When asked to describe the authentic Zimbabwean food from Zweli’s Kitchen & Catering, chef and co-owner Zwelibanzi Williams says it’s “simply, something different.” Although that may be hard to imagine, Zweli’s passion for cooking and sharing a bit of home with the Durham, North Carolina community speaks plenty. The food is comforting, yet unique, bold and cooked with creative care. This same energy and commitment is reflected in how Zweli and Leonardo, husband and Zweli’s co-owner, run their catering and restaurant business.

“I’ve always loved to cook. Back home in Zimbabwe, I started off at a very young age trying to get in the kitchen and come up with crazy combinations, whatever combination I could think of. I already had an interest in preparing food and entertaining people,” said Zweli.

Eventually, Zweli migrated to Durham, North Carolina where she attended North Carolina Central University, majoring in Hospitality and Tourism. Zweli then worked in the food industry, managing several restaurant chains and food service departments. Though the work was enjoyable, Zweli dreamed of being an entrepreneur, creating her own recipes and being a positive role model for her community, country and young girls across the world.

In 2016, Zweli moved forward with her dream. Like many small and diverse business owners, Zweli and Leonardo faced their fair share of challenges. Unable to secure a loan due to the uncertainty of the restaurant industry, they took matters into their own hands. Buying and building out their space—from constructing their own tables to painting the walls—Zweli and Leonardo handled everything themselves. With menu in hand, Zweli visited local businesses and organizations in person, delivering food and telling her story. Determination and long days and nights paid off: in just over a month, Zweli’s was receiving orders, and their customer base grew day by day.

Skanska was introduced to Zweli’s flavorful food in 2018, when a subcontractor had the restaurant cater a meeting. Amidst Covid-19 restrictions last year, Skanska and Zweli got creative with a virtual meet and greet with a group of our customers and their diversity leaders to help them learn more about our vendor diversity offerings.

“A really fun project with Skanska recently had our team traveling all over the Triangle to deliver meals to their client’s homes for a virtual meet and greet,” shared Leonardo. “We have a very close partnership with Skanska. They aren’t just a big corporate company. Their agility to work with a very small mom and pop restaurant like ours shows that these types of relationships can happen, and if more people knew that this is possible, I think that we could save more small businesses around the country.”

For Zweli and Leonardo, giving back is a priority. In 2019, they quickly responded with support for lower income families—about 700 individuals—displaced by a neighborhood-wide gas leak, providing meals for over four months. Their philanthropic efforts extend past the local community as well. They’ve partnered with Eden Spring Trust to sell items in the restaurant, like handmade furniture and sculptures from Zimbabwe, and hold fundraising events. This allows the organization to visit villages in remote areas of Zimbabwe and provide basic resources to those most in need.