A STARTING new course

Traditional spices plus modern presentations take African bites global

by Seánan Forbes

In traditional African cuisines, there's no such thing as an appetizer, but that isn't stopping African chefs from starting patron's meals with a bite of excellence. A sprinkle of imagination, a *soupçon* of tweaking and the starter's on the menu—and selling.

TRANSLATING COMFORT

"Usually, in Africa, a meal is a one-pot meal—no appetizer, no dessert," says Morou Ouattara, chef/owner of Arlington, Va.'s Farrah Olivia. His solution: Reduce the size of some dishes. Ouattara also tweaks his childhood cuisine to make it comfortable for his patrons. "I cook American cuisine with African influences," he says. Match the exotic with the everyday, and customers feel easier about taking risks.

One of his most popular appetizers features diver scallops, which Ouattara pan-sears and serves over tapioca risotto ($15, recipe, p. 77). Risotto is widely known, and it's easy for guests to stretch to tapioca. "I cook the tapioca just like I would cook a risotto; [with] a little onion and garlic," he says. A little coconut milk stirred in gives it African flair, as does *egusi*, the Nigerian melon seed sauce served alongside. Ouattara makes *egusi* with melon seeds toasted in olive oil, with dried shrimp, onion, garlic, clam juice, tomato paste, peanut butter and cream. "In Africa, we don't use cream," he notes. "I'm making it for the American palate, so we add cream and butter and purée it to a nice smooth [texture]."

Smoked and dried meats are common in African cooking. "Hunters used to spend days hunting," Outtara observes. "They had to smoke their meats." He works on recreating that African flavor in America by curing meat. "I use a lot of lamb and wild meat," Outtara says. He cures it with sugar, salt and spices like coriander and paprika for smokiness.

Organic *biltong* and grilled chicken wings served with sweet chili dipping sauce (recipe, plateonline.com) are two standouts on the appetizer menu of international flavors and local ingredients at Arnold's in Cape Town, South Africa. Chef Yomar Monsalve says the chili sauce is

Azifa salad, $7, Owner Henock Kejela, Zoma, New York City. RECIPE, p. 78.

Dry-packed scallops, bacon powder, melon seed milk, $15, Chef/Owner Morou Ouattara, Farrah Olivia Restaurant, Arlington, Va. RECIPE, p. 77.

local, but also familiar to visitors from all over the world.

"The food that we do is the more recent food," says owner Arnold Bettendorf. "[It's] slightly Eurocentric. If we were a totally African restaurant, it would be difficult to reach all people."

VEGETARIANS WELCOME

Henock T. Kejela, owner of the Ethiopian restaurant Zoma, in New York City, "crafted out a bit of everything from the cuisine" to make an appetizer section.

If you have vegetarian customers, Kejela notes, Ethiopian cuisine's a good choice, as there's a cultural aspect of fasting. "We're a Coptic Orthodox country," Kejela says. There are many days when religious Ethiopians abstain from eating dairy, meat and eggs. Factor in economics, and meat is seldom on the table. "They did not want to want for meat," Kejela says, so culinary technique compensates. "The cuisine revolves around braising."

"The downside is that everything takes time," Kejela says. The upside is that dishes taste "wholesome and full-bodied and have a lot of layers of flavor." Case in point, the *azifa* salad at Zoma, made with boiled lentils mixed with red onions, jalapeño, lime and olive oil on a bed of endive ($7, recipe, p. 78).

The presentation is not how it's served in Ethiopia, Kejela says, but "I found [endive] to be a good vehicle to serve the sourness of the lentils and the spiciness of the jalapeño, the firmness of the red onion—to cut that with the watery fresh texture of the endive."

For another starter, Kejela takes traditional *injera* and toasts it with clarified butter, *berbere* spice blend, ginger powder and garlic.

"In Ethiopia," Kejela says, "it's what you'd serve with coffee or give to children when they come home from school." At Zoma, it's an appetizer patrons return to buy.

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- Henock T. Kejela

At Farrah Olivia, veg-

Wild rooibos and mushroom risotto, $7.50, Executive Chef Yomar Monsalve, Arnold's, Cape Town, South Africa. RECIPE, p. 78.

TEA SERVICE

You can add African flavor simply by taking something familiar out of context. Most of us know rooibos as a tea. In South Africa, people have always cooked with it, notes Arnold Bettendorf of Arnold's in Cape Town. At Arnold's, rooibos is used in infusions, and reduced for sauces. Arnold's has served vegetarian mushroom risotto flavored with rooibos ($7.50, recipe, p. 78). The mushroom risotto "has all the elements of winter, offering fresh ingredients in season," Bettendorf says.

etarians choose Outtara's black-eyed pea fritters ($12, recipe, p. 76). They're time-intensive; the peas have to soak for three or four hours, and the skins have to be rubbed off by hand. Outtara purées the peas with red pepper, ginger, scallions and salt and deep-fries them.

"They're like hush puppies," he says. "We serve it with what I call refried tomato sauce." The sauce is made, set aside, and then sautéed with onion, shrimp powder and paprika. Garnished with bok choy oil and honey-sweetened tail pepper, it's exotic enough to be enticing while staying in the comfort food zone.

COMPLEX FLAVORS

Once people try African food, they tend to be sold. Kejela says, "The food is spicy, but not in the sense of burning your tongue out of your head. It's more in the sense of being flavorful, a lot of aroma, a lot of color, a lot of body." According to Cynthia Field, the manager of Radio Africa & Kitchen in San Francisco, "It's all about balance. Even when there's heat, it's played with a sense of sweet or a sense of sour. There's always a duality."

Radio Africa's menu blends Chef/Owner Eskender Aseged's childhood memories with his travels through Morocco, Egypt and America. Field, who spends a lot of time in the kitchen and helping Aseged with menu development, calls it, "African cuisine, but with a twist," created by taking an element "that's very familiar to African cuisine and then combining it with something else."

The restaurant's menu changes weekly, but some things stay on the menu.

Black-eyed pea fritters, refried tomato, tail pepper honey, $12, Chef/Owner Morou Ouattara, Farrah Olivia Restaurant, Arlington, Va. RECIPE, p. 76.

"Mushroom *wot* is an Ethiopian dish, with the *berbere*," Field says. Traditionally, it would be served with *injera*.

De Grendel Restaurant, on a wine farm in Durbanville, South Africa, also has culinary crossovers. Chef Ian Bergh says that's part of African cooking—even when it comes to ingredients. *Capsicum* and beans came only with colonialism. Historic trading with India shows up today as curries on African menus.

Bergh's in favor of showing local ingredients at their best, and that makes customers happy. "It's winter now," the chef says. "It's cold and rainy, and everybody likes soup."

Beans are common in African cooking. "We use them in a soup with tomato, different kinds of bean and garlic." Chorizo adds a European spark.

Bergh uses the soup course to give the young chefs a chance to try their own ideas. "I do the menu, but we have a lot of young chefs in the kitchen," he says. "Soup gives the young cooks something to play around with and be creative.

"We're big on sweet corn in South Africa," he continues. One of the cooks came up with a simple soup that met with immediate approval (recipe, plateonline.com). "It's just potato, corn and a bit of truffle, and the combination of the three things is a wonderful combination."

THE ONCE AND FUTURE CUISINE

Chefs and their customers are always hungry for something new. "When I came here in the '80s," Kejela says, "never mind Ethiopian food, sushi was a novelty."

"Back in the '90s, everybody wanted to do Nuevo Latino or fusion," Ouattara recalls, "but they were looking toward Hawaii or Asia. Then we moved to seeing a lot of Indian spices in restaurants. Nobody has tapped into the African cuisine yet—and we have a lot of spices that are here but not widely used in restaurants."

Experimenting with African spices is the first step towards adding African cuisine to the menu.

But chefs warn that when you're tweaking, don't stray too far. "In Africa," Ouattara says, "The starch is the biggest thing on the plate. In America, the meat is the biggest thing on the plate. [But] in order for people to try your food, you have to present it the way they like to eat it. I will take the African food apart, and—keeping the flavors—put it back together the way Americans will like to see it.

"We have Chinese food made for Americans and Mexican food made for Americans," he adds. "Why not African food made for Americans?"

Seánan Forbes is a food writer and photographer based in London and New York City.

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