

# A Taste of Home: African Immigrant Foodways

**Nomvula Mashoai Cook & Betty J. Belanus**

In almost all African cultures food is a traditional art. Simple or elaborate, frugal or opulent, food plays a vital role in affirming individual ethnic identities and in modeling cultural diversity. Recent African immigrants to the Washington metropolitan area come from different regions of the continent. And, as they create a taste of home through their foodways, they discover the similarities and differences in their fellow immigrants' foods. They also come to know the common problems they share cooking "authentic" dishes and recreating the contexts of serving them. Immigrant groups sustain continuity by cooking everyday meals similar to those that nourish families in Africa, by using food in the context of traditional celebrations, and by establishing African restaurants.

Mealtimes in Africa bring families together: the generation gap between young and old can be bridged; in conversations, children may learn proverbs, their meanings, and other wisdom from their elders. Here in the United States, however, African immigrant families are often too busy to sit down to a traditional-style meal every day of the week, or sometimes even once a week. But great effort is made to introduce to children traditional foods and the etiquette of eating.

While most ingredients needed for traditional foods are now available in the Washington, D.C., area at specialized grocery stores serving African, Caribbean, Latin American, and Asian cooks, this was not always the case for earlier immigrants. Olaniyi Areke, a film maker originally from Nigeria, recalls trying to find something in an American grocery store resembling the staple *fufu*, made in West Africa from cassava flour. The closest thing he could find was Bisquick!

Some African immigrants with enough yard space and access to seeds from home grow their own vegetables and herbs. Different varieties of greens, many of them not to be found even in specialty stores, are popular garden items. Sally Tsuma, originally from the Kalenjian region of Kenya, grows five types of greens around her home near Catholic University. Sally cooks a large batch of

greens on the weekend and serves them throughout the week, heating them in the microwave. The correct combination of greens is the

secret to the taste, as Sally says, "When you cook [the greens] alone, it tastes like something's missing."

Comfort foods for African immigrants are staples like *fufu*, or the Southern African *papa* (made from corn flour), roughly equivalent to American mashed potatoes. Typical dishes

accompanying the staples — depending on the region of Africa you hail from — are stews and soups made with palm oil, puréed peanuts, dried or fresh fish, okra, tomatoes, onions, hot peppers, black-eyed peas, lentils, many different kinds of meat, and an array of spices. But there are many foods considered more exotic by most Americans that also count among the comfort foods of some Africans: goat's head, for instance, or lamb's intestines. Foods served often reflect a combination of cultures, as Dorothy Osei-Kuffuor, originally from Ghana, says: "The main dishes in my house are African, though the children enjoy some American dishes, too."

Living in America, some African immigrant women break traditional food taboos. Nsedu Onyile wrote in a *Washington Post* article:

Let me tell you about the goat head. Where I come from, the women fix and serve it in a big platter but only the men are entitled to eat it. As a child, I fantasized about the taste of the goat head and could not wait for an opportunity to eat one.



*Members of the Saint Mark Coptic Orthodox Church in Fairfax, Virginia, celebrate Christmas with a variety of traditional foods. Photo © Roland Freeman*



*Veronica Abu, originally from Ghana, puts the finishing touches on a dish of gari foto, a stew made with roasted cassava powder and black-eyed peas. Photo by Ena Fox*



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(above) Sally Tsuma uses every available section of the front yard of her home near Catholic University in Washington, D.C., to grow greens like those she enjoyed in Kenya. Photo by Harold Dorwin

(left) Hermela Kebede prepares a traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremony for friends at her home in Silver Spring. Photo by Harold Dorwin

Now in a total declaration of independence, I buy a goat from the slaughterhouse, fix the head first, and sit down to catch up on missed years. I eat every bit of this delicacy, appreciating what those men enjoyed during their roundtable goat conferences in our sunny yard back in Nigeria.

In the Washington, D.C., area, such splendid African foods are more often served at family or community celebrations. Every major rite of passage — birth, coming-of-age, marriage, and death — is celebrated with specific foods. At a traditional naming ceremony in the Yoruba community, for instance, a tray of symbolic ritual foods is prepared that includes salt (for joy and happiness), palm oil, cola nut, bitter cola and alligator pepper (for medicinal purposes), and honey (for sweetness). After the ceremony, a meal including fried plantains, two rice dishes, goat stew with *fufu*, boiled yam, and chicken is served to all the guests.

Other types of celebrations bring communities together seasonally. One example is the *braai*, a South African cookout celebrated in the summer. Typically, the women congregate in the kitchen, cooking and singing. The men bond with each other and with their sons while preparing *imbuzi ne mvu* (goat and lamb) for the barbecue grill with such savory condiments as South African curry or cumin. The *braai* usually starts at noon and may last until midnight. Besides eating and reconnecting with old friends, people might listen to South African township music. Conversation might center around political, economic, or social issues and their effect on people back home.

Children are encouraged to play games such as *lebekere* (hide-and-seek).

Community-bridging celebrations that are hybrids of American and African traditions also involve food. At the Cook household in suburban Maryland, this year's Kwanzaa celebration (an African-American holiday) brought together African immigrants from all parts of the continent, African Americans, and White Americans. The food was potluck and included

roast turkey, Christmas cookies, Swedish-style meatballs, and a rice dish from an Egyptian guest. The centerpiece dishes, however, were cooked with great loving care (and no visible recipes) by Mimi Green, originally from Niger in West Africa. They included *yassa* chicken (a Senegalese dish), *egusi* spinach (spinach with ground melon seeds), and *mafi* (meatballs in a peanut butter sauce), all served with mounds of perfect white rice. As is the custom in many African cultures, a libation offering of drink for the ancestors was poured on the ground before the meal was eaten.

Other occasions bring generations together and reinforce language and customs. Amharic women in the Washington, D.C., area meet at one another's homes for a coffee ceremony. The coffee is roasted and prepared in a special pot and served with crunchy grain snacks. Kenyan women in the area try to meet once a month for *chai* (tea) and *mandazi* (doughnuts).

Restaurants offering many African cuisines have mushroomed around the metropolitan Washington area in the past ten years. Many find their homes in the ethnically diverse Adams Morgan area of the city including well-established Ethiopian restaurants like Meskerem, Addis Ababa, and The Red Sea, as well as newer ventures such as the Casa Africana, which serves West African food, and the South African Cafe. Cecelia Vilakazi, owner/proprietor of the South African Cafe, whose parents emigrated from South Africa to the United States when she was a teenager, explains her motivation to start her restaurant in 1995: "I looked and I saw Ethiopians have restaurants,



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people from Ghana, Nigeria, and Brazil, but no South Africa. So the timing was right to introduce the rich culinary spread that's there in South Africa. I saw an opportunity and said this was something I've always wanted to do."

These restaurants, of course, cater not only to African immigrant clients but also to culinarily adventurous Americans. Some attempt, therefore, is made to serve foods that appeal to a wide spectrum of people. Cecelia admits it takes some education for those unfamiliar with some of the dishes served at the South African Cafe, such as *bobotie*, a meat loaf with curry spices and raisins. "It's tasty, but you have to grow up eating it. When people do try it, we show them how to eat it, and they like it." She has toned down the heavily meat-oriented South African diet to accommodate American tastes.

There are also foods prepared exclusively for a busy African immigrant clientele. At lunchtime, taxicabs line the front of the Akosombo restaurant near Chinatown, where the African-born drivers can get cafeteria-style service like that in the restaurants back in Ghana. African immigrant caterers, some working out of their home kitchens, deliver traditional foods to wedding receptions, naming ceremonies, and birthday or graduation parties. Whether cooked as a simple dish at home, for an elaborate celebration, or for sale to the public, African immigrant foods embody cultural connections. They create a continuity with custom back home, and they reflect the circumstances of living in a new place. Like other aspects of

African immigrant folklife in the Washington, D.C., area, foodways are continually recreated and offer a glimpse of a community in the process of defining itself.

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*Nomvula Mashoai Cook was born in South Africa and raised in Lesotho. She is a recent graduate of Strayer College with a Bachelor of Science degree in business administration and will be continuing her studies at Howard University in African studies this fall. She has been a member of the African Immigrant Folklife Study group since 1994.*

*Betty J. Belanus is a complete novice at African cooking but has enjoyed eating her way through the research for this article. She is an Education Specialist at the Center for Folklife Programs & Cultural Studies and the Co-Curator of the African Immigrant Program.*

## Suggested Readings

- Brown, Linda K., and Kay Mussell. 1984. *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.
- Hafner, Dorinda. 1993. *Taste of Africa*. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press.
- Grant, Rosamund. 1995. *Taste of Africa*. New York: Smithmark Publishers.
- Kirlin, Katherine, and Thomas Kirlin. 1991. *Smithsonian Folklife Cookbook*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Onyile, Nsedu. 1995. I'll Have the Goat's Head, Please. *Washington Post*. 5 March.

## Kele Wele: Ghanaian Spicy Fried Ripened Plantains

2-3 well-ripened yellow plantains

4-5 cups of oil for deep frying

1 level tsp. ground hot, red pepper

1 medium onion, chopped

1 garlic clove, chopped

thumb-size piece of fresh ginger, chopped; or

1 level tsp. ground ginger (ground ginger does not give the dish as full a taste)

salt to taste

Increase ingredients by 1/4 when adding more plantains to the recipe.

Peel plantains, cut into one-inch pieces, wash, and place in a bowl. Blend pepper, chopped ginger, chopped onion, and chopped garlic. Add blended spices to the bowl with the cut plantains. Coat plantains well with the mixed spices. Deep-fry pieces of spicy plantain in hot oil until golden brown.

Serve *Kele Wele* after the main course as a dessert.

**Servings:** 4



—Recipe by **Veronica Abu**, a community scholar and cultural activist, who enjoys sharing traditions and culture from her homeland, Ghana.