

THE GOOD FOOD FESTIVALS - MARKET FOR SMALLHOLDERS' TRADITIONAL, CLIMATE-SMART CROPS AND SOURCE OF HEALTHY FOODS FOR ZIMBABWEAN CONSUMERS



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The Zimbabwean diet was historically highly diverse and nutritious. However, over the past 5 or 6 generations, people in Zimbabwe have moved away from traditional foods to a heavy reliance on processed foods. This change has taken a toll on the health and nutrition of Zimbabweans on both ends of the malnutrition spectrum: 26.6% of children under 5 years of age suffer from stunting linked to poor dietary diversity while 35% of adult women and 12% of men are overweight or obese. Over a third of all deaths are now attributed to lifestyle diseases.

At the same time, Zimbabwe continues to promote industrial agriculture and food systems that are heavily reliant on crops (particularly maize) that are agroecologically ill-suited for most regions of the country. Smallholder farmers struggle to produce them, and as rainfall patterns and distribution become an increasingly limiting effect of climate change, yields continue to decline, and crop failures become more and more common. A shift to drought-resistant, locally adapted crops (such as small grains and local legumes) helps smallholders diversify their production and ensure a more reliable, nutritious food supply for their families and the country.

We started the Good Food Festivals in response to these twin problems: limited markets for the traditional crops and plants that grow best for local producers and a shortage of healthy foods made from local ingredients available to Zimbabwean consumers.

The Good Food Festivals are organised by the Zimbabwe Traditional and Organic Food Forum, a network of organisations whose aim is to increase the cultivation and consumption of nutritious traditional and organically grown foods. Members of the Food Forum comprise of (inter)national NGOs, CBOs and farmer groups, UN agencies, private sector, universities (departments) and some ministries. The Forum was formed in 2014.

The Harare festivals began in 2013. They have run every year since then, virtually in 2020. Currently, the Good Food Festivals are organised by 2 of the Food Forum's lead members, Bio-Innovation Zimbabwe (www.bio-innovation.org) - a local NGO that researches indigenous plants for their commercial potential- and Participatory Ecological Land Use Management Zimbabwe (<https://pelumzimbabwe.wixsite.com/pelumzimbabwe>) - a network of NGOs promoting agroecology with farmers and linked across the East and Southern African region via other PELUM chapters.

The event is held over 2 days, a national seed fair day during which farmers from around Zimbabwe exchange seeds and knowledge on these seeds, and a festival day. The festival day has stalls selling a wide range of local produce and products including traditional grains, legumes and herbs, teas, cosmetics, appropriate technology, and small livestock, and locally adapted seed varieties; a food court offering diverse cuisines and dishes all made with Zimbabwean ingredients; cooking demonstrations and chefs' battles; activities for kids learning about traditional foods, and traditional dance, music, stories, games and crafts; and live music. Over the years, hundreds of smallholder farmers from across Zimbabwe, and the region, have participated. We've had more than 2,000 annual visitors. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the festival also has a virtual component, allowing tens of thousands of people to participate from all around the world.

In 2020, we launched a new website (www.naturallyzimbabwean.com) to carry the festival's key messages throughout the year. We have now published 7 booklets (naturallyzimbabwean.com/publications/) highlighting traditional crops, with nutritional information, farmer and processor stories, and recipes. The Food Forum also holds regular talks, to further raise awareness, inform and educate throughout the year.

As we are never able to bring as many farmers as we'd like to Harare, to increasingly make the festival a truly national event, and to facilitate greater trade and information exchange at district level, we started having mini-festivals in 2021, then in 2 districts (Chimanimani and Gutu). They are 1-to-2-day events with a mix of activities appealing to all age groups, capturing the richness and diversity of Zimbabwean culture, food and seed.

This year, we celebrated our 10th anniversary! From July, Taf -DeAnkarra Chef- Anifasi toured the country to learn about local foods from farmers, markets, youth and elderly people: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMBEM6Qmdl9eiao4ck66M7A>
In the 2 weeks leading up to the Harare festival, district mini-festivals were held in Chimanimani, Rushinga, Bikita, Goromonzi and Mwenezi.

On Friday 23 September 94 farmers came together at the Harare Botanical Gardens to swap an incredible variety of seeds and discuss addressing biodiversity and climate change issues through seed, farmer seed rights, seed and food sovereignty. On Saturday 24 September we celebrated the best of Zimbabwe's food and seed with the general public: 45 carefully selected exhibitors in the market section, to promote greatest diversity; a colourful, novel plants' and seeds' fair (13 stalls); 16 stalls in the food court, highlighting local dishes and a range of other cuisines preparing their traditional dishes using Zimbabwean ingredients; a kitchen pavilion for cooking demonstrations and battles with celebrity chefs; and great live music and lots of fun and learning at the kids' zone all day.

To develop ideas for future festivals, we will conduct post-2022 and 2023 surveys with stallholders and visitors at selected district and Harare festivals.

In the next years, the Food Forum would like to grow the festivals into increasingly bigger events with more people attending every year. We'd like to grow the national seed fair in stature and recognition, thus giving greater profile and protection to farmer-managed seed systems, while enabling significant seed sales and exchange amongst farmers. With regards to district-level festivals the aim is a web of festivals across the country. And we'd like to see Food and Seed Festivals in other towns in Zimbabwe.

For 2023 we are looking at introducing a road trip that will end up at the Harare event. The road trip will expose participants to activities by farmers who are leading the way to increase production of traditional and organic foods. They will see how this strengthens other critical areas such as climate change resilience, revival of cultures and landscapes, and farmer trials and innovations to improve agroecological practices.

We'll keep tying a virtual event to the physical event to reach those who cannot attend in person, in particular the very large Zimbabwean and African diaspora, as well as the wider world. African ingredients and cuisines aren't yet well known and there is a growing interest. And we'll continue to produce materials. This includes the publication of an attractive booklet each year that relates to the aims of the Festival, as well as a short films and radio interviews.

As the festivals are about raising awareness around healthy and traditional eating for Zimbabweans from all walks of life, they are purposely designed as free public service events. The Food Forum would like to thank its many funding partners, including NGOs and projects, UN organisations, and private businesses, that have made our work possible in the last 10 years. Here's to the next 10!