

How two entrepreneurs turned personal hardship into sweet, sugar-free success

What began as a side hustle born out of personal and financial hardship in a small ninth-floor apartment in Pretoria, has grown into a beverage brand now stocked in 103 stores across the Western Cape, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Freestate, Northwest, and Limpopo provinces.

Gudgu – short for “Goedheid Uit Die Grond Uit” (Goodness from the Earth) – started by accident in 2014, when a recently retrenched Viljoen de Kock began experimenting with homemade cordials. A chance encounter with public relations and marketing expert Pieter du Plessis soon turned this passion project into a business with real potential.

From that modest space to a fully-fledged factory in Cape Town, Gudgu now employs 14 people with the capacity to produce up to 300,000 units per month.

The pair jumped straight in from the get-go, using their concentrates to craft drinks at informal markets to build a loyal following.

One early customer, a diabetic, loved the product but raised concerns about its sugar content. That feedback inspired Gudgu to develop a sugar-free range. “We embarked on a mission to create a healthy, sugar-free alternative aptly named ‘Sug0,’ signifying zero guilt and zero sugar,” says de Kock.

This led to a growing selection of sugar-free, diabetic, keto and banting friendly concentrates to make ‘guilt-free’ cold drinks, cocktails and mocktails. But getting onto formal retail shelves was a different challenge altogether.

In 2022, Gudgu joined the Checkers’ SMME programme, which offers compliance and marketing support to help small suppliers gain access to the formal retail environment - leading to Gudgu’s products being stocked in 10 stores in the Western Cape.

The customer response was immediate and overwhelming: “Our social media followers from all over South Africa were constantly reaching out, asking when Gudgu would be available in their town or city.”

Recognising the growing demand, Checkers expanded Gudgu’s presence to 20 additional stores in the Western Cape, followed by a rollout to 20 more stores in Gauteng.

“The support, training, and access to systems we’ve received from Checkers has been phenomenal and essential to our growth,” says de Kock. “Listing with the country’s largest retailer boosted both brand recognition and customer trust, lifting credibility for Gudgu and increasing sales dramatically.”

This strong foundation has enabled Gudgu to expand its product offering with a variety of flavour concentrate ranges, such as Flavoursome, Gin Perfect, and Coffee & Milkshake — available in 750ml glass bottles and 50ml minis. They’ve also introduced 350ml ready-to-drink beverages, a sugar-free Keto Krunchie cookie, and is preparing to launch a premium concentrate line.

Inspired by their own health journeys - having lost over 70 kilograms between them - the founders are passionate advocates for healthy, sustainable living.

Their ISO 22000-certified facility in Cape Town’s Rivergate Industrial Park reflects a commitment to both food safety and environmental responsibility. The operation incorporates zero-waste water purification, biodegradable packaging, and bottles made from glass or compostable materials.

“We bottle exclusively in glass and will soon launch our ready-to-drink cold beverages in compostable bottles made from sugarcane. Our packaging boxes are 100% biodegradable, and while water is our main ingredient, our purification system ensures zero wastage,” explains de Kock.

““Our biggest challenge at Gudgu has always been to expand our footprint across South Africa to answer the growing need for healthy, ‘green list’ sugar-free options, particularly for people following a low-carb lifestyle and

those living with diabetes. As entrepreneurs, it can be a bumpy ride at times,” de Kock admits, “but Checkers’ guidance helped steer us back every time. It’s been a true partnership.”

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