

TONKA
STORY

Travel Book

Givaudan[®]

CHAPTER I

On the road to Maripa, seated next to the driver who was taking me to the village of Aripao, I could never have imagined such adventures : interior, human, and almost magical. It is true that the tropical forest of the Caura Basin keeps its secrets well hidden, and also the tonka bean.

Imagine me, trying to slip into the skin of an Indiana Jones of perfumery. The three-day beard is there to be sure, but not the skin, subtly burnished by the sun. Nor do I have the hardened look of someone seasoned by a life of adventure. The mosquitoes have wasted no time declaring their passion for me, neither has the sun, which greets me with its intense rays. As for my experienced eye, it rather resembles the eyes of the little frogs that are found in this area, round like marbles, devouring with wonder everything that passes in front of me.

We soon arrive at Aripao. Made up of sixty four families, the community is quite large. Most of the people live off the tonka bean, but it is not sufficient for their subsistence. This wrinkly seed, which is not much to look at, is their black gold. It is not its flesh that is precious but its scent. This raw material, so richly faceted with woody, balsamic, vanilla or even powdery notes, perhaps even a bit of pistachio, is a veritable perfumed composition in itself. Here they call the tonka, “sarrapia”, the same name as the tree that bears the fruit of which the tonka is the seed.

Milagros Perez, a member of the city council, greets me surrounded by a swarm of children, for school has just finished. They are shy at first, and curious as kittens watching the new arrival. They brighten up on seeing my pale face and my nose now bordering on carmine. Let's face it, I do not have their pretty caramel complexion. But, no matter, they adopt me straightaway as one of their own and hasten with pride to show me their village, which boasts a school, a clinic, and a small church. The atmosphere here is joyous, as the sarrapia harvest, which begins tomorrow, promises to be good.

After visiting the village, I spend the night at Milagros' home, in order to leave very early in the morning to collect the sarrapia. I will live the day-to-day life of the “sarrapiero” - one who picks sarrapia.



CHAPTER II

The next morning, everything is ready. I will be following Alberto Montañez for almost five weeks. Like a transhumance, his wife and children accompany him with everything they will need to survive for this period.

Eight of us board a long dugout canoe, stacked on top of each other, sharing the least little space with, among other things, chicken cages, and canvas for making tents. Each family occupies a precise area of the Suapure (88,000 hectares, 217,452 acres) where they have respected each other's territory for decades. Along the way down the Caura River, Alberto explains to me in Spanish that the Aripao community is the only one in the region of Creole origin. These people came to Venezuela at the end of the Eighteenth Century.

“In all that time you can imagine how attached we have become to this land. We know every little corner, its dangers and its wonders. And God knows they are rich. Its flora and fauna are threatened by deforestation and illegal gold and diamond mining.”

“When was the Caura Basin declared a protected reserve?”

“Very precisely, on January 23, 1968”, he tells me.

“Some say that the sarrapia brings good luck, do you know why?”

It’s simple. Even if the harvest is irregular, due to a three-year cycle - an excellent year, followed by an average one, then a poor one - the dried sarrapia is always good. It is an everlasting fruit.

Officially, the sarrapia tree is the symbol of the State of Bolivar.”

“I feel inspired to keep one in my pocket and make it my lucky charm. What do you think?”



CHAPTER III

After three hours of traveling we finally arrive.

The blue sky, flecked with white clouds, is favorable to setting up a camp on the river's edge. It will be minimal, canvases held up by thin trees and hammocks by way of canopy beds. There is one corner for cooking and another, protected by a curtain, is designated for preserving the beans, well shaded, before they wrinkle up later in the sun.

There, everything is prepared. The sun sets on the Caura and the orange red hues reflecting on the water are sublime. These images have quickly become precious memories. Around the fire, everyone savours the freshly caught fish. The atmosphere is calm, serene. In the distance we can hear the toucans, and the chickens, like us, are beginning to drop off to sleep.

It's a perfect moment for one of Alberto's stories that he loves to tell in a soft slow voice like a lullaby. Each evening he invents a new story for the children. Tonight the jaguar has the place of honor. Advancing on velvet paws among the leaves, it comes close to him plunging his savage look into Alberto's eyes. The animal senses a friend in him, a protector of the forest. The little ones listen agape to their father and watch him mimic the footsteps of the great cat. His wife Clara smiles, and she too is filled with wonder.

After the jaguar story, it's up to the hammock to rock me to sleep with its gentle swaying. At night the most unexpected sounds can be heard. They mingle with my dreams and pull me strangely from Orpheus' arms when I feel a presence near the hammock. My eyelids are too heavy to open.

Dawn barely breaks and I wake up gently while everyone else is still asleep. At that moment I discover in my pocket not one, but two tonka beans! Who put them there? I didn't see anyone bring any on board the long canoe. The family is awake now and no one got up during the night.



CHAPTER IV

Alberto and I head for the Suapure, the harvest zone, with several jute sacs on our shoulders and a machete in hand. Clara stays at the camp with the five children. Alberto explains to me how difficult it always is for him to leave. Even if after all these years the two of them are used to the separation, anything can happen, such as the arrival of drug traffickers or poachers.

It takes several hours to get to Suapure. Now I understand why we left so early this morning. Alberto knows the way by heart, but in one year the trail has disappeared, for the thick dense vegetation grows back incredibly fast. How can he find his way in the middle of this green ocean? In some places, we can not even see the sky for the rich high canopy. Finding your way in such a forest is part of a knowledge passed on from generation to generation. It is related to a kind of magic whose mystery I would very much like to uncover. This really is not the time to question Alberto on the subject. The concentration on his face suggests that I watch my every step. Working the machete to break the creeper vines that mock me with their long tresses, like those of an impertinent girl, is not so easy. I try to imitate Alberto's movements in this makeshift martial art, but my moves look more like a dislocated marionette. In spite of this I move forward. Slowly, but I move forward.

Darn! I've just got the machete stuck in a tree trunk. Clearly, I am no longer moving forward.

Alberto !

After dislodging the tool with a sharp blow, he asks me to look carefully on the ground, and not to miss the sarrapias we come across along the way.

“Don't hesitate to pick up the fruit you see on the ground.”

I realize just how hard the harvest really is. In its wild state the sarrapia tree grows up to thirty meters high. Of course, its fruit does not need to be picked, it merely grants us this favor. A tree can yield between 15 and 75 kilos of fruit per year, and when it grows near other trees there are no more than 30 total. These groupings are called sarrapiales. We now arrive in the middle of one of these groups; Suapure harbors quite a few. Finally arrived. My back is breaking; I have cramps in my arms, and one in my calf, which Alberto treats with a particular species of vine. Despite his efficient treatment, I painfully gather up the little strength I have left to pick sarrapias. After having collected a good number, we quickly turn around and head back to the camp. The day is not over yet and it soon takes on another facet...

CHAPITRE V

Another hundred meters and we arrive at the camp. Our return to the hearth is heartwarming. The children jump for joy when they see us coming. Clara helps us carry the well-filled sacs to the shelter where she has arranged the three folding chairs and the tree trunks. I finally learn their purpose. And here I thought they were stools for sitting on!

It is on these trunks that we break the sarrapias in two, using a rock or a hammer, in order to extract the oblong seed, still smooth but which will wrinkle up and become the precious tonka bean.

How many times did I try to open one? Fifteen at least. It requires



unexpected strength and agility.

I wondered why the children had been laughing for the last few minutes. Now I could see. The open fruit reveals light yellow filaments that strangely resemble my pale blond crew cut. Indeed I go from one surprise to another. I declare with a certain amount of pride, “The sarrapia and I are obviously distant cousins.”

“For sure” answers Clara, laughing with the children.

Now it is nightfall, the last hours of this day are among the most beautiful of those that fill the annals of my journey.

Just like the night before, Alberto tells us a story. It is inspired by the day's harvest and its heroes are two rather non-traditional companions: a tapir and a spider monkey. The latter is nestled close to the canopy and seeing us labor to picking up the sarrapias, he decides to come down and hang on the trunk of the tree in order to make more fruit fall to the ground. In passing, he calls his old friend the tapir, who was taking a long nap, to come and give us a hand on the ground. The large mammal applies himself to the task with such fervor and picks up loads of sarrapias thanks to his long muzzle. Our task is thus made easier than ever and our two new friends have promised to come back tomorrow.

As we go off to bed, Alberto explains to me that evoking these animals, threatened with extinction, is something he feels strongly about. These stories will remain in the children's memories for a long time: looking after the world around them and taking care of the flora and

fauna is essential to their own survival.

I sleep a very deep sleep, and nothing wakes me during the night. Along the way back the next day, I look for my pocketknife. It should be in my pocket. I thrust in my hand and, to my astonishment, pull out a third tonka bean!

I don't breathe a word of this to Alberto, and keep the secret to myself.

It is a sign, a call that must be answered. The sarrapieros must be supported and defended at all costs; and not only because tonka is among the world's most beautiful scents.



TONKA BEAN

BOTANIC NAME

Dipteryx odorata

ORIGIN

Tree native of the South American Tropical Forests. It grows along the Amazonian river banks. 20 m high, its trunk is between 50 to 70 cm in diameter. It has large elliptic leaves and purple flowers. Its fruits have the shape of small mangos, from which comes 1 or 2 seeds of 4 cm long by 1.5 cm wide : The tonka Beans.

HARVEST

Takes place in May. The matured fruits, fallen on the ground are gathered. They are dried, then their shells are cracked. The beans are sundried, then immersed in recipients containing 65 % alcohol for 24 hrs. They are then air dried which produces a nice « icing», due to the apparition of the coumarin crystals. The Venezuelan beans, Angostura, are the most appreciated. They are issued of wild cultures, and thus subject to a more irregular harvest.

PRODUCTION

15 kg of beans/year/tree

EXTRACTION METHOD

Extraction from the beans by volatile solvent.

PERFUME

Balsamic, smooth, caramel, tobacco notes.

GIVAUDAN / CONSERVATION INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIP

In March 2007, Givaudan signed an agreement with Conservation International, (C.I.), for a conservation and social project in the Venezuelan Guyana Shield region to ensure the sustainable sourcing of tonka beans. Tonka is a precious, wild grown natural raw material used in various luxury fine fragrances due to its surprising profound warm and sweet note, reminiscent of caramel, almond and tobacco.

The aim of the project is to ensure forest conservation while supporting local livelihoods in the lower Caura river basin of Venezuela, and to secure Tonka beans sustainable sourcing for the perfume industry.

In partnership with C.I., a non-profit organisation, agreements are developed with the Criollos people of the Caura basin. Through these agreements, local communities receive technical and productivity assistance in exchange for their commitment to preserve the forests and the flora and fauna. This also leads to a better drying process and storage, which will improve the quality of the beans. In addition, new and faster harvest routes will increase the amount of beans collected.

This project is part of C.I. global approach whose goal is to preserve Earth natural heritage – its bio-diversity – and to show that human communities can live harmoniously with Nature, by signing close partnerships and paying attention to human well-being.

For Givaudan, this project is a pillar of Innovative Naturals, a global program sourcing more than 190 pure and natural raw materials for fragrances, with very precise quality criterion.

“We have a responsibility in making sure that the natural resources currently used will not vanish in the future and that they are sustainable. It is our vital interest to secure resources going forward to be able to also create the unique fragrances in the future”, says Gilles Andrier, CEO Givaudan.

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