

After losing a promising flour business, Carol Zawedde-Sanyu turned to farming with little more than savings, patience and instinct, growing a diversified agribusiness and agritourism venture powered not by loans, but by customer trust, community support and relentless reinvention.

BY JOAN SALMON

When Carol Zawedde-Sanyu speaks about farming, her voice carries conviction and memory of loss, reinvention, and a stubborn belief that she is meant to succeed.

"I come from a very big family of 13 children," she says, almost casually, before adding, "and business has always been a part of my life."

At 31, Zawedde is an agri-entrepreneur, farmer and founder of Mlinza Farm, an agritourism venture blending farming, food, and immersive rural experiences. But her journey into agriculture was anything but linear.

Her earliest lessons in business came from her mother, who ran a restaurant. By Primary Six, she was already helping out, learning customer service, stock management and the realities of running a small enterprise.

However, it was her grandfather, the late Bweyinda Musoke, founder of Bweyinda Bakery, who planted a deeper seed.

"He had a big farm in Mende in Kiso District," she recalls. "Every time I went there, he would show me money, actual cash, and say, 'Farmers are the only truly rich people in this country.'"

At the time, the statement felt exaggerated. Zawedde did not own land, nor fully understand agriculture as a business. But the consistency of that message, reinforced by the farmers she observed, began shaping her thinking.

"I started believing," she says. "Even before I had a farm, I knew I would consider farming seriously one day."

Learning the market

Before farming, Zawedde found her footing in the flour trade while running a small restaurant in Gaba, a Kampala neighbourhood. The trigger was a small pick-up vending flour that caught her attention.

"Why can't these millers take advantage of shops?" she wondered.

That curiosity led to a marketing role with a flour business. But she quickly identified an opportunity beyond her job description.

"They would give us a base selling price," she says, "but in the market, you could negotiate your own price."

That gap became her advantage.

"I became a broker," Zawedde says. "I started making more than

Zawedde thrives in agritourism sector

my salary, about Shs7,000 per unit, while the company made Shs2,000."

When her employers discovered this, they let her go and took over the client relationships.

By then, she had saved Shs5 million. That capital launched her next venture.

With market knowledge and savings, Zawedde started Npulu Maize Flour. She did not own a milling machine.

Instead, she bought maize, paid for milling, packaged the flour, and sold it under her own brand.

"I already knew the market, so, the business grew very fast," she says.

Her clients extended beyond Uganda to South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). It was a promising enterprise, but vulnerable too.

"One of our long-time clients in the DRC took two trucks of flour and never paid," she says. "That loss was very heavy."

The financial blow destabilised the business and drained her motivation.

"I lost interest. I left the business to my sister and stepped away," she says.

A new beginning

Zawedde's transition into farming was unplanned. It came at what she describes as a low moment.

A friend with two to three acres of land and a few goats in Zirobwe, Luwero District invited her to explore the opportunity.

"I needed something to focus on,"

EXPANSION PLANS

Looking ahead, Carol Zawedde-Sanyu is rethinking expansion. Rather than investing in multiple locations, she is focusing on mobility, taking the farm experience to people. Through corporate events, weddings and training sessions, she recreates the farm environment beyond Zirobwe. "We want to bring the farm closer to people," she says.

she says. "Something that could ground me."

He offered her 25 goats, most of them pregnant.

"That is how I joined farming," she says. "I started with goats."

This time, she moved differently. "I spent one full year just learning," Zawedde says. "How to feed them, how to treat them, which breeds perform well."

The deliberate learning phase helped her understand the risks, timelines and discipline required in livestock farming.

By the time Covid-19 disrupted operations, she was managing most aspects of the farm herself.

"The farm became heavy," Zawedde says. "Goats are a long-term investment, but expenses are daily."

The imbalance forced a shift. "I needed short-term income," she explains.

She diversified into chickens, turkeys, guinea fowls, ducks, and later, fish farming, particularly catfish. The farm evolved into a mixed enterprise.

Turning challenge to opportunity

"We realised that instead of struggling to find a market, we could create one. We use systems such as 50 percent booking deposits to manage operations and reinvest. The women around me have been my biggest support system. They encourage and challenge me, especially during difficult moments."

Zawedde, proprietor Mlinzi Meat Store

The birth of agritourism

A new challenge emerged: the market.

"Some of these products were alien to the market, so, people did not know how to consume them," Zawedde says. "You tell someone you are selling guinea fowl, and they think they are wild."

The breakthrough came from visitors, who often got hungry during tours. She began offering meals.

"We started cooking for them," she says.

At first, the menu featured familiar foods such as chicken and goat meat. But curiosity grew.

"People would say, 'I have never eaten guinea fowl or rabbit. I want to taste.'"

That curiosity became opportunity.

"We realised that instead of struggling to find a market, we could create one," she says.

Social media exposure from celebrity friends such as Aziz Azion and Kyam-

agero amplified interest.

Zawedde then introduced a fee of Shs100,000 per visitor and expanded activities to include village experiences, games and dancing.

"People miss the village vibe," she says. "So, we gave them that experience."

The model blended education, leisure and food into a profitable experience.

From farm to table to city

As demand grew, off-farm deliveries became a challenge.

"People loved the food, but they could not always travel to the farm," Zawedde says.

She began delivering food to Kampala. Though initially costly, it proved viable.

She later opened Mlinzi Meat Store to supply fresh produce. Demand for cooked food led to the launch of Solene Foods.

"My dream was to build something bigger for my mother," she says. "To share our recipes with the world."

Her growth model is notable. "I have never taken a loan," she says.

Instead, she relies on customer trust. "We use systems such as 50 percent booking deposits to manage operations and reinvest."

The power of community

Zawedde credits much of her success to her community, especially a women's group, Abakyalaba Zirobwe.

"The women around me have been my biggest support system. They encourage and challenge me, especially during difficult moments," she says.

From early on, she chose to grow with her community.

"I teach farming, support financial literacy, and partner with organisations such as KCB Bank and seed companies," she says.

Zawedde also created a local supply system, acting as a primary buyer for produce.

This has improved livelihoods; women now own bicycles and can provide basic needs for their children.

The farm supports schools, empowers girls, and runs community initiatives. Children given baby rabbits now supply her with rabbits.

"Growth for us is collective," she says.



Carol Zawedde-Sanyu has been able to establish a booming business. PHOTO/JOAN SALMON