

The story behind those Amarula tassels

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Ever wondered what the story is behind the uniquely yellow braided, knotted tassels found attached to each bottle of Amarula?

Well, if truth be told, the tassels are handmade in Somerset West by women of the Helderberg, crafted to perfection for leading alcoholic beverage company Distell, producer of the cream liqueur.

Established in February, the Handwork Hub is a majority black-owned, wholly woman-owned business producing up to one million tassels each month.

In addition to incubating the enterprise, Distell provided R2,7 million in soft loans, helping to secure proper and safe business premises. The group operates from a spacious office building in Comprop Square, Asla Park.

Managing director and partner Toni Rimell says before Distell's involvement, the tassels were made by four women at a house in Sir Lowry's Pass Village.

"I taught them how to do it, and told them to bring a friend," she says.

Growing at a vast pace, there were soon teams in Nomzamo and Macassar.

With Distell on board, what started as a community project to uplift women soon became a well-oiled business, daily enriching the lives of the 29 women from Nomzamo, Sir



Pictured with managing director Toni Rimell (behind, right) are women who manufacture the iconic Amarula tassel.

Lowry's Pass Village and Macassar who, today, are the driving force behind Handwork Hub, sharing in the profit margin with a 51% share in the trust.

Where the women were previously paid per tassel they produced, they can now, with the involvement on Distell, be sure of a reliable monthly income.

The women each make between 1 500 and 2 000 tassels per day, depending on the size of the tassel.

The first consignment of the tassels was delivered in April to adorn bottles of the cream liqueur, which is sold all over the world.

In the few months since the business was established, Distell

has migrated 70% of the volumes of tassel purchases to the Handwork Hub.

Julia Malrasi, Zodwa Matyobeni and Francina Mhlabeni, all supervisors, have been with Rimell from the very beginning, when they first started making tassels from Malrasi's home in Sir Lowry's Pass.

All three agree the business has changed their lives.

Malrasi says having a stable income and a formal payslip has enabled her to apply for a bank loan, enabling her to realise her dream of extending her house.

For Matyobeni, it is the work and structure of having fixed business hours she enjoys most.

Mhlabeni adds that working from home brought along a lot

of distractions, having to attend to the children or taking a sickly neighbour to the doctor, forcing her to work irregular hours and even over public holidays as they were still paid per tassel.

She enjoys putting all her focus into her work, without distraction, and is able to enjoy her public holiday as she now earns a monthly salary.

Rimell says having the support of the supervisors makes her feel as if she doesn't have to manage employees herself.

"We touch base regularly to talk about and sort out any problems that may arise," she says.

As rewarding and beneficial as this newfound partnership



Nosivuyile Majali cuts the rope for the 50 ml bottle, to prevent the string from unravelling.

has proven to be to the women of Handwork Hub, the team at Distell shares in the excitement.

Says James Wilkinson, group general manager for business improvement at Distell: "Every time we see that yellow tassel that is so emblematic of the Amarula brand and resonates with our consumers, we know that there is a proud team of women, previously without proper jobs, and now the shareholders of one of Distell's newest, and indeed most special, suppliers."

Known colloquially as the "Elephant Tree", the marula features prominently in African folklore and is also known as the "Marriage Tree" for its shelter and reported fertility promoting properties.