

Local is loved

How one Swati chef is putting indigenous ingredients back on the map



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WEEKEND SPLENDOUR

LOVING LOCAL

F&H

From stock exchange spreadsheets to dessert masterclasses, Neliswa Nkala's journey is anything but conventional. A qualified accountant with a BCom in Accounting and Finance, the Swati-born chef, content creator and food storyteller has emerged as one of Eswatini's boldest culinary voices.

'What began as a playful side hobby turned into a powerful purpose,' says Neliswa. 'Food, for me, is more than nourishment – it's a canvas for identity, creativity and impact.'

In 2018, she launched Mrs M Decadent Pleasures, a confectionery and charcuterie brand rooted in delicious flavours and bold storytelling. It wasn't long before her unique offerings caught the attention of major food festivals like MTN Bushfire and the Standard Bank Lujun Food & Lifestyle Festival. From catering private events to headlining cooking demos, her reputation quickly gained momentum, online and off.

But what makes Neliswa unique is her commitment to indigenous innovation. 'We've become so familiar with international cuisines – many of us know more about sushi than *chuchuza* (blackjack) or other plants from our backyards,' she says. 'I want to change that.'

Her love for African ingredients runs deep, and it's not just about nostalgia; it's about reclamation. 'Indigenous food isn't poor man's food. It's rich in story, healing and identity. These ingredients deserve a seat at the fine-dining table and a voice in global food conversations.'



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Neliswa Nkala is passionate about showcasing indigenous ingredients, adding her unique creative twist.

Her passion for local flavours is rooted in memory. Neliswa vividly recalls the scent of fruit trees outside her grandmother's home – marula, *emantulwa* (African medlar) – ingredients that would later become creative fuel for her culinary reinvention. 'I did not grow up steeped in tradition,' she says. 'But the legacy was always there, woven into the women and the land that raised me.'

This curiosity, combined with a deep cultural calling, gave birth to her now-famous Marula Cheesecake. Inspired by Eswatini's Buganu Festival – a celebration of womanhood and the marula fruit – it was Neliswa's way of asking: What more can this fruit become?

'I tasted it again after decades, and my palate lit up,' she recalls. 'Cheesecake is one of my signature creations, and I thought, why not push this even further?'

The process wasn't without challenges. 'Balancing the marula's flavour with the creamy richness of cheesecake took trial, error, and a lot of effort. I wasn't just developing a recipe. I was carrying culture.'

The result? A show-stopping dessert with layers of flavour and meaning. 'It's a reintroduction of an overlooked treasure, a love letter to my heritage, and a reminder that our stories belong on the world's stage.'

The response has been nothing short of electric. ‘I managed to get the cheesecake into the hands of about 300 people, and I received 300 affirmations,’ she smiles. ‘People were blown away that you could reimagine something so familiar like that. It wasn’t just dessert; it was heritage, innovation and flavour in one slice.’

And the world is noticing. Her Indigenous Food Innovation Series is now gaining traction across borders. Neliswa is reimagining ingredients like *chuchuza*, *imbuya* (amaranth), *umbhidvo wetintsanga* (pumpkin leaves), and *emahlala* (monkey orange), transforming them into modern creations, such as blackjack tartlets, marula ice cream and pumpkin leaf pizzas.

‘We’ve grown used to valuing pasta, sushi and naan bread,’ she says. ‘But why shouldn’t someone have a favourite *imbuya* pie or *emahlala* tart?’

At its core, her mission is about decolonising the African palate. ‘Our ancestors had the blueprint for vitality and sustainability,’ she says. ‘I’m simply picking it up again and adding a creative twist.’

Social media has helped bring her work to the forefront, offering a platform to showcase indigenous flavours in a modern, relatable way. With over 60 000 followers across social media and millions of impressions across TikTok and Instagram, her content – whether a marula cheesecake reveal or behind-the-scenes plating – resonates.

‘People don’t just want food; they want the story behind it,’ she says. ‘And when it’s rooted in heritage, that story hits differently.’

The accolades reflect the impact. She’s been honoured with the Blue Sheroes Award by Standard Bank and recognised by the Taiwan Africa Vegetable Initiative for her work in promoting African leafy vegetables. She’s baked 1 500-plus dessert offerings for the Central Bank of Eswatini’s Golden Jubilee, and hosts *Cooking with Mrs M* on Eswatini TV.

Her proudest moments? Headlining the Luju Food & Lifestyle Festival. ‘From being a top-five finalist one year to leading a Dessert Masterclass the following year, it was a full-circle moment,’ she says. ‘It felt like being given my flowers while I could still smell them.’

Now, she’s taking the next step: writing her first cookbook. ‘It’s a celebration of African fusion, rooted in Swati heritage but reimagined with creativity and modern flair,’ she says. ‘You’ll find everything from

chuchuza bread and marula cheesecake to nostalgic favourites with a twist.’

And there’s more to come. ‘At the top of my dream list is launching a product line of indigenous innovation items, including ready-to-eat dishes, condiments and pantry staples,’ she shares. ‘I want to take this work to food expos, global stages and communities across Africa. This isn’t just about food. It’s about cultural legacy.’

With every dish she creates, every story she tells and every barrier she breaks, Neliswa is reminding us that Africa has always had greatness on its plates – we just needed to see it that way.

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Indigenous Marula Cheesecake

An indulgent fusion of tradition and creativity.

PREP TIME 30 min
COOK TIME 1 hr 30 min
CHILL TIME 4 hrs+
SERVES 8-10

BASE

2 packs Tennis biscuits
125 g melted butter

FILLING

400 g cream cheese
½ cup castor sugar
4 eggs
250 ml sour cream
1 tsp vanilla extract
3 tbsp flour
10 fresh marula fruits (boiled, skinned, chopped and puréed)

TOPPING (COMPOTE)

10 fresh marula fruit, peeled
1 tsp brown sugar
1 tsp cinnamon
¼ cup water + **½** tsp cornflour

CRUSH biscuits and mix with melted butter. Press into a greased, 23-cm springform pan. Bake at 165°C for 10 min. Cool.

LOWER oven to 145°C. Beat cream cheese and sugar. Add eggs one at a time. Mix in sour cream, vanilla, flour, chopped marula skin, and fruit purée. Pour over crust.

PLACE pan in a water bath and bake for 1 hr 30 min. Cool, then refrigerate for 4 hrs or overnight.

SIMMER peeled marula with sugar and cinnamon. Add water and cornflour. Cook until thickened (around 6 min). Chill.

TOP cheesecake with chilled marula compote and enjoy a bold, indigenous twist on a classic dessert.



QUICK-FIRE *questions*

Favourite local dish of all time?
Sinyaveve (tripe) and pap

Most underrated ingredient, in your opinion?
Sorghum

Your ultimate comfort food?
Oxtail and *dombolo* (steamed bread)

A food trend you love?
Sourdough bread art

A food trend you wish would disappear?
Bunless burgers

The dish that reminds you of home?
Sinkhwa semmbila nemasi
(mielie bread and sour milk)

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