



THE RWANDA CRAFT BEER PROJECT

Craft beer is gradually gaining ground across the continent, with microbreweries now found in at least a dozen African countries. **Lucy Corne** turns her sights to Rwanda and finds a local brewery with a fascinating backstory.





What is it we have here that we can brew with?" It is Jessi Flynn who poses the question, but it is a question that lies at the

heart of everything that happens at Kweza Craft Brewery, the first craft brewery in Rwanda. One of the core goals of the upcoming brewery is to focus on raw materials sourced from local farmers. But with little barley grown locally and no malthouses in the country even if the raw grain was available, craft beer as we know it has to be reinvented for the Rwandan market.

It is not the only challenge the Kweza team has faced since the brewery was first imagined back in 2016. It all began with a Kigali businesswoman, Josephine "Fina" Uwineza. A successful entrepreneur in the food and beverage sector, Fina set out to find funding and expertise to help launch the country's first microbrewery. The dream was that the brewery would be woman-owned and women-led, not only employing mainly women for the brewery operations, but sourcing ingredients from women in rural areas who use small-scale agriculture to support their families.

Thanks to an introduction by Nancy Coldham, a Canadian consultant who had mentored women entrepreneurs in Rwanda, Fina found the support she needed. Beau's All Natural Brewing Co., an employee-run brewery in Ontario, Canada, launched a Kickstarter campaign, raising over CA\$100,000 (ZAR 1.1million) to help secure a bottling line. They also rallied support within the Canadian beer community, managing to find a company to

pledge a new brewhouse for the Rwandan start-up. Beau's have offered advice and support throughout the journey, but the Canadian brewery does not own a part of what would go on to become Kweza.

ROAD BUMPS

The goal had been to break ground on the Kigali brewery in 2017 and to stage a grand opening in July 2018, but securing the perfect location proved tricky. In early 2018, Fina stepped away from the project to focus on family life and less than a year later, the manufacturer that had pledged the brewing equipment went into receivership.

"I don't see them as setbacks," says Jessi Flynn. "It all just keeps shaping what Kweza is. If we can't get the equipment, we will manufacture the first 'made in Rwanda' brewhouse. If we can't get malt, we'll work



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out how to malt our own grain or find other alternatives." Jessi officially joined the Kweza team late last year after volunteering on the project in her spare time for 12



Agricultural hillsides and fields, Northern Rwanda



Kweza Kickstarter Team at Beau's Oktoberfest in 2016.

L-R: Steve Beauchesne, Nancy Coldham, Christian Riemerschmid von der Heide, and Fina Uwineza



Chiedza Mufunde (right) has recently joined the Kweza brew crew alongside Patrick Rukundo (left) and Jessi Flynn (centre)



Northern Rwanda countryside

months. A landscape architect by trade, the American expat had been homebrewing for years and on discovering the lack of variety in Rwandan beer, she asked her father to send over her homebrew kit. Fast forward a few years and she popped onto

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the radar of Beau's CO, Steve Beauchesne and is now managing the Kweza project until a local team is in place.

Long before Jessi was involved, the brewing team at Beau's – along with Fina Uwineza – were working on recipes that would replace typical beer brewing ingredients with locally sourced alternatives. As well as sorghum and cassava, Beau's brewers in Canada began experimenting with bananas, taking inspiration from traditional Rwandan *urwagwa* – an alcoholic brew made from the juice of ripe bananas, fermented with wild yeast found on sorghum or millet.

QUENCHING THE LOCAL THIRST

Jessi is now forging ahead with those recipes along with Rwandan-born Patrick Rukundo. "I have a feeling he's going to be a brewing force in the future," says Jessi of Patrick, a chemical engineer who interned at Heineken and fell in love with

craft beer while living in the USA. Patrick had been experimenting with sorghum in his homebrews when he heard about Kweza. "The mission really resonated with me," he says. "I had started experimenting with different grains and really wanted to produce a beer that is 100% Rwandan, most likely using locally grown sorghum." Patrick has been picking the brains of sorghum guru Clement Djameh of Inland Microbrewery in Ghana in a bid to create a craft beer using sorghum in place of barley.

Jessi and Patrick are devising recipes not just for beers but for other beverages they find a local thirst for, including kombucha, ginger ale and possibly mead. "The beverages are all based on what grows well here," says Jessi. "Just over 80% of Rwandans rely on agriculture as a means of income so it's really important to us to support local farmers." There is also a financial incentive to buy local, with a 60-70% excise slapped onto imported ingredients compared to 30% for local produce.

With a brewhouse still to be secured, Jessi and Patrick are producing test batches on a 50-litre system to try out on the local audience. With no other craft breweries in the country and the market of course dominated by pale lagers, it's crucial that the team works out what will quench the local thirst. "There is a restaurant here that brings in some IPAs and other speciality beers," says Patrick. "Then Skol, one of our large producers, makes Virunga [a 6.5% ABV dark ale] which they call a craft beer. But really, anything other than lager is considered quite strange."

Once the recipes are finalised, Jessi plans to set up tastings at a few hand-picked venues until their own brewpub premises are ready to open. The official brand launch though, falls on a rather auspicious date – March 8th, International Women's Day. It is then that Kigali's residents can finally quench their thirst with a truly home-grown beer that's been nearly four years in the making. ☺

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Kweza is a Kinyarwanda word with a dual meaning: 'to ripen' and 'to build up through compliments'.



Kigali skyline

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