

# DISCOVER ESWATINI

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TALES OF CREATIVITY,  
SUSTAINABILITY  
AND EMPOWERMENT









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# Introduction

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## A LAND OF CREATIVITY, SUSTAINABILITY, AND EMPOWERMENT.

Eswatini is a small country nestled between South Africa and Mozambique. It has a population of just over a million people and possesses a lively culture and great pride in its heritage. The country boasts beautiful, mountainous landscapes in the Highveld and scenic plains in the Lowveld, a range of natural reserves with distinct wildlife, and striking natural landmarks.

The words and pictures on the following pages illustrate Eswatini's biodiversity, trends, innovation, and quality craftsmanship through a unique perspective: that of small and medium local businesses. This is first and foremost a collection of stories about people – entrepreneurs who are proactively engaged in the production of excellent products and services and who are constantly working to have a positive impact on local communities and the environment.

Colourful patterns and flavours, mixed with a pinch of genuine creativity and a generously clear vision of the future, result in these inspiring tales of talented and passionate men and women who are building, one day at a time, a strong and solid foundation from which to prosper – not as individual businesses, but as an entire community.

Photographs, maps and illustrations will guide you through the discovery of a land whose vibrant energy is concentrated in powerful, impactful and tangible activities.

Enjoy your journey.







*Section 1*

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ON CREATIVITY



# On creativity

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## *A foreword by*

### INTERNATIONAL TRADE CENTRE

Eswatini is blessed with a great creative force. Today, its growing community of Micro, Small and Medium enterprises: artisans, artists, designers, innovators and agri-entrepreneurs is steadily building new markets and opportunities that will allow it to shine. This book seeks to celebrate this creativity and the community of people driving it.

Creativity transforms new ideas into reality. Creativity connects ideas and people across generations.

Creativity generates solutions and builds resilience.

Creativity is also innovation, entrepreneurship, and growth.

In Eswatini, we are seeing people transform raw materials from their land into works of art or high-quality foods using traditional knowledge and craftsmanship.

Creativity is the guiding thread behind this transformation ran by small businesses and entrepreneurs connecting local materials and nature with design

and product. Baskets bloom into cabbage shapes, carved ants spring out of wood, cushion covers tell stories with handprinted moons, vibrant landscapes covered with fruits and vegetables, that is the backbone of the agri-business and food sector.

The engine of it all is a fine balance between looking to the past for wisdom and skill and facing the future with innovation and plans for long-term growth.

For Eswatini people, creativity and creation are part and parcel of life. 'Handmade' here is integral to everyday activities. There is also a culture of rising above adversity by finding solutions in community and creativity.

As passionate advocates for entrepreneurship and small businesses, we at the International Trade Centre are thrilled to witness this creative passion and skill and committed to supporting these enterprises in achieving their vision.

It is with immense pleasure that we share their stories with you through this book, together with our partners. We hope you enjoy them.







# Vuvulane Food Market

📍 Vuvulane, Lubombo region

While driving on the road across the farthest north-eastern point of the country, immersed in a pretty flat, monotone pattern of bitumen, red soil and sugarcane fields, one could easily slip into a hypnotic state to the point of losing the position on the map. Luckily, though, at an imprecise, unspecified spot along the MR24, one is brought down to earth by the vibrant tones of red, blue, yellow and black colouring the bricks of a bus stop at the edge of the road. And as if that is not enough, a flourish of vibrant greens literally explodes from behind the stop, a sort of botanical fireworks, magically awakening drivers from their concentration-induced slumbers.







Second star to the right and straight on till morning . . . if the lost boys have almost no trouble finding the road to Neverland, imagine how much easier it is to come across the bright, colourful bus stop that signposts the Vuvulane Food Market.

What appears to be an open-air, roadside cafe serving organic food and providing a quiet place to rest, turns out to be much more: a multi-functional space infused with art, beauty and design opens up to a community. Not only the community already there, but also the one that can be built around a cup of tea and open, meaningful conversation, meetings, exhibitions, farmers' markets and anything else you can think of for such a space.

Vuvulane Food Market was founded in January 2019 by young entrepreneur, creative and activist Khulekani Msweli, whose project emerged from a moment of great awareness. First, awareness of the local community – its proud past, its somehow stagnant, uncertain present, and its potential future; second, a high level of self-awareness of the great opportunities its founder had, until that moment, been collecting. Studying abroad, travelling to pretty much every corner of the world, working in the creative industry, searching for references and inspirations – all of this has been translated and sharply synthesised by Khulekani himself in just one word: privilege. Here the use of such a word is not only accurate – it also leaves behind that shade of the selfish,



the negative connotation, at the precise moment it is shared with the community. Instead, it releases its powerful energy towards a common vision of growth, development and restoration.

When Khulekani decided it was time to return home (and not for a single moment did he think he would never return), he had a clear idea of what he wanted – the *how* would come in the making of it. He wanted a place to restore dignity. A place with a strong emphasis on food to shed light on the great value coming from agriculture (especially in a predominantly agricultural rural area). A place resembling a market and its set of rules, politics, exchanges and activities. A place grounded in that specific part of Eswatini.

The recipe for the Vuvulane Food Market was there: it took only the right combination of ingredients, such as a small organic garden; beautiful art and décor, including pieces made by local artisans and artists (Khulekani included); a simple, yet tasty and representative list of dishes; a selection of decorative yet healing and/or edible indigenous plants; and, of course, a generous amount of good taste. A wise and strong stand by its founder to let things grow at their own pace, with no rush for success and expansion, also did the trick.

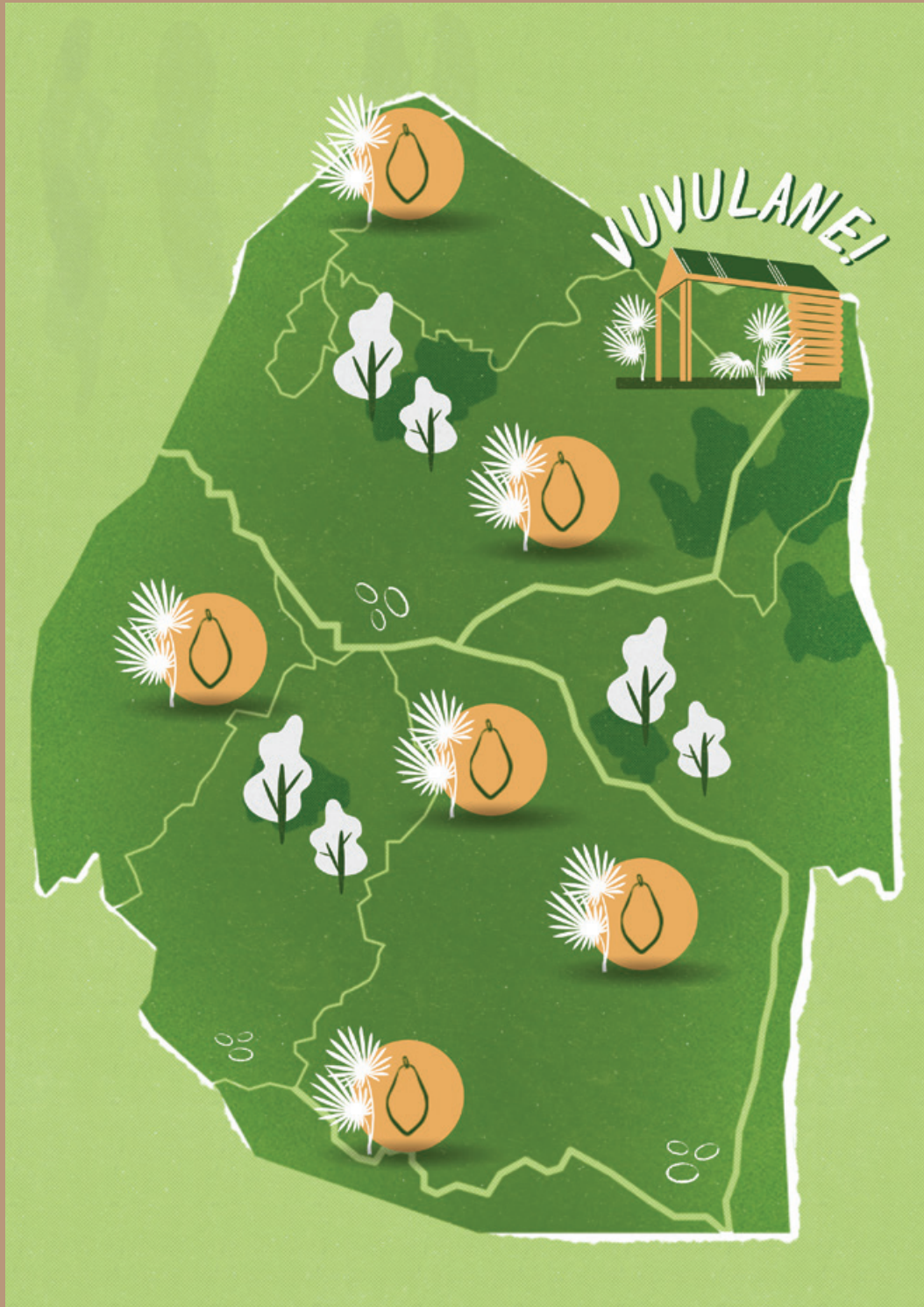
The pragmatic magic behind Vuvulane Food Market makes it a place for everyone – and is felt as such by all. Representatives of the blooming artistic scene of Eswatini might find themselves sharing tea with local gogos waiting for the bus to arrive – or maybe it'll be the next one. Here, passers-by can have something to eat during a break and also buy some iconic products, souvenirs and ingredients, locally sourced or manufactured. But Vuvulane Food Market can also be that place where farmers from the surrounding areas step into concepts and practices of organic food; school kids become fascinated with the idea of becoming artists; and cooks gather and discover indigenous recipes. Vuvulane is a place for everyone to reconnect and engage, where the social cluster can be as big, open and inclusive as the community wants it to be and at the same time reflect the pure meaning of what it means to live in Vuvulane.

At this point, one could get pretty creative with metaphors and think about Vuvulane Food Market as a comfortable nest, a box to be filled with ideas, a creative hub. Its unspecified, multi-purpose

*'Vuvulane is a place for everyone to reconnect and engage, where the social cluster can be as big, open and inclusive as the community wants it to be and at the same time reflect the pure meaning of what it means to live in Vuvulane.'*







essence is the key to its success, because it ensures a constant evolution that can follow, even mirror, the changes occurring within and around the community. What will always be there, for sure, is some space to be filled, in any way possible; a useful space in which the community can come alive and feel safe.

One may now ask, what will the Vuvulane Food Market look like in five years' time? The answer is: beautiful. It will be beautiful. And, hopefully, it won't be alone, with every community in Eswatini relying on a Manzini Food Market, a Malkerns Food Market, a Piggs Peak Food Market, and counting . . .



# Siyaphambili Handicraft

Makhungutja, Manzini region

‘What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.’ Shakespeare wasn’t quite right, though. Although the scent of a rose will stay the same no matter what we call that flower, a name has a strong, evocative power that anticipates the characteristics of the labelled object, so much so that it might induce us to open our nostrils and, calling any object a rose, catch the subtle fragrance of one. At the end of the day, names are useful. Names are powerful.

Arriving at the remote, wild lands of Makhungutja is quite a journey, even for the most adventurous of travellers.







Chances are Romeo and Juliet never reached this far. But the women from the local community who gather to weave don't need lessons in semiotics or literature. In order to be recognised as a group working together towards the same vision, they decided collectively to adopt a name: Siyaphambili, which means 'moving forward' in siSwati.

*We move forward:* it's a clear statement underlining the will to grow, to change, to expand. But it's also a clear statement of recognition, an acknowledgement of who they are, where they come from, what they do. Ultimately, a movement should start from somewhere. This conscious innovation with strong roots is mainly reflected in what the Siyaphambili women make: grass placemats, baskets and other products whose contemporary design is woven together with traditional, artisanal techniques – those passing from generation to generation, woman to woman.

Weaving a placemat from scratch is not child's play – not even lady's play – not least because every single blade of grass (the material used to make any piece) is hand-picked. While this may conjure images of a pastoral walk, these foraging sessions are extremely dangerous, not only because of the area in which the

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grass grows, which is quite far away from where the women live and gather to weave, but also because it is hard to find and even harder to reach. It lies on the slopes by the cliffs, rendering the journey itself an extreme sport. When one genuinely (but naively) points at the grass growing in accessible areas next door, the women just roll their shoulders and explain that, no, any other grass doesn't work because it's too fragile, not resistant enough to be woven.

The copious bundles of grass are transported to the gentle hills where the women gather, and now face two possible ways of evolving: either being turned into a braid, a slim rope whose end is held in tension between two toes; or having the other end moulded by nimble fingers that keep weaving and adding further blades to the line.

Grass can also be soaked in colourful, boiling water in a black cast-iron pot set on a lively fire, possibly containing a magic potion as much as it could contain the women's lunch. But far from any Macbeth-like witchery, the pot contains dye that transforms the grass into tones of bright green, deep ochre, full black or vibrant fuchsia. After proper drying, both neutral and coloured ropes are

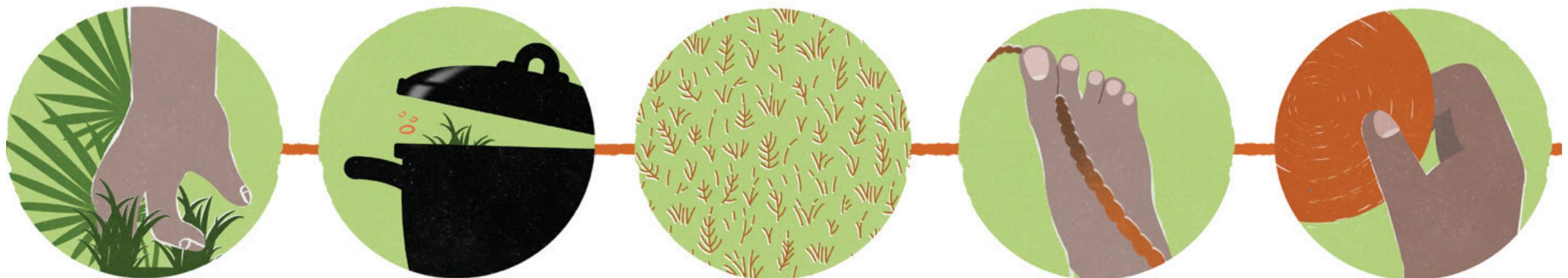


accurately combed through to remove, with tiny scissors, every rebel end emerging from the braid. Only then will the braided rope form the base for any design the weaver has in mind: it could be placemats, especially in the case of beginners who join the group; or baskets, cat trees or pet toys; or even baby baskets adorned with woollen pom poms to play with. These objects are considered iconic pieces of traditional handicraft, but among them are also newcomers that look simply terrific when woven. This genuine injection of creativity stems from several workshops the ladies were able to attend. These served to nurture great confidence in the design process, inspire the creation of new, out-of-the-box prototypes, and simply encourage the women to play with other artistic techniques, such as screen-printing, to help them explore and exploit the potential of the artisanal skills they were already mastering.

By promoting and enhancing the ideas and practices of traditional weaving, the Siyaphambili collective wants to acquire proper access to the market. But, more than that, they intend also to shed light on the demanding work that goes into every handmade piece and set a corresponding value in buyers' minds.

At the end of the day, what's in a name (or in a basket)? A whole story of busy hands, remote lands, joyful gatherings and a precious legacy kept alive.

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# Khokho

📍 Malkerns, Manzini region

It is said that there are no more than six degrees of separation between you and several million strangers whom you may or may not encounter in a lifetime. So let's pick two random people to prove it: let's try Jane Birkin and an old matriarch from the rural areas of Eswatini. Well, we might prove the theory wrong because these two ladies are only separated – or, better still, connected – by a single link: a bag.

In fact, chances are high that the world knows Jane and grandma Lindi because they first got to know a bag named after





them: a worthy representation of their personality and value. Just to make sure they get their daily dose of inspiration, a picture of a young, beautiful Jane Birkin hangs on the door of a wardrobe full of prototypes, leather ribbons and buttons, which stands in the open-space laboratory of Khokho, in Malkerns.

In 2014, Philippa Thorne, Sapna Shah and Zinhle Vilakati founded Khokho with a clear mission: to elevate and showcase the beauty of emaSwati handcraft internationally, the existence and perseverance of which, to this day, is entrusted in women's hands. They came up with the idea of a bag collection by intertwining the skills and background of the three of them: Philippa, a social entrepreneur; Sapna, a handbag designer; Zinhle, a master weaver. Not only did they choose African basketry as a means of expressing themselves and their generational knowledge; they also gave voice to one of the most powerful stories of tradition, community and pride: the story of the women weavers of Eswatini.

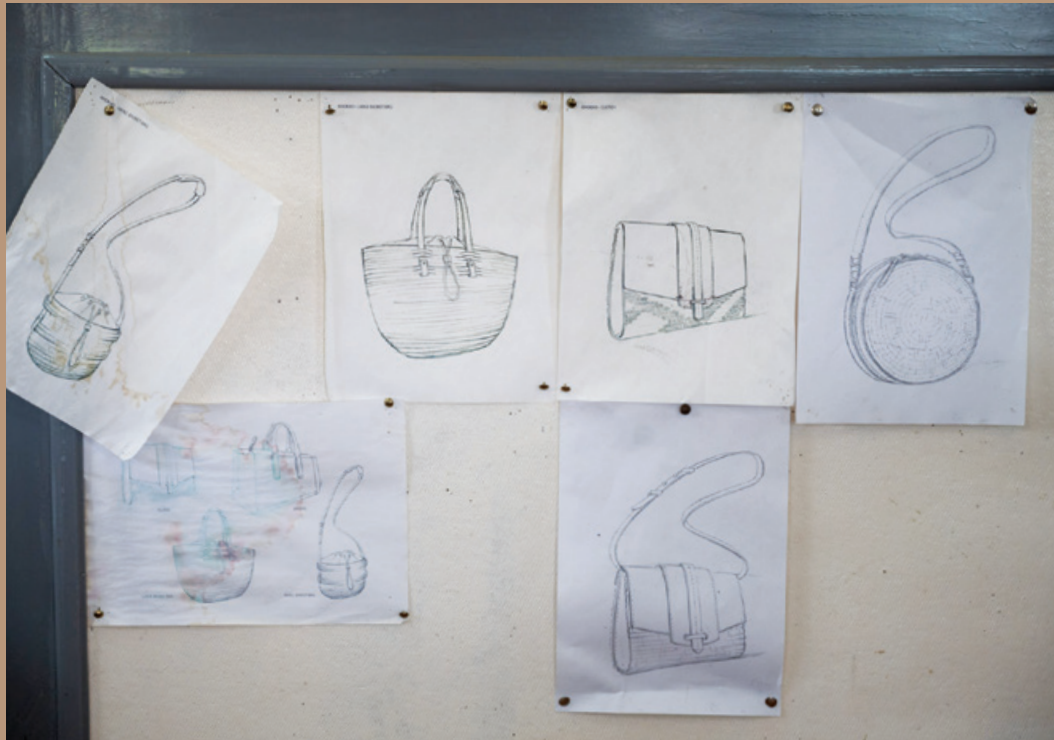
Khokho handbags are luxury accessories, the contemporary design of which outlines a language of shapes, colours and usability that clearly speaks to taste on different scales, from local to regional, even to the widest international public. Even the brand name suggests something that everyone can relate to: Khokho means 'grandmother' in siSwati. 'We all have strong women and grandmothers in our family who inspired us, inspired our work, whether it was creatively or by passing on skills and cultural heritage,' Philippa recalls. Every woman can relate to that: in the end, grandmothers are universal.

There's also another point of connection with grandmothers in the story of Khokho: the very first artisans who were involved in the production of the first bags were older ladies. Some of them were very demotivated because they felt that people no longer valued their work. But by creating something unique, something beautiful, they could feel a great sense of pride in and ownership of a tiny accessory that would help to make the world look more beautiful. Feeling that they still have something to offer can help them feel valued and change their lives. This is because they not only earn money from their work; it also enhances their status within the community. Best of all, it encourages younger women to

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*'Setting up Khokho was transformational for the founders, but perhaps even more so for the women who joined the production process.'*

have a dream and a vision, something real and tangible that their mothers and grandmothers were able to achieve, so why not them? Setting up Khokho was transformational for the founders, but perhaps even more so for the women who joined the production process. They first came together as an informal group that quickly turned into a cooperative.

And that's why, to honour the ownership of every handmade piece, Khokho solemnly names every shape of bag after the artisan who made it: here's where Lindi comes together with Zandi, Jabu and Thembi in a collection. This was yet another way consciously adopted by Philippa, Sapna and Zinhle to help communicate that hidden value to customers. One of the greatest challenges of their mission, in this sense, was to achieve the same level of awareness among the local public, as it wasn't very clear why someone should spend 'that much money' on a bag. For this reason, Khokho's founders decided to launch the brand internationally first, to leverage a widespread sense of beauty worldwide. Once the aesthetics had taken hold locally and they'd grabbed the attention of African and emaSwati consumers, they





could finally tell the whole story of artisans, grandmothers, legacy, and other narratives that turned baskets into something valuable and beyond being simply desirable. A successful example of the snowball effect.

Khokho bags are designed with a solid grasp of inspiration coming from the traditional shapes and colours of Eswatini landscapes. Collections don't emerge at the same fashion-trend frequency we are accustomed to; in order to be sustainable, considering the lengthy investment of time and energy required to make every piece, Khokho tries to be trans-seasonal by creating bags that are timeless, to be treasured in the wardrobe and perfectly matched with outfits of every season.

The thing about Birkin bags is that while they may be iconic, at the end of the day they're likely to feel a bit lonely. In contrast, Lindi and the other grandmothers will be in the good company of many other bags named after proud emaSwati women whose work and exceptional skills will be enhanced and appreciated by generations of descendents to come – descendents spread all over the world.

*'Khokho bags are designed with a solid grasp of inspiration coming from the traditional shapes and colours of Eswatini landscapes.'*







# Yebo! Art Gallery

📍 Ezulwini, Hhohho region

Yebo! Art Gallery has a large road sign at the intersection of Mpumalanga Road in Ezulwini featuring protesting rabbits saying 'Join the climate change revolution'. A short drive down the road is Yebo!, a space that is markedly alternative in design from other contemporary art galleries on the continent and beyond. A bright blue building surrounded by Eswatini's natural flora, hand-carved wooden sculptures and bright protest posters tackling misogyny and the climate crisis, Yebo!'s space reflects the distinct ethos and vision of its founders, Aleta, Pete and Dane Armstrong.







Established in 2010, the gallery has since built an environment that centres around professionalism and accessibility. With more than 50 exhibitions hosted by the gallery in person and online, Yebo! has worked with some of the most talented visual artists in the country and, in the process, has unearthed amazing talent from Eswatini's pool of young artists. This goal of making Yebo! accessible to artists has given the founders the opportunity to interact closely with artists and artisans, which in turn has affected the landscape of the creative industry and introduced professional and ethical practices in the art market, one exhibition at a time.

Yebo! has also connected their extensive portfolio of artists with wider local and international opportunities in the arts, despite it being a small gallery in a country that has historically underfunded and undervalued the creative industry. To date, they have exhibited at the FNB Joburg Art Fair twice and at the Forge Johannesburg. They have also organised several creative collaborations between local Swati artists and international organisations and galleries such as Akki Galleria (Finland) and Benetton Foundation (Italy). Through the gallery's extensive list of exhibitions, collaborations and projects, Yebo! aims to continue setting a standard for professionalism and modern art and design aesthetics for creatives in the country.

*'With more than 50 exhibitions hosted by the gallery in person and online, Yebo! has worked with some of the most talented visual artists in the country ...'*



Yebo! Art Gallery has a history of projects, workshops and collaborations that are focused on using creativity and the visual arts as a tool for responding to pressing social issues and concerns. Initiatives such as Livi LaBomake (Women's Voices) and Tibi Tendlu (The Dirt that Binds) have used the visual arts as a vehicle to give women the power to confront feminist issues in the country.

In an effort to broaden accessibility to the creative industry for Eswatini's population, Yebo! also regularly conducts design, product and branding development workshops for handcraft artisans. Through these workshops, the gallery team equips artisans with skills that can help them develop their handcraft products, giving them the edge to compete in local and international markets. The gallery strives to partner with other organisations who are interested in using the arts and creativity to reduce barriers to access and to work towards long-term poverty reduction – in line with their vision to use art as a tool for positive social engagement and change.

Through Yebo! Art Gallery's partnership with the International Trade Centre's Alliances for Action Programme, two handcraft artisan groups, Siyaphambili and Indzaba Yami, from Makhungutja and KaNdinda respectively, were identified by Eswatini's Ministry of Commerce and have had the opportunity



to undergo rigorous product development, textile design and screen-printing workshops funded by the European Union. These workshops have already culminated in two ranges of high-quality designs suitable for a wide range of products.

Co-founders Pete and Aleta Armstrong boast a long history of designing and printing unique products and artworks as artists in their own right, and have shared their skills with the various groups and communities they have worked with in Eswatini. Taking a look inside Yebo! Art Gallery, one would be pleased to find not just the gallery space, but also a shop that stocks unique gifts and products. In line with their vision of working sustainably, the driving forces behind the gallery source materials and additional products locally, and they work collaboratively with other artisans in the design and creation of the products. Tablecloths, posters, cards, canvas bags, wall hangings, tiles and a variety of other products made from designs created by Aleta and printed by Pete grace the shop displays. In collaboration with Siyaphambili and Indzaba Yami, Yebo! will also be promoting the two groups' new range of products in their shop.

Despite it being a difficult landscape to navigate, Eswatini's underdeveloped creative industry is currently fertile ground for a boom that could offer a wealth of opportunities for creatives to contribute to the development of the visual arts and handicrafts in this sector. In line with this, Yebo!'s vision is to work towards a future where access to the visual arts is not exclusive to those with economic security and privilege. This it aims to achieve through continuing art and design training for those who would ordinarily not have access to it. The gallery continues to foster a space for growth and freedom of expression despite the current difficulties spurred by Eswatini's growing socio-political turmoil and economic instability. The founders have worked tirelessly to establish an independent creative oasis that centres artists and their creative development through consistent support and encouragement. Undoubtedly, Yebo! Art Gallery looks to the bright future of Eswatini's creative landscape with optimism.

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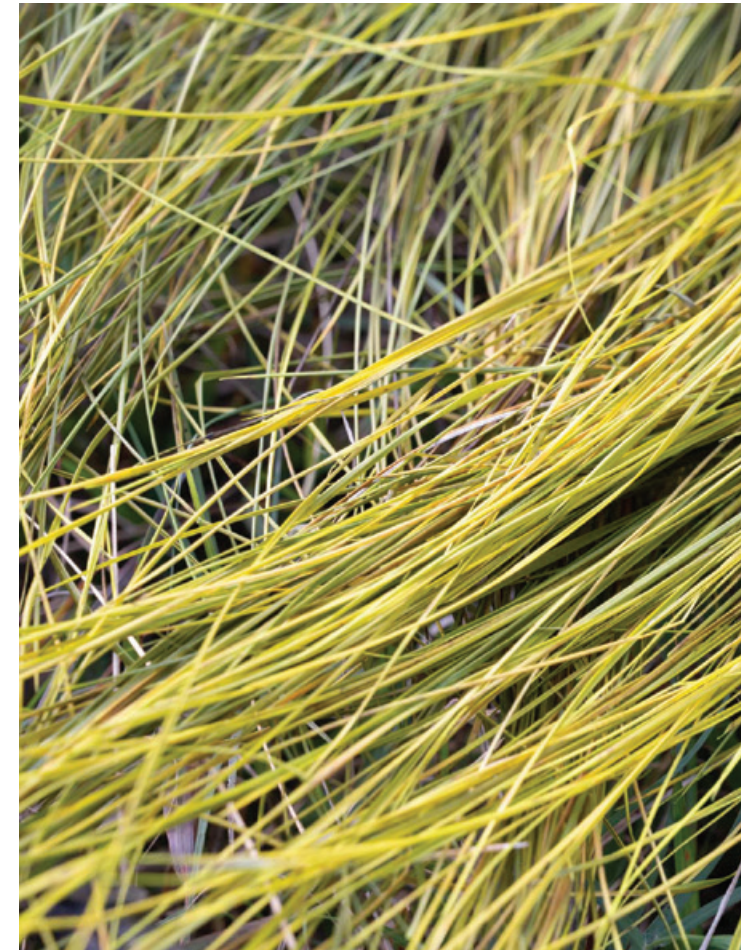
# Indzaba Yami

📍 KaNdinda, Manzini region

Indzaba Yami is a story about hands, women and light. But before anything else, Indzaba Yami is someone's story: *my* story, as the name of this collective says in siSwati. This is one possessive pronoun whose ownership is wide, inclusive and universal, as it refers to every woman involved in the group of artisans of KanDinda, situated in the western rural area of Eswatini. But to anyone who is interested in weaving it also refers to a collective ownership of traditions, techniques and cultural knowledge shared both inside and outside the group. Me becomes us, my becomes ours, not because all stories are the same, but because







their uniqueness merges into one and creates a single voice that speaks for the whole community.

Members of the group come from varying backgrounds and have different motivations. Besides those whose fate was written in the stars by being trained in weaving from a very young age by other older women of the family, there are also the stories of women who, as adults, became fascinated by weaving and joined the group. These women were heartily welcomed and knowledge was genuinely shared without reserve. Interestingly enough, Indzaba Yami also tells a story of overturned gender quotas, as the group can proudly count a man among their members – one who realised that he could make a living out of weaving. And, what's more, he likes it too – he likes it very much.

*'The idea of coming together as a group is an answer to the need for better representation and, consequently, better access to the market.'*

Indzaba Yami creates a wide range of homeware, toys and fashion accessories by mixing traditional weaving techniques and patterns with contemporary design. The idea of coming together as a group is an answer to the need for better representation and, consequently, better access to the market. Indeed, by joining forces and forging ahead as a brand (the first step in storytelling), they could lessen the gap between the market value and the actual value of their work through enchantment and raising curiosity around their stories. How do you make this basket? Why is this braid different from the others? When did you start weaving? Tiny bits of information shedding light on a whole scenario behind every product.





Artisan members of the collective are conscious of the limelight they have found themselves in, and they are not afraid to exploit it to their advantage. First, they highlight the value in weaving to make it interesting for other artisans and tempting for future artisans to join. Some of the activities led by Indzaba Yami include training programmes and demonstrations in elementary and middle schools, involving both boys and girls. Their purpose, first and foremost, is to show that weaving is an activity for all; second, that it can become a source of income, again, for all. Schoolkids have access to manual skills as well as a wider cultural heritage embedded in the traditional patterns, colours and objects. This enables them to reconnect with their roots and preserve their heritage, but also evolve the craft for future generations. Moreover, the Indzaba Yami product line shines a light on objects whose utility was neglected or considered no longer functional: broken plastic baskets, cardboard boxes and even tyres are repurposed as a base to weave on, undergoing transformation into new objects with a contemporary aesthetic and renewed usability. The light is part of the story, as is the logo of Indzaba Yami: it represents a moon and the stars showing the way to all men, women and – in





*'Outcomes of this process were capacity-building, the acquisition of new tools and combining styles in a way that would make every object unique and have a story to tell.'*

the collective spirit of the group – the community who want to support every member and grow resiliently together. This great emphasis on having a story and, consequently, equipping the group with storytelling tools, led to the creation of a brand and a logo. These emerged after a series of workshops in which Indzaba Yami members could expand their knowledge of traditional weaving and merge it with other creative techniques like screen-printing. Outcomes of this process were capacity-building, the acquisition of new tools, and combining styles in a way that would make every object unique and have a story to tell.

At the end of the day, a placemat is not just a placemat; a basket is not just a basket. Jumping from metaphor to metaphor, the aim is that they turn into megaphones so that grandmothers and younger nephews, men and schoolkids can make their voices heard, loud and clear.





*Section 2*

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**ON SUSTAINABILITY**



# On sustainability

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## *A foreword by*

### THE EUROPEAN UNION

Micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) are the backbone of Eswatini's economic growth potential. The European Union (EU) in Eswatini is dedicated to nurturing the empowerment of these small powerhouses by making business development skills accessible to them. The goal is to sow seeds of growth so they can eventually reach local and international markets; but it is also to nurture a profound awareness of nature and the environment, and in this way continue to build symbiotic and respectful growth through careful, innovative processes. In such a way, their products are and will keep being ambassadors of this country's great creative and commercial potential.

Empowering MSMEs in Eswatini has the ripple effect of positive social impact throughout its farmer and artisan communities, in addition to preserving the country's biodiversity and the vibrant energy of its land.

Supporting small firms and their development also means supporting

the work they are doing with their wider communities. Cultivating entrepreneurial spirit and creative power, reaching rural communities and engaging youths on global sustainability issues that will have an impact on their future are all part of this important work. Those leading these initiatives in Eswatini inspire us as we watch them turn ideas and potential into flourishing realities of empowered communities.

The EU's partnership with Eswatini is focused on supporting smallholder farmers and artisans and encouraging MSMEs to use locally produced raw materials to create uniquely EmaSwati products for export markets.

The shared motivation and commitment that underpins our joint work to achieve Eswatini's vision of increasing MSME participation in the economy is what will make these changes and developments sustainable in the long term.

We at the EU remain committed to Eswatini in achieving its vision.







# Ngwenya Glass

📍 Ngwenya, Hhohho region

'It all started with an elephant.' That elephant couldn't complain for long about its loneliness, because he was rapidly joined by another elephant. Then the two little ones became three, and then four, and then counting on until they turned into a proper herd, colonising a 17-foot-long wooden table at the centre of a dining room. These little glass animals were bought by Chas Prettejohn for his mum in South Africa as souvenirs. They were from a glass factory run by Swedes in Eswatini, still known as Swaziland at the time this story began.

Not so ironically, Chas now comments with a smirk on his face that after purchasing all those elephants it would have been easier





to just buy the factory to please his mother. And in fact, that's what eventually happened. In 1987, Chas became the next owner of Ngwenya Glass, together with his father, kicking off what is still one of the most world-renowned blown glass manufacturers.

The factory lies quietly on the mountain slopes in the north-west of the country. There, a silent, peaceful and almost still picture of vibrant greens, moved only by the odd puff of wind now and then, surrounds an elegant warehouse and clashes with its beating heart of loud noises, flashes of blinding light and burning heat. Here the furnace swallows thousands of shiny scraps of recycled glass that are melted and reshaped by expert hands – properly covered with heat-resistant gloves.

Over the years, Ngwenya Glass has been training many locals in the refined, sophisticated skills of glassblowing, the envy and admiration of artisans visiting from all over the world. They include in their number those from cities whose names resonate boastfully because of their predominance in this specific craft, the most notable being Murano in Italy.

Ngwenya Glass is a welcoming place where ideas and techniques are melted together with glass. Not only glassblower masters, but also artists and designers from all over the world are invited to join, play around with creativity and turn sketches into unique pieces. While the furnace becomes a stage for the most innovative sculptures, the bright gift shop at the entrance softens the shouting of workers trying to be heard above the din and showcases some masterpieces that made Peter famous for their unique design. These include elegant wine flutes, tumblers of different sizes, vases and, of course, the iconic glass elephants parading alongside giraffes, crocodiles and other figures of indigenous animals.

This open, encouraging approach to innovation that makes Ngwenya Glass spark is also reflected in its special care for the environment through practices that aim to curb the footprint as much as possible. First and foremost, the most basic ingredient of all is a statement per se: all glass used, both neutral and coloured, is recycled. Visitors strolling around can catch sight of a little sparkle coming from the walls because, even there, sand and other materials are mixed with recycled glass paste. Empty bottles peeping from a great number of bags stacked in the backyard,

*'Over the years, Ngwenya Glass has been training many locals in the refined, sophisticated skills of glass-blowing, the envy and admiration of artisans visiting from all over the world.'*







as well as broken and damaged pieces and not-so-good-looking prototypes, are reintroduced in the production line so that material waste is reduced to practically zero. For instance, the combustible that fuels the furnace is made by combining 60 per cent Kentucky Fried Chicken waste oil and 40 per cent paraffin. Even Ngwenya's packaging comes from recycled newspapers – and, make no mistake, shipping full sets of wine glasses safely to every corner of the world, from Australia to the United States, well, definitely takes some paper and good wrapping techniques. From the rooftop comes solar energy from a system of panels installed in 2017; and there's also water collected in storage tanks to be recycled both in the toilets and the grinding facility.

What makes this part of the story so fascinating is the moderate voice pitch used by Chas in listing such a substantial number of achievements, as if they were the most natural thing to accomplish. And it could actually be, especially for someone who, when it comes to major decisions and choices, first asks himself: 'What is this going to do to the environment?' and then asks: 'What is this going to do to our community?' As a catalyst for building awareness and generating income, this puts Ngwenya Glass under a spotlight that Chas chooses to focus on others by supporting and empowering communities, not only with employment and capacity-building in highly valuable artisanal skills, but also

*'What makes this part of the story so fascinating is the moderate voice pitch used by Chas in listing such a substantial number of achievements, as if they were the most natural thing to accomplish.'*

through projects and activities that put people at the very centre. Employees, their families and even neighbours are involved in one way or another in something playfully (yet, consciously) created by Chas or his family, from team-building tours to crowdfunding and donations to build up community facilities or to buy basic sanitary products.

Chas's head looks like an interesting place to get lost in a traffic jam of questions, answers, solutions and ideas: sheets of paper with sketches and prototypes fly around a tank of fast food oil that magically turns into biodiesel; glass elephants line up to build the next elementary school a few kilometres away from the factory. And not a single trace of this constant, energetic brooding can be found on his face, which remains quietly relaxed behind a warm smile. Apples don't fall that far from the tree: even the beauty of Ngwenya Glass lies in its enchanting, striking contrast of the noisy furnace, enclosed at the very heart of what can be considered one of the quietest corners of the world.





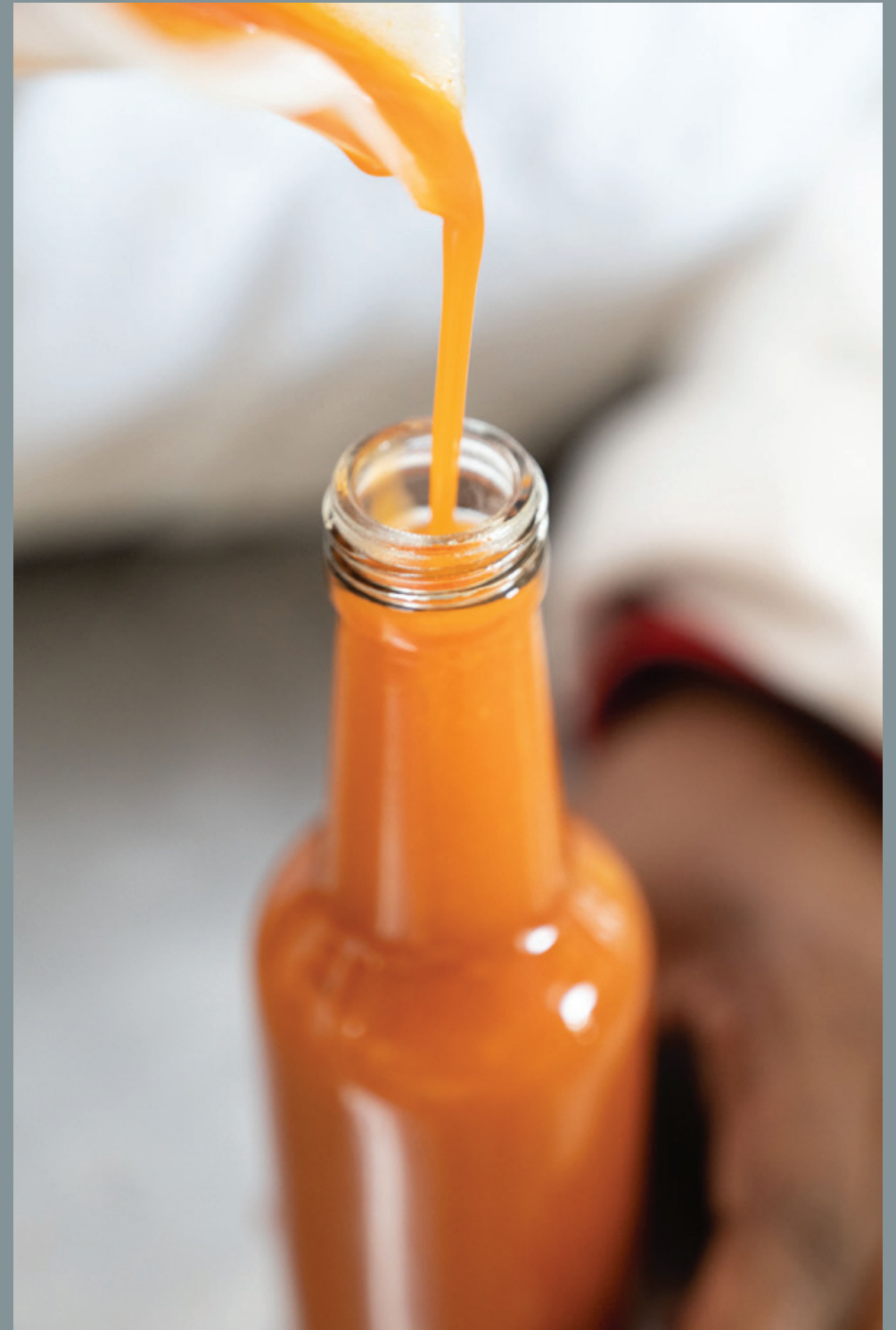




# Black Mamba

📍 Matsapha, Manzini region

A concentrate of flaming personality, great taste and tons of flavour: a perfect description of any of Black Mamba's sauces, but also of Claudia Castellanos, co-founder of one of the most vibrant agro-processing companies in Eswatini. This concentrate of energy and great puns, whose Colombian origins and half-a-life spent in Italy leave some trace in her sauces and pestos, teamed up with her African-born husband Joe to transform what was a homemade batch of 400 bottles of chilli sauce into Black Mamba. The brand







comprises a wide range of specialty foods with a clear, sparkling identity and a profound awareness of its impact on Eswatini communities, not to speak of its impact on the planet.

Claudia found herself in Eswatini to volunteer for a social business for a few months and, as Joe jokingly says, 'she volunteered to stay with me.' Her volunteering experience made her fall in love with Eswatini and see the potential for using business as a force for good, to make a real impact. After remixing Joe's African recipe with a dash of Latino flavour, they launched the first Black Mamba product, their award-winning cayenne chilli sauce, at Bushfire (Eswatini's internationally acclaimed music and arts festival) in 2010. All 400 bottles sold out right away. Within months, they went from employing one woman to stir a pot in the back of their house to having a workshop and, today, a fully fledged factory where they make their products destined for chilliheads and ethical foodies around the world.

The ingredients for the great sauces, chutneys and jams manufactured by Black Mamba are sourced from Guba, a local NGO, and its network of smallholder farmers. Guba offers permaculture design courses to improve the quality of life for community members and their families, growing resilient communities in a rapidly changing climate. Currently, Guba











manages a growing network of more than 60 smallholder farmers who grow fresh organic herbs and chillies for Black Mamba's products; the direct positive impact of this business model reaches more than 1 000 individuals in Eswatini. Through this partnership, the farmers reach more sustainable markets and receive a fair and upfront income at the point of sale. In addition, the soil and land ecosystems are regenerated through the use of green agricultural methods and, in return, Black Mamba sources fresh, organic produce for its products – a great win-win situation that benefits both planet and people and goes from strength to strength as Black Mamba grows.

But a good cause isn't enough to make any food product taste good. Recipes are sourced from cookbooks and grandmothers' secret stashes of any culinary culture where spiciness is an essential asset. Then they are adapted for wider-scale production and to reach the shelf – but without any flavour- or colour-

*'In addition, the soil and land ecosystems are regenerated through the use of green agriculture methods and, in return, Black Mamba sources fresh, organic produce for its products.'*

enhancing additives, preservatives, or what Claudia cleverly calls 'added nonsense'.

Besides the great taste of their products, the bottles and jars are key to Black Mamba's success. On the one hand, this is because they sustain the environment the company is engaged in (they're made out of glass), alongside other packaging compounds that are fully recyclable. On the other, they are the medium through which to communicate the flashing brand Claudia and Joe have built over time. In addition to telling a great story of local flavours (and brilliantly avoiding any slippery stereotypes of African culture), a name like Black Mamba (very African, adapted for chilli-based products and great marketing captions) has contributed to what is now a well-recognised ethical brand with award-winning products that are sold around the world. And as the business continues to grow and upscale, Claudia emphatically says: 'The best is yet to come.'





# Kucala Kofi

📍 Lwandle, Manzini region

A wide stretch of low bushes, carefully arranged in rows, is dotted with slender, tall papaya trees and their ruffled foliage, whose shadow embraces the tiniest bushes below. The boundaries of the rows do not define a precise, clear square; instead, they move irregularly and harmoniously adapt to the lines of the nearby forest, respecting those trees and plants which, presumably, have been there for much longer. Some human intervention on the land is clearly visible, but it's not as overwhelming as any other





plantation a visitor could stumble across. Rather, it suggests a conscious agreement on common growth. Harvesters moving around the rows trample the soil with the same gentleness, bowing to the ground until they're disguised by the foliage. Everything is quiet, but nothing is still. Beneath the slow movements in the coffee plantation there's a bursting enthusiasm and a rock-solid determination that has made the dream of two brothers possible – and will surely allow it to grow. But quietly . . .

It was 2017 when the idea of entering the coffee industry started tingling in the heads of Patrick Du-Pont and Eddie Mkhathshwa. After frequent visits to plantations and roasteries abroad, and being exposed to a wide range of ideas on coffee qualities, bean growth and plants, the two brothers decided to establish their own coffee farm in the half-hectare in Mpumalanga inherited from their mother. Until that moment, that acreage had been used to grow crops only for self-sustenance. But Arabica coffee didn't jump into their scheme all of a sudden. Instead, plants were gently lined up in between other crops such as maize, until coffee became the majority crop covering the land. Nevertheless, other species, such as papaya, were intertwined so that each plant could benefit from whatever good its botanical neighbour would bring, from shadow to nutrients.

The story of Kucala Kofi didn't begin with immediate success: an almost non-existent coffee culture in the country (not only in consumption, but also on the broader spectrum of production) corresponded to a comparable lack of specialised knowledge in the agricultural sphere. As a result, Eddie and Patrick had to advance slowly from one attempt to another – which did not always result in a fruitful harvest. Losses were taken into account as part of the game of pioneering the growth of a new crop with its own dynamic. But that didn't stop Kucala Kofi expanding in line with proper, targeted implementations. All those little tweaks, ameliorations and trials have always been a consciously considered part of a process, a learning curve. What helped enormously was that the pair's casual findings and experiments were bolstered by a proper, scientific backbone in the form of young students and graduates in agriculture who lent their knowledge and expertise in growing and harvesting, and also in the subsequent fermentation, dehusking and drying processes.

*'Losses were taken into account as part of the game of pioneering the growth of a new crop with its own dynamic.'*











This curious and ambitious approach made Eddie and Patrick realise that, besides growth measured in terms of the number of plants and plots (now extended to 4,2 hectares), they could boost the capacity of the project. And thanks to the competence of the people involved, the building of a solid network, and an underlying vision that would stretch way beyond their own garden, Kucala Kofi took hold: they welcomed and supported any farmer, individuals or existing small and medium enterprises interested in converting their plots into coffee plantations.

The example set by Eddie and Patrick made the coffee industry attractive in the country. Still to this day, to facilitate the consolidation of a national interest in coffee, besides distributing coffee seedlings, Kucala Kofi offers capacity-building and help with access to market and is currently building a nursery to make coffee plants more accessible and easily adaptable to the soils of Eswatini. Even among the contractors, Eddie and Patrick aim to

*‘Still to this day, to facilitate the consolidation of a national interest in coffee, besides distributing coffee seedlings, Kucala Kofi offers capacity-building and help with access to market.’*

involve mainly women and youths from local communities. This is their unique way of empowering them – through a project in which they can have proper ownership.

Patrick and Eddie can take credit for the discovery of such a treasure, hidden in the cherries inside vibrant red husks. As a result of their social commitment, inclusivity and vision, the growth of Kucala Kofi is set to expand far and wide. First, by involving as many farmers and MSMEs as possible in establishing a flourishing coffee industry in Eswatini. Second, by promoting the local coffee varieties so that they become known and recognised not only abroad, but also within Eswatini by cultivating a taste for coffee among consumers within its borders. What they also see in their future is a roastery where new generations of roasters can experiment with the beans and exploit the full potential of their coffee – ultimately having the local population enjoying the pleasure, one sip at a time, in Eswatini coffee shops.



# eDladleni Restaurant

📍 Lobamba, Hhohho region

The wall in front of the entrance to eDladleni is covered with dozens, perhaps even a hundred frames of different shapes and sizes, showcasing photographs, handwritten letters, tickets, newspaper clippings, souvenirs and memorabilia of a lifetime. Walking through the door of the restaurant, you'll immediately eye this parade of memories, only to be distracted, a few seconds later, by the enchanting rays of yellow light filtering in from the stained-glass windows on the left. Simultaneously, your nose is







*'Every meal served is a performance of indigenous habits, traditions and cultural heritage, stubbornly cooked by Dolores to enable her patrons to thrive rather than survive.'*

driven by the whiff of spices coming from the kitchen to the right. Another overwhelming sensory stimulus emanates from the wide glass doors at the entrance, filtering both the breeze and the noise and colours of the river flowing through the nearby pond. These fireworks of the senses converge into proper form, meaning and body in the person of Dolores Godeoffroy, chef and founder of eDladleni Restaurant in Lobamba, just a few steps away from the Mantenga Nature Reserve.

The boundaries between Dolores and eDladleni are difficult to fathom. In fact, one wonders if there is actually any boundary at all. Probably not. Years spent travelling around the world, from the most remote corners to metropolises and capitals, to witness the pivotal events that changed the course of history (the fall of the Berlin Wall, to mention just one); a passionate activism in the food system; shaking hands and joining forces with Carlo Petrini, founder of the Slow Food International movement; stories of tracking down the most remote, endangered species of pulses, plants and leaves – all of these bounce from Dolores' eloquent facial expressions to the plates she serves, and even to the walls and the décor of the restaurant in an incessant, dynamic feast of aromas, tastes, colours, images and motion.

Consulting a menu at eDladleni is pointless, because food is just a fragment of the whole story the restaurant tells. But there's also no such thing as a menu on paper. It is as if, just by stepping in, one decides to imbibe it all. If only all restaurants in the world could offer that sense of total surrender, total trust, in not asking patrons to make a choice. Questions only come once the food is served: Can you pass me that? Can I have some more of that? Can I have a bite of your chicken? In fact, plates and dishes are shared: they slowly appear on the table, one after another, until they cover the entire surface. Diners are then equipped with spoons to serve a bit of everything on their own plate – even though the idea is to use fingers and hand palms both to serve and to eat.

Every meal served is a performance of indigenous habits, traditions and cultural heritage, stubbornly cooked by Dolores to enable her patrons to thrive rather than survive. At eDladleni, the ingredients are sourced from small producers – even from the gardens of those women planting and harvesting merely for their







own self-sustenance. But the wilderness is also her 'garden', where roots, leaves and berries are carefully harvested from the green areas following the course of the river. These include endangered pulses, tubers, plants and fruits whose existence is now being undermined, even threatened, by negligence as the most fructuous, resistant and palatable crops are favoured. The point Dolores is making is that, in the case of extinction, not only the plant or seed will be lost forever, but also that splinter of human value embedded in it – that is, the set of acts and transformations that put nature and man on the path to symbiotic growth and evolution. And as food has such a pervasive role in our everyday lives and in every sector of human society, Dolores is clearly aware that she can resist the general trend merely by standing and working in her kitchen. In taking the stand she does, she is able to merge agriculture, health, politics, job opportunities and work regulations, land use and the distribution of wealth in a single dish or on a single plate. And, as she so deliciously illustrates, a plate or a dish can have an impact on every (eco)system. Her philosophy is especially appropriate in a country where the great majority (in some cases, the total amount) of food, even staple food, is imported, and the impact of the Western diet rich in fat, salt and sugar is taking a heavy toll on people's health.

Raising awareness of possible extinction and loss, though, could trigger two different reactions: on the one hand, there's the so-called 'panda programme' approach of putting the endangered thing (pulse, plant, animal or anything else) under a glass case in a museum and hoping that that one and only specimen will survive. On the other, there's the approach of continuing to plant, harvest, cook and eat (and so spread) what is likely to be lost. And through that, and resistance, the very existence of the endangered thing plus the human and cultural practices related to it, can be guaranteed. Which is precisely what Dolores has been doing throughout her years at eDladleni.

Activism really couldn't be tastier.

*'But the wilderness is also her 'garden', where roots, leaves and berries are carefully harvested from the green areas following the course of the river.'*







***Section 3***

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**ON EMPOWERMENT**



# On empowerment

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## *A foreword by*

### **ESWATINI INVESTMENT PROMOTION AUTHORITY - EIPA**

Our mandate is to promote trade and attract investment in the Kingdom of Eswatini. The opportunity to showcase what the kingdom has to offer in locally made products enhances economic participation and the inclusion of women and youths into the mainstream. Access to market opportunities is vital for SMEs to thrive and we at EIPA welcome partnerships with institutions such as the ITC that provide our SMEs with a platform through which to export products and services in line with our trade and investment promotion mandate.







# Eswatini Kitchen

📍 Sidvokodvo, Manzini region

There's a gentle, yet assertive movement that Sonia Paiva makes with her head in order to invite her young assistants to speak. A subtle nod of her chin, moving downwards, precisely, with a slight inclination to the left. There is no need to look her speaker in the eyes to indicate it's her turn. She doesn't suggest the right words nor does she give them a pitch: it takes only a nod to push those young ladies out of the nest in a way that they don't waste time finding enough courage to speak. Try with your own words.







*'Mentoring to find added value is the main mission of Eswatini Kitchen, the sustainable, fair-trade brand of chutneys, sauces and jams founded by Sonia.'*

Believe in it. Go for it: it's an excellent exercise (even if some find it rough) to make the individual shift from speaking to speaking up.

That's pretty much the difference between teaching and mentoring that Sonia has been striving to acknowledge and implement her whole life. Because, through mentoring, one can find one's own words. Moreover, an individual can make the brain work at full speed to find some precious hidden value in every place, every gesture, and even every single chilli.

Yes, let's talk about chillies. No matter how tasty, vividly red and fragrant a chilli is, it simply remains a chilli with its strong chilli character if no one processes it. It takes some drying and crushing, a pinch of creativity, a good old recipe stolen from a gogo's cookbook and the right mixture of ingredients to produce a great chilli sauce ready to be sold on the market. The good part of the story is that every flash of intuition could turn into a new product, just as every carrot, papaya, fruit and vegetable can be turned into something else – something worthier than in its natural, untreated form.

Mentoring to find added value is the main mission of Eswatini Kitchen, the sustainable, fair-trade brand of chutneys, sauces and jams founded by Sonia. It is currently exporting to Germany and the United Kingdom. That aside, the brand's 'Swazi fire', just one of its many products, is already renowned all over Eswatini.

But more than just giving a stable and fair income to more than 300 people in the country, Eswatini Kitchen aims to empower the local community and the next generation of agripreneurs. And when talking about 'empowerment', the idea that Sonia has in mind is definitely free of frills. As she herself puts it: 'Well, empowerment means that you should be able to sustain yourself, be financially stable, and have enough money to reinvest in your business.'

For Eswatini Kitchen, the key to unlocking empowerment comprises three easy steps. First of all, acknowledge the full potential of the food chain. Do so starting with the agricultural sector, where possibilities are endless. This entails working on an efficient, sustainable system that might already affect the value of the crop. And going beyond planting and harvesting, there's a full range of interventions, transformations and processing techniques







that can enhance and sensibly increase the value of produce. Simply put, in Sonia's words, 'there's money in agriculture', because as long as human beings live (and therefore have to eat and drink) there will always be a customer at the end of the food chain. Such a change of mindset could be crucial for Eswatini, a country where the greatest proportion of edible products, including staple foods such as maize, are imported.

The tricky part might come with the second step, because agriculture takes time, and therefore loads of patience. Agripreneurs should focus on the long run, as it pays off the high investments and efforts made at the very beginning, especially when expensive, innovative technologies for sustainable energy and infrastructure such as tunnels are involved, but also for processing equipment, marketing strategies and packaging to guarantee stable and successful market access.

Step three is definitely the problem-solver – although it is often the hardest to achieve. Sonia wants not to show, but to convince anyone involved in her programmes and business enterprise that everything is doable. Of course, that takes the right amount of courage. In this sense, Eswatini Kitchen is a great gym for exercising courage – which is not the ambitious, sometimes outrageous bravery of fighters, but the rock-solid, vivid (and sometimes stubborn) consciousness of common people that acknowledges, yes, it is possible. Yes, it is possible to add value even to a tuber; it is possible to make a living from agriculture; it is possible to uplift whole communities and become famous in

*'Such a change of mindset could be crucial for Eswatini, a country where the greatest proportion of edible products, including staple foods such as maize, are dependent on importation.'*

another hemisphere, even on the other side of the ocean; and, yes, it is possible to make every dream come true.

But again, just as the growth and success of Eswatini Kitchen is not a fairy tale or a dream come true thanks to a shooting star or some magic dust, all such enterprises take patience, hard work and a vision. That's why Sonia has been working towards establishing a free mentoring programme for the next generation of agripreneurs. The first round, launched in February 2021, involved youths from all over the country (with a great majority of women) in a holistic series of lectures and on-the-job learning activities. From seedling management and tunnel agriculture to accounting, quality assurance and marketing, the programme aims to provide participants with a complete set of skills to establish an enterprise in the agricultural sector. The good news is that the first seeds are already sprouting, as some of the former students are already showing great success in the outcomes of their own freshly founded businesses. With the new round of lectures approaching, Sonia is working to have sufficient funds to cover any associated expenses that a student might have, such as travel and accommodation.

While the aims of Eswatini Kitchen, the Women Farmer Foundation and the agripreneurs mentoring programme may sound a bit too ambitious, it might only take a head nod from Sonia for agripreneurs and others to believe that, yes, a sustainable food system able to empower whole communities is definitely possible in Eswatini.





# Mavulandela Co-op

📍 Ntfontjeni, Manzini region

Magazines and websites are flooded with tips, secrets and even algorithms for good, long-lasting relationships. These can be found pretty much everywhere. But most of the time they are nothing more than a genuine guess based on the observations of others' experiences. This is not the case for the delicate, yet successful balance between cooperation and autonomy that makes Mavulandela Co-op one of the oldest cooperatives (if not the oldest) in Eswatini. It was established in 1972 by the local chief of Ntfontjeni, in the district of Hhohho, who gathered various







*'Working as a group at Mavulandela is not as hard as one would imagine, simply because every farmer still retains ownership of their own work.'*

farmers already working on smaller plots in different areas of the country. The invitation was sent to those who demonstrated great enthusiasm for farming and proven abilities and knowledge of how to run multi-crop systems. Plus they all had a certain eye for innovation and growth, which was made possible by implementing shared infrastructures and providing better access to resources, by the fact of being a group. At the end of the day, the more people talk, the louder the voice is.

Working as a group at Mavulandela is not as hard as one would imagine, simply because every farmer still retains ownership of their own work. In fact, whole plots are divided into smaller, equal portions, each one assigned to one farmer. But when someone is not able to farm for a certain amount of time, the group comes together as one and takes care of the neglected plot so that the harvest is neither lost nor spoiled. The group is organised through a very simple scheme of representatives whose aim it is to collect any issue, feedback, demand or tip from the group and direct it to the most appropriate external institution or organisation, and vice versa; they bring into the group what's happening in the outside world. In other words, a comprehensive and efficient funnel of communication and information.

Having started with just 15 individuals, Mavulandela Co-op now counts 27 farmers. And even though none of the original group is still there, they all had the chance to pass on their expertise to newcomers. Alongside the people, even the land has changed through the years. As it became easier to grow fresh produce, farmers specialised in high-value crops such as baby vegetables and they did exceptionally well, to the point that the outstanding quality of their products was recognised through the various awards they won in several competitions. Moreover, they proved that they could produce a stable quantity of produce for export, and this caught the eye of the National Agricultural Management Board, the Ministry of Agriculture and other government-related donors, who decided to support them. With money, other improvements were possible: first of all, the plots became larger and other farmers could join; then they acquired a fence to protect their vegetables from hungry cows. They also acquired a water reservoir, at first only collecting rainwater but









then distributing water at an efficient and stable rate, thanks to an electric pump; finally, a coldroom was installed in which to pack and store fresh produce before delivering it to the Agricultural Board.

But sometimes acknowledgement of one's hard work and some conscious investments are not enough: the cooperative has faced quite a few challenges that have undermined its sustainability, the outcomes of which have had a negative impact. But the fact that the 27 farmers are still there, not only working the same portion of land, but also thinking about strategies to involve younger generations in agriculture, well, that gives further great testimony to the perseverance, trust and clear future vision of Mavulandela Co-op. In fact, Mavulandela envisages expanding its infrastructure to include a nursery that will give it a greater level of care of and control over the seedlings. There are also plans afoot to erect a processing facility and a packhouse that will enable Mavulandela's farmers to recover all those wholesome products that are not suitable for market sale and transform them into soups or chopped vegetables ready to be stir-fried and juiced.

Finding extra value in agriculture isn't atypical, after all.

*'But sometimes acknowledgement of one's hard work and some conscious investments are not enough: the cooperative has faced quite a few challenges ...'*

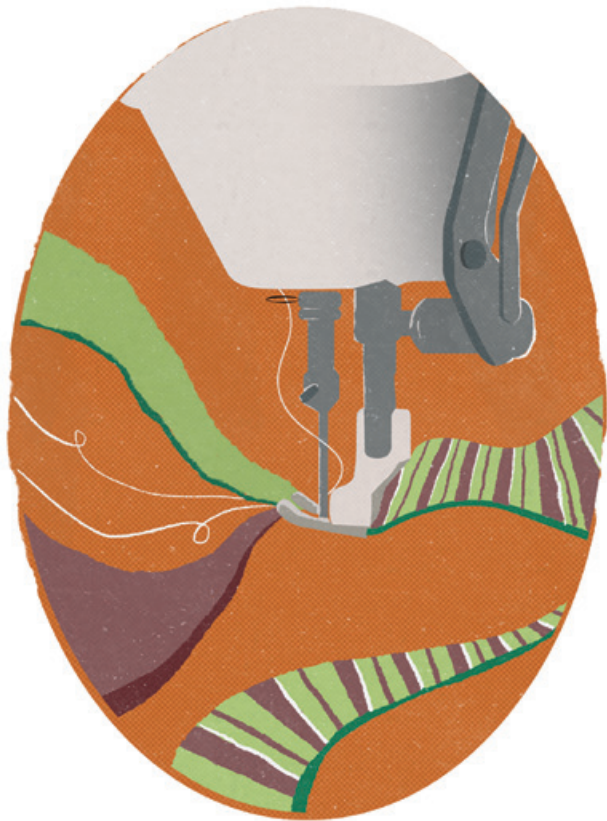




# Vukani BoMake

📍 Matsapha, Manzini region

'Turning trash into treasure.' A good number of recurring Ts makes for proper alliteration with a nice, catchy rhythm. A clear vision is what transforms such nice alliteration into a pay-off line and pushes it from the realm of poetry to business. Ms Tokky Hou is not a poet; in fact, she's a businesswoman and chairperson of Business Women Eswatini (BWE). She is one among many women in Eswatini who had the opportunity to access proper education, training and resources that led her to run and manage Far East







Textile, one of the main fashion manufacturers in the country.

But what makes her and other women of the BWE play a key role in this story is a precise feature of their skillset: they have a great alternative view. Besides ensuring that every single button is placed correctly on every single piece of clothing, that sewing machines are singing at the right pace, that young women in the training area are ready to join the production line – over and above running a whole fashion factory with impressive efficiency – they also take the time to look around and underneath the tables to search for any fabric band, ribbon, cut cloth; any piece of any size of any kind of material that escaped the manufacturing process.

It was in 2020, at the time when businesses were dealing with the consequences and impact of COVID-19, that those snips were turned into something different, new and useful: face masks, or the very first bit of that treasure mentioned above. The makers who were enlisted to sew the masks were pointedly chosen; not a thing

*'But what makes her and other women of the BWE play a key role in this story is a precise feature of their skillset: they have a great alternative view.'*

was left to chance. BWE specifically targeted women from the rural areas, not only those who were already making up about 90 per cent of the textile industry, but also those who needed a viable source of income to sustain families and, on a larger scale, the whole community. Considering the pivotal role that women play in every community, especially those in the rural areas, the strong belief of Vukani BoMake that empowering a woman is the first step to empowering a nation is not such a stretch. The project started from here: first, from and for women; second, out of necessity. And when talking about necessity, we are not referring to that precise and narrow moment of contingent emergency caused by COVID-19; we are concerned, rather, with a wider, deep-rooted systemic imbalance that the massive lockdowns and their consequences helped to acknowledge.

Women were trained, masks were sold, an income was generated, and not a single piece of fabric had gone to waste.





The positive side-effects of the project clearly came to light when the product line of Vukani BoMake expanded to include other staple items such as colourful shopping bags, underwear, baby clothes, cushions and duvets, whose stuffing is also made from leftover fabric turned into synthetic mohair. Pretty much everything used to make the unique Vukani BoMake products is saved from trash: damaged buttons, zips and other accessories; also cotton threads that are still very resistant and bright in colour but which cannot be used any longer because of the quality requirements of the textile industry. Instead, they all go to the ladies of the project to be transformed into useful items. Moreover, they were quickly joined by other beneficiaries: the project in fact aims to provide vocational and business skills, but also creative inputs and references, to women and to persons living with disabilities, and youths – the latter currently dealing with the problem of rampant unemployment all over the country.

*'Pretty much everything used to make the unique Vukani BoMake products is saved from trash: damaged buttons, zips and other accessories ...'*





Facilities for hosting production lines are consistent with the same repurposing philosophy of Vukani BoMake products: they are shipping containers that are turned into cottage factories able to accommodate up to 20 people. This is a system that will make the model of Vukani BoMake factories easy to replicate pretty much everywhere, and with low investment.

At this point of the story, the elephant in the room is impatiently waiting to be formally introduced: please come along, Mr Environment. When stumbling across the words and concepts of repurposing, refurbishing and recycling, every reader would easily guess the ecological vocation of Vukani BoMake. In fact, the project states pretty clearly that its engagement aims to save the environment and promote eco-sustainable practices. And together with aim and goodwill, numbers and facts: each constituency involved in the Vukani BoMake project collects an average of 300 kilograms of waste fabric a month. That being considered, and taking into account the three existing Inkhundla (constituencies) involved, one could easily do the maths of their impact – and also the potential impact of new production hubs to surely come in the immediate future.

At the end of the day, the more textile that factories waste, the more Vukani BoMake will sew, and the more cottage industries that will be established. This will draw more and more women into the job market and, in turn, rural development and community empowerment will increasingly become a reality.

*'And together with aim and goodwill, numbers and facts: each constituency involved in the Vukani BoMake project collects an average of 300 kilograms of waste fabric a month.'*





# Luna Hair and Body

Manzini, Manzini region

'Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?' If that mirror were to answer 'Everyone', it wouldn't be just a simplistic sop to the queen standing in front of it. Rather, it would trigger a challenging, yet compelling question about how we, as human beings, have defined beauty. And it would possibly also reflect how our idea of beauty (and the beauty industry) has defined us. A definition spiralling out of a series of consequences, tweaks, adaptations and redefinitions that turned out to be a sort of





chicken-and-egg dilemma, shifting responsibilities (but also opportunities) one to another.

Affirming that everyone is beautiful, in fact, doesn't mean that beauty is universal. Against the archetypical, imposed features of what is commonly considered to be a nice body with a pretty face and nice hair (most of the time referring to a Caucasian standard), Kim Nxumalo-Henwood and Seria Masilela, the founders of Luna, promote the uniqueness of every kind of beauty. Their line of natural, plant-based products is designed to celebrate the wonderful features of darker skin tones and afro hair with positive, encouraging messages and great nutrients.

Before becoming business partners, Kim and Seria were friends who were raised in the same beauty culture, with frequent stops at the beauty salon in their routine to blow out and straighten their hair – often with some chemical assistance. It was only a matter of time that both of them developed the same concerns about the health of their irritated scalp and burned hair-ends; moreover, they couldn't find an answer to why, after a certain length, hair simply wouldn't grow any longer. Not a single millimetre longer. This was the door to Narnia for Kim who, a few years ago, tried to find an answer by doing what pretty much anyone would do in the 21st century: she googled. The result – or, more accurately,

*'Their line of natural, plant-based products is designed to celebrate the wonderful features of darker skin tones and afro hair with positive, encouraging messages and great nutrients.'*







*‘What started as a hobby and a personal beauty and care routine quickly spread widely, thanks to their enthusiastic results ...’*

the thousands of results – led her to great sources of information, references and tutorials. In fact, she found a whole community promoting a movement towards natural hair culture. Although recipes for homemade products and remedies looked pretty easy to replicate and adapt to the needs of their specific type of hair, Kim found out that such a movement was spread mainly in Europe and the United States, ironically, with poor or non-existent connections with African countries. As a consequence, even raw ingredients were not so easy to find. Fortunately, she and Seria managed to arrange several shipments. What started as a hobby and a personal beauty and care routine quickly spread widely, thanks to their enthusiastic results: from Moon drops to collagen drinks, Luna products have become the means to empower not only black women – their dedicated beard-grooming products cater to the needs of men, too.

‘To be beautiful, you don’t have to look white.’ In order to unpack this concept, Kim and Seria have cultivated a great body of knowledge that led them to break up the false myths about black skin and hair. First of all, the thick, bushy manes crowning African





women's heads don't count on strong hair, as generally expected: black, curly hairs are in fact very fragile, and constant treatments with heat and chemicals couldn't be doing anything other than damaging them. Second, black skin isn't tough: on the contrary, it is very delicate and sensitive and requires extra care when exposed to sunlight; it also requires constant hydration.

Another clever intuition by the Luna founders is that most of the benefits of such natural conditions can be found in nature: shea butter, jojoba oil, avocado and almond oil, among many other ingredients, are gentle yet effective allies for nourishing, protecting and celebrating the body.

Through its product offerings, Luna talks about nature, but also about change and growth: the idea for the brand name came from the moon and its phases, pointing to an evolution of pride, consciousness and awareness of black beauty. But it also speaks to radiant and well-deserved business development for those two young entrepreneurs whose clear mission is openness, inclusivity and embracing everyone who wants to feel represented and comfortable in their own skin.

*'Through its product offerings, Luna talks about nature, but also about change and growth: the idea for the brand name came from the moon and its phases ...'*





# Ufalme

Mbabane, Hhohho region

'Connect the dots' might seem to be one of the most popular, relaxing and distracting games one could play. But when the dots are not numbered, nor do their position and proximity suggest a direction to trace, then it stops being just a game on paper and becomes a proper challenge in the real world. It takes some good intuition to solve the puzzle, and with Ufalme, George Nyandoro connected the dots to outline an encouraging picture of a more sustainable food system in Eswatini.







*'It was just a matter of time that the garden became a proper farm and the Nyandoro family had way more vegetables than they could consume. That's when George approached those retailers struggling with his identical problem, on a larger scale.'*

The social agribusiness emerged from an awareness of the lack of communication – and therefore connection – between two main dots: retailers, on the one hand, who couldn't rely on a stable supply of fresh and good-quality produce; and farmers, on the other hand, who were lacking market access but also needed a scheme to stabilise their own production capability in terms of quantity as well as quality.

The idea of Ufalme slowly took form and substance in George's own backyard. Literally. It was 2019 when he moved from Kenya to Eswatini: he and his family quickly faced the challenge of getting basic vegetables, from cabbages to any kind of green leaf, from local retailers. So they found their own solution by establishing a garden, a practice commonly spread among families in rural areas who were accustomed to growing and harvesting for their personal consumption.

It was just a matter of time that the garden became a proper farm and the Nyandoro family had way more vegetables than they could consume. That's when George approached those retailers struggling with his identical problem, on a larger scale. These were the same retailers he had approached a few months earlier to find out more about the reasons for the scarcity of supply in supermarkets and other food stores. Soon, all those green peppers, lettuces, tomatoes and cabbages originally grown for a family dinner were injected into the market in a regular and stable manner. And it was not only the quality of his produce but his reliable and trustworthy steadiness that made retailers ask George to establish a proper distribution channel.

The request for product supply and delivery kept growing to the point that George couldn't cover it all on his own; in order to grow, he had to face an essential choice, one of those sliding-door kinds of choices. On the one hand, he could ride the wave and take advantage of the well-established common practice of importing products from other countries in the way that supermarkets were already comfortable with and accustomed to. On the other, he could opt to bet on local farming. The expert dot connector decided to draw a line. Or, better still, he connected hundreds of other lines that widened up the food chain to include those who had finally realised that there's money in agriculture: local small-









scale farmers. The example set by George made it clear that the scheme usually employed to harvest food for self-sustenance could actually generate a healthy income for the families living in the neighbourhood. But besides sharing some logistical organisation, adequate tools and the trucks that George already owned to run his successful business venture, farmers were also asked to make a proper leap in terms of produce quality and – the key to success – steadiness of supply and delivery.

The promise of direct access to the market then came with the great pioneering work led by Ufalme to improve the quality and, above all, the consistency of production required by that same market. A technical team is still constantly deployed to serve those small-scale farmers who are willing to engage in a change that will lead them to growth and to a steady flow of income, which their being engaged in a business relationship with Ufalme would ensure. Visits from the technical team are meaningful occasions for capacity-building: seeding and harvesting schedules,



*'Spread over the length and breadth of Eswatini, there are now more than 200 farmers involved in the distribution system set up by Ufalme.'*

irrigation, ploughing, and every element involved in steadily growing high-quality fresh vegetables are subject to ameliorations and improvements that have previously been tested in Ufalme's ten-hectare farm in Siphocosini.

Spread over the length and breadth of Eswatini, there are now more than 200 farmers involved in the distribution system set up by Ufalme. The spinoffs of such a system can easily be translated into benefits for every partner engaged, but also every system that it affects: from guaranteeing regular revenue to those working on the first line to supporting the economy of the national agricultural system; from establishing more fruitful gardens to ensuring food security. By engaging more and more farmers and stabilising the supply, the picture finally coming out of Ufalme's connect-the-dots puzzle envisions both a self-sufficient Eswatini and a country potentially leading in fruit and vegetable exports, one internationally recognised for the quality of its products and its reliability in delivering them.



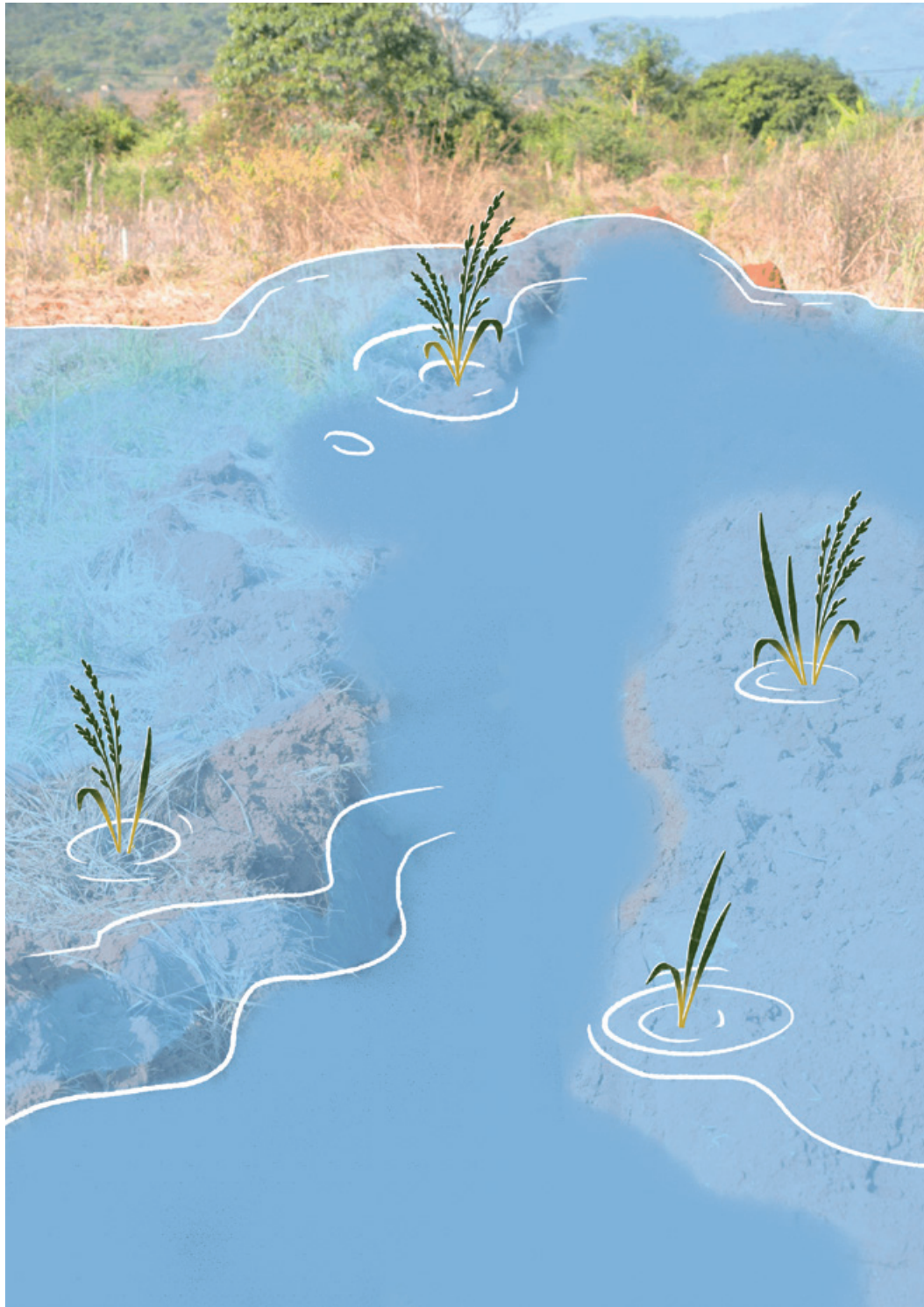
# Sisimo Co-op

📍 Mswati, Hhohho region

At the northernmost point of Eswatini, the dry, red soil of this rural area seems to run farther than the human eye can see, even beyond the horizon line. But it takes only a turn to the right or to the left at any crossroads (and sometimes, some courage and definitely some good driving skills) to stumble across green patches of harvested plots. This quite puzzling scenario of dryness dotted with flourishing green becomes even more surreal when visiting the flooded hectares where Sisimo Co-op grows rice.







*'The constant irrigation throughout the whole growing process is what turns the rice paddies into a ravishing landscape covered with water mirrors, suddenly broken here and there by tender green sprouts.'*

The 86 members (the majority being women) currently engaged in the cooperative take care of every single grain of rice along the production line, from seeding to packaging. Seedlings are collectively bought from South Africa or Malkerns and spread over the land, appropriately prepared to welcome a new harvest. The constant irrigation throughout the growing process is what turns the rice paddies into a ravishing landscape covered with water mirrors, suddenly broken here and there by tender green sprouts. As soon as the grains appear in long panicles at the top of each stem, showing proper maturation, they'll be ready to be harvested. And only then will the magic spell of the flooded fields be broken and the water drained to allow farmers to walk in and gather the crops.

Change of scene: still outdoors, a vast terrace breaks the green. Another sea now comes to life – and it's brown, with shades and spots of yellow, ochre and white. These are grains, coarsely scattered on a cement platform to dry at the right point (monitored and determined by a moisture metre) before getting milled.

Another change of scene: indoors, twilight, rough cement all over and decorated stained-glass windows letting some mild rays of light filter into the room. The air is filled with some thick powder and the constant buzzing of a machine whose parts are shaken by a rhythmic vibration. This is the mill, overseen by a group of men working at Sisimo. Here 'rough rice' passes through shellers that eliminate the inedible hulls that won't go to waste, because everything left out of the production line will be retained for farmers to feed their pigs and chickens. Fine white rice coming out of the main pipe is shovelled into loose bags woven with resistant plastic threads, ready to be shipped all over the country, where rice is considered a staple food as much as maize, especially by a specific segment of the population: Asian immigrants and their descendants.

Rice can also be bought by the local community directly from Sisimo facilities, and it's not the only product available. In fact, members of the cooperative have perfected an efficient agricultural calendar that, besides the six months needed to grow and harvest rice, makes provision for the land to be used in the









remaining months of the year to grow baby vegetables and other high-value produce. The choice of varieties is left to the members, each of them owning and running a hectare. Any time a farmer decides to return the land to the organisation because of a lack of energy or capacity, or simply to enable a new generation to take over, the hectare is reassigned to people who show an interest in joining, preference being given to youths and to those who have studied agriculture. Yet, Sisimo is far from being an autarchy: members have implemented an organisational structure that allows the cooperative to be recognised as a single voice, the members' requests to be better heard, and major expenses to be rendered more sustainable when split and shared. The chairperson of the cooperative is responsible for collecting, sharing and implementing new inputs by the members, helped by the deputy members, the secretary and the financial supervisor, so that each organisational, logistical and financial aspect is taken care of and constantly monitored. The diligence of the cooperative and its

*'The diligence of the cooperative and its members has allowed it to ensure stable market access; it has also enabled it to sustain and implement production from the inside.'*



members has allowed it to ensure stable market access; it has also enabled it to sustain and implement production from the inside. For example, besides some major facilities and equipment, such as the rice mill, that were donated, Sisimo Co-op could also buy three farming machines and a car from their own production output.

In the same encouraging spirit and at a constant, steady pace, Sisimo Co-op aims to strengthen its capacity even more and acquire new machines and introduce new infrastructure to make life easier and ensure profitable growth that will attract the younger generations to join and invest their energy and resources in the agricultural sector.



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