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How a Canadian Brewer Is Helping Open Rwanda's First Craft Brewery



By [Carolyn B. Heller](#), April 24, 2020

"There's no malt supplier, there's no hops here," says Jessi Flynn, managing director of Kweza Craft Brewery. "This is a huge risk, starting a new industry. We're starting over with, 'What is beer?'"

Flynn is describing the challenges of setting up the first craft brewery in Rwanda. Glassware isn't even a given, because the country has no local glass industry and all imported products, including glass, face high import taxes. She's considering serving brews in locally made clay mugs.

But the story of Kweza—and its mission to become not only Rwanda's first craft brewery, but also its first woman-led brewery—began several years ago, in a small Canadian town.

In 2016, Steve Beauchesne was looking to create a legacy project to mark the tenth anniversary of the certified organic brewery that he and his dad founded outside Canada's capital of Ottawa. As the CEO of [Beau's All Natural Brewing Company](#), he connected with an organization working with women entrepreneurs in Rwanda, one of whom, Josephine (Fina) Uwineza, dreamed of opening a craft brewery.

As Beauchesne began consulting with Uwineza on the business plan, he grew excited about the role Beau's might play in the fledgling brewery. He saw the project both as "something that's core to who we are and something that would give us a meaningful opportunity to make the world a better place."

Based in the small town of Vankleek Hill, Ontario, Beau's was the first Canadian brewery to achieve Benefit Corporation (B-Corp) status, which certifies businesses with a demonstrated commitment to social responsibility. The Beau's team decided that they could be most effective as consultants to the Kweza project, and because they felt strongly that the business should be locally managed, decided not to take an equity or ownership position in the venture.



Steve Beauchesne photo by Marc Doucette

Beauchesne traveled to Rwanda with Beau's CFO Tanya Beimers to learn more about the market and to consider how brewing beer using local ingredients might benefit rural agricultural cooperatives, many of which are women-owned. They returned intrigued by the possibilities.

"It struck me as the same opportunity as there was in the early '80s in the US or Canada," Beauchesne says. Two companies, Mützig and Skol, dominate the Rwandan beer market, both with industrial-style lagers, and imports like Amstel are also available.

"One of the big impacts we felt this brewery could have was to source as much local ingredients as possible," Beauchesne continues.

"We visited Rwandans who were making a fermented banana beverage, and we participated in making traditional sorghum beer."

Beau's launched a Kickstarter campaign for Kweza, which raised more than \$100,000 to support the brewery's launch. But despite the team's optimism and the successful Kickstarter initiative, the project hit two major obstacles. Fina Uwineza, the entrepreneur leading the project in Rwanda, had to leave her role for family reasons, and the Canadian company that had committed to supplying the venture's brewhouse went into receivership.

"Suddenly, we were without a brewhouse or an entrepreneur," Beauchesne recalls, but the team decided that it was too early to call it quits. They needed to find someone in Kigali to take over the project.

Enter Jessi Flynn. A landscape architect and avid homebrewer from Boston who arrived in Kigali in 2017 for a project at the Rwanda Institute for Conservation Agriculture, Flynn had been volunteering informally with Kweza when Beau's approached her about taking on a larger role. She's been Kweza's full-time managing director since October.

The team has decided to launch as a brewpub, rather than a production brewery, and while they've identified a potential location, it's not a done deal. Flynn describes her position as "chief convener," meeting with government officials, regulatory agencies, and potential suppliers. And most importantly, she's looking for women who can lead the project going forward.

While Flynn says there are plenty of savvy business women in Rwanda and many women hold responsible positions in government, many of the women she's approached see the idea as too risky. In a country with no domestic beer industry, Flynn says, "Why would a woman get involved in beer?"

While dealing with these business issues, Flynn has also been brewing test batches using local ingredients, assessing how Rwandans react to different types of beer. Unlike North Americans, she says, Rwandans tend not to eat many sweet foods, but they do like sweet drinks. IPAs, people there have told her, taste like "medicine."

With local partners, Flynn recently brewed a sorghum beer for International Women's Day, and she thinks that styles like milk stout may appeal to the local market. She's also considering producing non-alcoholic drinks like kombucha.

"The market that we're going after is more of the younger, growing middle-class that's looking for something new. People who want to go out with their friends, to be seen, to have an experience."

Flynn remains both "excited and challenged" by the tasks at hand, despite the fact that, on top of everything else, Rwanda is currently in lockdown due to the coronavirus. She's convinced that "Rwandans have a thirst for something new."

Beauchesne and several Beau's staffers continue to serve as ongoing advisors, joining Flynn on weekly conference calls. Assisting with the launch of a craft brewery on the opposite side of the world "is not for the weak of heart," says Beauchesne. "The number of setbacks that occur on a weekly basis really does test your resilience."

But in the long run, Beauchense believes that the years of effort will be worth it, once the brewery finally opens. "We hope Kweza will meaningfully impact many women in Rwanda."

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