



# HOLY COW

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*Revered across generations and consumed in special bars, milk is much more than a liquid you pour into your coffee in Rwanda. We visit Kigali's best milk bars to find out why the drink is so important to millions*

# سليم





As the sun sets over the ‘city of a thousand hills’, Kigali, there is a warm atmosphere in the air and vibrant chatter can be heard coming from what looks like a small nondescript shop perched by the roadside in the populous Gasabo District. A cross-section

of university students, motorcycle taxi drivers, market vendors and street hawkers are spilling out the front of the premises holding plastic cups filled to the brim with ivory-white liquid, residual white lines topping their upper lips. What are they drinking? Milk. Where are they drinking it? Milk World, one of Kigali’s 50 plus milk bars.

This joyful congregation sees young and old socialising and bonding over milk, Rwanda’s most besought and beloved drink. It’s a land where locals prefer this thick creamy liquid over all other drinks, including alcohol. Milk bars, serving exclusively milk to the country’s residents, act as local watering holes. People sit in milk bars every day from dawn to dusk with a get-what-you’re-given jumble of cups, mugs and glasses filled with milk: fermented or fresh, cold or hot, but never, ever flavoured.

“Milk is my favourite drink, I can’t imagine my life without it,” says Isimbi Mugwaneza, a market lady who sips from a tall glass surrounded by friends at Milk World. She tells me tradition dictates you must finish the cup immediately, drink it fast which has been a common practice for decades. “But I do have friends who like to sip their milk slowly while eating snacks like chapatis and cakes to savour the taste of milk between your lips,”

**Opposite page:** Inyambo cattle at the King’s Palace Museum  
**This page:** A glass of goodness at a private milk bar business in Kicukiro, the Inyange Milk Zone in Nyamirambo

she adds. It is also drunk in a delightfully frothy form called ikivuguto, that’s fresh milk mixed with boiling inshyushyu (fresh hot milk) and is usually enjoyed by older generations who sit on bar stools or chairs in milk bars discussing community affairs. There are pictures of cows on the walls at Milk World. If you like, you can also purchase cartons of milk to take home.

Mugisha Kwizera, a hawker proudly proclaims: “I’ve been drinking milk for as long as I can remember and it’s a culture that I would like my children and future generations to have.”

Kwizera likes to drink milk after a long day of selling commodities in Kigali. Milk is an important part of his upbringing because he grew up seeing his parents, and grandparents, drinking milk regularly and followed suit. It’s an important tradition to pass on.

There are now hundreds of milk bars scattered across Rwanda serving its population of 13.46 million. The popularity of these wholesome hotspots is driven by a tradition attached to the value of cows and milk in Rwanda’s rich cultural identity and ancient history.

For centuries in Rwanda, cows have been a symbol of wealth and status. “Cows were the most



## COWS WERE THE MOST IMPORTANT GIFT TO A LOVED ONE

important gift you could give to a loved one. They symbolised our highest values as a people,” says Francis Twahirwa, a tour guide from King’s Palace Museum in Nyanza, a modern reconstruction of the traditional royal residence where you can find a small herd of elegant long-horned Inyambo cattle, descended from the king’s herd, whose keepers carefully tend and sing to them, keeping alive a unique bovine tradition.

“Cows were also exchanged during dowries when a man wanted to marry a woman, his wealth and social status was determined by how many cows he brought to her family,” adds Twahirwa. Cows were regarded as currency in Rwanda from the 15th century until 1954 when King Mutara III Rudahigwa ended the practice.

Historically, the Tutsi monarchy believed that milk was sacred and that it was a taboo to sell the valuable commodity. Cows milk was stored right behind the King’s Palace (now King’s Palace Museum). Milk only began being sold in the 1900s when Rwanda was colonised by the German Empire.

In Kinyarwanda, Rwanda’s national language, there are many positive references to cows. To express gratitude, you say “nguhaye inka” (I’ll give you a cow) and to wish someone well you say “gira inka” (may you have a cow) and the response to



Above: Rwandans use traditional dance to celebrate their close connection to milk and cows

that is “amashongore” (have thousands of cows). These phrases are used in everyday language spoken by all Rwandans.

In another Kigali milk bar, Milk Zone, Claude Nkurunziza, a university student tells me, “Milk gives me strength and power. Without milk, I wouldn’t be who I am.” Nkurunziza visits milk bars multiple times during the week as part of his routine to stay fit and healthy – as important as exercise and sleep.

It is commonly believed in Rwanda that milk is fundamental to developing brain power and parents urge their children to drink milk to get good grades in school. Cows are so intrinsic to Rwandan culture that children are frequently named after them – popular local names include: Giramata (have milk),



**HERD IT  
HERE FIRST**

Three alternatives to cow's milk, popular around the world

**Hump day is coming**

Hailed for its medicinal properties and low fat content, camel milk is often called 'white gold' and enjoyed in India, the UAE and Kenya. It contains five times more vitamin C than cow's milk and its popularity is rising in the UK and US as the latest health drink. [camelicious.ae](http://camelicious.ae)

**Give peas a chance**

Pea milk is one of the closest non-dairy alternatives to cow's milk and contains higher levels of protein, calcium and vitamin D to other shop-bought plant-based milks. And no, it's not green. [sproud.uk](http://sproud.uk)

**Buffalicious drink**

Water buffalo have lived in India and China for over 7,000 years. Nowadays they are bred and grass fed all over the world for their creamy, high protein milk. It's an essential ingredient in mozzarella from Italy and there are creameries in the UK. But Asia is home to 95% of its worldwide production. [buffaliciousuk.com](http://buffaliciousuk.com)



Above: Cowboy Ngabo Alexis Karegeya at the Inyange Milk Zone  
Below: Fresh milk is dispatched from the Mukamira Dairy in the Nyabihu District





Above: A small business outside the Musanze District serves milk to thirsty customers

Munganyinka (valuable as a cow), Kanyana (female cow) or Inyamibwa (beautiful cow).

Traditional dances are also dedicated to cows, the Umushayayo is a dance where women imitate the movement of cows and in the Ikinyemera dance women and men stretch their arms upwards to portray cows. These dances started being performed in front of the Royal Court pre-colonialism and they are now performed to celebrate special occasions.

A study by Joseph Rwanyagahutu in 1961 revealed that an average Rwandan drinks 12 litres of milk annually. For most of the 20th century, there was a shortage of milk in the country. The government started importing Holstein Freisian cattle in the 1980s but during the infamous 1994 Rwandan Genocide over 90% of the cattle in Rwanda were slaughtered.

Cattle-keeping families who were traditionally from the Tutsi tribe were targeted by Hutu extremists. While the country was re-assembling itself in the late 1990s, milk bars emerged as great way to rekindle the bad blood between the

## MILK IS A CRUCIAL PART OF OUR CULTURE

community. “During the period of justice and reconciliation, people used milk as an ice breaker where hard topics were discussed in tribunal courts while people drank milk,” Twahirwa explains.

The government has since looked to cows to fight malnutrition and grow the economy. In 2006, president Paul Kagame introduced the Girinka Programme (which means “may you have a cow” in Kinyarwanda) to give every family a cow. Over 400,000 have been distributed in Rwanda.

During the Covid pandemic, more than half of Rwanda’s small dairy businesses closed. Keza Bisangwa, the owner of Milk World in the Gasabo District says his milk bar struggled to survive during the pandemic.

“I was barely able to pay rent and delayed paying my employees for months because of the lockdowns,” he says. “There were also milk shortages at the time and I didn’t think my business would survive. I’m so grateful to still have my milk bar when so many closed down. It’s been a great experience welcoming back my regular customers and seeing people enjoy themselves again.”

Milk production in Rwanda is once again on the rise. In January 2024, the Rwandan government began enhancing the quality and quantity of milk through an educational projects working with Alabama A&M University and the University of Global Health Equity.

Twahirwa believes this is an important step. “Milk is a crucial part of our culture as a people and bars unify the Rwandan community,” he points out. “This tradition needs to live on for future identity so that our children never lose their true identity.”



Ethiopian Airlines is SKYTRAX’s Best Airline in Africa winner for six consecutive years

### CREAM OF THE CROP

Three other countries who value milk in their culture

#### India

The country with the largest dairy herd in the world – last count over 300 million bovines that produce over 187 million tons of milk and generate the highest production and consumption of milk. In Hindu culture, cows are seen as a sacred symbol of life.

#### Sweden

The second highest milk consumption in Europe (after Finland) and in folk medicine here, milk was used to treat common ailments like colds, whooping cough and fevers. Filmjök also is a traditional fermented milk product from Sweden.

#### USA

The USA has had a long-standing positive relationship with milk. The ‘Got milk?’ ad campaign in the 1990s saw prominent Hollywood stars of the time with milk moustaches. Today, milk consumption per capita is roughly 661 pounds per person.