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THE

DIASPORA SPOTLIGHT

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TASTE OF SAI WINE

NADIA TAKYIWAA-MENSAH

GHANA INVESTMENT PROMOTION CENTRE

THE DIASPORA

SPOTLIGHT

TASTE OF SAI WINE NADIA TAKYIWAA-MENSAH

DID **Kindly introduce yourself and describe your role as the founder of Sai Wine Cafe?**

NT I'm Nadia Takyiwaa-Mensah, I was born and raised in the UK, I came to establish a business in Ghana in 2010 and I've never looked back. Sai Wine Café is my second business, after Sixth Sense Manifesto, which is an award winning Pan-African brand management agency headquartered in Osu, Accra. My role as Founder/CEO of Sai Wine Café is to ensure that our customers get the most ideal experience when they engage with us, and that we continue to expand our offerings, develop new products and services, all whilst penetrating new audiences within Ghana, the Diaspora and Expat community.

DID **How many years have you been working in this industry and how did you get started in this field?**

NT Sai Wine Café has been in operation for 8 years now and to be honest, I had no intentions and no business entering into the hospitality industry as I am a Marketing Professional at the core.

NT However, God had other plans and whilst operating a hospitality business is not easy and is full of myths and smokey mirrors, I love what we do, I love the people we get to meet and interact with, I love the experiences we get to deliver and the stories we get to tell and hear.

DID **What inspired you to start your own business in the hospitality industry, and what has been the driving force behind your success at Sai?**

NT As I said before God first, but the why - at the time when I started Sai Wine Café - the wine industry was not interesting. Wine options were poor, many people in the middle class didn't know wine in terms of its culture, etiquette and I remember when I was moving up the corporate ladder in the UK and belonging to new social circles - wine was a staple beverage. I remember my personal journey of learning about wine and what that did for me, in terms of shaping me for the new environment in which I found myself.

THE DIASPORA SPOTLIGHT

TASTE OF SAI WINE NADIA TAKYIWAA-MENSAH

DID **Could you tell us more about the specific services and products that Sai offers?**

NT This is the interesting aspect of Sai Wine Café - it is more than food and wine, we have identified numerous revenue channels for our business that we are constantly expanding on and exploring. We provide our space for private and corporate rental. We have an open garden which can hold over 100 people and our internal space which has a capacity of 120, so we sometimes close for private bookings. We also have our private white label wines, Volta, which is a Made in Ghana wine available in 4 varietals consisting of Cocoa, Cocoa/ Hibiscus, Cashew and Coffee which we sell. We also have strategic partnerships with Wealth teams of a few banks, we work to provide their High Value Networth clients with unique experiences. We also host a variety of experiential events every week from Wine Tastings, Food Pairing's, Wine & Art, Art Exhibitions, Live Music etc. So we do a lot of work behind the scenes to fully deliver on the Sai experience.

NT Opening a wine café was an opportunity to present the world of wines, its different varietals, to provide experiences but to also create a space in Accra which was not about loud music and people showing up to show off. It was designed to be a home away from home, a space to enjoy a glass of wine, read a book, have a conversation with a friend without shouting, have a business meeting - just an intimate space to relax and unwind. The driving force of our businesses success has been our customers and strategic partners. Honestly, what I initially thought I would do with Sai Wine Café and what it has grown to become has alot to do with the feedback and conversations with our customers. Our teams over the years have carried us through. It has been a bumpy ride but when we are winning we are winning. We have a big vision for Sai which incorporates a legacy plan to ensure that after my days are over, the business will still go on to stand the test of time.

GHANA INVESTMENT PROMOTION CENTRE

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THE DIASPORA SPOTLIGHT

TASTE OF SAI WINE NADIA TAKYIWAA-MENSAH

DID **As a hospitality service provider, which sector(s) of Ghana's economy does your work focus on, and what are some of the challenges and opportunities in catering to this market?**

NT Our business is focused on the formal sector as it is relatable to them. Some of the challenges we face is, 'fitting in' to the social culture in Ghana. The lifecycle of a customer is relatively shorter than external markets, even in comparison to that of Nigeria. The culture of just going out for a quiet drink without 'turning up' is still a growing trend in Accra, plus we tend to see after a certain age, a drop in frequent patronage as our clients start hosting at home with their friends and family. People generally like to be in a hyped environment where there are a lot of people and loud music so when they come to our establishment, they think there is something wrong and do not fully appreciate the alternative of being out yet chill. Sai presents itself as a 'grown' environment.

NT I often have people saying, if Sai was in another country, maybe Nigeria, Kenya, UK, USA - people would understand and appreciate it more. Nevertheless, I have seen over the years, how Ghanaian's interact with Sai and it is promising. The opportunities within hospitality is in abundance, and honestly if money wasn't an object, human resource was more reliable and I had a second heart, I would run to the hills with businesses within this industry. The challenge with Accra in particular is that there are too much of the same business replicated all over the place. Accra is completely saturated with the same food, same music, same same - it just takes one to be bold, creative and innovative to provide new experiences and spaces for people to enjoy.

DID **What motivated your decision to start and grow your business in Ghana, and how have you found the experience so far?**

NT Honestly again, coming to Ghana was a spiritual calling. I reached a high point of my career by the time I was 27 in the UK. I was a high-earner, my personal life was on point, I had a house, a luxury car and all of those things that the system encourages us to strive for in life.

GHANA INVESTMENT PROMOTION CENTRE

THE DIASPORA SPOTLIGHT

TASTE OF SAI WINE

NADIA TAKYIWAA-MENSAH

NT Yet one day I was stepping out of my car to go to the train station and my spirit just said ‘I cannot do this for the rest of my life’. I was bored! The life I was seeing before me in the UK just wasn’t for me, so when I prayed about it and waited, everything just started directing me to Ghana. I established my first business, Sixth Sense Manifesto after being in Ghana for 6 months. As soon as we opened our office, we received our first contract within 2 weeks and then 2 months later we won a contract with Vodafone Ghana and the clients just kept on coming from there. By 2012, we expanded our agency to Nigeria and the journey over the years has been incredible. Today our agency is a Pan-African agency which has presence in 9 other African countries and we have successfully worked with leading global brands such as Mastercard, Standard Chartered, Prudential Insurance, Merck Pharmaceutical and more.

DID **Could you share with us some of the notable achievements or milestones that Sai Wine & Cafe has reached since its inception?**

NT The very fact that Sai Wine Café is still in operation after 8 years is an achievement. Globally, hospitality businesses have a high rate of failure after the first 24 months and then again at 5 years. Considering how niche our business is and an initial slow adoption, it is a great achievement that we are still in business today. A key milestone for us was when we moved from Labone to Ako-Adjei, Osu in the midst of Covid. We moved from our old location the very week lockdown was announced and we had already paid a deposit for our new location which needed renovation work to be done. Investing in a hospitality business during Covid was seen by many as insane, yet everything inside me told me to continue. So as soon as lock down was lifted we started renovating our new space and re-opened by July 2020. We were fully booked for the first 3 months of our re-opening. In that same year, I won a Hospitality Award for 40 under 40 Awards.

THE DIASPORA SPOTLIGHT

TASTE OF SAI WINE NADIA TAKYIWAA-MENSAH

NT Honestly, the real achievements and milestones for me are the everyday small wins, it takes alot of work and energy to run a hospitality business in Ghana, so for everyday we open and close successfully without any major hitches in terms of staff, operation, ECG, water etc. - thats an achievement for me.

DID **What were some of the biggest obstacles or challenges that you faced while navigating Ghana's business ecosystem, and how did you overcome them?**

NT 3 things; Access to financing, Human resource, and Government institutions. I will elaborate;

Access to Finance - sometimes you need bridge financing to be able to grow your business or execute a project. Going to the bank is a non-starter if you do not have collateral plus the interest rates are wild. Everything is based on what you have available and that is all. In some ways it is good, but at times it can be frustrating because you miss opportunities and your business grows slowly.

Human Resource - many people speak about the human resource challenges in Ghana and it is all true. It can be painful at times dealing with our people, and the Gen-zer's are a whole new kettle of fish.

NT In my experience, we cannot recruit and train the way we do in the West. There needs to be a more personable approach and a focus on who is loyal first then you build up from there. There is no one formula that works, you have to keep on persevering. Finally I mentioned **Government institutions** because, at times it feels like they are working against you than for you. The lack of information, the back and forth and sometimes the attitude of the staff can be very frustrating. I always tell people you cannot see the beginning from the end when you engage with most government institutions and it can be overwhelming and frustrating, communication is so bad. Processes seem long winded and nobody is able to provide you with timelines, or be transparent with costs. Also, as a business owner I find the government institutions are very quick to take matters to court for minor non-compliance issues.

THE DIASPORA SPOTLIGHT

TASTE OF SAI WINE NADIA TAKYIWAA-MENSAH

DID **What positive outcomes have you experienced so far as a result of your investment and work in Ghana, and what are your future plans for growth and expansion?**

NT I will say it again, the fact that our business is still operating in good health is a positive outcome. There are other positives such as being able to empower, teach and grow with people. Many of my staff have gone on to do great things and we are still in touch today. It is beautiful to know that at some point I was an integral part of their success story. We have also been fortunate to attain international attention for what we are doing with Sai, and we have been featured in leading online publications in the US, UK and South Africa.I have both short and medium term plans for Sai which I am excited about, including launching a Private Members Club within our premises and developing Sai to be a 'go to' place for business persons. Realising the plans is primarily about access to finance and the necessary resources to make it come into fruition.

DID **As someone who has successfully established and grown a business in Ghana, what advice or words of encouragement would you offer to other diasporas who are considering returning home or investing in the country's limitless opportunities?**

NT The first thing I will advise is for one to take their time, be patient. Ghana has a rhythm which you need to understand and fall in line with in order to get the most out of this environment. Secondly, I would say disabuse your mind of how you think things 'should be'. What works for the West works for the West, and what works for Ghana works for Ghana, it really doesn't matter how you think, things should be, unless you are going to do something about it. Be willing to be in it for the long game, Ghana has money! Ghanaian's have money! But it is never one, two and then you've got it, there are many pitfalls, tossing around, ghosting, power plays, ego rubbing which happens and you need to be humble and ride the wave.

NT

Networking is always important but not only with other Disaporan's or Expats but with our own people - Ghanaians in Ghana. Albeit corporate or informal sector, across board I have experienced it is important to be friends and listen to their counsel, whilst understanding our history as it puts things into context. It is also an opportunity to understand our people and what motivates them. I love Ghana, it is home, people are happy, food is good, sun is shining and everyday you wake up and see people trying and working hard with what they have.

Sai Wine on SOCIAL MEDIA

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