

Onezwa Mbola shares festive, farm-to-table joy with Eastern Cape food garden

A crackling fire, armfuls of freshly harvested vegetables and the company of local farmers set the scene for popular South African content creator and chef Onezwa Mbola's latest culinary journey in the Eastern Cape.

Mbola recently spent a day cooking with the farmers of Phawu Agripak Co-operative in Willowvale in the rural Eastern Cape. This community food garden is one of the entrants in Shoprite's inaugural Act for Change Food Garden Competition. Surrounded by rows of cabbage, beetroot, kale, carrots and peppers, Onezwa – known for her passion for home-grown food and traditional cooking – prepared a festive, fire-cooked meal using vegetables harvested just metres away.

For Mbola, also known for her farm-to-table approach and zero-waste cooking, the visit was a homecoming of sorts. "I make meals using ingredients I've grown or foraged," she says. Phawu Agripak felt like an extension of her own home, as she is also from Willowvale and lives close to the co-operative. "These vegetables tell the story of the people caring for them, and that adds a different kind of flavour to food," she says.

A festive meal straight from the soil

During the visit, Mbola cooked alongside members of the co-operative, preparing root vegetables wrapped in foil and roasted on an open fire, homemade flatbreads and a fire-roasted chicken. Gathered around the fire, she and the community members chatted and connected over the meal, enjoying the warm, communal atmosphere.

"For me, open-fire cooking isn't only for Christmas, it's just how we cook at home. The smoke brings everything to life, especially root vegetables like beetroot, sweet potato and potatoes," she said. "But what makes it special is knowing exactly where they came from. That someone planted, watered and cared for them. You can taste that connection."

The visit also inspired Onezwa to share some of her festive favourites with South Africans. Her go-to dish during the holidays is a hearty beef stew packed with vegetables from her garden and she's encouraging home cooks to try millet, an indigenous grain she loves for its versatility and neutral flavour. "It's perfect for salads and a great way to bring traditional ingredients into festive meals," she says.

Phawu Agripak: A beacon of community resilience

Founded in 2019 on land inherited by community leader Bakhusele Mathupha, Phawu Agripak Co-operative has grown into a thriving hub supporting numerous women farmers and their families. Through training, permaculture practices and support from partners like Shoprite, the co-operative has transformed once-degraded soil into a sustainable, productive food system.

From building compost systems to installing solar-powered water solutions that harvest 150 litres per hour, the team demonstrates how community gardens can thrive even in drought-prone areas.

For Bakhusele, success is not measured in money, but in meals.

“It was never about how much we could earn, it’s about how much food we can produce. Knowing that people can take food home 365 days a year means more than any amount of money,” he explains. His long-term dream is to grow Phawu into a national hub where people can learn about agroecology, permaculture and traditional farming.

About the Act for Change Food Garden Competition

Shoprite launched the first Act for Change Food Garden Competition this year. The winning gardens will receive tailored support collectively worth R1 million.

The competition is designed to spotlight the work of community growers from across the country, to strengthen their long-term sustainability, and to deepen their impact in the communities they feed. These gardens are vital lifelines. They provide nutritious food, create livelihoods, preserve indigenous farming knowledge and restore dignity through self-reliance.

“Shoprite is shining a light on community gardens all over South Africa, because they are helping tackle food insecurity and uplift communities in ways that truly matter,” Onezwa says.

As the festive season unfolds, Onezwa is encouraging South Africans to keep their celebrations rooted in community and connection.

“There’s a kind of magic in food that’s close to home, whether you’ve grown it yourself or bought it from a local garden. It brings people together and reminds us that sustainability isn’t just a concept; it’s something we practice through the meals we share,” she says. “Gather around the fire, support your local growers and enjoy the incredible flavours our land has to offer.”

Onezwa’s visit to Phawu Agripak Co-operative offers a glimpse into what’s possible when communities are supported to grow their own food, both nutritionally and economically. As South Africans await the announcement of the Act for Change Food Garden Competition winners, the message is clear that gardens like Phawu are not just growing vegetables. They are growing resilience, knowledge and hope.

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