla, together with his wife, Debra, and West African-based associate Gilles Adamon, founded Out of Africa in 2005, a personal-care products company with a conscience. The company began rolling out its first commercially available products in 2007 and currently offers more than 30 items within its growing portfolio.

The partnership was forged quite unexpectedly after a trade show introduction—launching Lulla and his team into the world of personal-care products. Lulla took hold of sales and marketing for the company, his wife spearheaded product development and Adamon was charged with overseeing product procurement and production.

Similarly, Debra Lulla was a licensed cosmetologist specializing in aesthetics. Her love for the beauty business had been cultivated throughout her professional beauty career, and she had discovered a passion for natural and aromatherapy luxury skin care.

The story was much different for Lulla when he and Adamon started conversing. Lulla's business experience fell heavily within telephone product manufacturing, and he had recently sold his electronics firm in 2002. However, he had long held an interest in healthy living and was passionate about the environment and social responsibility. His encounter with Adamon at the 2005 Natural Products Expo West proved timely.

"A friend of mine, Charlie Stathacos, was a director of the Peace Corps in Africa and introduced me to Gilles Adamon. I knew little about the industry or about the indigenous ingredients existing in Africa," says Lulla. Although it was a major departure from Lulla's prior life, the new opportunity piqued his interest. Several conversations later he decided to pursue it to the next level. "I jumped in with both feet," he says.

Adamon negotiated with the government to waive its duties in order to facilitate job creation at the local level, paving the way for Out of Africa and U.S.-distributed products. Lulla upgraded production capabilities in



A member of one of the Benin cooperative groups at work with raw shea.

the year. While many small brands struggled in the recession, this brand beat the odds and continues to grow with no signs of slowing.

Setting the personal-care product company apart is its two-fold purpose: offering quality, natural products while committing to social responsibility. "We help nourish the skin while making the world a better place to live," adds Lulla.

SHEA BUTTER

At the core of Out of Africa's line is unrefined shea butter. Often considered the gold of West Africa, says Lulla, shea butter is a product derived from the

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For Adamon, the move to Out of Africa seemed a natural career extension. He was already the owner of Natura Sarl, a shea butter cosmetics manufacturer in Benin. He had attended the 2005 Natural Products Expo West—where he and Lulla first met—looking for a U.S. distributor.

Benin by procuring state-of-the-art equipment that enabled faster manufacturing of its personal-care products while assuring consistent quality.

The investment paid off. Out of Africa is already boasting big sales, rolling out more than 150,000 bars of soap alone throughout the busy months of



karite tree. The species is so highly regarded by locals it is referred to as the tree of life. It is indigenous mainly to West Africa and stubbornly resists cultivation efforts elsewhere. The tree develops dark green fruit with white nuts containing a fatty, buttery substance. This buttery substance—the basis for shea butter—is naturally loaded with vitamins A, E and F, and healthy fatty acids—a key to its beneficial personal-care properties. “That’s what keeps the skin healthy. Shea has the highest concentration of these elements,” adds Lulla.

Each element plays a role. Vitamin A is known to improve problematic skin conditions, ranging from blemishes to wrinkles to sunburn. Vitamin E boasts age-fighting benefits related to increased micro-circulation in the skin as well as anti-free radical agents. Vitamin F consists of three fatty acids, and is known for its soothing and protective properties. Together, the potent mixture offers strong moisturizing, antiaging, protecting and healing benefits to skin, a quality that consumers covet and one that isn’t found in other ingredients—at least not in the same high-level concentrations.

Extracting shea butter isn’t a simple process, however, and that’s where Out of Africa’s partnerships prove critical. Adamon manages the procurement and production of shea butter, turning to two women’s cooperative groups in Benin. Profits are shared between the all-female groups to help feed their families, support education and fuel the local economy.

“A co-op is work gathered for a common cause,” explains Lulla. In this case, the cause is creation of shea butter, and the women unite voluntarily to achieve the common business goal.

Although proprietary methods of extracting the raw materials vary from family to family, the basic process remains the same. Shea nuts are picked, cracked, grilled and pounded. Once the buttery substance is exhumed from the nut, it’s boiled in water until the premium shea butter rises. The shea butter is then scooped with a gourd, cooled and set. The end

result is best described as looking like creamy scoops of butter pecan ice cream. It is solid at room temperature but liquefies near body temperatures.

While the process doesn’t lend itself to mass production, it is the only way to obtain the shea butter without the use of chemicals or synthetic agents. The unrefined shea butter used in Out of Africa products is 100% organic. According to Lulla, “unrefined shea butter is the finest, purest shea butter available on the planet and provides the best healing properties.”



All Out of Africa products are mixed and blended by hand.

While most other brands boasting the inclusion of shea butter only add 1% to 2% of the ingredient into their products, Out of Africa doesn’t skimp with its precious organic material.

Among its product offering, its lip balms and bar soaps have emerged as company best sellers. The lip balm line comprises three flavors—tropical vanilla, orange cream and peppermint—and delivers 30% organic shea butter. The products sell for \$5 per 25-ounce container—double the size of competitors, says the company.

Its best-selling bar soaps are sold for \$4 and contain 20% unrefined shea butter. It’s available in four scents—vanilla, lavender, African black and verbena—and promise to moisturize and cleanse.

The company also sells a range of hand creams, lotions, oils, washes and shea butter tins, with plans to release body butters and body scrubs in late summer. No matter what the final application, the focal point of every product is unrefined shea butter.

COMMITMENT TO EDUCATION

In addition to its commitment to quality, Out of Africa also seeks to serve the people of Benin. Its work through women’s cooperatives has aided numerous women, increased jobs and bolstered the local economy. Yet, the company goes a step further by donating 3% of its sales to the Benin Education Fund, a U.S.-based nonprofit organization launched in 1998 and committed to providing educational support and tools to more than 550 rural students.

In Benin, only primary education is free. Educational costs for a high

of Africa squarely fits this wildly popular and growing market. Product is distributed through a variety of retailers—both large and small—including beauty stores. Suggested retail prices range from \$4 for 3.7-ounce bar soaps to \$20 for an 8-ounce bottle of Shea Butter Body Oil.

Out of Africa has invested resources into educating potential customers through direct demonstrations at the store level. “We feel that when they experience the product, they *get it* as far as quality goes,” adds Lulla.

Strong packaging presentation is also a key component of the brand’s marketing. The packaging and branding remain consistent throughout the line, featuring earthy, vibrant tones that harken back to Africa’s beginnings. The logo features a signature giraffe profile, a memorable symbol of the brand. For retailers, birch wood displays as well as various other on-shelf promotional materials are available to enhance product presentation on the shelf.

While packaging and marketing are important to the brand, they are not what sets it apart, Lulla insists. “What separates us from most others is the quality of ingredients we use to make certain that the consumer is getting products that most effectively nourish the skin, while offering it at affordable retailers. We put our money into the quality ingredients rather than expensive packaging.”

Retailers seem to agree with Lulla’s assertions. Whipping out his Blackberry at the close of his *Beauty Store Business* interview, Lulla scrolls down and begins to read a glowing message sent from one of his most recognizable retail clients, a major Internet retailer selling hundreds of personal-care items. “I had the opportunity to try one of your products,” starts the message. “The product made my skin feel so soft and the scents are just fantastic,” the writer raves.

The message makes Lulla smile, but it’s not the only accolade he’s received from a retailer-turned-consumer. “After using Out of Africa, many of our customers have become our biggest product fans.”

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RETAILERS

The trend toward environmentally-friendly products continues, and Out

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