

FOOD

Starch-based dishes stiffen the sense of flavours

Vicki Williams

Nigerian cuisine benefits from the influences of regional and the hundreds of ethnic groups that make up the West African country.

"In Nigeria, each ethnic group can have different cuisine characteristics and signatures. My father was from the Yoruba people. The signatures of that cuisine are a great taste, full body, very rich, and very spicy, with solid use of chilli," says Hong Kong resident and IT professional, Tayo Olowu, who partly grew up in Nigeria's largest city, Lagos. There are, however, some common factors in Nigerian dishes, and one of these is the predominant use of starch, and the importance placed on it. It features in all meals, and can be the core ingredient.

Prominent food writer and author Alan Davidson writes in *The Oxford Companion to Food*, second edition, "the starch content of meals [in countries in West and Central Africa] is considered to be real food, while sauces or stews are there to help it down". He adds that it is common to also use starch pastes, made from sweet potato or maize. Stews and soups are key and are noted for having a strong depth of flavour, often spiced up with chilli. Soupy stews or stew-like thick soups

often feature. One example of this is the signature cuisine, egusi, considered a soup, which Davidson says contains ofofal, fermented carob, partminger (a herb) and egusi powder, made from the seeds of certain cucurbitaceous plants, including squash, gourd and melon.

There are, however, many, many variations, the common factor being the egusi (seeds) it is named after. "For me egusi can be considered a signature dish, with melon seeds [egusi] its main ingredient, providing texture and body, served with pounded yam that is dipped into the soup," says Olowu, who has eaten the dish in Nigeria and in Nigerian restaurants in Britain when living there.

Charles Nwanaga, ex-professional football player, and now coach and founder of the Saikung Sharks soccer club agrees: "Both egusi and okra soup are widely eaten, and can be considered typical Nigerian cuisine dishes."

Okra soup goes far beyond the vegetable and can contain a choice of protein, such as a combination of different meats and cuts, and/or a variety of seafoods including dried, or one strong protein such as goat (with dried seafood), plus a green vegetable and spices. Olowu says: "For me the dish is full of seafood flavour from dry fish, fish stock, and cray fish."

For special occasions there is



Egusi soup with dried fish, served in Zanzibar restaurant in TST

goat soup, with some versions of egusi containing goat. "Soup made from goat is such a paradigm of the national cuisine that it is usually served at the most important functions," Davidson writes.

A festive occasion or party dish, says Olowu, is Jollof rice. "It is a one-pot rice dish, with chicken, rice, peppers, tomatoes and okra the main ingredients. My father's family always prepares it at Christmas."

A spice blend is also added, and this can include nutmeg, ginger, scotch bonnet pepper, cumin and chilli, or a prepared curry powder.

Nwanaga says that for him another signature dish is garri, made from crushed cassava, with a cuisine definer being the use of chilli in primary dishes. "Chilli is used in so many dishes, a variety is used, and they are a key feature of stews, soups, and rice dishes."

Beans feature often, including moin moin, a savoury bean pudding made from black-eyed peas (indigenous to Africa), onions and chillies, wrapped in



Jollof rice with beans and plantain is a favourite party dish.

banana leaf and steamed. Modern versions add other ingredients such as apples.

Street food form part of the culinary story, with hot items being tsire agashe – spiced kebabs (similar to doner kebabs) and akara (deep fried beans, ball or scone shape), originally introduced from Brazil and eaten at all times of day.

One dish commonly served in restaurants that can take diners new to the cuisine by surprise is peppered snail, featuring tender, but large African snails, a hefty use of chilli and tomatoes. Olowu says: "The snails taste great with a certain umami quality."

A taste of Nigeria in Hong Kong is possible, Nwanaga says, in Mirador Mansion (1st and 4th floors) and Chungking Mansion, on several floors, but finding them can be tricky. He recommends a friend's restaurant, Zanzibar (4th floor, Block C, Chungking Mansion).

For information about dining out in Nigeria see www.mydestinationnigeria.com, a guide written by local experts.