

KFC's Nolo Thobejane on achieving QSR success in Africa

By  Lauren Hartzenberg

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In her role as franchise operations director: rest of sub-Saharan Africa at KFC South Africa, Letlhogonolo 'Nolo' Thobejane travels the length and breadth of the continent overseeing restaurant operations and significantly contributing to the success of the KFC brand in Africa.



Letlhogonolo Thobejane

In the spirit of Women's Month, Thobejane shares what she loves most about her job, the philosophies that guide her decisions in life and business, and the quick-service restaurant industry trends being driven by Covid-19.

■ As an introduction, can you tell us a bit about yourself?

I am a Christian (faithful) woman, a mother of two, blessed with a daughter and son. I love my family and view them as my anchor in life. I am also lucky to be married to a very supportive husband who has played a significant role in my journey to success.

I was born and bred in a small township called Temba, in Hammanskraal North of Gauteng, and I was raised by a clan of queens "Imbokodo". Thanks to them, I am a strong and courageous woman. However, it was both my mother and grandmother who played this most significant role in my life, as they taught me how to appreciate life's lessons, where they imparted on me that "you must know that gaining knowledge is the first step to wisdom and sharing this knowledge is the first step to humanity".

It was the example my grandmother set for me – how my grandmother managed to raise and educate four children while working as a domestic worker and taught us to strive to be better people within our community – that inspired me to be the well-rounded woman that I am today.



KFC pauses the use of It's Finger Lickin' Good slogan in advertising

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🍲 **Describe your typical workday.**

As a franchise operations director I oversee the operations across all the KFC restaurants in the rest of sub-Saharan Africa. I see myself as custodian of the brand to ultimately contribute towards the success of the brand in Africa. To achieve this, my role requires me to be detailed, innovative and energetic while using available resources to ensure and drive customer satisfaction.

As a global brand, we have stringent processes and procedures across all our restaurants to ensure that our customers get the same safe and great-tasting food that they have come to love, and so a big part of my role is to ensure that our franchise partners stay true to these.

🍲 **What is the best advice anyone has given you?**

My mother would always say “if you feel like life is meaningless, then it is your fault”. We are always given a choice in life and we should constantly strive to be better versions of ourselves – which means giving your best in all that you do.

Life will always have challenges and curveballs, but we should never give up – we should trust in the process, be patient with ourselves, remain steadfast, learn from the experiences, and move on. This has been my mantra and it has anchored my journey and career.

“ *It becomes important to understand that everyone is on their own personal journey, so understand yours and stay true to it. You must know that in life things will not go your way all the time, so take things in your stride and move forward.* ”

🍲 **What do you love most about your job at KFC?**

I love the brand and what the brand stands for. Values such as hard work, humanity and being my best self are ingrained in our company which ultimately makes it an incredible place to work. I love how, we as women, within this male-dominated industry are afforded opportunities to learn, grow and break boundaries.

The people that I get to meet through my travels have so much passion and that help keeps me motivated. I love being in the restaurants and seeing our teams develop and grow into better versions of themselves. It somehow humbles me, reminds me of where I come from.

I am very blessed that I work for such a strong people-first brand, my job allows me to make a difference in people's lives as well as being instrumental in growing KFC across Africa. This energy truly resonates with how I grew up and more importantly where I started - and this fuels me to be the person that I am today.

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▣ **What advice would you give to young women wanting to enter your industry?**

While I was studying for my degree at the University of Pretoria, I had an urge to upskill myself and obviously start earning an income. I started working at as a team member at a fast food brand and worked my way up until I ran my restaurant at the age of 21 – this journey formed the basis of my career within the QSR industry. I know how to make chicken, and I know how to make a burger, and these skills have been crucial – knowing the ins and outs of this sector, has really boosted my insight.

So many young people today are looking for quick and easy ways to success, but the truth is you will never buy experience, this comes with time. Go with high intentions learn as much as you can whilst having fun, hold your head high and believe me you will be untouchable.

“ For women to be noticed and take up space within the QSR industry, we need to know that it is a game of detail so know and be willing to spend a lot of time out in the field. ”

I have been in the industry for more than 20 years and I am still learning and growing within the industry. However, this constant growth is important, and you must immerse yourself in knowledge, as knowledge and experience is the most powerful tool that you simply cannot substitute.

The minute you decide that this is what you want to do, hold true to that. You must strive to be customer-obsessed, remain courageous when it comes to your viewpoint, challenge the status quo, act like an entrepreneur, have an ‘it can be done’ attitude, do the right thing and always be accountable.

▣ **What are the current trends you're seeing in the QSR industry?**

Due to the Covid-19 outbreak and lockdown regulations, there is a heightened demand for takeout and delivery in the quick-service restaurant industry. Consumers now prefer platforms that makes them feel safe.

Additionally, we have seen that consumer sentiment has been focused on the following:

Safety and hygiene: Continuing to place hygiene at the forefront of our operations is what will keep customers and staff safe. The industry has become more conscious of hygiene than ever before, as we are preparing to move to a post Covid-19 world. How food is handled and prepared has always been a key consideration when it comes to KFC. As we begin to come out of the other side of the Covid-19 outbreak, it is very important that customers know our high hygiene standards and processes; visibility of this is very critical.



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E-commerce and digitisation: Consumer behavior in the food industry is transforming thanks to emerging e-commerce and technological trends. We are now seeing the value of online food delivery sales grow, with consumers moving towards using some form of online platform, regularly, for food deliveries. Consumers are shifting toward a contactless, off-premises service, which means a shift toward [delivery curbside](#) and takeout.

“ This ‘newnormal’ has many quick-service restaurants embracing digital transformation to capture a much greater market share. Since consumers, particularly millennials and Gen Z, are especially digitally savvy, there is a growing expectation that restaurants must adopt new technologies to offer better in-store and online experiences. ”

Consumer awareness is growing, and the preferences are shifting towards a digitised approach to purchases. Our brand has truly embraced this and mobilised quite quickly, partnering with our point-of-sale service providers and franchisees. We have added features to our e-commerce platform to enable transfer of car details, handling this in our back-office system in the kitchen and investing in signage to ensure customers know where to park. With this we now offer three convenient ways to order online and collect: in the restaurant, through our drive-thru facilities, and now at participating Curbside restaurants.

What are the industry challenges?

- To be successful in the African continent. Most of the companies are running African business from their South African operations, making it challenging to really understand the markets. Without a clear vision and long-term support for the whole business it becomes difficult to succeed in Africa – because it is completely different from markets that are established.
- I believe we need more women within the QSR industry - the more diverse we are the more we can grow the industry
- There is a need to act locally, brands need to be flexible in creating local friendly versions of the brand for survival. You need to be more open to localising strategy to suite the market – consumer insights are crucial for localisation
- You can't do it alone. To ensure business survival it becomes crucial to have strong local partners in the franchise system. These are complex markets that requires local knowledge
- During the Covid-19 pandemic, working in 21 different countries in the African continent has been quite challenging – given the requirements to address different legislation, governments and markets – as well as ensuring safety and hygiene becomes an increased component in the livelihood of our business



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What advice would you give to your younger self?

I would tell little Nolo that it is crucial to trust the process, trust God; this will protect you from overly striving, experiencing many sleepless nights and many tears. I would tell her to be patient with herself and to truly understand that acquiring growth and knowledge takes time. I would have told her to anchor herself around her beliefs and principles, and that hard work always pays off.

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