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UCT student turns craving for kota into thriving business

A University of Cape Town (UCT) student, who craved for a kota sandwich on her arrival in Cape Town and couldn't get one, has turned her cravings into a successful enterprise.



"Tshom yam" – one of Khoza's best-selling kotas

Photo: Supplied

As a first-year student at UCT in 2020, Khensani Khoza was a long way from home. She yearned for face-to-face connections with her family because FaceTime and WhatsApp video calls just weren't doing the trick. But what she missed most was the food.

The thought of the food kept Khoza awake at night! The aromas from her mother's kitchen and the perfect flavours that she got to enjoy at the end of a long day were what she missed most. Life as a first-year social science student was hard enough, and without those familial ties and familiar flavours her soul desperately craved, it was doubly tough.

Khoza scoured the areas near her UCT residence for meals that reminded her of home. What she longed for was a kota (a giant sandwich with a filling of your choice). But what the Mother City had to offer did not come close to what she was used to at home in Johannesburg. So, she changed that. Thanks to her knack for cooking, Khoza fed her craving and before she knew it, she was feeding other students' cravings too, selling kotas on campus. And the appetite for her product was enormous. It seemed everyone was after the same kind of soul food.

"So many students enjoyed the kotas. There was clearly a gap in the market because I couldn't keep up with the demand. In 2022, I was invited to exhibit at a campus market day and, as they say, the rest is history," Khoza explained.

From tiny seeds

From tiny seeds, grow mighty trees. After her highly successful exhibit, Khoza launched Build-a-Bite, a street food business that prioritises students who are crazy about the kota. Since the launch, she has also partnered with Food & Connect, a UCT student-focused food service provider and successfully integrated her concept into these outlets on campus.

Food & Connect provides Khoza with the kitchen space she needs to operate her business from. And her staff members are situated at outlets across campus to prepare kotas from scratch, servicing their growing market of hungry students and bringing them the flavours they love.

"The idea was to get into Food & Connect and to bring this service to other students who may not have been familiar with my little business, and it worked. They took a chance on a budding entrepreneur, and we are doing really well," she said. "I love bringing students who are not from Cape Town a taste of home through my food. Studying far from your family can be quite lonely. But the little things like a kota goes a long way and we see that it has brightened many days."

Branching out

Khoza, who graduated from UCT in March, has big plans for her business, which includes taking it to other universities in the country. And her market research, which she conducted among students at other universities in the country including Cape Peninsula University of Technology, the University of the Western Cape, the University of Johannesburg and North-West University, has revealed an equally healthy appetite for the kota.

But branching out takes work. This, Khoza explained, includes conducting feasibility studies and ensuring there's enough capital to successfully scale and sustain Build-a-Bite outside UCT's campuses. It's not a decision that she can make overnight.

"Entrepreneurship is so rewarding. But it takes a lot of hard work and dedication and the resolve to not give up. Branching out is a great idea and a dream for my business. But it requires enough capital to ensure that we are successful on that side. So, it's not a decision

that I can make in a blink of an eye. There are many pros and cons that need to be weighed up first," she said.

Be the change

Khoza described her journey as a successful entrepreneur as a rewarding whirlwind. She said it has brought with it endless challenges and opportunities and has forced her to think out of the box to ensure its success.

"The reality is that we need to be the change we seek for our society. We have the power to change things and so we must. Entrepreneurship is a calling, and it is a demanding venture, regardless of the kind of business you're running. But it has the power to make the shift in society that we so need. It solves mighty challenges our communities face and benefits the entrepreneur and the consumer," Khoza said.

And despite the challenges that come with tough economic times, she said these challenges also serve as the driving force for opportunity and provide a platform for growth and development, especially for the entrepreneurially minded youth.

"When economies show up as dormant and non-progressive, it offers us new ideas and approaches that as young people we need to take advantage of. We can bring change if we're willing to be the change," Khoza said.



Khensani Khoza

Photo: Lerato Maduna

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