

## **The woman who turned a fly problem into a promising business**

When Thato Poo first began experimenting with natural repellents in 2020, she was aiming to solve a problem: keeping unwanted insects at bay. What resulted is a steadily growing business, with her innovative products now stocked in 27 Checkers stores.

As hotel manager at her family's boutique hotel in eMalahleni, Mpumalanga, Thato noticed buffet tables attracted flies and mosquitoes — and none of the available repellents were effective.

"Where there was food, flies followed," she recalls. "Nothing on the market worked, so I started researching ingredients and testing my own formula."

Her early experiments led to a handcrafted candle made from citronella, lemongrass, and lime — which also doubles as a balm for bites and irritation. That candle became the foundation of Matlhasedi, a range that also includes body balms and oils. Presented in eco-friendly packaging, the products are made from vegetable wax and essential oils. New seasonal variants include peppermint and eucalyptus, making it multipurpose: repelling insects in summer, easing congestion in winter.

Thato launched the brand just before the Covid-19 lockdowns hit, which forced her to pause and rethink. She used the time to refine her products and started selling to friends and family on social media. Demand grew, and by 2022 she tested the retail space with a placement in a boutique store in Menlyn, Pretoria. The results were underwhelming.

"My products didn't sell well in that store. But I knew they worked, and I didn't want that to shake my confidence," she says. "So, I decided to leave and channel my energy into applying for Checkers' small business development initiative and I was fortunate to be accepted in 2023."

As part of the retailer's SMME programme, Thato received compliance support, and expert guidance. By early 2024, her products were in five Checkers stores — and quickly sold out.

"Being part of Checkers has been life-changing - that's where my breakthrough came," she says. "The product is now sold in 27 stores across Gauteng and Mpumalanga — and it's beautiful to see how people are responding. The reviews are honest, and they've helped me grow."

At the heart of Matlhasedi — which means "ray of sunshine" — is a commitment to youth employment and skills development, especially for young women. During peak seasons, she employs up to 10 people. Her mostly young, semi-skilled team contributes across the business — from production to web design. "There aren't many opportunities out there for young people," she adds. "My goal is to give them experience — and let them shine," says Thato.

She draws inspiration from her mother, a lifelong entrepreneur, and from role models like Portia Mngomezulu, founder of the Portia M skincare brand.

This August, as Women's Month shines a spotlight on women-led businesses, Matlhasedi is proof of what's possible when entrepreneurs are supported to build — and uplift others along the way.

"I'm still learning, still growing," says Thato. "But I know we're onto something special."

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