

BUSINESS CASE • SOUTH AFRICA

Umqombothi: Revitalising tradition through science

**Thembisile Ndlovu,
The Queen of Umqombothi**



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

Thembisile Ndlovu, famously known as The Queen of Umqombothi, is a trailblazer in modernising traditional African beer and introducing it into the entertainment industry. Her expertise and leadership are widely recognised, she has served as a judge at umqombothi competitions and received international attention, including a certificate of recognition at the Dubai Expo 2020.

The umqombothi business was started after Thembisile was named one of the top 3 in a local umqombothi competition. The business idea came from a patron who came to taste her umqombothi and told her that her umqombothi was unique. Thembisile's wish for the future is to start an umqombothi festival in South Africa.

Her impact on the arts and culture has been formally acknowledged through a nomination at the Soweto Tourism Awards. She graduated with the University of Johannesburg for Small Business Enrichment Programme.

Thembisile's story behind her business is to reconnect people with their roots by promoting tradition and culture through umqombothi. She honours ancestral practices, preserves cultural identity, and brings this iconic beverage back into the heart of community and daily life.





Value Chain

The key stakeholders and their roles in the Umqombothi value chain are

FARMERS	Land preparation, planting, cultivating key grains (maize, sorghum, millet), crop care, harvesting, and drying.
WHOLESALEERS	Grain aggregators and distributors. Buy in bulk from farmers, handle transport, storage, quality control and pricing. Supply grains to millers, processors, and some retailers.
MILLERS	Grain processors. Mill maize and malted sorghum into flour; package and distribute to producers and retailers. Sometimes store milled grains to maintain supply.
RETAILERS	Local distributors. Sell grains or milled products in small quantities to home-based processors and local consumers. Operate in markets or community shops.
PROCESSORS	Brewmasters of umqombothi. Ferment grains, monitor quality, and produce the final brew. Sell directly to consumers, shaping taste and consistency.
CONSUMERS	Umqombothi end-users. Purchase umqombothi (often in 20L containers) for cultural, social or religious events. Offer feedback that influences future batches.



Impact Data

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:	4
QUANTITY SOLD PER WEEK:	40 litres

Quotes

What are you most proud of in your business?

” I am proud of the achievements I have obtained through my business, such as being featured on several international and national newspapers, magazines and expositions; obtaining my certificate of Small Business Enrichment Programme with Johannesburg Business School (JBS); and being the first lady to start selling umqombothi in our entertainment industry.

What would you like to do next in your business?

” What I would like to do next is to suppress the stigma that says umqombothi imbamba. Imbamba refers to a version of brewed umqombothi that has been adulterated with harmful substances, such as battery acid or other toxic additives. This dangerous practice is often driven by attempts to increase potency or reduce fermentation time, but it poses serious health risks to consumers and undermines cultural and traditional integrity. I want to educate our people about the health benefits of authentic umqombothi and own a modernised shebeen.

Social media information and website

WEBSITE	https://queenofumqombothi.co.za/
FACEBOOK	https://www.facebook.com/thembisile.ndlovu1?rdid=0UdaG77e02fyynCX
INSTAGRAM	https://www.instagram.com/thequeenofumqombothi/
TIKTOK	https://www.tiktok.com/@thequeenofumqombo?_t=ZM-8xAGJNjhZwM&_r=1



Gallery of Pictures

↓ The Queen of Umqombothi with UP-RISE partners.
Thembisile Ndlovu produced Umqombothi for all participants
at the UP-RISE General Assembly in Johannesburg.

