



POSTCARD FROM BUTARE

## Can Ice Cream Help Pull Rwanda Out of Poverty?

By LEE MIDDLETON / BUTARE Saturday, Jun. 19, 2010



A worker at Inzozu Nziza ("Sweet Dreams") ice cream parlor makes ice cream in Butare, Rwanda.  
Courtesy Blue Marble Ice Cream

Motorcycle taxis zip along the narrow tarmac road from Butare, Rwanda's second largest city, to the National University on the outskirts of town. Along the verge, clusters of students mosey towards campus while men on bicycles laden with sacks of beans cruise past a backdrop of terraced hills. About halfway between town and the university, the students pause at a modest yet modern white-stucco storefront where a hand-painted banner announces the arrival of Inzozu Nziza — Rwanda's first local ice cream parlor.

In this small Central African nation best known for its horrific 1994 genocide, the significance of a new ice cream shop may not be immediately apparent to

most. But to Odile Gakire Katese, the woman behind the shop — which opened June 5 and whose name translates as Sweet Dreams — the carefree pleasure that ice cream represents is exactly what Rwanda needs. "Life isn't just about survival," says Katese, who is also the artistic director at the University's Centre for Arts and Drama. "It's about living. And what better way to taste the sweetness of life than with some ice cream?"

In one of the world's poorest countries, with over 50% of its population living below the poverty line, Katese's focus on happiness might seem an unaffordable luxury, and ice cream a bizarre means to achieve it. Not so, says Josh Ruxin, head of Rwanda Works, an NGO committed to improving health in part through expanding the country's dairy industry. Ruxin calls the bias in development towards fighting HIV, improving maternal mortality rates, and helping children survive to the age of five "obvious." But citing NGOs such as Film Aid International that focus on nurturing the mind as well as the body, he says that "in general in development we aim too low — it's [viewed as] enough to address the most basic human needs and not these higher needs."

Though ice cream may seem an unorthodox way to meet our higher needs, Katese's visionary thinking has already succeeded in bringing joy to people who had ceased to believe they deserved it. With the intention of creating a healing space for widows and orphans after the war, she founded the country's only all-women drumming group, Ingoma Nshya. Entering what was historically an exclusively male domain, Katese's drummers — there are more than a hundred of them — represent both sides of the 1994 genocide. Since the group's 2004 founding, Ingoma Nshya has thrilled crowds across the U.S. and Europe, and performed for Rwandan President Paul Kagame.

And now the women of Ingoma Nshya are about to become Rwanda's first ice cream entrepreneurs. Which is where the dairy mavens from Blue Marble Ice Cream come in. An eco-conscious, all-organic ice cream boutique that started only three years ago in Brooklyn, Blue Marble has since opened two more locations in as many years, with its delicious icy treats earning it a host of awards and a cult following in New York City. In the midst of their success, co-founders Alexis Miesen and Jennie Dundas envisioned "eventually" starting a non-profit in line with their general business mission of "being good for the community, near and far."

Eventually came sooner than they expected, when a 2008 Sundance Theater Lab workshop brought Dundas — an actress by trade — and ice cream fanatic Katese together. Now the company's non-profit, Blue Marble Dreams, is helping pay for the women of Ingoma Nshya to receive English lessons and intensive training in business and financial management from collaborator Business Council for Peace. A recent trial run of Sweet Dreams' new soft-serve machine (soft serve is less expensive, easier to make, and not as vulnerable to power outages as traditional scoop ice cream) was met with ululating glee. "This job will change my life," said Marie Louise Ingabire, Sweet Dreams' assistant manager.

The shop's founders may be dreamers who see happiness as an important development goal, but they are also business people who intend for Sweet Dreams to be a self-sustaining venture that will provide people with employment and income for years to come. And according to Susan Thomson, reconciliation scholar at Hampshire College's School of Critical Inquiry in Massachusetts, bringing an ice cream parlor to Butare is a step towards bridging the tremendous divides — between elite and poor, returned refugees and those who never left — that bifurcate Rwandan society. "I see value anywhere where people can come together in a neutral space and have an informal conversation," she says. "Informality creates the ties and networks of communities that Rwanda so desperately needs to create."

Blue Marble Dreams plans to replicate the ice cream parlor project in various spots around the globe, but as Miesen says, "First things first. We need to give the shop in Butare the attention and support it needs to really get going and succeed. Then we'll look to the next one." And that means focusing on the first shop in Rwanda to offer locally made ice cream (using all local ingredients), which will initially come in two flavors: sweet cream and strawberry — or a swirl of the two. Only time will tell whether Sweet Dreams will be a success, but it would appear that ice cream has already brought more than a dollop of hopeful happiness to Rwanda.