

What started as a hobby for Waiswa Nyende is now a full-time job. The youthful farmer has transformed his snail farming venture into a full-blown commercial farm having started with just 12 snails last year, writes George Katongole.

Snail farming: Waiswa finds goldmine in snails

Innovation in Uganda's farming is a never ending-battle for survival. Coffee has been the main source of income for Uganda's rural agriculture population.

According to one Abdu Zikusooka, a peasant farmer in Ndese, Mukono District, the dwindling fortunes from coffee due to wilt disease and unpredictable rains, have pushed farmers to the extremes. Coffee remains the leading export with about 3.5 million people dependent on it but Dr Africano Kangire, the head of the Coffee Research Centre Kituza in Mukono District, says an increase in global temperature will push the crop past its margins; only a few highland areas could continue to grow coffee.

He says the increase in pests and diseases is directly linked to climate change. When temperatures are hotter than usual, some pests and plant diseases thrive.

Shifting the focus

Traditional crops are suffering a knockout and the household incomes are following a similar dreaded path.

The need for foreign currency, healthier diets and ease of minting millions from limited space, are offering new options.

Say bye to traditional crops and say hello to snail farming, call it escargot, when it is ready to tease your taste buds - the other fast income earner.

Edward Nyende Waiswa, was an early convert to heliculture after quitting his radio job on Bamboo FM in Jinja, in 2010.

How he started

For thousands of years, humans have consumed land snails and in Africa, it is a delicacy in West Africa especially Nigeria and Ivory Coast, but Ugandans do not eat them.

"When I first started rearing snails, my strategy was to get some income," Nyende said at his three-acre farm at the extreme end of Kabira village in Luwero District, where he also keeps rabbits. For him, the opportunities are diverse. The appetite for snails among expatriate communities, the animal feeds industry and crafts, is weighing on demand.

"The future belongs to new farming practices and it will have a real impact on what farmers choose and on what the world eats," he said.

Booming business

The global market of edible snails' worth is in a region of €1b. An Irish group, National Organic Training Skillnets (NOTS) indicated that there is an ongoing demand for snails across Europe - and especially France and Italy, which accounts for almost one third of that market.

According to NOTS, an acre of land producing snails has the potential to generate a profit of €20,000 (about Shs90m). Nyende has given parent stock to 15 other farmers he has interested since starting the venture in



Waiswa Nyende displays his mature snails. Below he speaks to Seeds of Gold how he started the venture. Right, chef Ernest Kayondo confirms snails market. PHOTO BY GEORGE KATONGOLE

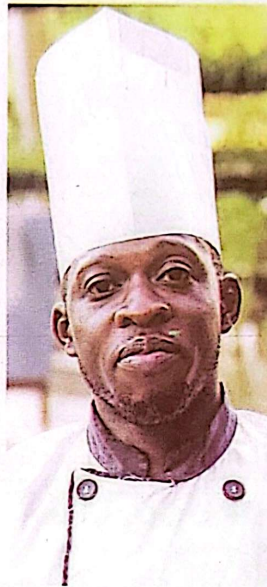


2017. He sells to them a minimum of 100 parent stock at Shs500 each.

Heliculture will not overtake traditional cash crops anytime soon but the economics of rearing snails is very attractive. "The more demand we have, the more consistent the market becomes," he added.

Nyende says the tiny piece of good news is that there is ready market even in Uganda where he claims to sell each snail at Shs5,000. Nyende supplies more than 100 snails per week, earning about Shs500,000.

"I always knew there were buyers, but I did not realise they would become that important." Though they



are a bane of everyday gardener's life, snails could prove to be a very profitable farming enterprise.

It is however very much a niche enterprise in Uganda with just one known snail farmer in business who cannot produce commercially.

"I got an offer to supply one restaurant 20 kilogrammes weekly but I could only afford one," he noted.

Nutritious

Snail meat contains proteins, iron and Omega-3 and is considered a very healthy food. Like most molluscs, escargots are high in protein and low in fat. Escargots are estimated to con-

500,000

AMOUNT OF MONEY WAISWA EARNS PER WEEK

SNAIL FACTS

- They produce a thick slime which protects them to crawl even on sharp objects
- Snails are hermaphrodites
- Snails have up to 14,175 teeth located on the tongue
- The biggest is the archachatina marginata popular in Nigeria
- They can hibernate during extreme cold or drought
- They are nocturnal animals - more active at night
- They are a good source of proteins
- It can crawl upside down
- Snails are deaf with no sense of hearing. They only see, feel and smell
- Snails can live up to 20 years
- The keeping of snails is called snailery
- Snails are basically vegetarian

SNAIL FARMING BASICS

Want to start a snail farming business? Here are some of the basics you need to know.

- Choose the suitable farming method. These include, outdoor pens, controlled climate buildings, plastic tunnel houses or greenhouses.
- Soil should not be too sandy nor too heavy since snails face difficulty digging in heavy soils and dry out in the sand.
- Snails flourish in mild climate and high humidity.
- A pen should have soil of up to two inches deep for the laying of eggs.
- It takes up to 2 years for snails to be saleable.
- Transport of live snails is not permitted, meaning that they must be processed at the facility.

ket next to you?

It's all in tradition. There are some foods that are taboo in Uganda and snails are one of them. The clan system in Buganda also forbids certain animals to be eaten by a certain lineage. Ernest Kayondo, a chef at Le Chateau said in an interview that Escargots were on demand but he was quick to add that it is an elite soup. It averages Shs40,000 around most restaurants.

"We have strange ideas about snails and their slippery nature makes them a turn off for me," Budala Mutebi, a boda-boda rider in Luwero said.

Changing tastes

Snail meat may not be hitting local super market shelves in the near future, but the appetite for healthy diets may be a game changer.

Some restaurants in Kampala including; Explorer's Hub, Protea Hotel, L'Epicurien, Humura Resort and Nanjing Hotel among others offer escargot on their menu.

When some chefs got wind of potential snail supply in the backyard, the phone started ringing for Nyende. Unusually, he carries them with bare hands and says it's being human.

Feeding

Nyende feeds the snails on vegetables such as cabbages, sukuma wiki, fruits in particular watermelon and water.

"I also add lime to harden their shells. I feed them twice a day," he says, noting the food is placed in the boxes and the snails feed on it.

Nyende says snails thrive well in cool temperatures and wet surfaces, which enable them to multiply during the rainy season.