

Belgian-Congolese chef opens Senegal's first artisan chocolate shop

By [Cooper Inveen](#)

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Forced by the Covid-19 pandemic to abandon plans to open a restaurant, Danuta Nganko, a Belgian-Congolese chef in Senegal's capital Dakar, settled instead on an even tastier endeavour: to become the country's first gourmet chocolatier.



Artisanal chocolate bars are seen on display at Venko Chocolatier in Dakar, Senegal, July 6, 2021. Source: Reuters/Cooper Inveen

"When Covid started, all my activities stopped," she said. "I thought about working with a product, and I thought, 'Why not chocolate?' ... Because I really love technical types of cooking, I thought it was for me."

Since then, Nganko has realised a new dream with the opening of Venko - Senegal's first and only artisanal chocolate company.

By fusing Belgian chocolate with locally sourced ingredients such as bissap, or the hibiscus flower, and moringa, Venko has quickly developed a reputation for blending unique flavours with stylish presentation, making Nganko's chocolate a coveted delicacy among Senegal's confectionary enthusiasts.



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"The idea is to take a very classical chocolate and work it with local flavours," Nganko told Reuters ahead of World Chocolate Day on July 7. "I hope that moving forward, my work can help to put those flavours a bit into fashion."

Named after a bakery established by Nganko's parents during her childhood - a fusion of the couple's last names - Venko has navigated the Covid-19 outbreak by leaning heavily into deliveries and catering for special events.

Creating a cocoa culture

While lacking the cocoa culture of other regional powerhouses like Ivory Coast and Ghana, Senegal's stability has made it an attractive destination for investors and entrepreneurs, including Nganko.

Nganko wants to change the way Senegalese regard chocolate.

"I think the next challenge will be to accustom Senegalese customers to buying chocolate on a day-to-day basis," she said. "They do not yet buy chocolate as something to have in the fridge and take a bite, but we will get there."

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