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## Their cup of tea: Former Nigerian residents brew a unique business here

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**BORIS MINKEVICH / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS** Meshak Kusa displays some of the hibiscus tea products Yomm Beverages is marketing.

It was 20 years after both Meshak Kusa and Michael Daramola had left their native Nigeria to study in Moscow that they actually met for the first time -- in Winnipeg.

The two educated, accomplished professionals are now partners in what may be North America's first hibiscus tea company.

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Based out of the Eureka Project business incubator in Smartpark at the University of Manitoba, Kusa, Daramola and two other partners -- one Nigerian, one Russian, all Manitoba

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residents -- are laying the groundwork for a herbal tea business built for the long term.

The sun-dried petals of the hibiscus flower have been brewed into teas and drinks by cultures around the world for many years.

In Nigeria, it's consumed in great volumes. Around the world it's known by various names such as roselle, flor de Jamaica in Latin America, karkadé in Egypt and Sudan, Chai Kujarat in Iraq, bissap or wonjo in West Africa, sorrel in Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, and red sorrel in the wider Caribbean.

As well as producing a delicious, tart taste and a rich, ruby red colour, hibiscus tea has also been part of folk medicine in many of those cultures.

Any health benefits have not been proven scientifically nor recognized by Health Canada, so Kusa, 46, a trained veterinarian who owned his own 22-employee practice for 20 years in Moscow, says only, "I call them exciting properties."

But hibiscus is believed to have greater antioxidant properties than pomegranates and new research is showing two or three cups a day can have positive effects on blood pressure.

Although his training is in animal health -- he is also a registered diagnostic ultrasound professional in Canada and works part-time at the Animal Hospital of Manitoba -- Kusa learned about the tea business as a director of a company that made hibiscus tea in Moscow.

There were several reasons to move from Moscow to Winnipeg, but his dream of starting a company like Yomm Beverages was certainly one of them.

"The main reason I came to Canada is because of my kids," he said. "There was a lot of discrimination over there. I was doing very well in Russia. It was a big practice. But I wanted to get my kids out of that place."

But as well as making a better life for his children -- his oldest, born in Russia, is a first-year student at the U of M and a licensed pilot, and his youngest less than a year old and born in Winnipeg -- he had other dreams, as well.

"From day one, I was thinking of starting a business like this one," he said.

Part of the dream included connecting to his homeland in Africa.

The company has acquired 100 hectares of land in Nigeria and the plan is to grow its own hibiscus to control the supply of raw materials and establish a positive economic presence in their homeland.

"The corporate concept is not just to do business and make money," said Daramola, an experienced finance professional who has worked in the wireless telecom business in Nigeria for many years.

"We want to give back to our heritage where we come from."

Although he emigrated to Canada within the last two years, Daramola is now spending much of his time in Nigeria, establishing the hibiscus farm and Yomm's network of Nigerian farmers.

"The concept is to create jobs in Manitoba and contribute to the economy in Manitoba, our new home, as well as give back to community where we came from," Kusa said.

Dave Shambrock, executive director of the Manitoba Food Processors Association, said Yomm is part of a larger trend featuring increasing demand for natural products and consumer transparency.

They're also helping reverse another trend.

"We get upset when we ship out raw materials to other countries and buy it back as finished product," Shambrock said. "Here we have the opposite happening."

The provincial food-processing industry has experienced significant maturing over the past 10 years and is deeper now, so niche processors have a better chance of succeeding today than they might have in the past.

For instance, there probably aren't too many local business people who know the challenges Yomm is facing better than Michael Fata, CEO of Manitoba Harvest Hemp Foods, who is acting as a mentor of sorts for Kusa, Daramola and their partners.

He started his business about 13 years ago with little more than an idea. His company may hit \$20 million in sales this year.

"They have a strong brand story and a good product," Fata said. "I think it has the potential. Now it's just a matter of putting some muscle behind it."

Yomm Beverages' hibiscus tea has been in development at the Food Development Centre in Portage la Prairie since 2009. The first batch of product -- packaged and loose tea as well as four bottled, ready-to-drink flavours -- was released this fall.

They're starting the arduous task of setting up a distribution network and the hard work of getting the product on the street.

Gary Brownstone, president of the Eureka Project, said that is never an easy task when it comes to consumer beverages.

"It is a brutally tough industry to break into because it is dominated by huge monsters like Nestlé, Coke and Pepsi that own the shelf space in the grocery store," Brownstone said.

Being able to combine an investment in their homeland with an appreciation for the new country where they've been welcomed gives Kusa and Daramola added incentive to make this work.

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