

Entrepreneur says Kenya has more opportunities for new businesses than UK

BY Dinfin Mulupi

When Sarah Russell quit her job at the United Nations news service in 2008 and enrolled at chef school, her friends and classmates thought she was foolish to leave “a really good job”. The UK-born entrepreneur had a successful career in journalism, but yearned for something more stimulating.



“It came to a point where I felt a little tired of the media industry. I was looking to do something more creative and cooking was my real passion... It just developed from a hobby to something more serious,” Russell told *How we made it in Africa*.

Today, Russell runs Bella Luna Kitchen, a Nairobi-based bakery that focuses on traditional recipes from across the world. Bella Luna

Kitchen produces New York style bagels, English muffins and crumpets, American cookies, Jewish challah bread, Mexican flour tortillas and European rye loaves and regional breads.

The products are produced from scratch and are targeted at people who appreciate quality and are willing to pay for it.

“Rather than focus on the mass market where there is so much competition, this is something that is a lot more specialised. All food culture is globalising, so Kenya should not miss out on globalised baked products,” she said.

Russell has grown the business from an initial team of five to 25, expanded the range of products and widened the market reach.

“In the last three years we’ve more than quadrupled the turnover and introduced new products. Before it was more of a hobby business, but we’ve turned it into a professional operation,” she explained.

The products are stocked at a number of supermarkets and mini-markets and also sell at high-end hotels and restaurants in Nairobi and the Kenyan coast.

According to Russell, spending habits in Nairobi are changing because of higher disposable incomes and greater exposure to the rest of the world.

“I don’t know if I would ever have started my own business in the UK. I just feel like here there are more opportunities. It is more of a frontier. If I did a business like this in the UK there would probably be hundreds of people with the same idea, whereas here, this is a lot more unique. It is like starting afresh,” Russell explained.

She plans to expand the business with a core line of products at Nakumatt supermarkets and open Bella Luna coffee shops in the future.

“Eventually to solidify the brand, it would make sense to have our own coffee shops. There is a market... people love to drink coffee and eat cakes. Coffee [drinking] is not really a Kenyan culture but things are changing...” she said.

In the meantime, Russell has to deal with the challenges in the market, such as corruption and bureaucratic red tape, power outages and Nairobi's infamous traffic jams.

"There is no handbook for how to run a business in this country and the laws are constantly changing. There are so many penalties if you are not compliant... it can get very confusing," Russell lamented.

She noted that entrepreneurship is often romanticised and that it is not an easy path to walk.

"I wake up in the middle of the night... there is so much responsibility. You can't really take time off, your phone is always on and even if you go on leave there are always things to deal with. You can't just walk away from it. It's a huge responsibility."

Although doing business on the continent is challenging, Russell said that starting a business in Africa "is worth a shot".

"This really is a land of opportunity in terms of business. If you can find something unique and something that is missing from the market and you are willing to put in the hard work, then go for it," said Russell.

"You have to be very open minded. Things are not always going to run smoothly. People are always late for meetings. Traffic is hell. If you can't deal with that and you expect it to be the same as Europe, forget it. You have got to be able to adapt and make the most of it," she added.