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An Entrepreneur On A Mission To Help Americans Discover Superfood Moringa



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ForbesWomen

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“Champions aren't made in gyms. Champions are made from something they have deep inside them—a desire, a dream, a vision.



Create success stories before you fundraise



Lisa Curtis- Founder Kulikuli PHOTO CREDIT: KULIKULI

Mintel Global New Products Database (GNDP) research reported a 36% increase in the number of food and beverage products launched around the world in 2015 alone featuring terms such as "superfood", supergrain or similar terms. Consumer demands seem to be driving this trend in product launch, with more than 70% of consumers in France, Germany, Italy and Spain believing strongly in the health benefit of functional food.

BETA

Apart from market trends and consumer demands, scientific findings highlights the health benefits of some food types commonly grouped as "superfood ". An example of such is Moringa (*moringa oleifera*), which is **native to western and northern parts of India** and is currently grown in different cities around the world. While studies have shown the effect of specific components of moringa on **inflammation**, reports have also shown that this plant is used in some parts of the world to **treat malnutrition**.

Treating malnutrition with moringa led Lisa Curtis who was serving in the Peace Corps in Niger at the time to discover the nutrient-dense plant, and her company Kuli kuli was launched. The company which now has products in more than 6,000 stores across US partners with more than 1000 female farmers in rural communities in Ghana, Haiti and Nicaragua providing business opportunities for them.

Curtis, who secured funding for her company from Kellogg's Venture arm, was also recognized on the [Forbes 30 Under 30 2018 list](#). She shares her story, successes and lessons in this interview

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Olayanju: How did you come up with the idea for Kuli Kuli?

Curtis: After experiencing malnutrition as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Niger, I turned to moringa to regain strength. Moringa is a local superfood that helps with malnutrition, but only a few people benefit from it. I found that the women in my village saw no reason to grow moringa since there was no market demand. In the US there are millions of health-conscious people looking for all-natural ways to nourish their busy lifestyles, just as there are a billion people around the world just looking for nourishment to survive. Investing in agriculture is, hands down, the most effective method of reducing poverty, but investment in agriculture

has been declining for the past two decades.

Upon my return from the Peace Corps, I co-founded Kuli Kuli, a mission-driven business, to drive economic growth, women's empowerment and sustainable agricultural development by utilizing moringa as a tool for nutritional security. Together with my childhood friends Jordan, Anne and Valerie, we launched a crowdfunding campaign on Indiegogo to raise money to manufacture Moringa Superfood Bars. The crowdfunding campaign was the most popular food campaign Indiegogo had ever had, enabling Kuli Kuli to launch onto the market in 2014. Whole Foods Market was the first retailer to pick up Kuli Kuli's Moringa Superfood Bars, starting in Northern California. Kuli Kuli then launched the Pure Organic Moringa Powder in 2015 and expanded to over 2,000 retail locations. In 2016, Kuli Kuli partnered with the Clinton Foundation, Whole Foods Market and a nonprofit in Haiti to help reforest Haiti with moringa trees and develop the Moringa Green Energy shots made with Haitian moringa. By creating partnerships with small farming cooperatives in Ghana and Haiti, private foundations like the Clinton Foundation and major retailers such as Whole Foods Market, Kuli Kuli created a truly sustainable and philanthropic business model. In 2017, Kuli Kuli was one of the first Benefit Corporations to receive investment from a Fortune 500 company, Kellogg. Kuli Kuli now sells our Moringa Superfood Bars, Pure Organic Moringa Powder, Moringa Green Energy shots and new Organic Green Smoothie Mixes in over 7,000 stores nationwide. To date, Kuli Kuli has planted over 1 million moringa trees and partnered with over 1,000 farmers, providing more \$1.5M in income to women-led farming cooperatives and family farms.

Olayanju: Can you highlight specific benefit of moringa and

how these benefits propelled you to start your company?

Curtis: Moringa is one of the most nutrient-dense plants on the planet. The leaves of the Moringa tree are packed with protein, essential amino acids, 27 vitamins and 46 antioxidants. Recent research has shown that moringa contains a multitude of medicinal benefits, including anti-inflammatory properties that rival those of turmeric. Named the top wellness trend of 2018 by [Good Morning America](#) and [the Sterling Rice Group](#), moringa is an extremely versatile and nutritious super green that can be blended into smoothies, baked into cookies and cakes; sprinkled over savory dishes, or mixed into sauces and soups. As the world's premier moringa brand, Kuli Kuli sources only the freshest moringa leaves and maintains strict quality control standards. Hand harvested from family farmers and women's' cooperatives in rural areas, Kuli Kuli's moringa provides livelihoods to farmers around the world. In the same way that Sambazon introduced acai, Mama Chia introduced chia seeds and Guayaki introduced yerba mate, Kuli Kuli is introducing moringa to the US.



Moringa Powder BY KULIKULI

Olayanju: Where is your company now?

Curtis: In less than five years on the market, Kuli Kuli has grown from an idea dreamed up in Peace Corps into a multi-million dollar social enterprise. We've worked hard to pioneer a global moringa supply chain with high safety and impact standards. Kuli Kuli's moringa products have won multiple awards and are sold in over 6,000 retail locations including Whole Foods Market, Sprouts and Safeway. Kuli Kuli has formed partnerships with leaders in the field, including Whole Foods Market, the Clinton Foundation, Timberland, Indiegogo and Kellogg. Our Pure Organic Moringa Powder is in the top 2% of all supplements sold by the largest natural food distributor in the country. In 2017, Kuli Kuli closed on a \$4.25M Series A led by Kellogg's venture capital arm, eighteen94

Capital. Kuli Kuli has been featured in over 300 media publications, including Forbes, MSNBC and The Wall Street Journal. Moringa was recently named the top 2018 wellness trend by [Good Morning America](#) and [the Sterling Rice Group](#). Kuli Kuli is headquartered in Oakland, CA and has ten full-time employees.

Olayanju: Where do you see your company in 5 years from now (societal and health impact perspective)?

Curtis: Kuli Kuli's goal is to add an innovative expansion to the Fair Trade model. Instead of sourcing a crop that has little nutritional value (coffee or chocolate) to the local community, we are sourcing a superfood proven to reduce malnutrition and CO₂ - moringa. Kuli Kuli is building Fair Trade 2.0, a way for consumers in the U.S. to gain access to superfoods while encouraging farmers in the developing world to grow and utilize more local nutritious plants. By carefully managing our supply chain to source only a portion of each harvest for Western consumption and by paying fair wages, we can ensure that superfoods like moringa benefit those who need them the most.

We're working to become the leading provider of unique superfood products, starting with moringa. We will work with women's cooperatives all over the world to drive sustainable growth and agricultural development. Our non-profit arm will invest heavily in nutritional education and rejuvenate nutrient-rich food sources as a tool for nutritional security.

Our mission is to create a world where everyone has access to nutritious sources of food and malnutrition only exists in history books. We believe investing in the nutritional power of plants like moringa nourishes

communities where these plants are sourced. Kuli Kuli supports farming groups that teach women to grow, process and incorporate nutrient-rich moringa into their families' diets, reducing malnutrition. Kuli Kuli can scale globally, as moringa thrives in many countries (India, Haiti, Nicaragua) that suffer from malnutrition. Moringa is also resilient to increasing droughts caused by climate change.

Olayanju: How many women are currently supporting their families courtesy of affiliation with Kuli Kuli?

Curtis: To date, Kuli Kuli has partnered with over 1,000 women's cooperatives and family farmers, providing more \$1.5M in income to women-led farming cooperatives and family farms. Additionally, Kuli Kuli has invested over \$20,000 in supporting nonprofits in the communities where we work.

Kuli Kuli also partners with female moringa farmers whose moringa may not yet be up to exporting standards to get their farms on the fast track to meeting the requirements. [Farmers like Pierrette](#), an incredible woman running a moringa farm in Benin, have inspired Kuli Kuli with their stories, and affirm the impact moringa can have on the lives of women worldwide.

Olayanju: What are the biggest challenges you have faced and how have you handled them?

Curtis: Entrepreneurship is hard, but starting Kuli Kuli is the most rewarding thing I have ever done. Even if I fail, I won't regret a minute of this journey. Muhammad Ali once said, "Champions aren't made in gyms. Champions are made from something they have deep inside them-a

desire, a dream, a vision. 🐦 They have to have the skill, and the will. But the will must be stronger than the skill.”

When I returned from the Peace Corps and told my friends and family that I planned to create a market for an unknown superfood and build a supply chain of small farmers from the poorest places on the planet, people literally laughed in my face. I was 22, had no food industry experience and was living in my childhood bedroom since I'd just gotten out of Peace Corps and didn't have any money.




I pitched Kuli Kuli to everyone I could possibly think of. I was constantly attending events, speaking and networking. Most of the investors in those early days told me "that's a nice project" or a "cute lifestyle business." It was frustrating and belittling.

Four years and \$4.5M later my "project" has taken off. There has been a lot of blood, sweat and tears along the way but the journey has been incredibly rewarding.

There are nearly 800 million people on this planet who do not have enough food to lead a healthy active lifestyle. That means that one in nine people on this planet do not have the fuel they need to achieve their dreams. I believe that nutritious plants like moringa can play a role in giving people worldwide the tools they need to nourish themselves. I believe that in a world as advanced as ours, the only place these saddening statistics belong is in a museum. I have the will and the vision to do everything in my power to put them there.

Olayanju: If asked to share 5 top lessons learnt so far, what will that be?

Curtis: Starting a business has been a daily lesson! But if I had to narrow it down to my top five I would say:

1. Find the idea that won't go away, the thing that you keep talking about, the passion that makes you come alive and go do that. Starting a business is no easy journey so you need to make sure that you are 100% dedicated to your idea before you begin.
2. Test at a small-scale and refine before you go big. This is particularly important in manufacturing businesses like mine where it is incredibly expensive to change a product once you're already manufacturing it at scale.
3. Create success stories before you fundraise  . I often find entrepreneurs who say things like "I could do X,Y,X if only I had \$250k." While that might be true, fundraising will be much easier and faster if you can do part of X and show progress before you raise.
4. Know your own strengths and weaknesses and hire people who are good at the things you aren't.  My goal is that every new person I hire should raise the overall IQ of the organization.
5. Take care of your team and they'll take care of your dream.  Though we're still relatively small and budget constrained, we provide full healthcare with vision and dental, a 401k match and a free gym membership to everyone on our team. We also actively work to create a strong, positive culture.

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