

# Melinkqubo Ndabokutya: From humble beginnings to market agent

By Rotondwa Raligidima, Potatoes SA

**M**elinkqubo Ndabokutya, known as Meli, is the founder and director of Eyoluntu Project Market Agency and a new market agent at Kei Fresh Produce Market in Mthatha, Eastern Cape. With over 15 years' experience in the fresh produce industry, Meli is determined to revolutionise the way producers access markets and grow their businesses. His passion for agriculture and community development drives him to bridge the gap between small-scale producers and formal markets, ensuring they can participate in the mainstream economy.

Born in Elliotdale (Xhora) in the Mbhashe local municipality of the former Transkei, Meli's journey into agriculture began after he completed his matric and moved to Mthatha for better opportunities. He found employment at Fruit and Veg City (now Food Lovers Market) and later joined the OR Tambo District Municipality's development agency, Ntinga OR Tambo Development Agency. Here, he worked closely with emerging farmers, encouraging them to produce high-quality fresh produce and guiding them toward formal market access.

## Producer-focussed passion

Meli's love for agriculture grew through his involvement with organisations such as Potatoes SA's transformation division. To further his understanding and effectiveness in the sector, he studied agriculture and development studies. Over the years, he observed the struggles producers faced in accessing markets, leading him to establish his own market agency. "Most producers don't know the market dynamics, which means they won't grow or participate in the

mainstream economy or value chain," Meli explains.

In January 2024, he founded the Eyoluntu Project Market Agency, becoming one of just a few black market agents in South Africa and the only one in the Eastern Cape. His agency serves as a platform where both small and commercial producers can sell their fresh produce to formal and informal markets. He is currently a market agent at the Kei Fresh Produce Market in the Eastern Cape.

## Empowering producers

The core mission of Eyoluntu Project Market Agency is to provide market access to producers of fresh produce, empowering them to reach their full potential. The agency connects producers from the OR Tambo District, the Eastern Cape, and beyond to a wide range of clients, including retail stores, hawkers, government departments, the hospitality industry, and tertiary institutions.

Meli envisions creating a seamless link between producers and buyers, enabling both small and commercial producers to benefit from formal markets. The agency emphasises strong communication with producers, providing them with regular updates, price transparency, and insights into market demand.

"Producers appreciate us because we value and communicate with them regularly. Our marketing strategies are effective, and as a result many of them are increasing their production sites to supply us," Meli says. In addition to fresh produce, the agency handles grains and other agricultural products, serving both the formal sector and informal traders crucial to local food distribution.

Meli is dedicated to supporting all producers across South Africa, regardless of their size. He appeals



*Melinkqubo 'Meli' Ndabokutya, founder and director of Eyoluntu Project Market Agency.*

to both successful commercial producers and small-scale farmers to leverage the opportunities provided by Eyoluntu Project Market Agency. "I urge all producers in South Africa to supply us with their fresh produce so we can sell it on their behalf on consignment," Meli says. "There is a huge demand for fresh produce in our area, especially from potato producers. We are here for you."

By encouraging producers to work with Eyoluntu Project Market Agency, he aims to address the market access challenges, helping them navigate the complexities of supply and demand, quality standards, and pricing mechanisms.

## Overcoming challenges

Meli's journey has not been without challenges. One significant obstacle was seeing a perfectly built market facility funded by public money, being underutilised by local producers and buyers. The lack of market knowledge among local producers further complicated matters. To address these issues, Meli initiated educational programmes such as producers' days, information days, exposure visits, and market days, where producers could interact with successful commercial growers, government departments, and agricultural experts.

These programmes have empowered small-scale farmers by

providing them with the tools and knowledge needed to improve the quality of their produce and increase their competitiveness in the market.

### Eyoluntu information day

Eyoluntu Project Market Agency hosted its first information day on 26 September this year, marking a major milestone for the agency. The event exceeded expectations, with a 98% attendance rate from invited institutions and participants. The day brought together producers, buyers, government representatives, and industry experts to address key issues in agriculture, such as supply consistency, market dynamics, access to finance, and agricultural sustainability.

Among the attendees were stakeholders such as the Agricultural Research Council (ARC), Eastern Cape Development Corporation (ECDC), National Youth Development Agency, Standard Bank, Land Bank, the Department of Agriculture, Tsoho Agricultural Development Institute, and all local municipalities of the OR Tambo District Municipality.

The panel discussions, chaired by Liso Nqintiza from OR Tambo District Municipality, featured expert panellists:

- **Market access:** Meli shared strategies to help producers navigate market dynamics and access formal markets.
- **Access to finance:** Simphiwe Ntshweni of the ECDC provided valuable information on funding opportunities available to producers, simplifying the process of obtaining financial support.

- **Sustainable agriculture:** Mthetho Lwana from the Department of Agriculture and Mpho Makhanya from the ARC discussed the importance of adopting sustainable farming practices to ensure long-term agricultural success.

Each panellist brought a wealth of knowledge and expertise, offering practical solutions and strategies to the attendees. The discussions were well-received by the producers, particularly the presentations on market access and finance, which addressed pressing issues such as inconsistent supply, quality control, and the importance of understanding market trends.

One key takeaway from the event was the need for the agency to explore providing subsidised transport for producers and expanding its offerings to include agricultural inputs like potato seeds. These insights will guide Meli's future plans for the agency.

### Future vision

The success of the information day has strengthened Meli's resolve to grow Eyoluntu Project Market Agency into a major player in South Africa's agricultural sector. He envisions expanding the agency's reach to other fresh produce markets across the country, making it a one-stop distributor for agricultural products. This expansion will also create much-needed jobs for young people in the region.

Meli is focussed on helping producers grow their businesses by working with them to plan

production schedules and sign offtake agreements that guarantee market access. "We want to pre-sell the produce and provide consistent supply so that demand can be created at production level," he explains.

In the next five to ten years, Meli hopes to see his agency grow significantly, with more producers supplying a wider variety of products, particularly staples such as potatoes, onions, bananas, and apples. His long-term vision is to make Eyoluntu the fresh produce market agency of choice for producers across South Africa.

### Advice for entrepreneurs

Meli encourages young entrepreneurs interested in agriculture to study the sector and explore different roles within the value chain. "You need to grow a love for agriculture to realise profit and make an impact," he says, emphasising the importance of technology in modern farming.

As a leader, Meli believes in being hands-on, committed, and results-oriented. His background as an event organiser taught him the importance of time management, which he applies to balancing his professional responsibilities with his personal life. "During business hours, I focus on excelling in service, and I make time for my family because they give me strength," Meli shares.

### A bright future

His work in the Eastern Cape is transforming the lives of producers. His vision for Eyoluntu Project Market Agency focusses on growth, innovation, and community development, offering crucial market access for both small-scale and commercial producers.

Eyoluntu's future looks bright. Meli's call for producers to supply their fresh produce on consignment marks a new chapter in agricultural development, providing producers with the tools, knowledge, and support for success. 



Panel experts at the information day are, from the left, Liso Nqintiza, Simphiwe Ntshweni, Mpho Makhanya, Melinkqubo Ndbokutya, and Mthetho Lwana.

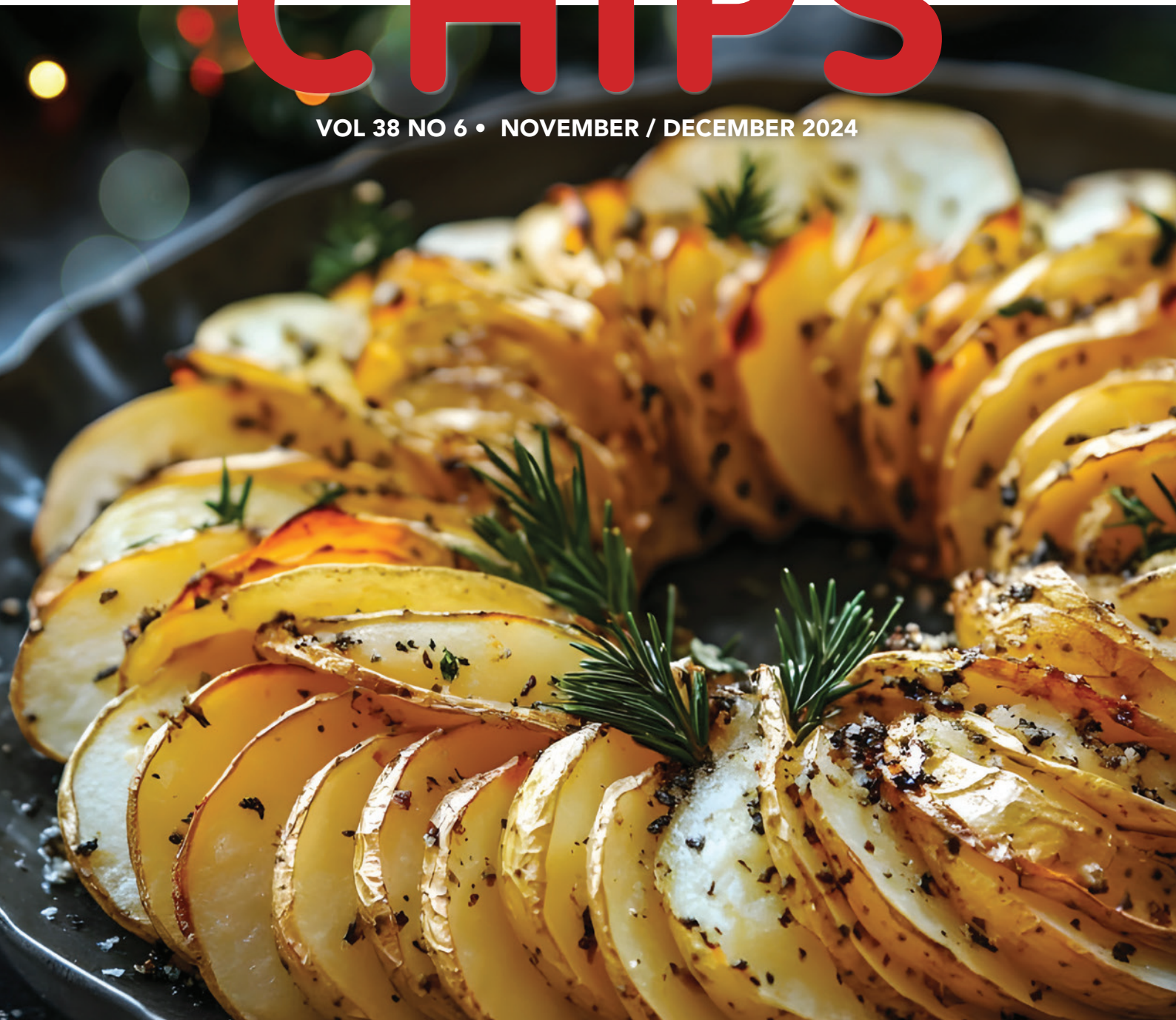
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