

Thomas Melessi  
Dehnamar Inc.

When he was a boy growing up in Ethiopia, Thomas promised he'd share his grandmother's special spice drink with the world. Little did he know he would start with Edmonton.

Thomas Melessi's grandmother, Almaz, used to prepare an elixir made with honey, lemon and cinnamon for her diabetic husband. The drink became a personal favourite of the young Melessi and of the village at large. No keeper of culinary secrets, Almaz shared the recipe for her 'honey spice' drink with her neighbours and eventually opened a small business. The drink became so popular that a restaurant owner in a nearby village complained that he would lose all his customers if he didn't stock the drink.

Thomas grew up on his grandmother's honey spice, but by the time Thomas reached adulthood, the drink had been reduced to little more than a pleasant childhood memory. He had more important concerns, he had to find work. Thomas moved to Kenya to seek employment, but he couldn't find a steady job. "No one helps you there," he remembers. "Working sometimes and sometimes not, is really tough." While in Kenya, Thomas befriended a Canadian family who agreed to sponsor his immigration. He arrived in Canada in 2003 and worked at a Maple Leaf plant in Brandon, Manitoba before reading about the Alberta's then-booming economy. He chose Edmonton over Calgary because he'd heard Calgary was too crowded.

Thomas took classes to upgrade his high school education, and then began training as a machinist apprentice. This was not his passion, however. In his heart, Thomas was a businessman. He knew he had to secure his footing in his new country before he could start on more exciting ventures. "When you go through a difficult life, you lose your whole being," Thomas says. "When I came here, I had to find a way to start. Only when you are settled can you think about what you are passionate about."

Seeing the incredible array of bottled drinks available in Canadian grocery stores, and hearing his neighbours discuss the health benefits of various products, reminded Thomas of his grandmother's honey spice. "I've seen that people here like to try different things," he says. "They are very open to new things." He made a batch for his friends and they encouraged him to start his own business. Inspired, Thomas enrolled in a microbusiness training course offered by the Alberta government. He named his company Dehnamar Inc., the word means "good honey" in Thomas' native Amharic, and named himself CSO, or Chief Spicing Officer. On June 12, 2010 the first bottles of Honey Spice appeared for sale in Edmonton.

Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development assisted Thomas by allowing him to bottle his Honey Spice at their food processing plant in Leduc. In addition, the Growing Forward program helped Thomas develop a business plan and introduced his product to local retailers willing to sell and promote it. "There is no way I could do this in Ethiopia," Thomas says. "I was overwhelmed that people would support me here."

The support led to speedy success. Thomas' first run of Honey Spice was 3,000 bottles which he sold at the St. Albert Farmers' Market and at an Edmonton Italian Grocery. Vendors have taken notice, he is now working on a second drink, a ginger-ale, to add to his fledging drink line. But first, he will have to contend with a recent order for 60,000 bottles of Honey Spice. Thomas is now working with a commercial bottler to handle the increased volume.

Thomas is especially touched by the encouragement he's received by his neighbours in St. Albert. They were the first to embrace Thomas and his Honey Spice. "They show me love," he says. "I grew up loving this drink. Now, here in St. Albert, I have tons of new relationships. I fell in love here. It is not about the drink, it is about the people."