

# Introduction

*African Cooking and African History*

Culture began when the raw got cooked.

—Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Food: A History*

*Yameftebay guday, chewna berbere lay*  
(A solution lies in salt and spice)

—Proverb written on the back windscreen  
of a motorbike taxi in the market town of  
Welkite, Ethiopia

IN 1887, on a mountaintop overlooking Addis Ababa, her kingdom's new capital, Queen Taytu Bitul laid out a magnificent feast for her guests. She had prepared pots of mutton stew, roasted beef, spiced soups, peppered pea sauce, minced meat sautéed in butter flavored by exotic spices, all accompanied by rivers of honey wine. The scents of the simmering stews, the buzz of the assembled guests, and the tableau of elegant presentations were part of an elaborate theater of political ritual, but the food itself had not only taste, aroma, and texture, but also historical meaning. The act of the feast, I would argue, had as much to do with the meaning of the cooking as with taste of the food itself. What can we learn about history

from understanding the cookery? This book examines the deeper historical evidence and the meaning of food and cooking in African history.

Food as a topic in African history adds taste and texture to events and personalities. There are two possible approaches to discussing it. The first is to consider the daily struggle for sustenance, whether in the African origins of humankind or, in modern times, in the famines that have devastated regions of Africa such as Ethiopia, Niger, and Sudan. This approach has value in addressing Africa's economic woes and their human consequences, but it emphasizes struggle and heartbreak at the expense of recognizing Africa's fundamental energy and creativity in the history of its cooking and its solutions to life's problems.

The second approach, the one I adopt, is to consider cooking and cuisine as a creative composition at the heart of all cultural expressions of ourselves as humans. Historically, and in Africa until recently, food has grown, literally, under our feet or as animals that we herd or hunt, and until recent times families prepared meals from the bounty they could create from the lands and waters where they lived. They thus ate in the rhythm of the seasons, the bearing of wild fruits, the movements of fish, the timing of harvests, and the migrations of animals in the wild.

So I want to explore cuisine in Africa as something conceived, cooked, and consumed, first around home fires, cooking pots, griddles, and spits, and later in market stalls and restaurants and at political events where food expressed power. Eating together, commensality, was thus not just nutrition but also a measure of human values, linking communities of kin, neighbors, and friends around tastes and sequences of taste expressing who they were on a daily basis: in a word, cuisine.

The focus of the book is therefore on what African peoples composed to eat throughout the centuries on a wide variety of their landscapes, seasons, and historical exchanges. The combinations of textures, flavors, and techniques of preparation they created, and when and with whom, thus expressed their agility in keeping up with their times, their struggles, and their opportunities. A central theme here is that food is a marker of cultural identity. It tells us who we are, how we grew up, about our memories and the history we share. Africa is no different in that respect than other world areas, yet what are those things that make Africa's history of food distinctive? Empress Taytu's feast (described further in chapter 3) is one example. The book explores more of these as they appear in the historical record.

In Africa, as in other world areas, cookery is a stage for performance (by the cook) and audience (family, neighbors, and guests), who respond by eating and appreciating it. In Africa, women were almost always the performers, and techniques of cooking remained women's specialized knowledge. Women cooked in the home, but in Europe and in many world areas the art itself became the privilege of a literate, male, class, dominated by professional guilds as a kind of priestly knowledge. African food preparation, in contrast, has, until recently, been consistently a woman's daily domain rather than a distinct profession. Like other forms of oral performance that combined creativity with consistency of reproduction, erudition in cooking in Africa could take place via both the memory of individuals and that of groups of people as their shared cuisine—but only very recently via written recipes. While written recipes became important in literate societies and among the elite classes in Europe, Asia, and the classical world, cooking and cuisine in Africa was more fundamentally an oral art in societies that preserved traditions and history via both the spoken and unspoken word. African griots from the Mali empire have become famous for their ability to recall the details of political history and its cultural meaning. Like griots, Africa's cooks have long demonstrated a remarkable capacity for oral memory that combines experience, practice, and replicability.<sup>1</sup>

The African cuisines that we encounter today express history and a blending of local ecologies and public cultures. Cooking displays itself in the elaborate political structures of empire as well as free cultural interchange between neighbors, mothers, and daughters, and among social classes within villages and across larger cultures and geographies. African cuisines were and are not simply the result of what outsiders brought, but the formative imperial experiences of political history in Mali, Ethiopia, and Asante. Ideas about cooking and ingredients were more often intra-African sharing of ideas than, as some Western food scholars say, purely the result of European colonial and cultural domination in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>2</sup> African cooking showed distinctive qualities of technique and innovation in adapting new farm crops (maize, peppers), trade items (salt or seeds), and more perishable ingredients borrowed from neighbors (leafy vegetables, fruits, exotic spices).

Yet inequality and political domination do often appear in the culture of cooking. Pasta, French-style baguettes, and colonial curries appeared in African cities shortly after colonial rule arrived in the early 1900s. Distinctly African experiences, such as state formation in the West African forest-

savanna in the seventeenth century and the Horn of Africa, and maritime empires at the Cape of Good Hope, promoted the processes of migration, the formation of class hierarchies, cultural overlays, and social borrowing that were fundamental to the emergence of the cuisines of Africa over time. The rise of global agricultural ecologies and systems of trade in the post-Columbian mercantile period brought Africa major foods like maize, cassava, tomatoes, and potatoes. African forms of these foods later spread back across the Atlantic and into Europe and Asia. The exchange between Europe and Africa that metastasized into formal colonial rule by European powers in the late nineteenth century also affected food and cooking in ways that expanded European food systems in Africa, but later also exposed Europeans themselves to African and Asian techniques of cooking and specific food preparations like curries, gumbos, porridge with green leafy relishes, and samosas.

Each of these actions of cultural exchange, especially ritual feast cycles within African societies and religious cultures, had implications for food and cooking. A dominant theme in these cases, as in many nonindustrial societies, was the idea that filling the belly and fulfilling the ritual requirements of a meal constituted the cook's primary goal, rather than food as an aesthetic pleasure. In those African societies where everyone had the same diet regardless of station in life, food's preparation and consumption did not mark rank in power or social class. This pattern of what we might call culinary equality is what the well-known Cambridge anthropologist Jack Goody in the 1950s found among the LoDagaa and Gonja people of northern Ghana, leading him to conclude that Africans did not have a properly defined "cuisine," or what he called stratified food-consumption habits. In his view, while food in these African societies had ritual meaning, beyond meeting a biological need, it did not achieve a status of beauty in which people took pleasure in both variety and sophisticated ingredients and preparation. African cooking, he concluded rather narrowly, was mundane and unremarkable. He argued prematurely that cuisine occurred only in societies that were historically literate and used the plow as a primary tool of agriculture.<sup>3</sup> Goody's argument was impossibly narrow. Parts 2 and 3 of this book directly challenge this idea in describing a range of African culinary cultures and the elaborate ways that Africans (women in particular) cooked and presented their own foods in a brilliant array of techniques and taste. Part 4 describes how these ideas have moved out of Africa and affected what people eat in the world as a whole.

## Cuisine as a Historical Phenomenon

*Webster's Third International Dictionary* defines cuisine rather simply as “a manner of preparing food.” One food scholar, however, makes the more nuanced and elegant observation that cuisines are more precisely “formal and symbolic ordering of culinary practice.”<sup>4</sup> I want to expand that definition considerably by using cuisine to denote a distinct and coherent body of food preparations based upon one or more starchy staples, a set of spice combinations, complementary tastes, particular textures, iconic rituals, and a locally intelligible repertoire of meats, vegetables, and starchy textures. Most importantly, these elements form a structure of both preparation and presentation that makes a meal. In the modern developed world that sequence might consist of a hamburger, fries, and a Coke, while in Africa it might more likely mean a dish of pounded yam, fish, and garden egg (eggplant), or one of the many other combinations of a starch and sauce that show local ingredients and taste.

African cooking is a part of the universal human experience. Sauces, oils, herbs, and spices add flavor and texture to primary ingredients and remove food “from the state of nature and smother it in art.”<sup>5</sup> A cuisine is thus a collection of dishes and meals that mark a distinct culture much in the way that styles of dress, music, or dance do. Cuisines behave like language families in that they are bodies of knowledge and practice “mutually intelligible” between several societies, locations, and ethnic identities.<sup>6</sup> People tend to know intrinsically what they consider food, its taste, and how to eat it—or what is not edible. For some, food means rice, and for others it means maize porridge. The taste, textures, and sequencing of peoples’ food shows history, geography, and ideas shared within and between cultures. Moreover, the act of cooking is not merely a mechanical skill, but a special form of knowledge. Cuisinal concoction (in other words, cooking) is an accumulation of collective experience, experiment, and observation in the use of various forms of heat (dry heat, immersion in water, sautéing) that release sugar and transform carbohydrates and meat fibers into digestible form. Cooking and food preparation is an application of both knowledge and accumulated experience that has historically been a fundamentally oral skill, and one quite specific to women.

Tracing the origins and the character of African culinary history, and identifying African cuisines as products and reflections of African agricultural, cultural, and economic history, requires a breakdown of the idea of cuisine. What, in fact, is cuisine, as opposed to cooking or the simple

idea of foodways? Sidney Mintz, the distinguished anthropologist of the Caribbean and of food commodities (sugar, coffee, tea, Coca-Cola), argues that cuisines

are never the foods of a country, but the foods of a *place*. . . .

. . . What makes a cuisine is not a set of recipes aggregated in a book, or a series of particular foods associated with a particular setting, but something more. I think a cuisine requires a population that eats that cuisine with sufficient frequency to consider themselves experts on it. They all believe, and *care* that they believe, that they know what it consists of, how it is made, and how it should taste. In short, a genuine cuisine has common social roots; it is the food of a community—albeit often a very large community.<sup>7</sup>

My argument in this book reflects my own sense of cuisine as a product of two factors: first, dominant political cultures, such as empires, including African ones; and second, cultural exchange (via trade, intermarriage, or religious conversion). These factors in terms of food and cooking include a history of ingredients, their procurement and use in cooking, styles of cooking, and also the social context of the presenting and consuming of cooked food. Meals consumed by Africans were both public (banquets or restaurants) or private (family or household) occasions in which preparing food and acquiring the right ingredients put in play a body of symbols, economic possibilities, and the political structures that underlay them. People ate all of this during a meal, whether they were Senegalese, Ugandan, or Sudanese, though they obviously did not dwell on deeper meanings with every mouthful.

With the notable exception of southern Ghana, the selling of food in public places, such as restaurants and market stalls, was a twentieth-century phenomenon in Africa, a much more recent development than elsewhere in the world. The Ethiopian feast described earlier is an example of food as ritual rather than as a commercial good. But Africa's contributions to world culture now are part of the international phenomenon of cooking in restaurants and homes throughout the world. How and when African woman's knowledge came to express itself in this way is part of the larger story of African history as world history.

This book distills bits of evidence from agronomy, archaeology, anthropology, ethnobotany, linguistics, and cultural history into a story of the history,

geography, and styling of food in Africa. The consideration of taste, color, and texture—what scholars call hermeneutics—has mattered a great deal in this story. In many parts of Africa a meal was not a meal without the sensation of fullness in the belly produced by glutinous staples like pounded yam, maize porridge, rice, and millet—foods not well known in northern Europe or North America. These factors in African cooking and foodways have also changed over time with the inclusion of new materials and new ideas via Africa's global trade contacts, the forced migration of slavery, and the seeking by Africans of new lives in new places. Of course they adjust, but they also tend to bring their own ideas about foodstuffs and how to cook them edibly. While the story told here will acknowledge premodern African innovations in the production, processing, and presentation of what they eat, this book emphasizes the centrality of global contacts in framing Africa's foods in the last half millennium. African cooking shows the continent's cultures' unique engagements with neighbors and its place in the world, flanked by two oceans and the Mediterranean Sea, and containing its own landscapes of forest, desert, and savanna. And, of course, its cities.

### How Distinctive Is the History of African Cookery?

Combinations of ingredients and structures of cooking are not carried in the genes, but come from historical experiences shared among peoples and across generations. Not all countries or nations have a distinctive "cuisine," though they sometimes try to invent them for political reasons.<sup>8</sup> Cuisine is a product of history, and a meal is a conjuncture of time, place, particular ingredients. It is the powerful act of cooking that draws the physical and sensory elements together. In Africa there are a number of obvious examples of cuisines—Ethiopia, southern Ghana, Senegalese, southern Nigeria, the Cape of Good Hope—that show such a meeting. In those places and cultures a type of cooking involves the layering of ideas, daily rituals of eating, ingredients, and methods of assembling foods for both public and private meals that transform cooking and food into what we then call a cuisine. "Culture began when the raw got cooked," as the historian Felipe Fernández-Armesto has said. Mutually intelligible traditions of cooking are like similar languages with which people can communicate across borders and between political groups that were otherwise in competition. These areas existed in places like the Nile Valley, along the Indian Ocean rim, and later in colonial kitchens where Africans cooked for European colonial employers in their homes or hotels.

Like its geology and its distinctive plants and animals, Africa's cooking exhibits regional character. But it also shows broad historical themes of continuity that we can also see in dress, music, and language. Restaurants in London's Covent Garden or Paris's Rive Gauche that claim an African cooking theme and cultural milieu more often than not have a hybrid menu that mixes a number of national cuisines and quite separate traditions of African cookery via signature dishes like Ghana's groundnut stew (with a rich peanut sauce), Senegal's *thiebou dienn* (rice and fish), and Ethiopia's *doro wot* (buttery, peppered chicken stew) that would never actually appear together in a kitchen in Africa. These new African restaurants cherry-pick dishes from around the continent rather than presenting the coherent cultural and historical settings behind a true cuisine. Few African cooks would recognize these dishes as having common elements of style or taste that would make them part of a thing called African cuisine. Ethiopian-Swedish chef Marcus Samuelsson learned his craft in Europe and America but has now studied African cooking styles around the continent to bring to his New York restaurant's creative menus. While African-inspired, those menus do not represent a single coherent cuisine that Africans ate in past times. My argument here is that there has not historically been such a cuisine, and that Africa in fact has produced a number of distinct cuisines that deserve recognition and celebration on their own terms.

If there is, however, a common theme that marks African cookery, it lies in African cooks' adaptation and indigenization of staples and ingredients collected from encounters with other world edible ecologies (for example, bananas, maize, cassava, Asian rice, capsicum peppers) and oceanic trade networks (the Indian Ocean, the Atlantic Rim, the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf) that contributed spices, herbs, and fruits to Africa's bowls, mortars, and cooking pots.

### Structure and Key Themes of the Book

I have organized this book around themes and regional geographies of cookery in Africa. The first two chapters describe the basic local components available to African cooks in the two or three millennia before the current era, including the origins and genetic endowments of foodstuffs from Africa's ecology. Chapter 1 describes the distribution of starches and staples used as the base of Africa's cooking, especially the role of Africa's own staples of grains—rice, sorghum, millet, and teff. Chapter 2 looks at key staple foods borrowed from other world areas, like maize, cassava, bananas,

and Asian rice, and considers the effect of the arrival of New World capsicum peppers, which “democratized” flavor in a remarkable transformation of African cooking. Hotness and spice became a trademark for many (though not all) types of African cooking.

Contact with world regions like the Indian Ocean rim (from at least the first century CE) and the Atlantic world (after 1500) brought many more challenges and opportunities that African cooks built into their stews, porridges, and breads until the eve of the twentieth century. At that point Africans began to adapt these local cuisines to even wider worlds. The pressures of European colonialism and colonial rule by the twentieth century often forced Africans to sacrifice variety and nutrition for empty calories and strategies of survival to endure the strain. They also began to add the exotic food habits of their rulers, just as the rulers began to adopt foods and ideas from their own colonies, including regions of Africa.

Parts 2 and 3 of this book examine the adaptation of African cooking to a new world in which Africans dealt with their role as subjects of colonies and as citizens of modern nations. Part 2 (chapters 3 and 4) describes one of Africa’s most celebrated traditions of cooking, that of the Ethiopian highlands. Ethiopia, unlike most of Africa, did not endure colonial domination but built its own nation from a multiethnic empire—and food was a part of that process. Part 3 identifies other regions that have historically evolved distinctive and coherent cuisines: West Africa (chapter 5) and the central and southern African maize belt and maritime coasts (chapter 6). In those places cuisine was not so much the product of modern nations as of regions that shared common ecologies and histories.

Part 4 (chapter 7) traces the diffusion throughout the world of these African traditions of cooking in the era of North American slavery and the wider African diaspora in Latin America and the Caribbean, which influenced the European and American communities with whom Africans and their descendants interacted.

Readers should notice a number of interwoven themes about African cooking and culinary cultures. The first of these is the dynamism of African foods and the broad geographic reach of ingredients over the years 1500–2000. Another is the extent to which cooking constitutes a particular body of gendered knowledge—Africa’s cooks, who built distinct repertoires of methods, processing, and presentation, were women. In African societies bachelors do cook—but not creatively and rarely well. Women, on the other hand, share their knowledge with one another and over generations

via practice and oral transmission rather than in written form (at least until very recently). And again, food, like dress, music, and art, carried deeper structures of cultural identity that formed a marker of group coherence and solidarity—food helps define who we are.

### Historical Sources on African Cooking

Each of the book's chapters highlights food and cooking as it appears in several types of primary historical sources. The raw materials of the historian's craft are correspondence, published observer accounts, or archaeological artifacts. But what are the raw materials of a study of cooking? One set of valuable primary sources is description by external observers. Travelers who tell us in written accounts about the exotic peoples and landscapes they encountered in Africa also faced the daily task of feeding themselves by "shooting for the pot" when on trek or relying on the hospitality of their hosts in villages or royal courts. Travelers away from royal courts or elsewhere on the continent fed themselves on trek or were fed at the homes and courts of local hosts. They only occasionally describe the preparation of the food they consumed. Food, like sex, was part of their experience but not the stuff that their Victorian or home mission audiences were interested in reading about. Modern audiences are very different.

Later, during the years of colonial rule in the early to mid-twentieth century, foreign residents, as anthropologists, colonial officials' wives, or travelers, watched what African women did hunkering around the compound hearth, moving about the kitchen, or standing at the mortar and pestle. These observations appear as cookbooks, informal lists of local dishes, or formal ethnographic studies by outsiders. In the case of imperial Ethiopia, for example, a key observer was the emperor's physician, from Russian Georgia, whose interests in nutrition, the emperor's and empress's health, and his own daily life allowed him to comment authoritatively on "les cordons bleus éthiopiennes" as well as the culinary preferences of the empress, who took a great interest in cooking and imperial hospitality. The historian gleans evidence from these sources carefully, since the writers were often short-term visitors who had little stomach for local flavors or techniques or had to work hard to tolerate foods that seemed exotic to their palettes and bellies.

Indigenous primary historical sources generated by African societies themselves are richly embedded in both oral and written forms of expression. They include fixed texts of oral traditions (such as the *Sundiata* epic of Mali), songs, or written religious texts (in Arabic, Hausa, or Ge'ez

languages). Though these texts had other purposes and rarely comment on what people ate or how they prepared it, there are key exceptions. The Ethiopian imperial chronicler who described Queen Taytu's feast in 1887 showed her influence on his observations and described the food prepared for the feast in deep sensual detail of sights, smells, and taste. In *Sundiata* we learn that the young Sundiata, who would be the founder of the thirteenth-century Mali empire, displayed his physical prowess in pulling down a baobab tree so that his aged mother could gather the leaves for her cooking pot. Ifa *orike* (oral verses from southwest Nigeria) refer to food and crops, though they rarely offer the details of cookery.<sup>9</sup> But such insights preserved in indigenous historical sources on what Africans ate in the past and how they cooked are few and far between. For many, food was a matter of everyday life that no one bothered to record for posterity in the usual ways.

When all is said and done, the most revealing primary historical sources about cooking are, in fact, recipes. Recipes are a peculiar form of historical text, being rather awkward written summaries of oral knowledge always in some state of change and adjustment. The transcribing of that knowledge as a formal recipe by missionary women or a literate middle class violates, in a sense, their original flexible and creative oral character. Cooking practices are in fact gendered (female) historical oral transcripts that combine ingredients (spices, starchy staples, meats, beans/peas, fruits, leafy vegetables, roots), cooking techniques (boiling, frying, smoking, baking), and relishes of leafy vegetables that comprise dishes and a cuisine.

The young learned the art of cooking by listening and watching mothers, aunts, relatives, and neighbors. Recipes (written or oral) also imply accepted ideas about color, texture, and flavor combinations acceptable to cultural practice of both performance (cooking) and audience (those who eat a meal). Written recipes are strange things. They are intended for strangers to use in future times and, maybe, in foreign places. But for the historian they are valuable as markers of accumulated experience of those generations of cooks who have gone before.

Each of these recipes cited in chapters here, of course, is an attempt to duplicate a performance of the individual cook's skill and choices. A dish that appears in a oral demonstration to a young woman or in a fixed written recipe in a mission wives' or Peace Corps cookbook presents its own historical testimony of historical exchange, gathered wild local materials, agriculture, livestock husbandry, and, in some cases, male hunting. Oral communication maintains an important element of ambiguity that allows each cook to

adjust or personalize the concoction across generations or time. The African American food writer and novelist Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor refers to the improvisational nature of African American cooking as “vibration cooking,” reflecting the idea that measurements and combinations are not fixed texts but open to individual style.<sup>10</sup> That fact is doubtless true of all cooking, but Africans have maintained the oral form more thoroughly than other world areas. Yet, like jazz, what appears to be a free form was actually a deeper structure understood by the performer and by the informed within the audience. Its essential orality was carefully preserved and passed on via performance, practice, and the response of those who appreciated the final result and encouraged the cook to repeat the performance. A dish like groundnut stew with fish, chicken, or beef eventually evolved into different forms as its popularity spread around a number of West African cooking cultures.

The oral transcripts of women’s accumulated experiences passed between neighbors and family—and between generations; African American writer Maya Angelou, for example, recalled this in her own life: “Mother brought out a recipe for Jollof rice that I had sent her from Ghana. She unfolded the letter and read, ‘Cook about a pound of rice, sauté a couple or three onions in not too much cooking oil for a while, then put in three or four or five right-sized tomatoes.’”<sup>11</sup> Here, the recipe sent to the mother in America conveys the ambiguity of the oral version that the daughter observed in situ in Ghana. The subjectivity of “right size” and “not too much” suggests the role of the individual cook’s judgment. I have included such a context in chapter 4 to contrast a published recipe (by a male author) with a woman’s oral rendition to me, including her voicing of the sound “tuk tuk” made by the sauce itself as it simmered to a certain thickness.

Each chapter of this book thus contains a mix of ideas, images, and text from these primary sources: recipes, photos, engravings, and external observations. For each theme and region the book suggests dynamics of change as well as the deeper-seated structures of continuities of flavor, aroma, and texture. For each of these the historical evidence differs in its presentation of the sensual aspects (taste, sight, smell, and texture) and the process of concoction (boiling, baking, frying, smoking, and so on). The texts presented here consist, inevitably, of a number of foreign observations of what were, to the writers, exotic ingredients and methods. As historians we rely on outsiders to tell us what they saw, and what they ate. Local foods were, to these outsiders, strange, not mundane, and only maybe worthy of note. For each of these regions, moreover, there is a need to understand the dynamics

of change in African regional cookery as well as the globalization of diet and foods through migration and commercialization. When did canned tomato paste become a required ingredient? Or a cube of chicken bouillon? Finally, the globalization of African culture, including the growth of a powerful cultural production in diaspora, appears here as a collective expression of distinctive types of African cuisine (Ethiopia) or an amalgam of New World culture and African culinary aesthetics (Caribbean, Creole, African American).

Bon appétit (or, as they say in Addis Ababa, “Good appetite”).