



Botswana: a tale of Beauty and the Beef

Leeuport Oscar stands four-square in his stall at the 2015 Botswana National Agricultural Show. A ton of prime Simmentaler beef-cake, even without his blue rosette and sash there could be no doubting that he is a “Grand Champion”. Tshepo from Bothatogo, leans further over the railings, pushes his red Massey-Ferguson baseball cap to the back of his head with his motswiri (a Botswana knobkerrie), then clucks in admiration: “Mmmmm-hmmm!” he says “*THAT is Botswana!*”



Leeuport Oscar, Senior Tooth Grand Champion 2015

Diamonds might be the economy’s best friend, nowadays, but it is still cattle that makes Batswana hearts beat faster – a key cultural icon as well as export industry. Forget the day job, true Batswana dream of cattle; so, whilst the country’s human population is just over 2.1 million, the national herd is around 2.6 million head.

Europe became Botswana’s No. 1 export destination for beef in the 1970s, thanks to the preferential access offered under the Lomé Convention. Trade faltered in the 1990s and the future looked uncertain, as the old Lomé relationship with the EU wound up, so Batswana beef farmers let out a collective sigh of relief when Botswana, together with fellow Southern African Development Community (SADC) members Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Swaziland, concluded negotiations for an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with the European Union on 15 July 2014.

Under the EPA, the EU will fully open its market of half a billion people to almost all exports (except arms and ammunition) from SADC EPA partners, free of quotas and duties. For Botswana, this of course means beef.

Tshepo shares the general enthusiasm for this EU market-opening, although he is not sure it will bring him a better price. “*But I do think it provides more greater certainty for the future*”, he says. With that in mind, he is looking to upgrade the mainly Brahman herd at his cattle post and is very interested in the message penned next to Oscar’s family tree, which offers semen for sale at P300.00 per straw: “*The price is good and Brahman-Simmentaler is a great cross*” Tshepo says.

Not everyone is quite so upbeat, however. Nearby, Mohammed is leading prize bullock “Mr T” through the enclosure: “*Sure the EPA is good for Botswana beef exports,*” he says “*but not necessarily for the farmer. We are still stuck with one buyer for our cattle – the BMC.*”

“The BMC”, the Botswana Meat Commission, whose mission statement is “*To produce quality meat and value-adding products for global markets*”, is a household name nationwide, as is Chief Executive Akolang Tombale. Quota and duty free access to the EU market is a great opening for Botswana beef, Dr Tombale says, but has to be exploited intelligently. “*The EU is still the best market for BMC products, but it demands quality – and that’s good, that’s where we have to fight. Beef is big in Botswana, but we are a little country. Every week JBS of Brazil, which also supplies the EU market, slaughters around one hundred times as many cattle as we do. So we cannot compete on volume or cost. Fragmentation of our supply chain would be suicidal*” he says, in answer to Mohammed’s grouse about the BMC being sole buyer: “*It would be like turning up with lots of little wheelbarrows and trying to compete with JBS and their articulated truck-loads!*”



Dr Akolang Tombale of BMC: “EU best for Botswana beef”



Molepolole's poster girls

Dr Tombale's message that *"BMC must aim for niche markets, which requires quality of product and consistency of supply"*, is filtering down to the farmer. Molepolole is cattle country. Along the highway there are signs offering easy loans. Elsewhere, these might show flashy cars, motorcycles or TV sets: in Botswana the big draw is a rather winsome looking heifer.

Tumelo Paledi, a retired Defence Air Wing Major-General, raises some 100 head on his cattle-post of around 120 hectares. Like Tshepo, he started with Brahmans and native Longhorns, but is carefully introducing European breeds to bring the beef stock into line with EU tastes.



Tumelo Paledi: ex-pilot, now beef farmer

The result, he believes, is beef of a unique quality: *"Because the animals roam the land taking what they need and what is good when it is ready and in season, the beef has a very special flavour. As a pilot with the Defence Force I travelled all round the world and I never ate beef as tasty as here at home in Botswana!"*

Dr Tombale's belief in the EU market goal of quality over quantity is still not universally popular in Botswana, where size of herd defines social status, but it is gaining ground. BMC are pursuing this aim strategically by working with the GPS Food Group, who advise them on ways to improve the supply chain, from farm to fork. Brian Perkins, Director of GPS in London, says that the access to the EU market under the EPA will be *"fantastic – the best access you can have"* but not enough in itself. Like Dr Tombale he cites the competition from mega-producers like Brazil and salutes BMC's determination to *"turn a disadvantage into a benefit"* by prioritising quality over quantity. And it is working. With GPS's help, BMC are starting to penetrate new markets in Europe: *"Two years ago, when we started, the UK was the major EU market for Botswana beef, consuming 80% of EU imports. Today we are selling to customers in 15 EU countries"*, Perkins says.

This promises to be a happy development cooperation story and a tribute to the EU EPA strategy. The EU offers access to its markets – and Botswana is gearing up to seize the initiative and turn it into real market gains. There is also another important dimension to this success that is rarely highlighted: the EU actively supported the SADC countries in their EPA negotiations and is continuing to do so, through the support provided by the Regional Economic Support Programme (REIS) that was launched in April 2013.

REIS, which runs until April 2017, is managed by the SADC Secretariat and funded by the EU, with a budget of €20 million. As well as supporting the EU-SADC EPA negotiations, REIS also supports areas of interest to SADC regional integration, including Investment, Payments, Tax, Technical Barriers to Trade, Sanitary & Phytosanitary measures and Trade in Services.

So, not only do the negotiations with the EU promise to bear fruit, through REIS the EU is helping Botswana and other SADC EPA Group countries to nurture and pick them. You can't "beef" about that.