

Hoodia Love

America is going mad over a desert plant that promises to make us all skinny. So why can't we get our hands on it?

By Andrew Goldman

Not long ago my girlfriend Robin told me she'd heard about an exotic plant that, when ingested, takes away the need for food. You can eat just a little bit of the stuff and you don't feel hungry or thirsty all day, with no side effects. "Cool," I said, barely looking up from my computer, not particularly eager to bite. "Where'd you hear about it?"

"The *Enquirer*," Robin said.

When you break it down, the big difference between Robin and me is that she believes in stuff I wish I could believe in. Unlike me, she believes in God. She also believed Roy when he told Maria Shriver that, as he lay on the operating table after being mauled by his own tiger, all the deceased animals he'd ever worked with had beckoned him to heaven. I never realized that this brand of faith extended to Robin's body until I walked into the bathroom one night to find her naked, placidly scrubbing her ass with a hard cactus brush. "For cellulite," she told me.

Robin doesn't like to say she hates anybody, but she often says she hates her body. "I'm so fat," she'll sigh, falling into a heap on the bed. "No, I'm so fat," I'll shoot back. It's our horrifying little urban birdsong. She's thinner now than she was in college, when I first decided she was the most alluring woman I'd ever seen, but we both feel we should drop 10 pounds. The last diet she tried, which included all-you-can-eat raw onion, didn't work as well as she'd hoped and made me feel as if I were sharing a bed with Henny Youngman.

The *Enquirer* item that first got Robin's attention said that *Desperate Housewife* Teri Hatcher had used this plant to shrink from a size 8 to a size 6. "She and her *Desperate* co-cuties are desperate to keep their bods tight for TV, and their secret weapon is a potion concocted of herbs by...mysterious African Bushmen," it read. "Teri heard about their flab-fighting



HUNGRY HOUSEWIVES Teri Hatcher (second from right) and her *Desperate Housewives* costars are alleged users of hoodia, a natural appetite suppressant eaten for centuries by Kalahari Bushmen.

powder...and now shares it with all the hubba-hubba *Housewives*." While I sat there doubting that Teri Hatcher would share anything other than strychnine with her costars, Robin grabbed her credit card and hit the internet. She Googled "African Bushmen" and "diet" and found dozens of sites selling pills filled with something called *Hoodia gordonii*. For 40 bucks she bought the first credible-looking bottle she could find.

I swaggered over to the computer to reap the reporter's cold satisfaction of seeing how few keystrokes it would take to destroy her dream. An hour later, after I'd read story after reputable story exalting the properties of the hoodia plant, one thought remained. "Hon," I said, "we need a plantation of this stuff."

The hoodia phenomenon, I learned, truly exploded last November, after *60 Minutes*'s Lesley Stahl traveled to the Kalahari Desert to munch on the spiny succulent, found only in remote parts of South Africa, Botswana, and Namibia. For centuries nobody had tasted hoodia apart from the indigenous San, who apparently were hungry enough to eat something that, in full bloom, smells worse than a Chinatown

dumpster. (Hoodia's five-petal flowers reek of rotting meat to attract the flies that pollinate them.) The Bushmen, unaware of how many meerkat steaks they could buy if they set up a hoodia stand on Sunset Boulevard, would hack off bits of the plant to stem hunger when tastier food was unavailable. They knew it worked. Now we know it works. So why isn't it under the sneeze guard of every salad bar in the country?

The problem was, by the time Lesley Stahl and her crew had trekked to South Africa, hoodia had encountered several delays on its way to the American market. The plant was first "discovered" in the '60s by South Africa's Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), the largest research and development lab on the continent. Thirty years passed before the CSIR isolated the presumed appetite-suppressing agent in hoodia, a steroidal glycoside known as P57. Once a patent was secured, the CSIR licensed it to Phytopharm, a small "herbaceutical" company in England, which in 1998 partnered with Pfizer, the largest pharmaceutical company in the world, to produce an obesity pill. Pfizer had just unleashed Viagra on the world and



FROM TOP: FITZROY BARRETT/GLOBE PHOTOS; SIPHWE SIBEKO/AP



LITTLE BIG PLANT Demand for hoodia plants has surged on E-Bay; the thumb-size one pictured here cost \$75. Plants are much harder to come by than the pills flooding the market.

perhaps figured that what all those newly randy septuagenarians needed were more skinny women willing to sleep with them.

In 2001 hoodia hit another obstacle when a Phytopharm executive told a reporter that the San, the Bushmen who had traditionally chewed the plant, were extinct. Roger Chennells, a Cape Town human-rights lawyer who works on behalf of the San, was called for comment on his clients' extinction. "Certainly not," he said. True, after decades of being pushed off their lands and hunted down by white farmers, many of the 100,000 remaining San weren't so happy and carefree. They drank too much and smoked pot like rap stars. But dead? No. Now all these companies were trying to make billions of dollars selling what Chennells likes to call the San's "family silver"? After threatening a lawsuit, he negotiated a deal guaranteeing the San six to eight percent of whatever profits the CSIR earned from its patent.

Another hurdle had been cleared, but, unable to synthesize large quantities of P57, Pfizer pulled out in 2003 and returned the rights to Phytopharm. As bleak as things seemed for hoodia, when Stahl choked down a pickle spear-size chunk of the stuff, its future suddenly burned bright. "So, did the hoodia work?" Stahl asked. "Well, first of all, I had no aftereffects, no

funny taste in the mouth, no queasy stomach, no racing heart — nothing. And second, I was never hungry all day."

For viewers who had a hard time picturing Lesley Stahl sitting down to a plate of babyback ribs, *60 Minutes* offered harder evidence by citing the one hoodia trial performed on human beings. In 2001, 19 fat British men were holed up for two weeks with nothing to do but watch TV and eat. Half were given hoodia extract, the rest a placebo. The hoodia group, on average, consumed 1,000 fewer calories a day.

The segment also reported that Phytopharm doesn't anticipate delivering a hoodia product until 2008 — but Robin, and America at large, couldn't wait that long. For several days after the piece aired, "hoodia" ranked number two on Dogpile, a website that counts hits

on Google, Yahoo, and other search engines. During the two days it took for Robin's hoodia pills to come in the mail, she penned a one-word jingle that sounded as if it had been written for a flock of hoopoes in *The Lion King*. "Hoo-hoo-hoodia," she took to singing, usually accompanying the song with an ersatz tribal dance. I sang it once or twice myself.

The puffy envelope came, looking as if it had been furtively bundled in someone's kitchen, not in the mail room of a real company.

After I'd read story after story exalting the properties of hoodia, one thought remained: "Hon, we need a plantation of this stuff."

We popped two tablets in the morning and waited to forget about eating. Robin called me around noon, after taking a second dose. "I've never been so hungry in my life."

"Really?" I said, my mouth full of pork sandwich.

Convinced we'd been given some bunk pills, I decided to scout other sources. Neither Teri Hatcher's publicist nor her manager would return my calls, which led me to the only sensible conclusion: That Hatcher bitch

was obviously bogarting her stash. Worse, every cheap website claimed that its product — whether Pure Hoodia, Hoodoba, Afrigetics, or Hoodia Super Slim 400 — was the real stuff and all others were frauds. I became wary of the whole bunch when I learned that a California law firm had filed two class-action suits against TrimSpa, a company that promotes its hoodia product by showing that even a creature as undisciplined and listless as Anna Nicole Smith has figured out the directions on the bottle and lost 69 pounds. The suit argued that not only was TrimSpa X32 ineffective, it didn't contain any hoodia at all.

I pressed on. Ignoring fine-print disclaimers about FDA evaluations, I dropped 40 bucks on an ounce of hoodia powder from a source in outer Brooklyn. The seller claimed that sprinkling her unadulterated stuff in tea had helped her lose 15 pounds. "I forgot to eat at times!" she posted in bold letters. When the powder came I instructed Robin's doorman to stir half a teaspoon — twice the recommended dose — into one of our coffee cups while we weren't looking, for a semiblind experiment. "This tastes bitter," I told Robin. "I'm pretty sure I got it."

Incredibly, I was able to work all day without eating a thing; my afternoon hunger pangs were muted enough to ignore. Later, Robin admitted she hadn't had the heart to tell me she'd barely been able to choke down her coffee, which had been filled with coagulated chunks of bitter-tasting powder. Robin had eaten only a crumpet all day. By the time she got home, at 8 p.m., she refused to speak until I'd ordered Indian and set her up with a sleeve of saltines and a beer. I noticed she'd stopped singing her hoodia song. She also said that she'd read that you can drop a quick 10 pounds by switching from coffee to green tea. I was losing her.

The next day I gave the powder one last try, mixing a full teaspoon into my coffee. My neighbor at work stuck his nose into the powder. "Do you know what it smells like?"

he asked as I choked down my coffee. "When you were in school did you ever have to raise mealworms? It smells like the stuff you raise mealworms in." I managed to swallow the concoction anyway, wondering whether I would feel comfortable eating even a cookie sent by a stranger way out on Avenue V in Brooklyn, let alone a foul brown powder. The granules crunched between my teeth. I didn't feel hungry, but this was mostly due to waves of nausea caused by the ball of mud in my stomach.

The middlemen grinding the hoodia were disappointing me. Knowing I needed a plant, I got caught up in a bidding war on E-Bay. Seventy-five dollars bought me one matchbook-size specimen; I needed much, much more. Miles Anderson, owner of a cactus nursery in Cortaro, Arizona, didn't have any hoodia in stock, but he was used to the question. "The drug companies would call us up saying, 'Do you happen to have 50,000 seeds of this stuff?'" I told him what I'd spent on my runt. "Well, that's kind of sad," he said. Even if Anderson could get the seeds — now exceedingly rare — he felt odd about reaping the rewards of the hoodia craze. "As much of a whore as I pretend to be, I'd just as soon not," he said.

I had to settle for Brad, a 35-year-old manager for an E-Bay listing service that sells everything from sledgehammers to antique dolls. He offers a pack of 10 hoodia seeds for 10 bucks, which, according to Anderson, is about a 2,000 percent markup from wholesale. Though he'd never tried it — "I'm not in an overweight position" — Brad had his own pet hoodia theory. "Africa has suffered for hundreds of years by a disease called the skinny disease," he said, lowering his voice. "I've heard that the signs of skinny disease are what we would call AIDS. But it's not proven. So who's to say that the skinny disease is not from the eating of this plant? Think about it." I thought for a moment about the idea that Africans weren't dying of AIDS but of anorexia — and felt very, very ashamed. Brad then argued that hoodia is a scary prospect for diet product companies. "You think the company that produces Slim-Fast wants to see this amazing plant you can buy for under \$10 and lose weight?"

I didn't want to nitpick, but it just so happened that Unilever, a multibillion-dollar company that provides us with everything from Dove soap and Ben & Jerry's to, yes, Slim-Fast, snatched up the license last December,

after Pfizer bailed. Rather than trying to cram hoodia's active ingredient into a little pill, Unilever plans to use a hoodia derivative in food products. The company already has hundreds of acres of hoodia plantations in South Africa; I figured they'd have enough to keep Robin happy for a week. So, after dutifully planting Brad's 10 teeny seeds, I asked Kevin Povey, the British head of Unilever's hoodia project, if I could slip him some scratch for some of their South African stash. Even one plant?

"I'm afraid not," Povey said, possibly amused. He did, however, disclose a significant fact about the much-touted British hoodia study: The corpulent men whose caloric intake dropped 1,000 calories were fed an extract from a full pound of plant material per day. What about Lesley Stahl, sated with a slim spear? "I can't comment too much on what one individual felt, but I ate a small amount and I didn't see any difference in what I wanted to eat afterward," Povey said. "The clinical trial would indicate that you need quite a lot of material."

We had a three-ounce plant. We'd have to make the best of it. "Poor little guy," Robin said, as I sliced off the spines. "You have to say a prayer for the soul of the little hoodia." Without its spikes it was the size of a large Tootsie Roll; its flesh was the color of a lime Freeze Pop. Robin popped it into her mouth. "Cucumber, but peppery," she said. "Not unpleasant. Wouldn't be bad chilled, with lemon. And some salt, of course. Are you going to take care of me if I freak out?"

We took a walk, to allow the hoodia to be absorbed. I asked her what she'd eaten that day. She frowned. She'd been caught in a limousine for eight hours with her boss and the boss's three kids. They had stopped at McDonald's and she'd had a Big N' Tasty meal, a handful of Skittles, and a few bites of a Butterfinger. "But you can't write that," she said as I wrote it all down, including the orange and the handful of cashews she'd also scarfed down around five.

"I haven't been to McDonald's in a year!" Minutes into our stroll I checked in with her. She looked almost apologetic. "I'm not sure," she said, "but I think I might be a little hungry."

As we sat down at an Italian restaurant near my building, for pan-seared scallops with caviar, I wondered if this was a fair test. If she hadn't been put in front of a table full of food, maybe she would have simply forgotten to eat? It was inconclusive, but in any case we weren't done yet. I told her my exciting news: "I think I've found a dealer who sounds promising."

Earlier that day, on the FDA website I came across a letter to Hoodia Products, which had unsuccessfully petitioned the agency to put hoodia in mints. The letter was addressed to the company's CEO, one Jacob V.O. Mullins; after Googling the name I found a photo of someone I take to be the CEO's son, a 21-year-old also named Jacob V.O. Mullins, wearing a polo helmet on the Yale polo team's website. I began to suspect there's no Jacob V.O. Mullins Sr. when I see on his page a quotation from Luca Cordero di Montezemolo, Ferrari's chairman, that reads in part, "Enthusiasm is at the bottom of all progress. With it there is accomplishment. Without it there are only alibis."

The kid in the polo helmet returns my call within a half hour. "I'm late for Spanish class," Mullins tells me from the corporate offices of Hoodia Products, which double as his dorm room. Before signing off he recounts the story of his company, born over a chicken quesadilla at a Chili's near his parents' house in Dublin, California. His best friend, Kedric Van de Carr, who like Mullins was 19 at the time, had seen a news account of Pfizer's plan to produce a hoodia pill. Sensing it held more promise than their earlier ventures, which included an internet company that matched handymen with people in need of light home repair, he and Van de Carr bought as many plants as they could



and asked Van de Carr's dad, a retired Bay Area obstetrician who had long battled with his weight, to try the stuff. "In four weeks or so Kedric's dad lost 17 pounds," Mullins said. "It was pretty dramatic."

Their attempts to grow hoodia in the back yard of Van de Carr's dad's house in Palm Springs were foiled by a disastrous root rot problem. Now, Mullins claims, they've found an impeccable South African source. "Our company is one of the only ones that has the direct, straight hoodia," he tells me confidently. "Other companies mix other things with it: plant roots, cellulose, and silica. We're good guys. Maybe we're young and idealistic, but we're not going to steal from consumers." Could the college boy please hook me up with some of his uncut shit? "We don't have much raw material now," he says. "We have a big shipment coming in the next couple weeks. But we could get you our finished product."

Van de Carr, who is finishing his senior year at NYU, lives eight blocks from me, just off Tompkins Square Park, which in New York's pre-Rudy Giuliani days was one of the easiest places in the city to score heroin. At noon the next day Robin and I show up with empty stomachs at the apartment he shares with two other guys. Van de Carr, a clean-cut, fratty-looking guy in a blue polo shirt and faded Guess jeans, gives me a vigorous arm pump and a Tony Robbins smile. He explains that Nataliya, his model girlfriend, is in the shower, having just returned from a long night out. We settle in the living room, where I shift in my seat, remembering why I've always hated papasan chairs.

Van de Carr delivers an impassioned spiel about Hoodia Products. Mullins, because of his innate charisma, is the CEO of the company, and Van de Carr, with his business school background — and because his dad is bankrolling them — handles the finances. I should be listening more closely, but like a twitching junkie all I can think is, When am I going to get my hands on the bottle of pills sitting on the coffee table? Nataliya, after about 40 minutes of showering and blow-drying, finally emerges in a halter dress so short it makes me uncomfortable to even glance in her direction. While asking me not to take a snapshot of her because it could infringe on a recent contract with Prada, she nevertheless gives hoodia her all-important model's imprimatur. "I've gone through every possible diet pill you can imagine," she says with a weary smile and the slightest hint of a Kazakh accent. "When I've taken Stacker and TrimSpa, they would make me really, really shaky. They would give me a large boost of energy, but then there'd be a crash afterward." She says she's tried Slim-Fast and the California juice diet, the mention of which causes her to make a retching sound. But with hoodia she had neither speed

nor crash, and it reduced her appetite. Soon she seems to be nodding off on the couch.

"So, how much of this stuff can a person take?" I ask Van de Carr.

"Jake and I wanted to make sure this product wasn't going to kill anyone," he says, finally handing over two bottles, one for Robin and one for me. "So we took 15 caplets in a 24-hour period. I didn't eat for 30 hours straight, except for a handful of trail mix. I wouldn't recommend you take the entire bottle or anything like that."

Tough. I want to eat only a handful of trail mix in 30 hours. I've been hunting this elusive hoodia for weeks. This is as close as I'm getting to a real plant. It's time to chase the skinny dragon.

Robin and I show up with empty stomachs. Like a twitching junkie all I can think is, When am I going to get my hands on the bottle of pills sitting on the coffee table?

I stuff 10 capsules into my mouth and wash them down with water from a plastic keg cup. The dudes in Van de Carr's apartment look impressed. Robin takes four from her bottle. On the way out Van de Carr tells me that on a trip he took to South Africa in February, he didn't have the pleasure of meeting any actual Bushmen, but he's hoping to next time. "I really want to go hunting with those guys," he says. "You know, put on the face paint and all that." For a moment Kedric Van de Carr grips an imaginary spear in his living room.

After we leave I tell Robin I'm disturbed by something Van de Carr said. In the midst of his sales pitch he mentioned that some people require a "loading period" of two weeks before they notice any effects. I also admit that Van de Carr's ground hoodia smells as if it may have come from an apartment on Avenue V, so much so that I suppressed a gag when I put my nose in it. Not to mention that the dosage of each capsule is based on the "traditional use" of the plant, the pickle spear-size piece Stahl ate. These people — the San and Lesley Stahl — are small people.

Robin has other things on her mind. "You always want to take this stuff at such stupid times," she says. "It's two o'clock in the afternoon. I want to eat!" At a nearby cafe, while she nibbles a scone, I sip an iced latte and decide there's only one way to power through the loading period. It's 2:30. We have dinner plans at nine. I haven't eaten a thing, and I don't plan to eat anything other than what's in my glass bottle. Robin happily abandons me to get a pedicure. I go to the office. This is the end of the road.

I can't say I recommend taking 40 tablets

of *Hoodia gordonii* in three hours. Maybe the violent episode in the bathroom after capsule 12 has nothing to do with the pills, and the disturbing frequency of urination between pills 14 and 16 has more to do with Van de Carr's advice to drink a lot of water. Maybe the odd jaw grinding, compulsion to smoke way too much, and hourlong appetite for trance music after pill 16 is more about the iced latte than about the hoodia. It's possible the violent pounding in my head from pills 17 to 24 is related to the trance. Perhaps if I weren't sitting at a computer assessing how much I really, really want to eat something, the stuff would kick in and take my mind off my gnawing hunger, which becomes acutely unpleasant right before I swallow pills 25 through

40. Maybe Van de Carr is right, and I just need to allow myself a comfortable "loading period." This thought makes me pity the poor Bushman on his first hunt, clawing at the ground in hunger while all his buddies are padding around the terrain zoned out on hoodia, looking as if they've just come back from a third trip to the \$9.95 Golden Corral buffet. I've taken more than six and a half days' worth of the maximum recommended hoodia dosage, and I swear if I had an open fire and a bottle of barbecue sauce I could eat both of those nice college boys, and probably manage a crème brûlée afterward.

I call Robin at 8 p.m., expecting that she'll be ready to kill an old lady for a corn-dog. "I'm actually feeling all right," she says. After the scone she ate an orange at around six and wasn't close to homicidal. "I don't know. I think it could be working!" Not the sort of testimonial that's going to turn Mullins and Van de Carr into Bill Gates and Paul Allen, but enough to warrant further trials. Maybe if I hang on until the boys get the next shipment and suck the raw stuff before it's ground into pills, I can coast through this tedious loading period. I'm not ready yet to accept God in my heart, but I am ready to accept this plant into my stomach. I feel so very close. I finally understand what Lesley Stahl meant when, upon spotting the distinctive spikes of hoodia in the Kalahari, she exclaimed, "It was like being on safari, and coming upon a tiger."

I explain all this to Robin, then ask her to spot me a few pills until I can get a shipment of the hard stuff.

"Tough shit," she says, shoving the glass bottle into her purse. "You ate all yours." ❧