

UNWRAPPING A STORY FROM AFRICA



On Saturday 29th February Tatsfield Fairtrade organised a wonderful Fairtrade Chocolate Brunch in the Village Hall. We feasted on bananas, banana bread, waffles and chocolate sauce, hot chocolate and teas and coffees. A wide range of Fairtrade chocolate bars were both on display and available to enjoy, and later on Alizon Mooney reminded us of these delicious treats, and how we can so easily choose to buy them instead of non Fairtrade chocolate. But the greatest treat was listening to Rosine Bekoin, a cocoa farmer from Cote d'Ivoire. Hilary Harber introduced Rosine, and from then on, we sat back and listened.....

'I am here to tell you my story,' she began.



With the excellent translation skills of Sam Platt, from the Fairtrade Foundation's campaigns team, we bore witness to Rosine's journey towards Fairtrade.

It all began with Rosine's grandmother who - most unusual for West African society - owned some land and wanted to hand it onto her granddaughter. The grandmother was the eldest daughter of her father, and she was determined that Rosine should inherit this land. A plot of 2.5 hectares.

This displeased Rosine's partner. Men have been the traditional landowners in Cote d'Ivoire. There were many struggles at home as tradition was being challenged. None of her grandmother's brothers or sisters wanted Rosine to have this land, either. But eventually, a certificate from the Government was awarded enabling her to inherit the land.

In the 1980s, she had learnt from her grandmother how to grow cassava, manioc, bananas and cocoa when she was a schoolgirl. In 2010, Rosine was called in to see her grandmother who told her that she was giving her the cocoa plantation. So, Rosine started cultivating cocoa and selling it to anyone who would buy the cocoa pods. This was not making her any real income.

In 2015, she discovered the co-operative CAYAT, which advised her to join them as they belonged to Fairtrade. Where before, she had produced 450 kilos of cocoa, she was increasing her yield to 1.5 tonnes per year; due to improved agricultural techniques taught by CAYAT and healthy fertilisers. Plus, she was receiving the Fairtrade premium which she re-invested into local community projects.

Life was not easy with her partner. But Rosine made it very clear how much she loved him, and with their five children, she was determined to make the cocoa plantation a success, despite his misgivings.

CAYAT asked her to attend training sessions and then one day its director called on her to ask her to attend the Fairtrade Africa women's school of leadership. Rosine spoke no French at this time and was very ashamed of this and felt she could not fit in at such a grand place, far from her rural plantation in the south of Cote d'Ivoire. Her partner was not keen either! But she went, and it changed her: it empowered her, taught her self esteem and self confidence and that women have equal rights with men. She had grown up in a culture where women were subservient to men, not even speaking in front of them.

CAYAT had seen in Rosine a force for change, and she had taken up their call. She came home with her books from the women's school of leadership and showed them to her partner, and he began to see that what Rosine was doing was really important. He changed and really supported her now. He encouraged her to complete her diploma in leadership, which she did and she returned to her village, ready to lead other women. Rosine created a women's association in CAYAT, and she was elected its general secretary.

With the Fairtrade premium, the local school has had its roof mended; an hydraulic pump has been installed to save on the long walks to fetch water and a school canteen built providing lunch for the pupils instead of them walking back the 3km to their homes in the middle of the day to eat.

Plus, the premium has really helped local women with training in agriculture and in making them more independent. Fairtrade has completely changed Rosine's and other women's lives. Were it not for Fairtrade, she would not be here in the UK. Someone from the Fairtrade Foundation had visited her home in her village last year inviting her to come to England in order to speak about her life. But her visa did not arrive in time, so she had had to wait until now, 2020!

She spoke with such joy and passion about the real difference Fairtrade has made to her and her family's life. She was clearly delighted to be able to speak to us, and in French! She laughed as her story drew to its close. Her partner, she told us, had been worried that she might never return to Cote d'Ivoire if she visited England! So, twenty-five years after they had first met, he asked her to marry him!

Rosine, full of smiles, thus ended her tale, by saying she had Fairtrade to thank for her marriage! Lastly, she implored all of us to buy, buy, buy Fairtrade! And so, the story ends.

But it continues all over the world, with Fairtrade trying to help farmers get a minimum fair price for their produce and a premium to re-invest back into their communities. The story is ours to tell, and we can make it bolder, and stronger by choosing to buy Fairtrade foods. By us paying a little more for these goods, farmers can be propelled onto a basic and fair payment for their produce. We as consumers can force this tale onwards by retelling it to others who may not realise how incredibly powerful the Fairtrade story is and needs to be.

After Rosine's words, Tandridge District Council chairman Jeremy Pursehouse spoke followed by Kim Jennings for the Parish Council. Barbara Hester, who orchestrated the whole event, was thanked and applauded by all of us. Plus, the amazing Fairtrade team who make these events so welcoming for us all. We had the final treat of browsing the beautiful array of Fairtrade gifts that Moyna Bridge always brings to these gatherings. So, we did indeed end the story as Rosine had hoped - we did buy, buy, and buy.

Thank you to Barbara and all the Tatsfield Fairtrade team. Each and every one of you made the morning delicious! Eating ethically is very easy to do; we make the choices in what we buy, and how we write our own stories.



PHOTOS: KATE BAMBER

Kath Dymoke



In loving memory and with grateful thanks to Carol Jordan who was a wonderful advocate and supporter of Fairtrade in Tatsfield.

Carol was a founding member of the Fairtrade Committee and worked tirelessly on the website raising awareness of Fairtrade, supporting all our events and she oversaw the supply of Zaytoun Olive Oil and other Fairtrade goods to the Shop. She was part of the fabric of our group and we will remember her with every Fairtrade purchase we make.