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ENTREPRENEUR: Brewing up a dream

Apr 2, 2015 | Stafford Thomas

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GOLD fever has returned to Gauteng. But this time it is beer drinkers who are staking a claim to treasure of a very different type: Soweto Gold.

Brewed in the new Ubuntu Kraal Brewery (UKB) in Orlando West, Soweto Gold is the dream-come-true of Ndimiso Madlala, founder of UKB's parent company, MadMead Brewing Co.

Just 16 months since Soweto Gold's trial launch and six months since UKB turned on the taps, the golden brew is a firm favourite. "We are in 50 restaurants in Gauteng and are adding five to six a week," says Madlala. "We are also in five in Durban and three in Cape Town."

Meeting demand is the only constraint. "We are producing at full capacity of 30000l/month and will have doubled capacity by December," says Madlala.

A confessed Black Label drinker during his University of KwaZulu-Natal student days, Madlala discovered his true passion for beer while he was studying for an MSc in chemical engineering at Enschede's Twente University in the Netherlands. "I came across real beer," he says. Armed with his MSc, Madlala started his career at Dutch firm Norit as an engineer working on a revolutionary beer filtration process. He returned to SA in 2004.

After a year with Sasol, his passion for beer took him to SABMiller, where he worked as an engineer.

Technical know-how earned Madlala a key position at Heineken's new Sedibeng brewery, where he spent three years, until he was again poached by SABMiller.

"I consulted to their [SABMiller] breweries in 14 African countries," he says.

Along the way Madlala earned a diploma in brewing from the UK's Institute of Brewing & Distilling. It is a qualification that has proved invaluable in his role as entrepreneur.

In October 2012 Madlala founded MadMead Brewing Co. Developing his dream brew began two months later. "I knew what I wanted," he says. "I had to create a beer that was less bitter than most SA beers and also slightly sweet."

After six months of tasting and ever-larger test batches, Soweto Gold was born. "It can't be compared with mainstream premium beers brewed for mass consumption," says Madlala. "It is a hand-made superior beer."

Soweto Gold began its commercial days brewed under licence by Nottingham Road Brewery. It gave Madlala the foundation to group together local and foreign investors to back him in a R6,5m venture to build UKB. His own money very much on the line, Madlala remains the largest MadMead Brewing Co shareholder.

Madlala's vision does not end with the current expansion of UKB. "I am targeting annual production of a million hectolitres within 10 years," he says.

Quality will not be compromised by volume, vows Madlala. "Our beer will always be handmade," he says.

And the hands may all be female. "Culturally, in Africa it has always been women who have made beer," says Madlala.

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