



A new podcast  
from the most trusted  
voice in music

THE  
**Pitchfork**  
REVIEW

SUBSCRIBE

Falling For Beer

october



Women of Beer

# Black Female Brewers Are Reclaiming Craft Beer in South Africa

October 16, 2019

Brewmaster Yamkela Mbakaza grew up watching her grandmother brew.

In South Africa's black Xhosa and Zulu ethnicities, women were traditionally in charge of brewing umqombothi: a homemade beer made from maize malt, sorghum malt, yeast, and water. Umqombothi is made for special occasions like weddings, funerals, and the homecoming ceremonies when boys return as men after circumcision and initiation. It's traditionally prepared over an open fire before it's poured into a large drum known as a gogogo. When family and friends arrive for the party, they help themselves to a taste.

The beer is typically fizzy on top, and thick and sour throughout thanks to the maize. It's light in alcohol by volume (ABV), only about 3%. The recipe is often passed down in families through the generations. Today, it's still a common drink in some South African townships.

Beer-making turned into a man's job during the industrial period, but now South Africa's craft beer scene is seeing young black females, like 26-year-old Mbakaza, come up as brewmasters.

In a full-circle phenomenon, many remember umqombothi being made in their childhood, though they never dreamed they would grow up to be brewers for a living.

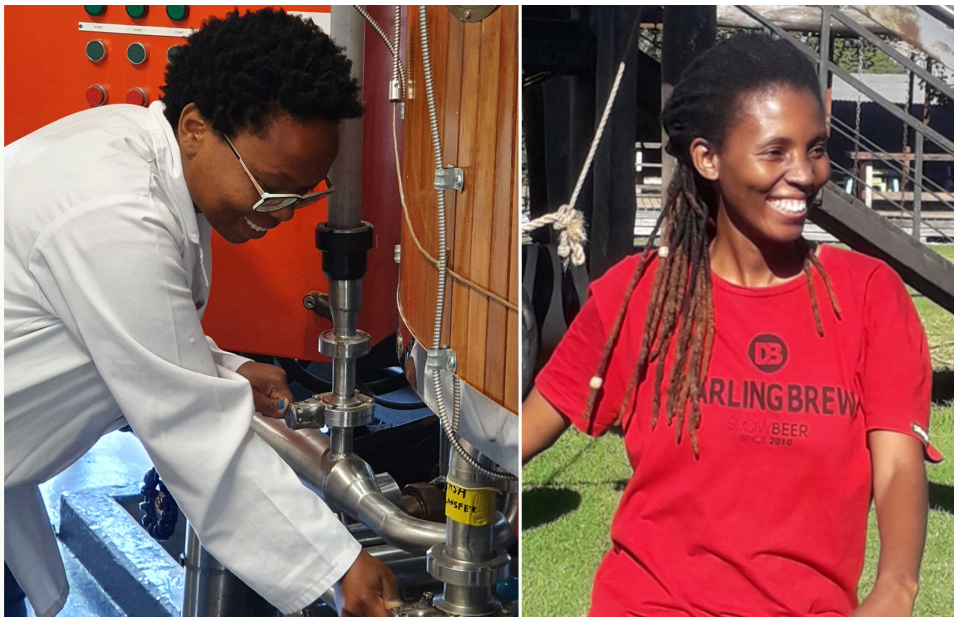
"I remember the first time I tasted [umqombothi], I went to brush my teeth after—it was terrible," she laughs. "What I love about brewing is the science behind it. I want to branch out and produce gin and ciders. By completing a national brewing diploma, and I want to be able to experience how brewers function outside of South Africa, too."

Mbakaza studied microbiology and biochemistry and is almost finished getting her brewing diploma. At the same time, she is managing Brewhogs, a microbrewery in Kyalami north of Johannesburg.



By Barbara Woolsey





Yamkela Mbakaza of Brewhogs (left) and Joyce Denson of Darling Brewery.

In 1927, the South African government passed the Liquor Act barring non-white South Africans from entering licensed premises or selling alcohol. As a result, illegal watering holes called shebeens rose up in townships throughout the apartheid era. They were operated by women, known as “Shebeen Queens,” who welcomed the community into their homes, selling commercial beer but also brewing umqombothi. Political gatherings often happened at shebeens and as such, they were often subject to police raids.

These days shebeens still exist, although they are legal now and frequented by young people. They are a cultural relic, preserving the past in a post-apartheid South Africa.

In a way, craft brewing is also an extension of upholding ethnic and cultural traditions – an element of the healing that is still carrying on 25 years after the end of the cruel, racist system.

But like many other black Xhosa women who have taken up brewing professionally, Mbakaza has had to prove to her family that it offers real career opportunities. There are still old-fashioned misconceptions about brewing which fuel stigma and gender stereotypes, she says.

“In my grandmother’s mind, she had just some idea of me tasting alcohol in a tavern the whole day,” she explains. “But I’m doing it for two years now and she sees I’m not a drunkard yet. I remember when I started, she said, ‘At least, if you were a boy this would be fine.’ Women are the ones who initially started brewing, so why is it a man’s thing now? It’s about removing the stigma that beer is all about men.”

Similarly, learning to brew has been an empowering experience for Joyce Denson. The 27-year-old single mother of two is a junior brewer at Darling Brewery, a microbrewery and taproom in Darling on South Africa’s Western Cape.

At the age of 19, she left Zimbabwe in search of better economic opportunities.

“I was cleaning houses, and the wife of the brewery’s co-owner wanted someone who could help with spring cleaning,” she says. “I was thinking, I’m going to clean her house for that day and that will be it, but she offered me a job, as the brewery was based in Cape Town and moving to Darling.”

## “Like in any other industry, we need equal representation of women.”



She started working as a server in the taproom but when the head brewer offered employees the opportunity to learn about brewing if they were keen to, she jumped at the chance.

“I see myself doing this forever and ever,” says Denson, whose kids are 3 and 9 years old. “When I face challenges, I just find my inspiration in what I’m doing and I know this is my purpose.”

She finds strength in the example of other female brewers, like Apiwe Nxusani-Mawela, who this

year became the first black female South African to open a microbrewery.

With Brewer's Craft, Nxusani-Mawela produces beer for other labels and teaches students. Helping women to get opportunities in the male-dominated brewing scene is one of her biggest passions, so she organizes International Women's Collaboration Brew Day events.

"Like in any other industry, we need equal representation of women," says Nxusani-Mawela. "We all face similar challenges [in opening a brewery] like licensing and funding. But for women, it's more challenging because there are not as many women in the industry."

Denson recently bought farmland for her mother back in Zimbabwe, and her dream is to open a microbrewery in her homeland where people can learn about the brewing process.

"My advice [to other women who want to pursue craft brewing] is to not be intimidated," she says.

"Don't just look at your challenges or obstacles, but at the end product, what you are giving to people. If you take it that way you won't go wrong. There are lots of opportunities for us females in this industry. I would say go for it."

---

*Top photo courtesy of Darling Brewery.*

ZX Ventures, a division within AB InBev, is an investor in October

#### RELATED ARTICLES



# october