

Makerere boys turn grasshoppers into high-end business

Business

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Fresh grasshoppers (nsenene) ready to be fried

Near the main entrance to the Food Science building at Makerere University, a canteen sells snacks and drinks to hungry passers-by.

Sitting on a shelf are boxes of grasshoppers, prepared and packaged on campus. With this small box, a group of young men hopes to revolutionize the Ugandan snack industry. This crew of young businessmen and food scientists are the Jordan Natural Food Buy, a company they founded in 2008 and registered in April 2011.

They have developed a process that naturally preserves grasshoppers for up to three months. The entrepreneurs face several challenges in distribution and marketing. But working together, they hope to expand their distribution across the country. Geoffrey Ssepuuya, a food scientist and graduate assistant at Makerere, is the quality assurance manager for the Jordan Natural Food Buy.

He is originally from Masaka. For him, grasshoppers have been a lifelong fascination. "Ever since I was a kid, I have sold a number of foods, including grasshoppers," Ssepuuya said.

The insect is a popular snack throughout Uganda, providing a crucial source of protein. A labour-intensive collection process and a final product with a short shelf life complicate the

grasshopper's commercialization. They tend to only be available during two three-month seasons.

"The trouble with grasshoppers is that they are very perishable," Ssepuuya said. "Usually when you catch them in the morning, they spoil by the afternoon."

But for his third-year project at Makerere, Ssepuuya resolved to make selling grasshoppers a more lucrative, year-round proposition. Using natural preservatives and a drying process, he made great strides towards that goal. "When I first said I would find a way to preserve them, everyone started laughing," he said. "But I have since managed to extend their shelf life to three months."

In this effort, Ssepuuya was not alone. Dr Dorothy Nakimbugwe, his faculty mentor, and three of his fellow Makerere graduates supported him. The four young men prepare all their food products at the Makerere campus. A box of grasshoppers is sold for Shs 5,000. The company also sells natural juices and jackfruit jams.

They market their wares on their own, door-to-door. Jordan Natural Food Buy items are available at the Makerere canteen, Mulago and Mengo hospitals and several supermarkets throughout the capital. Joel Tumwebaze, a food scientist, is also a part of the operation.

Wearing a T-shirt that reads 'Obesity Kills', he explained his belief that the company is headed in the right direction. "The demand for this type of product is increasing," he said. "Few are aware of our products, but those who are, go for it a lot."

For now, the five-member team itself must cover all overhead costs. They tried unsuccessfully to secure funding from the National Youth Fund – a government project whose implementation remains shrouded in controversy - and from commercial banks. But the young men remain determined.

Mahmood Kibombo, CEO of the Food Buy, believes his team is in the right place at the right time. "When you look at the market, it is growing as people begin to move away from artificial food products," he said. "And grasshoppers in particular could be a big deal because if you can sell them in the off-season, you can make big money."

Ssepuuya is proud of what he created and confident his grasshoppers will distinguish his company from the competition. "We only put out a product that upholds Makerere's reputation," Ssepuuya said. "They're not quite as juicy, but they taste just as good as any fresh grasshopper."

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