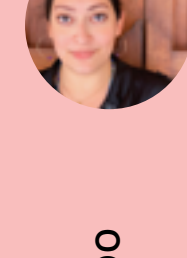


Feature

Meet the Brewers Bringing West African Flavors to America

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By Christabel Lobo

Raised in West Africa, Kofi Meroe and Amado Carsky met in elementary school in Nigeria before eventually parting ways—Meroe's family moved to Ghana, while Carsky's settled in Benin. It wasn't until Meroe graduated from college in Massachusetts that they reconnected in the nation's capital, and they did so because of beer.

"I had come down to DC with a love for craft beer that was really budding that I had picked up my last year of college. I was truly intrigued about trying all these different types of beers. And I found that when I got to DC, Amado was on the same level," Meroe says. "We would try beers and go to breweries, but didn't have a lot of money. So, I decided to buy a book about brewing beer because I had heard about people making beer. I thought that maybe I could make my own beer, and if it was good enough, I wouldn't need to keep buying it."

The duo homebrewed their first batch of beer in 2012 in Meroe's small, two-bedroom apartment in northwest Washington, DC. They also spent a lot of time expanding their knowledge by visiting local breweries, going to beer events, and tasting as many beers as they possibly could. By 2015, Meroe and Carsky ramped up their homebrewing operation and went from producing three- to five-gallon batches in glass bottles to ten- to 15-gallon batches in kegs.

"We'd see our friends' reactions to our beer go from like 'Oh, this is good,' but they didn't really want more than the one we just gave them, to having them show up just out of the blue to come hang out and drink," Meroe says of their burgeoning brews. "We would go to breweries and realize that the beer we were making was just as good as the beer that we were paying for." However, it wasn't until 2016 when Bill Perry and his wife, Cathy Huben, owners of The Public Option, a small neighborhood brewpub in northeast DC, offered up their brewing equipment for Meroe to use, that things really started to take off.

"I told him about some of the recipes that we had been working on, and one of the ones that really caught his attention was the HYPEbiscus Pale Ale," he says of their signature beer made with organic dried hibiscus flowers. Popularly used to make tea in West Africa, this tart red flower is known for its medicinal properties and has always been a staple in Meroe's kitchen. "One day, when home brewing, I had the thought of throwing in some hibiscus flowers into the beer. That's what really kicked off experimenting with ingredients from back home for me."

Ginger, cacao nibs, chocolate, and kola nut (a caffeine-containing nut that gave Coca-Cola its name) are just some of the West African flavors that have made appearances in their beers. Out of the Night, a black IPA made in collaboration with Saints Row Brewing in Rockville, Maryland, used coffee grounds specially sourced from Ghana. And even if they don't use West African ingredients in their brews, Meroe and Carsky always find a way to allude to their West African upbringing. Take Harmattan Haze, for example. This wheat ale, with its spicy German yeast and light, citrusy American hops may be based on a German hefeweizen recipe but its name certainly isn't. Instead, it transports drinkers' to the continent, evoking memories of the climate phenomenon that occurs when dusty northeasterly trade winds blow sand from the Sahara Desert all over West Africa.



After Perry's offer to use The Public Option's brewing system and showcase HYPEbiscus on tap, Carsky and Meroe went all in. In January 2017, they hosted an unofficial launch party for their signature beer. "We went through six kegs that night. The brewery is a small space and it was packed. I don't think they've sold that much beer to this day in one sitting," Meroe says.

The next week Meroe registered for an LLC with the name Sankofa Beer Company. "Sankofa is a Twi word, one of the languages in Ghana from the Ashanti tribe, and what it means is to go back and fetch," says Meroe of the company's name and logo, an Adinkra symbol of a mythical bird with its head turned backward and an egg in its beak. "So, in order for you to be able to move forward and have a strong future, you have to go back to know who you are or where you're from."

A series of events, including a Sankofa Summer Tour at different DC venues gave the duo insight into what their fans liked from the recipes they were putting out. And, being one of the few black-owned craft breweries in the United States, it didn't take long for Sankofa to build a strong base of supporters. "You know, maybe we've just been lucky, but we haven't had an issue trying to get our product into any spaces," Meroe says. "Frankly, people have supported us more than I thought they would."

The Kickstarter they launched at the end of 2017 raised \$28,894 from 217 backers. This allowed them to contract with Calvert Brewing Company in Upper Marlboro, Maryland, who brews Sankofa recipes on their behalf, increasing their production from one barrel to thirty barrels. It also let them expand their distribution network within the DMV, allowing Sankofa to be sold at a number of restaurants and wine stores including Thamee, The Midlands Beer Garden, D'Vines, and Wardman Wines.

According to the Beer Institute, the US brewing industry's national trade association, the United States exported just 6,963 gallons of beer in 2018. Unlike the United States' thriving craft brewery scene, the market in Ghana is nascent and dominated by foreign commercial breweries that use barley and wheat imported from abroad. The country's first and only microbrewery, Inland Microbrewery, only opened in 2003. Its co-founder, Clement Djameh, made it a point to only use sorghum, a local African grain, in Inland's brews in hopes of promoting homegrown lagers and helping farmers take the drought-resistant grain from subsistence to industrial crop.

Last October, during a visit back home to Ghana, Meroe got a chance to shadow Sala, a Ghanaian brewer making a local sour beer using millet. "The grains they use and the way they brew there, using clay pots and wild yeast strains, makes the process of fermenting a little different than when you're working with barley and wheat," he says. "A lot of these brews are sour unless they add sugar in the fermentation process."

As Sankofa grows, so does its plan to continue mixing West African flavors with traditional craft beer styles. Incorporating sorghum and millet recipes into Sankofa's offerings is something that Meroe has started working on this year. In addition, they're also going to be releasing a chocolate milk stout infused with raw, unprocessed cocoa nibs from Ghana, as well as pale re-releasing their most popular offering, the HYPEbiscus pale ale. Meroe also hopes to collaborate with craft brewers both within the district and nationally. "I want to collaborate with other breweries because every time I do, I've learned a lot," he says. "Not only just about making beer but also about the business side of things."

ZX Ventures, a division within AB InBev, is an investor in October

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