

BUSINESS CASE • SOUTH AFRICA

Umqombothi: A brew of heritage, community and caution

**Apiwe Nxusani-Mawela,
Founder of Tolokazi**



Brief overview of the traditional fermented drink

Umqombothi is a traditional South African beer made from maize, sorghum and sometimes pearl millet. Umqombothi was referred to as 'kaffir' beer in the 1950s, particularly in South African mining communities. The beer possesses profound cultural and social significance among South Africans.



Today, it remains a vital part of social life, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas. The beer is often used in rituals to honour ancestors, which form an important part of many indigenous African belief systems. Umqombothi emphasises nutrition over alcohol content, with a typical alcohol by volume of around 3%. It is nutrient-rich and has a thick, sometimes chewy consistency.



Food Processor

Apiwe Nxusani-Mawela, born in 1984 in Butterworth, South Africa, is one of the pioneering female brewers in the African brewing industry. Her interest in beer making was sparked during her high school years after visiting a university open day. She pursued a BSc degree at the University of the Witwatersrand and an Honours degree in Microbiology & Biotechnology from the University of Pretoria. In 2006, she joined SABMiller through their graduate recruitment program and underwent intensive training to become a qualified brewer.

In 2010, she became the first person in South Africa to complete the National Diploma in Clear Fermented Beverages. After years of working with SABMiller, she joined Brewhogs Microbrewery as a Brewmaster and Shareholder in 2015, before founding her own company, Brewsters Craft, the first black female-owned brewing company in South Africa.

Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, Apiwe remains a key figure in the brewing industry, leading her beer and cider brand, Tolokazi, which celebrates African brewing heritage with indigenous ingredients. Apiwe is also involved in skills development, entrepreneurship coaching, and business support across the African continent.





Value Chain

The journey of umqombothi begins in the fields, where **farmers** nurture the grains that will one day fill the calabash. On vast lands, commercial farmers use tractors, harvesters, and silos to produce maize, sorghum, and millet on a large scale. In rural homesteads, subsistence farmers rely on their hands, and family labour, drying and storing their harvests in traditional containers. Whether through modern machinery or age-old methods, it is here that the story of umqombothi is planted and harvested.

From the fields, the grains move into the hands of **wholesalers**, the great movers of the chain. They buy in bulk, gather, and redistribute, linking the farmer's effort to the miller's craft. They arrange transport, control quality, and negotiate prices, ensuring that sacks of maize or sorghum find their way to both urban processors and village shops.

Millers then transform the raw harvest into usable form. Some specialise in grinding maize into fine meals or crushing malted sorghum into flour. Others take on the malting process themselves, adding depth and readiness to the grains. Their flour is bagged and passed along, finding its way to retailers in busy markets and to processors who carry the ancestral duty of brewing.

Finally, the **processors** of umqombothi are the ones responsible for carrying out the fermentation process, and the final product flows to consumers, who raise their clay pots at weddings, funerals, and community gatherings. Their enjoyment, their critiques, and their traditions complete the cycle, sending signals back through the chain. Thus, the value chain of umqombothi is not just economic, it is cultural, weaving together livelihoods, community, and heritage in every drop.



Impact

Apiwe Nxusani-Mawela broke new ground by becoming the first woman of her background to own a brewing company, founding Brewsters Craft in 2015, and later launching her own brand, Tolokazi Beer and Cider, which draws inspiration from African brewing heritage through indigenous ingredients.

The impact of her work extends far beyond the brewery floor. Her creations won acclaim both locally and internationally, earning a bronze medal for sorghum pilsner and a silver medal for mango beer at the 2021 African Beer Cup, a bronze for label design at the 2021 Winemag Awards, and platinum at the 2022 International Craft Beer Marketing Awards. She also became the first person in South Africa to complete a National Diploma in Clear Fermentation Beverages (NQF 6) through the FoodBev SETA and Institute of Brewing and Distilling Africa Section, consolidating her role as a pioneer of African brewing knowledge.

Today, Apiwe is not only a brewer but also a respected certified BJCP judge, lending her expertise to prestigious competitions such as the African Beer Cup, Brazil Beer Cup, European Beer Star and World Beer Cup. Her journey represents impact data in motion. She has opened doors for women and underrepresented brewers, elevated indigenous ingredients onto international stages, and inspired a generation to see umqombothi and African beer not only as heritage, but as innovation with global recognition.

Quote

” One has to be really passionate as there will be days that test your limits. Brewing is very physical and one needs to be okay with the fact that wearing makeup, jewellery or stilettos at work is a big no, especially if you will be spending time in the plant.

Social media information and website

WEBSITE	https://tolokazibeer.co.za/
FACEBOOK	https://www.facebook.com/apiwe.nxusani/ https://www.facebook.com/Tolokazibeer
INSTAGRAM	https://www.instagram.com/tolokazi_thebrewster/
TIKTOK	https://www.linkedin.com/in/apiwe-nxusani-mawela-741bbb2b/?originalSubdomain=za



Gallery of Pictures



↑ Apiwe Nxusani-Mawela,
founder of Tolokazi



↑ Tolokazi team



←
A bowl used to
filter fermented
umqombothi



↑ Grains being dried in the sun