

Jozi lovebirds blossom into business owners

 By [Lauren Hartzenberg](#)

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"It was love at first sight," says Thato Masondo of his first encounter with girlfriend Thula Ndema. Having grown up in different provinces - he in Gauteng, she in the Free State - their paths merged when they both took up jobs at a retail store in Sandton.



They started dating and later worked at an ice-cream parlour together, which is where they noticed how well sorbet sold, particularly among customers seeking non-dairy alternatives. In 2017, the couple became business partners when they launched an artisanal sorbet brand of their own called Sobae Frozen.

Sights on their frequent walks around Johannesburg CBD catalysed the creation of their business. Masondo and Ndema often encountered piles of rotting fruit which made them realise that over-ripe fresh produce was being discarded by street vendors who struggled to sell it.

To help combat food waste and satisfy Joburgers' desire for dairy-free frozen desserts, the couple experimented with sorbet flavours using the very ripe produce from fruit and veg markets that were close to being discarded. Selecting produce at their optimal ripeness means that Sobae Frozen products require small quantities of added sugar, if any at all.



The startup handmakes the sorbet in small batches, using in-season, locally-grown produce, and zero artificial ingredients. The colourful array of flavours include Pawpaw Pineapple, Watermelon Black Peppercorn, Lime Cucumber and Pumpkin Chai Spice, of which Duchess of Sussex Meghan Markle [enjoyed a serving](#) on her trip to South Africa in September.

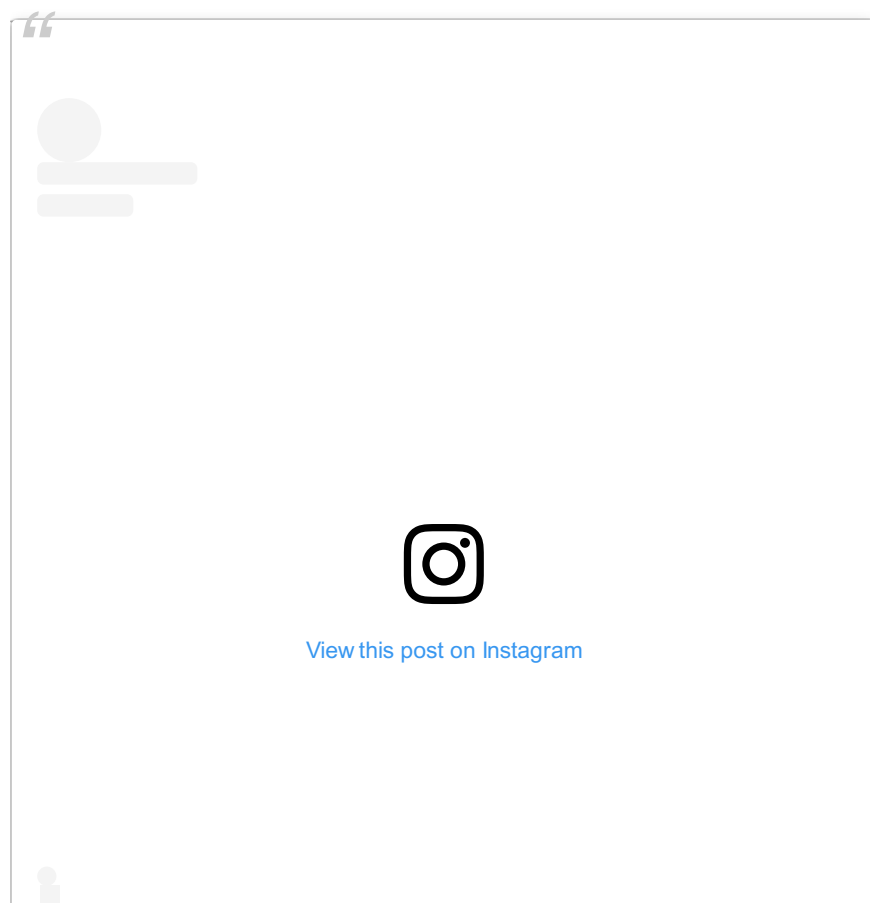
The Sobae Frozen brand identity is a sweet nod to the founders' relationship - the 'bae' in Sorbae is a colloquial term of endearment for a romantic partner and the startup runs with the tagline 'Sorbet so bae you'll fall in love'.

In the spirit of [#YouthMonth](#), we chatted to Masondo and Ndema about their business journey.

📌 ***Tell us a bit more about the inspiration behind Sobae?***

The walks we took together inspired the idea behind Sobae, because we came across a lot of illegal dumping sites around Joburg CBD. We were not happy about that and we wanted to find the source of the dumping. We saw that most of the dumping was fruit, and street vendors were the source.

Our main idea was to buy the ripe fruits and juice them. When we did more research we decided to make sorbet because it was an original idea and it would take off for people looking for non-dairy treats.





A post shared by SOBAE™ (@sobaefrozen) on Oct 10, 2019 at 3:55am PDT

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▣ ***How did you go about formulating the product and launching it to market?***

We researched more about sorbets and saved up money from our salaries to buy equipment. We launched on the streets. We knew we had to find a place that attracted lots of people who were open-minded, and that's why we settled in Braamfontein and Maboneng.

▣ ***How do you come up with your sorbet flavours?***

We play around with our flavours and experiment with what's in season; many fruits can be overpowering, like guava. This season we have oranges and we want to have a range of citrus sorbets, but delivered differently, so we infuse the orange with thyme. We also get inspiration from our street vendors when they mix fruit salads like pawpaw and pineapple.



▣ ***What have been the biggest challenges and highlights on your entrepreneurship journey?***

When we were selling on the streets we used to get chased away by the security guards. We have been trading at The Wilds Nature Reserve in Houghton, but getting a permit to sell in parks around Johannesburg has been a challenge.

Getting around Johannesburg with a cooler box using public transport is difficult, and when we buy stock we walk to the market. Things like transport is also a challenge when we need to get to interviews, meeting and pitches.

We've also needed to educate people about sorbet, because many people we interacted with didn't know what was.

Our biggest highlights starting up were receiving our first fund from the National Youth Development Agency and NGOs like SEEDA, Makers Valley and the Global Philanthropy Alliance.

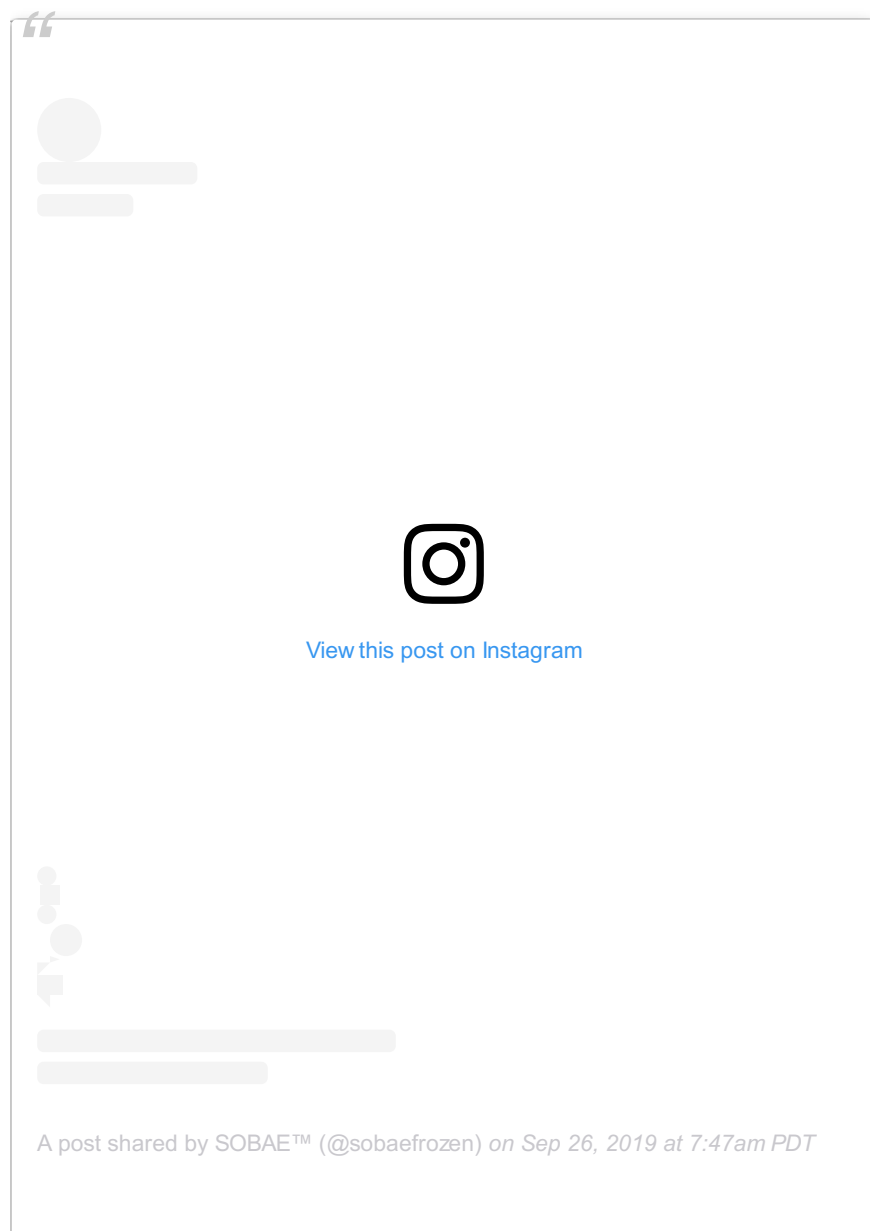
We also recently opened our first store at Victoria Yards.

📌 **How has the Covid-19 lockdown affected your business?**

We had to close the store and pause our plans for this year. We have two part-time employees and this affected them greatly. We cancelled all our planned events which left us with no source of income.

But we took some time to volunteer in our community. As an organisation it's important to give back to the community and that's where our hearts are during Level 3.

We have reopened on Saturdays and Sundays and we're doing deliveries with Foakes Coffee Bar and Roastery. Because of the lockdown we've had some time to innovate, develop a different strategy and work with complementary local businesses.



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■ **Have you had any mentors who have inspired and assisted you along the way?**

Yes, many, from people we talk to on a daily basis to others who mentor us occasionally. We have met many individuals who have grown close to us as mentors.

Thina Ralutemba - Thina City
 Nick Wider - SEEDA
 Mpho Phalane - Food I Love You
 Carrie Pratt - Independent consultant
 Ntasko Mkhabela - Global Philanthropy Alliance



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■ **Name some other young South African entrepreneurs whose work you particularly admire.**

Tebogo Mabye - Hillbrewed Coffee Co.
 Themba Mntambo - NYOC Organics
 Sinenhlanhla Ndlela - [Yo Coco](#)
 Elihle Ndema - Zazi Beautiful
 Sibusiso Zulu and Hector Mgiba - Sneakers 4 Change
 Keitumetsi Mokoena and Zwelihle Magwaza - Love Our City Klean

■ **What advice do you have for young aspiring entrepreneurs in South Africa?**

To always follow their instincts, have passion, be patient and be consistent. The youth should observe what they can contribute to their community and build ideas that can help people.

Find [Sobae Frozen](#) at Victoria Yards and connect with the [@sobaefrozen](#) brand on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

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