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SUNDAY MORNINGS

ENTERTAINMENT AND LIFESTYLE

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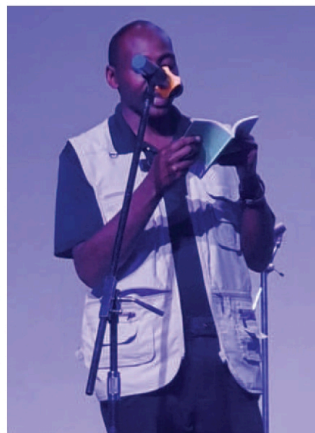
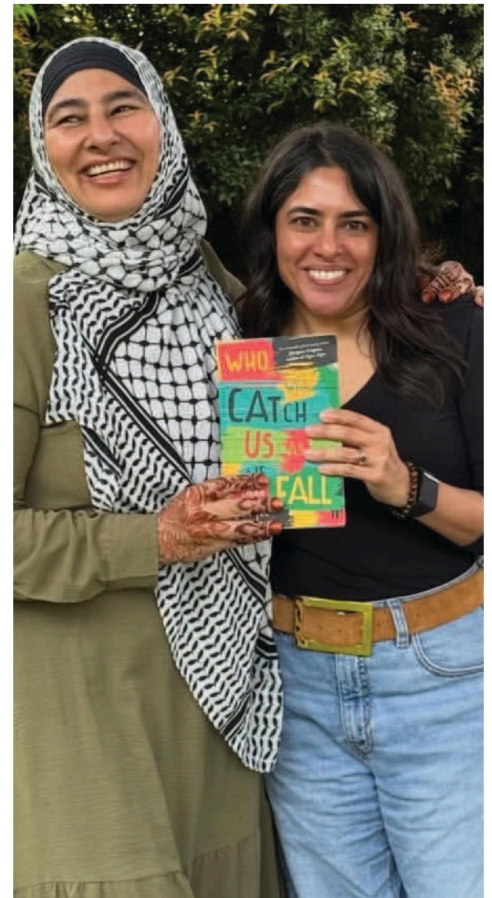
Kenya Hosts the Asian Literary Festival's African Debut



Recently, writers, filmmakers, thinkers, and cultural enthusiasts gathered for the inaugural Kenyan edition of the Asian Literary Festival (ALF), marking the festival's first-ever appearance on African soil. Previous editions have been held in Brussels, Bhubaneswar, and Gampaha. Founded by Sri Lankan novelist Pramudith D. Rupasinghe and directed in Kenya by acclaimed author Alexander Nderitu, the three-day celebration unfolded under the theme "Monsoon

Relatives," exploring the centuries-old maritime, cultural, and ecological connections between Asia and Africa. More than 35 regional and international literary figures, filmmakers, entrepreneurs, and intellectuals participated in over 20 panel discussions, screenings, performances, and interactive sessions, transforming the venue into a vibrant meeting point of stories, ideas, and cross-continental dialogue.

BY HARRIET JAMES



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FOOD

From the Operating Theatre to the MasterChef Kitchen: Kenyan Surgeon Chases Culinary Dream in South Africa

BY HARRIET JAMES

@PeopleDailyKe

For most people, surgery and cooking occupy opposite ends of the professional spectrum. One saves lives in sterile operating theatres, while the other creates memorable experiences in bustling kitchens. But for Kenyan-born surgeon Phillip Munda, the two worlds are not as different as they seem.

Munda, a specialist surgeon based in South Africa, is one of the contestants on the latest season of MasterChef South Africa, a journey that has seen him swap surgical instruments for saucepans and scalpels for skilllets.

His appearance on one of the country's most popular cooking competitions is the culmination of a passion that began not in a professional kitchen but in a university residence where cooking was more about survival than artistry.

"Cooking started as something very simple for me," Munda recalls. "When I finished school and went to university, I could barely cook at all. Living with friends meant we had to learn quickly just to survive."

What started as necessity soon evolved into a friendly competition among housemates, each determined to outdo the others with increasingly ambitious meals.

At the same time, Munda became captivated by cooking shows, particularly MasterChef Australia.

"I became fascinated by how ordinary ingredients could be transformed into something beautiful," he says. "It's like real-life magic."

As the demands of medical school and later hospital work intensified, cooking became more than a hobby. It offered a welcome escape from the pressures of medicine. "Medicine is a demanding career, and after long days at the hospital I found that cooking became a way to relax and reset," he says. "The kitchen became a place where I could slow down and be creative."

Over the years, that hobby gradually transformed into a serious passion.

The opportunity to test his skills on a bigger stage came while he was completing his specialist surgical training. When applications opened for MasterChef South Africa, Munda felt compelled to take a chance.

"For years, I loved watching MasterChef and imagining what it would be like to cook in that kitchen," he says. "When applications opened, it felt like the right moment to take a leap and see where that passion could go."

The call confirming his place on the show remains one of the most memorable



moments of his culinary journey.

"It was honestly surreal," he says. "I had watched MasterChef for years, so the idea that I would actually be standing in that kitchen felt almost unbelievable."

Alongside the excitement came apprehension. "There was excitement and a bit of fear because I know the standard is incredibly high and the pressure is real."

Preparing for the competition involved countless hours of practice, experimentation and learning.

"I spent a lot of time cooking and experimenting in the kitchen," he says. "I tried to improve my techniques, learn new cuisines and challenge myself with different ingredients."

Yet he quickly discovered that preparation could only take him so far.

"On MasterChef, the real challenge is adapting quickly, thinking creatively and staying calm under pressure."

Interestingly, those are qualities that also define his work as a surgeon.

"There are definitely similarities," Munda explains. "Both require focus, preparation and attention to detail. In surgery, every movement matters and you have to stay calm under pressure."

Cooking in a competitive environment demands the same level of discipline.

"You are working against the clock and need to execute your ideas precisely."

Despite juggling a demanding medical career, Munda has found ways to maintain his culinary passion. In fact, he views cooking as an important part of his wellbeing.



"After long hours in the hospital, cooking allows me to switch off mentally," he says. "It gives me space to be creative in a completely different way."

He describes the process as deeply therapeutic.

"Surgery can be mentally and emotionally intense. Cooking gives me a way to decompress and reconnect with something simple and joyful."

While representing South Africa on the show, Munda remains deeply connected to his Kenyan roots. Born into a family originally from Asembo in Siaya County, he hopes to showcase Kenyan flavours whenever the opportunity arises.

"My Kenyan roots are a big part of who I am, and food is one of the most powerful ways to share culture," he says.

Among the dishes closest to his heart is a staple from western Kenya. "One dish that means a lot to me is tilapia with ugali, which is very common around Lake Victoria," he says. "It's simple but deeply comforting and full of flavour."

He believes Kenyan cuisine deserves greater international recognition.

"Kenyan cuisine reflects the country's diversity," he explains. "Different regions and communities bring their own ingredients and cooking traditions. You see influences from East Africa, the Indian Ocean coast and inland farming communities."

That rich cultural blend, he says, creates a cuisine that is both distinctive and varied.

Munda's own culinary style draws inspiration from both his upbringing and his curiosity about global food cultures. While television chefs sparked his imagination, memories of home continue to shape his cooking.

"The flavours and memories from home play an important role in how I think about cooking," he says.

His medical background has also influenced his relationship with food.

"Being a doctor makes you very aware of how food affects health and wellbeing," he says. "But for me, food is also about joy, culture and connection."

Having spent most of his life in South Africa after moving there with his family in 1997, Munda says living away from Kenya has presented both challenges and opportunities. "You miss family, culture and familiar environments," he says. "But it also exposes you to new perspectives and opportunities."

One of those opportunities, he jokes, was meeting his South African wife.

As he continues his MasterChef journey, Munda hopes his story resonates with others who may feel confined by a single career path.

"Your career does not have to define the full extent of who you are," he says. "It's possible to pursue excellence in your profession while also exploring the things that bring you joy."



DIGITAL INNOVATION



Exploring Smart China: Where Ancient Heritage Meets Digital Innovation

PHOTOS BY HARRIET JAMES

BY HARRIET JAMES
@peopledaily

China is often introduced through its imperial grandeur—the vast courtyards of the Forbidden City, the spiritual symmetry of the Temple of Heaven, and the enduring stones of the Great Wall of China. These landmarks tell the story of an ancient civilization that stretches back thousands of years.

Yet beneath the layers of history lies another China altogether: a city powered by QR codes, artificial intelligence, facial recognition, digital payments, smart mobility, and increasingly, robots. As destinations around the world explore smart tourism initiatives, China offers a living laboratory demonstrating how technology can improve visitor experiences, streamline transportation, reduce waiting times, and support sustainable urban management.

I witnessed this first hand during my tour in this tech enabled destination. For visitors arriving in China's capital today, the digital experience begins almost immediately. From the passport-check to airport transfers and hotel check-ins to ordering meals and buying souvenirs, technology quietly shapes nearly every interaction. Beijing offers a fascinating glimpse into what urban tourism may look like in the decades ahead.

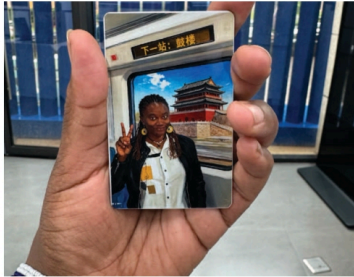
In many destinations, tourists still carry cash, paper tickets, and guidebooks. In Beijing, a smartphone often replaces all three.

A visitor can navigate the city using mobile apps, access public transport through digital payments, translate signs instantly, order meals, book attractions, and even unlock a bicycle within seconds. The result is a travel experience that feels remarkably seamless, efficient, and surprisingly intuitive once one adapts to the system.

For many first-time visitors, and I can also share from my experience, the biggest adjustment is not learning Mandarin but adapting to a society where cash is becoming increasingly uncommon.

Limited presence of police on the road in cities such as Beijing, traffic flow is largely controlled through digitally operated traffic lights linked to centralized monitoring





centers rather than relying on police officers at intersections. Cameras, sensors and artificial intelligence help monitor traffic volumes in real time, allowing signal timings to be adjusted automatically to reduce congestion. While traffic police remain available for emergencies, accidents and enforcement, the day-to-day management of many junctions is handled by technology. This not only improves efficiency but also allows authorities to gather data that can inform future transport planning.

Living in a Cashless City

One of the most striking aspects of visiting Beijing is the dominance of mobile payments. Back home in Kenya, many people are familiar with the convenience of M-Pesa which enables us to pay almost everything with it thanks to the pandemic which made this a reality. In China, however, mobile payments have evolved into an even broader ecosystem. Throughout my visit, I found

myself relying heavily on Alipay, one of the country's most widely used digital payment platforms.

Whether purchasing bottled water from a convenience store, buying snacks at tourist attractions, paying for meals in restaurants, booking trains/metros or shopping for souvenirs, the process was almost always the same: scan a QR code and pay instantly. The experience felt familiar yet remarkably advanced.

At times, I realized I had gone entire days without touching physical cash despite having converted my few Kenyan shillings into yuan. Street vendors, small shops, cafes, supermarkets, and even some independent traders accepted digital payments. The smartphone had effectively become my wallet.

For tourists, the system can initially seem intimidating, especially for those accustomed to using cards or cash. Yet once set up, it transforms the travel experience. Transactions take seconds, queues move quickly, and there is no

need to worry about carrying exact change. The digital payment culture reflects how deeply technology has become integrated into daily life in China.

Lost in Translation? Not Anymore

Language barriers have traditionally been one of the biggest challenges for international travelers in China. This was my greatest fear before traveling to China and wondering how I would be able to communicate. Yet technology is increasingly solving that problem. Throughout my stay, I witnessed countless examples of people using smartphone translation applications to communicate.

In restaurants, shops, hotels, and tourist sites, it was common to see locals typing messages into translation apps before showing the English version to visitors. Likewise, travelers could type questions in English and instantly receive Chinese translations.

What might once have been an awkward exchange became a surprisingly

smooth conversation.

At one point, when seeking assistance, a local simply pulled out a phone, typed a response in Chinese, and within seconds the translation appeared in English. The technology eliminated the uncertainty that often accompanies travel in countries where one does not speak the local language.

Translation apps are also integrated into many tourism experiences. Visitors can translate menus, street signs, information boards, and directions using their phone cameras. The result is a city that feels far more accessible than many travelers might expect.

Exploring the City on Two Wheels

Another visible symbol of Beijing's digital transformation is its shared bicycle system.

Rows of brightly colored bicycles can be found across the city, lining sidewalks, transit stations, universities, shopping districts, and residential neighborhoods.

Unlike traditional rental services, there are no attendants, forms, or lengthy registration processes. Travelers simply scan a QR code using an app, unlock the bicycle, and begin riding.

The system has helped revive cycling culture in a city once known globally as the "Kingdom of Bicycles."

For visitors, shared bicycles provide an affordable and environmentally friendly way to explore Beijing. One can ride through historic hutongs, circle scenic lakes, visit cultural districts, or simply experience the city at street level.

Beyond convenience, the system reflects how technology is being used to support sustainable urban mobility by reducing congestion and encouraging low-carbon transport.

When Robots Deliver Hospitality

Perhaps the most futuristic aspect of my Beijing experience came inside hotels.

In several establishments, robots were no longer a novelty but an active part of daily operations.

Small autonomous robots could be seen moving through corridors, delivering items directly to guest rooms. Rather than a staff member bringing forgotten toiletries or room-service items, a robot would arrive at the door, announce its presence, and complete the delivery. The experience felt like something from a science-fiction film.

Yet what was even more fascinating was learning how China's hospitality sector is increasingly embracing automation. Hotel operators are experimenting with robots that can assist with cleaning, room deliveries, customer service, and logistics.

Some hotels already use robotic vacuum cleaners and automated service assistants to support housekeeping staff.

Industry experts say future developments could see robots playing even larger roles in elder care, domestic assistance, and household management. While human interaction remains important, technology is increasingly being viewed as a solution to labour shortages and efficiency challenges.

For travelers, these innovations provide a glimpse into how tourism and hospitality may evolve over the coming decades.

Ancient Heritage Meets Artificial Intelligence

What makes Beijing particularly fascinating is the contrast between its ancient landmarks and futuristic systems. Museums increasingly employ interactive exhibits, digital guides, augmented reality experiences, and intelligent visitor-management systems.

Technology is not replacing history but rather, it is helping visitors engage with it more effectively.

Smart navigation systems reduce queues at major attractions. Digital ticketing simplifies entry procedures.

For visitors from Africa and other regions where digital tourism is still evolving, Beijing provides a glimpse into possibilities that may shape future destinations. The technology is not just impressive, but it is how well the city has been able to blend modern efficiency with thousands of years of heritage that leaves the strongest impression.

TECH

Top Italian Artist Franz Cerami Brings Kenya's Coffee Workers into the Global Spotlight

BY CYNTHIA ATUO
X: Cynthia_Atuo

Come to think about it. When the night falls, and you are somewhere in the streets of urban towns, what makes them beautiful? Darkness, nope. Tall buildings? Somehow. The never-ending vehicles? Hell Naah!

Think harder, there's something that makes the Central Business District (CBD) special... could you maybe think about the street light advertising? Now we talking.

See, street light advertising has been a thing, and depending on how well it is executed, they make urban centers vibrant. From the famous faces of celebrities, to models, luxury brands, soon-to-be released movies, et al, there is so much that entertains us before we get home.

But on nearly all-occasions, the faces of those we see are often those of famous people we know. You see them, you already know them. And this somehow steals from the public curiosity. Imagine seeing the face of people behind your favorite brand, sparks curiosity, right?

Now this is what Franz Cerami, a renowned Italian artist from Naples, thought of when he showcased the faces 300 coffee workers from Kenya into the global scene.

Recently unveiling his latest project dubbed Jute Portraits, it celebrates the people behind Kenya's coffee value chain and strengthens the growing cultural and economic ties between Kenya and Italy, in the spirit of the Mattei Plan for Africa.

When he came to Kenya, his goal wasn't the usual postcards of land portraits and what nots of countries. His goal was one: looking for faces.

He visited coffee growing and processing communities, met and photographed about 300 women and men whose hands, labour, knowledge and resilience sit behind one of the world's most cherished beverages. The result is Jute Portraits.

The name Jutes, refers to the jute bags commonly used to carry coffee. For Cerami, however, the name also speaks to the wider journey of Kenyan coffee. From farms and communities to international markets, cultural spaces and global conversations. Additionally, Cerami denotes that the name reflects the journey of the people and landscapes that give coffee its meaning.

According to the artist, the project was inspired by the shared coffee culture between Italy and Kenya: Italy is globally known for its coffee traditions, while Kenya is recognised for producing some of the finest coffee in the world.

"Behind every cup of coffee are many hands and many stories. There are people

who work the land, people who harvest the coffee, people who shape the flavour, people who process it, and people who carry it through the value chain. This project is my journey through Kenya, through its people, roads, coffee and colours," says Cerami.

His work began by photographing workers across the coffee value chain. Later, back in Italy, he reworked the images through painting, watercolour, graphite and digital techniques, transforming the portraits

into moving images and large-scale projections.

"The first thing I can say is Angalia hapa, look here," Cerami recalls, referring to the words he used while photographing people during his journey across Kenya. "Behind every cup of coffee are many hands and many stories."

In one of the most moving moments of the project, Cerami photographed a 95-year-old woman whose face, strength and smile stayed with him long after he returned to Italy.

For him, Kenya revealed itself not only through its landscapes, but through colour, layers of colour, human presence and emotion. That visual richness became the artistic language of the final installation.

He denotes that through the project, it shifts attention from the final cup of coffee to the human beings whose labour, expertise and resilience make that cup possible.

For Nairobi, a city where art is often confined to galleries and private spaces, this public encounter matters. It gives ordinary people access to an international art experience while placing Kenyan workers at the centre of the frame.

The project also comes at a time when Kenya is seeking to increase value addition in agriculture, strengthen creative and cultural industries, and expand strategic partnerships with global partners.



Speaking about the significance of the project, the Ambassador of Italy to Kenya and Seychelles, H.E. Vincenzo Del Monaco, said Italy's National Day in Kenya is an opportunity to speak about the depth of the relationship between our two countries through the lenses of culture, of creativity, moving the cursor toward people-to-people connections, and bringing to light the human contribution to the bilateral relations.

"With Jute Portraits, we are celebrating the joy and, in a positive sense, the craziness of

art. We are bringing colour, music, light and human stories into public spaces. For me, this is one of the most beautiful sides of diplomacy, bringing people together without asking for anything in return. It is not transactional. It is not political. It is simply the joy of art and the immense power of human connection," said Del Monaco.

The Ambassador noted that coffee offers one of the strongest bridges between Kenya and Italy. While Italy has perfected the culture, technology and global language

of coffee, Kenya produces exceptional coffee that continues to earn global recognition.

He further added that the project highlights not only the economic importance of coffee, but also the

people whose work is often hidden behind trade statistics and consumer experiences.

"Coffee is not just a beverage. It is an economic story, a cultural story and a human story. Behind every cup of coffee there is a supply chain, and behind every supply chain there are human beings. That is what Jute

Portraits seeks to show," he explained, further noting that cultural diplomacy is not an ornament to economic diplomacy but rather a catalyst," he said.

"If we want the Italy-Kenya relationship to be resilient, we must go beyond government-to-government relations. We must reach communities, students, artists, farmers, entrepreneurs and families," he added.

The project is expected to travel beyond its public installations in Kenya to major institutional and cultural platforms, including UNIDO headquarters, the National Museums of Kenya, the Ministry of Culture, and the new United Nations Office at Nairobi facility being developed in Kenya.

Speaking of which, coffee lovers, do you know whose behind the coffee you take?





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HOSPITALITY

BY HARRIET JAMES
@peopledaily

For Benson Kanyi, cocktails are far more than a blend of spirits and ingredients. They are stories, memories and cultural experiences served one sip at a time. Known in the hospitality industry as “MaKoSa,” the award-winning bartender and mixologist has built a career around transforming flavors into narratives, drawing inspiration from Kenya’s rich culinary traditions and cultural heritage.

His journey from the streets of Jericho in Nairobi’s Eastlands to international bartending stages is a testament to perseverance, creativity and the growing recognition of African talent in the global hospitality industry.

“My passion comes from the science of spice, flavor and culture,” says Kanyi. “I became fascinated by the idea that one drink can transport someone to different memories, places and emotions.”

Growing up surrounded by Kenya’s diverse flavors and traditions, Kanyi began to view cocktails not simply as beverages but as vehicles for storytelling. Watching skilled bartenders work with confidence and precision further fueled his desire to master the craft.

What followed was years of dedication marked by long working hours, continuous learning, mentorship and participation in competitions. Along the way, he developed a distinctive style that combines creativity, hospitality and cultural expression.

Today, Kanyi is among a new generation of bartenders redefining mixology by drawing inspiration from local ingredients, traditions and personal experiences.

His approach mirrors broader shifts taking place across the global cocktail industry.

One of the most significant trends shaping modern mixology is the growing demand for low-alcohol and alcohol-free cocktails. As consumers become increasingly health-conscious, they are seeking sophisticated drinking experiences without the effects of heavy alcohol consumption.

In response, bartenders are experimenting with botanical infusions, herbs, spices, teas, fruits and sparkling ingredients to create premium zero-proof beverages that deliver complexity and flavor.

“People want to drink more mindfully, but they still want creativity and elegance in their glass,” Kanyi explains.

Another emerging trend is culinary

How a Kenyan Mixologist Is Putting Culture, Creativity and Storytelling in a Glass



mixology, a movement blurring the lines between kitchens and bars. Bartenders are increasingly incorporating ingredients and techniques once reserved for professional chefs.

From olive oil and tomato water to mushrooms, seaweed, fermented ingredients and smoked spices, cocktails are becoming multisensory experiences that explore texture, aroma and flavor in new ways.

“The cocktail world has evolved beyond refreshment,” says Kanyi. “Today

it is about creating an experience that engages all the senses.”

Sustainability is also becoming central to modern bartending practices.

Across the world, mixologists are embracing zero-waste principles by finding innovative uses for ingredients that would traditionally be discarded. Citrus peels, banana skins and pineapple rinds are being transformed into syrups, garnishes and infusions. Local sourcing is also gaining momentum as bars seek to reduce waste and support nearby producers.

For Kanyi, sustainability aligns naturally with the creativity required in mixology.

“Guests appreciate businesses that are thoughtful and responsible,” he says. “It’s about respecting ingredients and using them to their fullest potential.”

Perhaps the most exciting development, however, is the growing celebration of cultural identity behind the bar.

Rather than relying solely on international trends, bartenders are increasingly looking inward, drawing inspiration from their heritage, traditions and local ingredients. This movement is allowing guests to experience cultures through flavour while giving mixologists a powerful platform to share their stories.

For Kanyi, that philosophy has become central to his success.

His biggest breakthrough came in 2025 when he was crowned World Class Bartender of the Year Kenya Champion, one of the country’s most prestigious bartending titles.

The victory did not come easily. After competing in the competition for five consecutive years and consistently finishing among the top six contestants, Kanyi finally secured the top prize on his fifth attempt.

“That win taught me the value of per-

severance,” he recalls. “Success is built through resilience, learning and remaining committed even when the journey becomes difficult.”

The title earned him the opportunity to represent Kenya at the global World Class competition in Toronto, Canada, where he competed against some of the world’s most accomplished bartenders.

For him, the experience extended beyond personal achievement.

“It was an opportunity to represent Kenya, our culture and our stories on a global stage,” he says.

Through his cocktails, Kanyi showcased Kenyan-inspired flavors and narratives to international judges, hospitality leaders and industry professionals.

The experience also introduced him to some of the figures he had long admired, including master blenders, distillery owners, authors and globally recognized bartenders.

Those interactions reinforced his belief in the power of hospitality to connect people across cultures and borders.

While awards often attract public attention, Kanyi is quick to point out the realities behind the recognition.

Many aspiring bartenders see the glamour of competitions, social media visibility and creative cocktails but often overlook the sacrifices involved. Long shifts, physical exhaustion, demanding customers and constant pressure to innovate can make the profession challenging.

“Burnout comes easily if you don’t maintain balance and passion for the craft,” he says.

Competitions are particularly demanding, requiring months of preparation, concept development and practice for only a few minutes of performance before judges.

Yet Kanyi believes these experiences are invaluable.

“Competitions build resilience, confidence and creativity. They challenge you to think differently and push your limits.”

In addition to his World Class title, Kanyi won the Coastal Kikwetu Competition 2025 and recently earned a place among the top five finalists in the Hennessy My Way Challenge Kenya 2026.

The recognition has opened doors to international opportunities, including his current role working abroad as a professional bartender.

But despite the accolades, he remains focused on growth rather than trophies.

“Hospitality is an industry where learning never stops,” he says. “Humility, discipline and collaboration are just as important as talent.”

For Kanyi, every cocktail remains an opportunity to create connection.

“At the end of the day, these awards are not just personal victories,” he says. “They remind me that passion, culture, storytelling and perseverance can create something powerful enough to bring people together from all over the world.”

And in an industry built on experiences, that may be the most valuable ingredient of all.



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