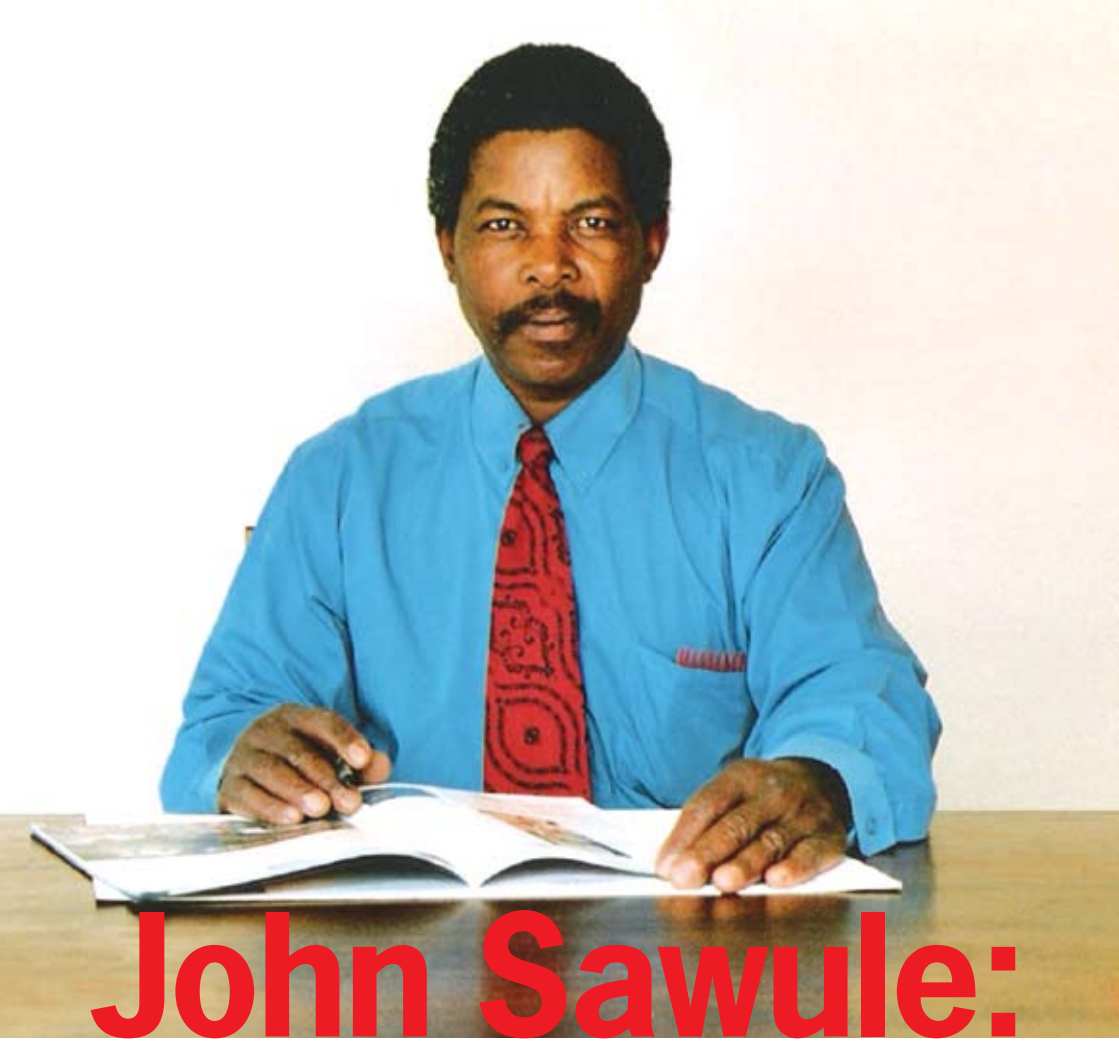

John Sawule: Master cheese maker

by **Isabel Basson**

The Stormberg Cheese Factory's head cheese maker, John Sawule, is one of the only black master cheese makers in the country. He has been making cheese for more than 30 years and has truly become a master at his job.

John loves the Stormberg Mountains very much. It is here that he was born and raised. He proudly says, "it is here that I want to work and remain working until I fall over." As a young boy, John was a shepherd with his father and brothers. Back then he already stood out as a competent and conscientious worker. He mastered all the aspects of farming before he became a cheese maker.

In 1970, John started working as a mineworker in the Eastgeduld Mine in Springs. In 1972 he began working at Stormberg Co-op Cheese Factory as a general worker. Later he became assistant cheese maker under Koot van Rensburg. According to John, Koot is his mentor. "Koot is a man who shared his knowledge with me. I was never afraid to ask if there was something I did not know, this helped me to learn faster," says John. In 1992 he became a full-time cheese maker. He started working as a cheese maker with the company's standards and quality control director, Mof van Eeden. John is a very loyal worker and has never missed a day of work due to illness in all his life.

John has a wide general knowledge and he can have a long conversation about the politics of the day. "I'm afraid the youth of today is a lost generation that is going to end up jobless if something drastic is not done." He feels that young people are only searching for own gain, without going through any trouble, and without any input from their side. He is also worried that older people do not give the youth the necessary guidance.

As a Christian, he feels that the Bible teaches him to do the work he does for his employer as if he does it for himself. He feels that this important message should go out to all employees. His advice to the next generation: "Ask, learn, find out, be interested in the future – be a learner, don't act as if you know everything already. Be prepared to learn from those who know! Do as I do – start at the bottom, be the least, but work your way upwards. Do not wait for someone else to do it for you, the world owes you nothing."

We asked John for some secrets of cheese-making. He gave us the following tips:

- The better the quality milk, the tastier the cheese. Good quality starts with the climate in which the milk is produced. Cows are very sensitive to heat. Heat stress harms milk production. The less the stress, the better the quality milk and cheese.
- Cheese-making is a fine art. You work with a raw product the whole time and its composition and solids change the whole time. You have to keep adjusting the cheese-making process to it. "Small-scale cheese makers like myself, find it easier to make a tasty cheese than bulk cheese makers with their mechanical methods," says John.
- The hand-eye method works better than mechanical cheese-making methods. "The moment I see the quality of milk, I know how to adjust the cheese-making process to make the ideal cheese."
- Cheese takes a long time to ripen – from four weeks for Gouda, to six months for matured Cheddar. You must watch the cheese closely to make the correct adjustments. "I look at it, feel and taste the cheese the whole time, until I am satisfied with its texture, etc. With mechanical cheese-making, you loose that fine control," feels John.

If you wish to become a cheese maker, John advises that you attend a course on cheese-making. The Agricultural Research Council (ARC) offers regular cheese-making courses. John also recommends that you go to work as a student at one of the cheese manufacturers. There you can gain some useful experience. The cultures companies are also a useful source of information. They are usually very friendly and of much help if you have questions for them. "You just have to ask if you do not know something, do not be afraid," says John. ***UM***