

Malian Cuisine

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The Bambara (Bamanan) people announce the birth of a baby girl with the saying “*den be gwaso la*,” “the child is in the kitchen.” In Mali, cuisine is the exclusive domain of women. Only since the colonial era have men entered into this domain, either as house servants (called “*boys*”) or, later, in restaurants, where, as in Europe or the United States, chefs are usually men.

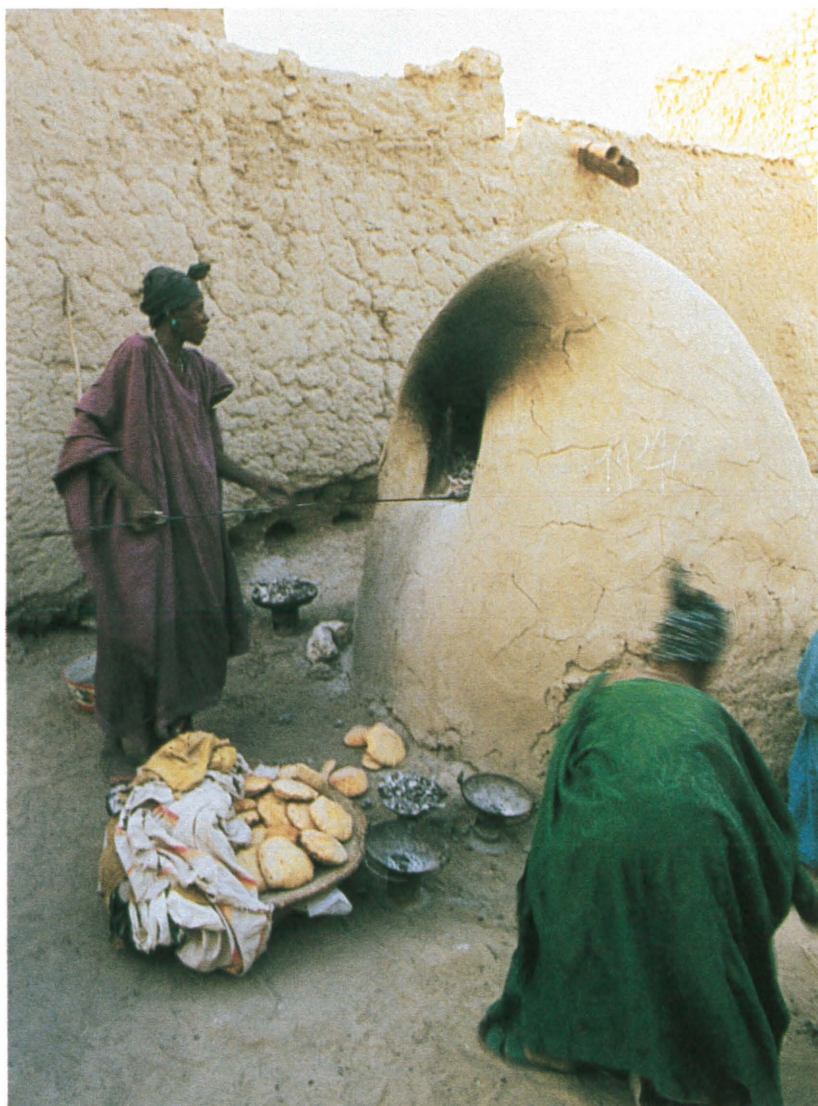
Starting from simple cooking techniques (boiling and grilling) and sometimes limited by the lack of variety of food supplies, Malian cuisine has historically been dominated by a concern for quantity rather than quality. As a result of greater contact with the cities, which has introduced new products and vegetables of European origin to rural villages, the formerly frugal diet of most of the countryside, based almost exclusively upon the processing of local products, is evolving toward greater refinement and sophistication.

As for the cities themselves, the existence of a food industry, although still nascent, along with the increasing influence of Western imports in both cooking techniques and products, have led to radically new culinary practices and attitudes toward food.

In spite of this development, Malian cuisine retains a strong regional character. Each ethnic group’s foodways are generally linked to the group’s traditions, history, and nearly always to its mode of production. Thus, for nomadic populations such as the Tuareg and Fulani [Peul], whose main activity is herding, foods are based on milk and its by-products; while the Bambara, Dogon, Bwa, Soninké, Senufo, and other farming groups base their cuisine on cereals such as millet, corn, and fonio. Rice serves as a staple in the flood plains of the Niger and Bani rivers, and Boso (Bozo) and Somono fishermen eat mainly fish.

Cooked foods, most often in the form of pastes or couscous, are almost always flavored with sauces, sometimes mixed with milk, and made from a great variety of local products: meat or fish, shea butter, onion, fresh or dried okra, baobab or beans, peanut butter, and many spices such as hot peppers, pepper, and *sumbala* or its variant, *datu*. Tubers, including yams and sweet potatoes, are important staples, as are cereals; vegetables such as beans are used occasionally or seasonally in cooking. (Beans nevertheless occupy a special place in Malian society. Because their consumption causes gas, people will not admit to having eaten them in the presence of certain *sinanku*.† *Sinanku* also will tease one another about having eaten beans and offer them publicly to one another as a joke.)

Women in Timbuktu (Tombouctou) still use the time-honored method of baking bread in clay ovens. Photograph by Eliot Elisofon, 1971, EEPA 7862, National Museum of African Art



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JIJIMBERE (GINGER DRINK)

A refreshing, spicy drink on a hot day.

- 4 3-inch chunks fresh ginger
(choose plump roots with shiny skin)
- 2 large or 4 small lemons,
juiced
- 1-1/2 quarts water
- 1-1/2 cups superfine sugar
- mint leaves

Grate peeled ginger on a fine grater, conserving as much juice as you can (grate directly into a bowl). Mix with lemon juice. Add water, sugar, and mint leaves. Stir well to dissolve sugar. Put through a fine sieve or several layers of cheesecloth. Refrigerate before serving.

TÔ

Made from flour such as millet, sorghum, maize, cassava, and rice, Tô is like mashed potatoes in consistency, or like dense polenta. It is typically eaten with two sauces: one made from okra; and a tomato sauce.

- 2 lbs. corn flour
- 1/2 T potash

In a dutch oven boil 4 quarts of water, then add the potash. Place 1 quart of warm water in a large bowl and pour over corn flour, mixing well. Return the mixture to the boiling water in the dutch oven, stirring briskly with a large wooden spoon or spatula. Make sure it is well stirred and that the mixture is smooth, without lumps. Continue to stir 10-15 minutes. Cook covered 45 minutes over medium-low heat. Stir again for 5 minutes. Form into golf-ball-sized dumplings.

Recipes adapted from Malian Cuisine: The Art of Living.

Certain dishes are linked to particular events or circumstances. For example, *jibato naji* (the birthing sauce), a very spicy tripe, fish, or poultry soup, is given to women in labor. This soup, eaten very hot, is intended to promote lactation. Festivals, like the Muslim Tabaski celebration, are also occasions for cooking, and women take the utmost care to prepare the family's favorite meals. At these festivals related families also exchange meals and give food to those without.

Despite its apparent simplicity, traditional Malian cuisine offers an extraordinary diversity of recipes. Unfortunately, a significant number of these recipes have disappeared or are in the process of disappearing, replaced by preparations more in line with current tastes and styles.

The cooking of different foods is almost always preceded by a series of preparatory steps, and the range of utensils used indicates the complexity of this process and its desired results. Traditional utensils are simple and basically designed to either crush or grind (such as the grinding stone, used for at least 5,000 years), or to cut, knead, or mix: knives for cutting meat and fresh vegetables (okra, onions, baobab leaves, or beans), axes, toothed knives for fish, wooden or gourd ladles, whisks and spatulas used to stir pastes and sauces.

Traditionally, Malian cooking takes place on a hearth made of three stone blocks, or on a terra cotta stove placed either in the kitchen or outside, within the family courtyard. The main fuel is dry wood. In the northern Sahelian and Saharan zones, dried manure often takes the place of wood.

The use of charcoal has spread in cities in the past thirty years, as have metal stoves. The considerable increase in the amount of wood needed by a growing population has led to deforestation beyond the regenerative capacities of Mali's forests. In an effort to curtail this development, several organizations have created and distributed stoves that are more economical in their use of wood and charcoal. Furthermore, the government has made significant efforts to popularize the use of gas. Electricity is also used as a source of energy.

Significant changes are also occurring in cookware. Earthenware pottery has today been largely replaced by metal cooking pots made of strong heat conductors such as cast iron, aluminum, and stainless steel. Strong Pyrex baking plates and Teflon saucepans and frying pans have appeared in the kitchens of the wealthiest women. Their use is improving the quality of cooking, and gradually easing the cook's work.

After cooking, of course, the food is served, and each community has its own ways of presenting food. The discovery in archaeological sites near Timbuktu of a significant number of small, glazed vases of high quality that may have been used to contain butter, drinks, and other food products suggests that there was a particularly refined "art of table setting" even in ancient times.

In rural communities, particularly in the south of the country, meals are very simple and generally consist of a dish (*tô*—millet or corn cakes—rice, or couscous) served in a calabash, a wooden bowl, or a ceramic basin, accompanied by a sauce. Some foods are served in large leaves.

Meals are eaten together—men in one group, women in another, in a respectful silence, particularly among children. Food is eaten with the fingers, except for liquids, which are consumed with wooden or gourd ladles. Today, wooden, gourd, and ceramic receptacles are increasingly being replaced by enameled metal, aluminum, and plastic dishes.

This practice of communal eating with the hands from one plate constitutes the essence of the dining ritual in Mali. In well-to-do and/or “Westernized” settings, the use of plates, spoons, and forks is having a considerable effect on this ritual. Each person eats from his own plate, no longer with his hand but with his own fork or spoon; and no longer on the ground, but at a table. People no longer drink from a common vessel but from individual glasses.

This individualization of the dining experience, copied from European behavior, is accompanied in wealthier areas by diversification of the diet; the meal no longer consists of a single dish, but of a variety of dishes.

Cuisine, then, like other aspects of Malian culture, is in a state of rapid flux. Rooted in historical knowledge, it is open to other culinary traditions, adopting new products, techniques, and eating habits. ■

† *Sinankuya* is most often described as a joking relationship. People who have a certain connection with one another, based on kinship, a historical episode, gender, or age have the right to be more familiar with one another—and the social familiarity sometimes involves humor.

In many rural households women cook outside in the courtyard and use wood as their primary fuel. Photo © Shawn Davis

