



Bongsi and Mahlomola judging cheese at the 2010 South African Dairy Championships (Photograph courtesy of Roger Sedres and Agri-Expo)

# The taste of **success**

by Lynette Louw

**Kimilili Farm near Wolseley in the Western Cape, is a certified organic dairy farm where hand-crafted farmhouse cheeses are made from milk produced by the farm's own grazing herd. Kimilili is home to some award-winning hard, soft and semi-soft cheeses originating from various regions in France.**

But behind every successful cheese, there is a dedicated cheese-maker. And dedication is what counts at this farm. It was therefore fitting that two of its hardest workers, Bongsi Nondzaba and Mahlomola Moso, were awarded scholarships to perfect the craft of cheese-making in France.

The scholarships are awarded by the Western Cape provincial government and Burgundy in France. Every year, winners of the scholarship travel to France with well-known cheese-maker, Kobus Mulder, to hone their craft and learn new techniques. Burgundy is the most important wine region in France, but is also known for its quality cheeses.

## **Big dreams**

Born and raised in the Eastern Cape, Bongsi's childhood dream was to become a tour guide, but to also pursue a career in cooking, a dream that started to take shape when he joined Kimilili Farm as waiter and cook at their roadside stall, Grain & Grape.

Mahlomola's dreams were much more airborne, and he hoped to one day become an airplane pilot. However, he started working on farms in the Ceres area and soon landed a job at Kimilili Farm, where he was responsible for, among other things, milking the cows.

Both young men eventually ended up working at the farm's cheese-making operation and soon both were actively involved in producing the farm's award-winning cheeses, together with farm owner and manager, Robert von Tobien. Their hard work paid off and it was literally the cherry on the cake when they were awarded the bursaries.

### **In Burgundy**

"Besides travelling by airplane for the first time," says Bongi, "the experience was unbelievable. France is very different from South Africa and things are very expensive there. Everything is old and steeped in history. We stayed in the town of Macon, where some of the houses are over 500 years old. Their history is also apparent in their food and wine industry – and they love simple things such as good cheese and bread."

Mahlomola also found the trip to be very rewarding and he was very interested in the traditional way in which the French do things: "Their wine- and cheese-making methods date back hundreds of years and they choose to do things by hand, rather than mechanically. I have since returned to Europe and participated in the Terra Madre Slow Food conference in Turin, Italy – another very rewarding experience."

Both cheese-makers say that they learnt a lot while overseas, especially when it comes to aspects such as bacteria, fermentation and the general chemistry involved in cheese-making. Bongi brought back a recipe for a blue cheese which Kimilili produced and recently introduced into the market. The cheese, Tulbagh Blue, has received praise from cheese connoisseurs across the country.

Both men hope to one day be able to expand their knowledge of cheese by experimenting more with different styles of cheeses.

### **It starts with hard work**

And for those who wish to follow in their footsteps and become successful in the cheese-making business, Bongi has the following advice: "You need to be willing to work hard. This often includes working on weekends. Perfect your knowledge in a small operation before you venture out to a big company.

"Cheese-making is not easy and one can make mistakes. Practice is very important to produce a product of consistent quality. Do not underestimate the challenges of marketing your cheese – it is much easier to sell a small amount locally, than trying to compete with the big guys."

Mahlomola agrees: "You need to work very hard and overcome many challenges and difficulties. Most important though, is that you must have a passion for all aspects of cheese-making. You really have to want to do it and not underestimate the difficulties of marketing your product. Make a cheese that is different from Gouda or Cheddar, as you will find it difficult to compete against the big industrial producers." 