

Hardy McQueen on building a Black-owned beverage business and doing things differently

 By [Lauren Hartzenberg](#)

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Creative entrepreneur Hardy McQueen has worked at the intersection of food & beverage, music, streetwear and culture. His latest venture, Nice Beverage Company, sees him building a proudly African beverage enterprise that's hyper-focused on changing industry norms through its approach to winemaking, market delivery and the target market it's looking to reach.



Hardy McQueen, founder and CEO, Nice Beverage Company. Source: Supplied

Established during the pandemic, Nice Beverage Co launched its canned wine brand UNFLTRD in December last year, with plans in the works to expand abroad and across Africa. According to McQueen, South African wine brands rarely take consumers on the African continent seriously. Nice Beverage Co aims to be present across key African cities, giving these markets the attention they deserve.

As a Black-owned business, the company prioritises working with winemakers of colour to help drive diversity and inclusion in SA's wine industry. With the company's focus on sustainability, the beverage producer also only works with winemakers who are fully immersed in the low-intervention natural wine and natural fermentation scene.



Source: Supplied

The company sees great potential in the canned wine category, in part due to the convenience of the packaging format and its recyclability. Nice Beverage Co states that it's committed to 90% recyclable packaging. With canned wines sometimes being associated with low-quality products in SA, Nice Beverage Co has set out to change consumers' minds about this by delivering a quality beverage that helps drive category growth.

McQueen explains that the winemakers Nice Beverage Co has partnered with all have their own independent brands. "But working on a canned delivery gives them an opportunity to do something different. And also something which we would consider a lot more fun and not as serious as a bottle of wine that's been aged for 12 to 18 months in oak," he says.

The company also works with a network of advisors – leaders in winemaking, branding and global distribution.

Here, McQueen shares more about the inspiration behind Nice Beverage Company and its vision to bring a taste of Africa to the world.

■ **Hardy, how did the idea for Nice Beverage Co come about?**

I wanted to create a modern beverage product for a new generation of consumers. There exists very little in the way of innovation for the marketing, consumption opportunities and focus on taste in the current SA beverage scene, and I thought we could change that.

■ **What convinced you of the business potential of canned wines? And conversely, what misconceptions about canned wines do you feel are still lingering about?**

“ Canned wines present an opportunity to showcase where wine is going. It's a clear break from tradition but does not mean that the liquid is of a lower quality. ”

Most people's first experience of canned wine is low quality. Our intention is to serve great wine purpose-made to come out of a can. Beyond ourselves we have a category job to do. There are some great canned wine brands, consumers just need to give them a chance.



Source: Supplied

■ **Why low-intervention wines?**

Low-intervention refers to a style where the winemaker allows the fruit to express itself without the use and interference of additives. It in no way means less work! This style allows us to deliver a product that is a true reflection of the grapes, lower alcohol volume and just NICE!

■ **How have you set out to distinguish your wine brand UNFLTRD in a competitive marketplace?**

We've been fortunate with our relationships that UNFLTRD has managed to pop up in some unexpected places. Whether we are supporting a global product launch with [Mami Wata and Vans](#), to gallery openings, creator talks and cocktail bars to mention a few, going to where our consumer interacts with lifestyle has been our advantage.

“ We've quickly realised that sitting on a shelf in a store and waiting for the consumer may not be the right strategy for people to discover our brand. ”

■ **What have been your biggest challenges encountered establishing Nice Beverage Co?**

We face the common food & beverage startup challenges; lack of funding and next to zero retailer support. When introducing a new type of product, funders and retailers want to see consumer support before considering your product.

We need to reconstruct the models used for supporting products. Not all brands are created equal, we all have different starting points that allow us to leverage opportunities in our networks - be it family, friends and funding.

■ **Can you comment on the state of diversity within South Africa's wine industry in terms of representation of people of colour? How does Nice Beverage Co intend to shake things up?**

There's definitely a lack of diversity within the SA wine industry. Whether you look at winemakers, brands, farm owners, viticulturists, lab techs or logistics operators, there's clearly a problem that needs to be addressed. We have too many boardrooms with the same type of person sitting at the table making the same decisions.

“ Diversity not only presents an opportunity to challenge and transform the past, it allows new ideas and practices to come to the fore. ”

As Nice Beverage Co, we want to collaborate with as many BIPOC people as possible to grow our and their businesses. Whether that means collaborating on special edition products with winemakers or using our networks to assist in the promotion of Black-owned wine brands.



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■ **Tell us about your plans to expand Nice Beverage Co into Africa. What are the strategies being employed that you believe will set you up for success in other markets on the continent?**

First of all, we can't go into Africa when we are already on the continent. Our phrasing on that needs some serious change. We have strong belief in the market that exists right on our doorsteps. As the biggest wine-producing country on the continent we have an industry-wide opportunity to explore.

Once again through relationships we've been able to share our products at pop-ups and festivals in Ghana. Right now we are in the testing phase, figuring out what works best, what the consumer likes and then to go in! Our main strategy is respecting the consumer, acknowledging we have a category job to do and be as innovative as possible to set ourselves apart from what they have come to expect from a wine brand.

■ **What is your ultimate vision for Nice Beverage Company? How would you like to see it grow?**

We want to build a beverage business that has great products from the continent and exports them to markets unknown. Across the continent, we have amazing regional beverages yet to be tasted and discovered. We want to be the conduit for those products. Africa to the world! That's our objective.

ABOUT LAUREN HARTZENBERG

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