

Supporting Women's Cooperatives in Morocco

Women's Cooperative

The Atlas mountain range, home of the mountain of Toubkal, is so populated with Argan trees that it is commonly referred to as “Argana.” Aura Cacia team members, Tim Blakley, Jennifer Ferring and Jane Merten traveled to this region in May 2011 to meet the producers of our organic Argan oil. We came upon an unassuming, grey concrete building — but once inside we found a group of lively, colorful women. They greeted us with much excitement and had a special welcoming performance to share using only an empty water jug, a metal plate and silverware, their hands clapping, and voices singing. The music vibrated throughout the room and you couldn't help but dance! The “band” continued singing traditional Berber songs as other women sat amongst them cracking the shell of the Argan seed. Their hands worked quickly, tossing and separating the shells and seed.

Here we met Fatima, the leader and co-founder of this particular co-op. She lost her husband years ago, leaving her with two young sons and significant debt. She came across a woman named H'Maidouch trying to sell her Argan oil in the market. Fatima bought the oil from H'Maidouch so that she could use it to exchange for kitchen staples such as flour and bread. This experience gave Fatima the idea to start the co-op. With some help from government grants the two women were able to open Afoulki-Amskrout Cooperative in 2004.

The women here are very grateful for the opportunity to be employed and are proud of their work. Some of the women, like Fatima, have lost their husbands and now have a way to support themselves and their families.

Hanane, Fatima's assistant, is one of the few women who can read and write. She helps with accounting and in the selling of their products. Fatima would like to have more workers like Hanane, and she dreams of helping to create a school nearby.

Photos: Argan trees, Morocco

Fast Facts: Argan Tree

- ✂ The Argan tree (*Argania spinosa*) can live for 150 to 200 years.
- ✂ Argan trees have been indigenous to Morocco for thousands of years, first used by the native Berber tribes of Southern Morocco.
- ✂ Originally cut down and used for charcoal fuel, the trees are now protected by the Moroccan government.
- ✂ The deeply penetrating root system of the trees allows long, fruitful life spans, even in the very dry climate.
- ✂ Argan branches can reach over 35 feet in height.
- ✂ In the last 10 years, the Moroccan government has protected the Argan forest by keeping it clean, preventing livestock from eating the fruit, and by ensuring it is not over-harvested. Universities are also becoming involved in research related to the tree and its many benefits.



Photos: (Above) Fatima, (Right) Hakima



A second women's cooperative we visited was located in a small village further north. We met Saadia who has been the manager for over 4 years. She is slightly shy at first, but she is eager to introduce us to the other women.

We went into the home of one woman, Hakima, who has worked in the Argan oil business for 10 years. As she skillfully cracked the shells releasing the seeds, she told us about all the uses of Argan. As with most of the local women, Hakima utilizes the oil in her daily life — in cooking couscous and vegetables, and on her hair and skin. While Hakima continued to crack apart the shells, Saadia explained the Argan oil process.

Saadia shared with us how the oil production helps the women in her community. She said the women are paid by the weight of the seeds they crack each day. But it is not possible to be paid any less than the minimum wage, which is 75 – 100 Moroccan dirhams each day (equivalent to \$10 –\$13 USD per day). This would not amount to much in America, but here in the remote Southern region of Morocco, the wage sustains these women. The earnings are especially welcome since there were previously no employment options for them in this area. As the market price of Argan oil rises, the women will be paid accordingly. Managers such as Saadia, who have an invested interest in the communities and cooperatives of women, ensure that they are receiving a fair price for their work.



Photo: Saadia showing the 4 stages of the Argan nut



Photos: Women's cooperative, Morocco

Process

- ✂ When the fruit drops from the trees, the yellow fruit dries up and must be peeled off the shell. The fruit peels are saved and sold in the market as livestock food.
- ✂ Then women crack the Argan seed from the shell. They do this by hand using two stones. Generally, they gather in groups for this work, sitting around in circles on the ground. The task can also be done from their homes, or just about anywhere they would like.
- ✂ As the women crack open the shell, they toss the two pieces so they each land in separate piles in their baskets. The empty shells are collected and used as fuel for homes and community bath houses.
- ✂ The Argan seeds are then roasted in a simple manner over a fire (a fire being fueled by the Argan shells).
- ✂ Grinding can be done by the traditional hand method or with newer equipment owned by processors in the area.
- ✂ Once ground, the oil is pressed to take out any pieces of seed and to further smooth out the oil. Like all stages in the process, nothing goes unused. The spent seed material is pressed into pellets which are then sold in the market for animal feed.
- ✂ Finally, the oil is filtered to make the final product, a beautiful golden liquid that helps sustain a people and a way of life for Berber women.



Photo: Cracking open argan shell



Photo: Argan pellets

Aura Cacia® is proud to be sourcing our quality, organic Argan oil from these women's cooperatives in Morocco. Through our purchasing efforts we are able to make an impact in the lives of these women and their families to help them realize their dreams.



Photo: Hanane with a fresh argan fruit

Fast Facts: Afoulki-Amskroud Cooperative

- ✂ The cooperative produces around 10 tons of Argan oil each year.
- ✂ Their yield is around 1 kg of Argan oil from 2.5 kg of seeds.
- ✂ The cooperative employs 80 women, and each of them produce around 3 kg of Argan seeds each day. Many choose to work part-time. The women share in the profits based on the amounts they produce.
- ✂ Afoulki-Amskroud is one of 11 women's co-ops in the "Argana" area, and one of the 600 across all of Morocco.