

Opiyo Oloya, Letter from Toronto

# Drink Uganda tea, live longer

**D**rink Uganda tea, live longer! I tweeted this out Saturday afternoon as I flew over tea land in Kabarole District. No sooner had it gone out than Twitter users chimed indicating they loved it, promptly retweeting the phrase. Actually I tweeted a few more: Uganda tea, the stuff of life. You only live once, drink Uganda tea. Nutrition is just a word, taste the real Uganda matooke. But the tweet that resonated the most on social media was the first one: Drink Uganda tea, live longer.

What inspired me at that moment were the breathtaking fresh green tea farms on the rolling hillsides that dipped into beautiful valleys below. It was simply stunning, genuinely moving me.

As I peered down at the greenery, it occurred to me that the time was here and now for Uganda's tea growers and manufacturers to abandon a timid approach to marketing our high quality tea. Research shows very clearly that green and black teas have antioxidants (fat-burning) qualities that act like a dry-cleaner, making the body healthy and prolonging life.

Now while all teas do that, Uganda has unique claim to growing the highest quality teas that are neither adulterated by pollution nor corrupted by technological manipulation. They retain the purity that is sought after by tea drinkers around the world. Yet on the shelves of supermarkets around the country, Uganda teas sit limply, unrecognisable, almost dejected by neglect, touting names like Africana, Mukwano and Garden, essentially making the teas look pedestrian and unremarkable. Who wants to drink Garden tea and where does it come from anyway?

Simply, just as Italian producers of olive oil have marketed its health benefits, every single tea produced in Uganda needs to be aggressively marketed as such. By tagging Igara Tea with the name of the area where it is grown, for example, the smart farmers from western Uganda telegraph to the world that you are drinking bold and beautiful Igara Tea, not just any tea from some no-name place.

To complete the marketing of their tea, all that Igara Tea producers now need to add is the tagline: Drink Uganda tea, live longer.

The same can currently be extended to other food products—fruits, vegetables, grains like maize and millet and the list goes on. The organic wholesomeness of these foods are taken for granted. To many, they are not all that special because they come from local farmers, nothing to get excited about.

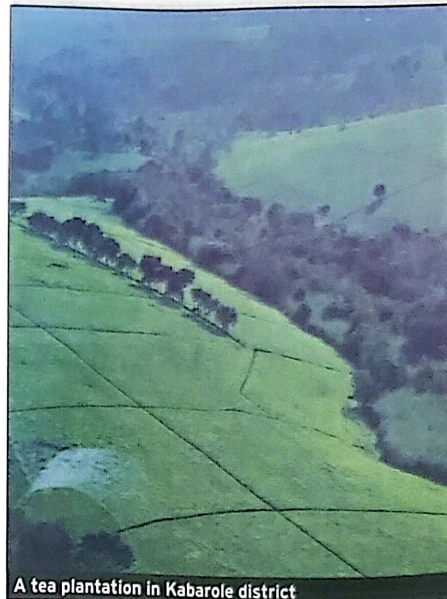
Wrong, because the foods grown by Uganda farmers stand tall above the frenetic world of genetically modified foods where scientific manipulations have gone amok, with few willing to predict future health consequences.

To date, American producers of genetically modified foods refuse to name their products, fighting tooth and nail to keep them from being labelled as such. Yet, here we are again in Uganda pushing for the passage of the discredited Biosafety and Biotechnology Bill 2008, the so-called GMO Bill.

Why are we so much in a hurry to destroy the good, healthy clean food we have in Uganda?

Is it because we feel so inferior that we must lay claim to being technologically sophisticated and, as a result, appear to join the league of Canadian and American farmers?

If so, why are Canadian and American consumers voting with their wallets by rejecting GMO products, spending more on organic foods which are abundant in Uganda today? The painful truth is that no Canadian, American or, for that matter, European consumer will ever



A tea plantation in Kabarole district

buy a single GMO product from Uganda. Never!

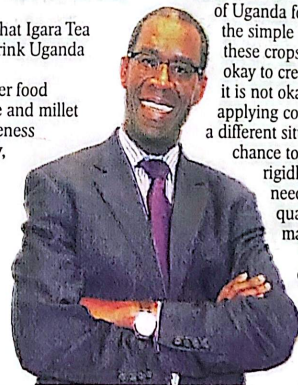
In fact, as pointed out time and again in this column and in others, the Biosafety Bill completely ignores the uniqueness of Uganda foods, treating them like all else. It is blind to the simple fact that the very land, water and air in which these crops are grown make them unique. It may be okay to create GMO maize in America and Canada, but it is not okay to do the same in Uganda because you are applying completely different cultures and methods to a different situation. As I have said before, Uganda's only chance to marketing its food products overseas is by rigidly rejecting the GMO hysteria. Instead, much needed is better infrastructure to preserve the quality of food before and after it reaches the market.

The high quality teas grown in Kabarole currently face hurdles because of poor road networks that cause unreasonable delay in transporting the freshly picked leaves to the auction points in Mombasa. Similarly, coffee from Kapchorwa faces delay from the moment of picking to the point of market because the markets are not as well developed.

Better transportation and first-class storage facilities will preserve these products, allowing the producers to fetch high prices in the market and, in turn, guaranteeing steady employment in the farming sector.

The time is now to embrace who we are, stop trying to be someone else, avoid borrowing dead ideas such as GMO that others have rejected and, instead, focus on marketing Uganda's true worth. That starts with being bold, aggressive and shameless about promoting our own. Drink Uganda tea, live longer!

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*The time is now to embrace who we are by focusing on marketing Uganda's true worth not GMOs*

