

# African Cuisine

**A**FRICAN FOOD is as regional as is American food: there are coastal cuisines similar to New England and Louisiana and inland cuisines similar to our Midwest. Sampling the food of an African region teaches you much about its history, culture, and traditions. Fufu is a thick porridge-like mixture from Central Africa and one of the region's staple foods. You form it into small balls with three fingers of your right hand and then dip it into highly spiced hot sauces and relishes to accompany meat dishes. Pap—a Southern African staple—may remind you of American grits or polenta. American and African cuisines have much in common.



## Objective:



Summarize African cuisine's influences, common ingredients, and classic dishes.

## Key Terms:



African cuisine  
Bambara stew  
bobotie  
bunny chow  
Cape Dutch  
cassava  
couscous

eguisi soup  
fufu  
groundnut stew  
injera  
jollof rice  
klouiklou  
koeksisters

matoke  
pap  
plantain  
staple  
tajine  
ugali

## African Regional Cuisines

**African cuisine** is a very general term that combines and implies all cuisines from the various regions of Africa. African cuisine is based on locally available fruits, cereal grains, vegetables, milk, and meats. The continent's diverse demographic makeup is reflected in the many

different eating and drinking habits, dishes, and preparation techniques of its peoples. Africa is the second largest continent in the world and its diversity includes its cuisines.

## AFRICAN CUISINE INFLUENCES

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### History

**LOCATION:** To learn more about the history and culture of an African region, all one needs to do is sample its food! Depending on the region of this continent, there are quite significant differences in the drinking and eating habits. Each region has special preparation techniques, distinctive dishes, and eating habits. The regions that make up the continent of Africa and foods associated with each are:

- ◆ North Africa (seafood, goat, lamb, dates, olives, almonds, vegetables, and fruits)
- ◆ Central Africa (cassava, peanuts, chili peppers, plantains, and stews)
- ◆ East Africa (grains and vegetables)
- ◆ West Africa (rice, black eyed peas, brown beans, root vegetables, goat, chicken, and beef)
- ◆ Southern Africa (grain crops, beef, lamb and mutton, goat, pumpkins, beans, and leafy green vegetables)

North Africa: North Africa has had several centuries of traders, invaders, migrants, and immigrants, all of whom have influenced the local cuisine. Before the arrival of the Romans olives and olive oil were introduced.

- ◆ Phoenicians brought sausages in the 1st century.
- ◆ Carthaginians brought wheat and semolina (a by-product).
- ◆ Berbers adapted semolina into couscous, one of the main staple foods in North Africa.
- ◆ Arabs (beginning in the 7th century) introduced a variety of spices: saffron, nutmeg, cinnamon, ginger, and cloves. These spices contributed to and influenced the culinary culture of North Africa.
- ◆ Turks brought sweet potatoes and other bakery products.
- ◆ From the New World, North Africa received potatoes, tomatoes, zucchini, and chili peppers.

Central Africa: Central Africa was largely free from culinary influences of the outside world until the late 19th century. An exception is the widespread adaptation of cassava, peanut, and chili pepper plants, which arrived along with the slave trade during the 16th century. These food items have had a large influence on the local cuisine. Central African cooking has remained traditional.



**FIGURE 1.** Africa is the world's second largest and second most-populous continent, located to the south of Europe and to the southwest of Asia. It is also located south of the Mediterranean Sea, west of the Indian Ocean, and east of the Atlantic Ocean. Africa is surrounded by water.

East Africa: East African nations have many influences from the Middle East, because merchants settled on the Swahili Coast about a century ago. Steamed or cooked rice with spices in Persian style; saffron, cloves, cinnamon, and several other spices of the Swahili cuisine are common along the eastern coastline. Several centuries later, the British and the Indians brought foods with them: Indian spiced vegetable curries, lentil soups, and a variety of pickles that have influenced various local dishes.

West Africa: West African cuisine is very diverse—it's as different as the numerous Chinese or European cuisines. Many West African nations produce the vast amount of their diet themselves: farming, hunting, and fishing. The basic diets contain yams, cassava (yuca), and plantains. Influences are noted from the Arabs, the Portuguese, and Europeans primarily through ships landing along the Atlantic coast. The Portuguese and Europeans brought tomatoes, pea-

nuts, and some new cooking techniques. West African food uses lots of bold spices that produce exceptionally hot dishes and they use a great deal of umami.

Southern Africa: About 2000 years ago, native Africans of South Africa arrived in the region, bringing crop cultivation and cattle farming. They grew grain crops and raised cattle, sheep, and goats. They also grew and continue to grow pumpkins, beans, and leafy greens vegetables.

## Geography

**TOPOGRAPHY**: Africa has eight major physical regions: the Sahara, the Sahel, the Ethiopian Highlands, the savanna, the Swahili Coast, the rain forest, the African Great Lakes, and Southern Africa. Some regions cover large portions of the continent, while others are very isolated. Each region has unique animals and plants that produce great culinary dishes using lots of fresh ingredients.

- ◆ Sahara: The Sahara is the world's largest hot desert covering 25 percent of the African continent. The physical features include sand dunes, plateaus, plains, springs, wells, and mountains. The animals and plants in the region have adapted to the extremely dry conditions.
- ◆ Sahel: Sahel is a narrow band of semi-dry flat plain landforms that create a transition zone between the Sahara and the savannas. Animals here constantly scavenge little water and vegetation sources. Green vegetation is only an option during the rainy season and is quickly harvested by farmers or consumed by animals.
- ◆ Ethiopian Highlands: This region is home to about 80 percent of Africa's tallest mountains.
- ◆ Savanna: The savannas are the African grasslands that cover almost half of the African continent. The Serengeti is the most well known plain and is home to large mammals: lions, hyenas, zebras, giraffes, and elephants. These animals graze that encourages more grass to grow and their waste helps fertilize the soil.
- ◆ Swahili Coast: This is the African coastline that stretches along the Indian Ocean. It has many coral reefs and barrier islands that help protect the coast from severe weather. Along the coast, the mangrove forests (small shrubs or trees) are the most common vegetation.
- ◆ Rainforest: Most of Africa's rain forests were destroyed by development, agriculture, and forestry. Today, 80 percent of Africa's rainforest is concentrated in central Africa, along the Congo River basin. Rainforests support many varieties of animal and plant life: the majority of the plants are unidentified.
- ◆ African Great Lakes: The African Great Lakes are located in 9 countries and are some of the largest and deepest lakes in the world. The lakes support a range of water and land animals and a majority of the plant types from nearby rainforests and savannas.
- ◆ Southern Africa: The rocky features of Southern Africa include plateaus and mountains. However, the Cape Floral area is home to one of the richest collections of plants in the world.



## BROADENING AWARENESS...

### AMAZING ASPECTS: Culture and Cuisine

North African ethnic traditions have emerged as new inspiration for kitchens across the U.S.: unusual spice blends and bold flavors, ingredients, and techniques. Japanese, Thai, and Indian cuisines have been officially staple cuisines in major cities across the U.S, yet African cuisines have remained mostly exotic until recently. African spices such as harissa and cooking methods such as tagines are now regularly featured on western menus. North African cuisines have strong roots based on the early Mediterranean spice trade. These spices help define and unify the many cuisines of Africa.



Today, chefs in California are integrating African spices with local produce to create fresh, brilliant dishes that push the traditional western palate. Is that dish of cobalt blue powder a spice? Find out.

**THE COASTS:** The African continent is surrounded by water: the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Atlantic Ocean. Africa has fisheries on all of its marine coasts, as well as inland, that serve more than 10 million people. Marine fisheries are important to these coastal countries. Small fish, especially herring and sardines, are the most common catch on the coastlines. The more profitable fishes are larger: tuna, cod, and haddock.

**INLAND:** The Great Lakes support the continent's largest inland fisheries with more than 3,000 fish species and two-thirds of the globe's inland fish production. Inland fish species are consumed locally and coastline fisheries export much of their catch.

**CLIMATE:** Climate greatly influences Africa's agriculture. Climatic regions include tropical wet, savanna, desert, Mediterranean, and highland.

- ◆ **Tropical Wet:** Tropical wet conditions occur across the continent: along the Equator, the Gulf of Guinea, and the east Madagascar coast. Tropical temperatures are about 80°F and precipitation is about 60 inches annually. Important crops are plantain, pineapple, coffee, tea, cocoa, and oil palms (source of the primary cooking oil in Africa).
- ◆ **Savanna:** Temperatures in the savanna are cooler than in the tropical wet and a larger variety of crops are available: cassava, peanuts, peppers, okra, eggplant, cucumber, and watermelon. Africa's important grain crops, millet and sorghum, are also grown here.
- ◆ **Mediterranean:** Temperatures in the Mediterranean area is mild with dry summers and moderately rainy winters. Important crops include figs, olives, oranges, tomatoes, onions, and large vegetables, such as cabbage and cauliflower.

- ◆ **Highland:** Temperatures in the Highland is cool to cold and rainfall depends on the mountain in relation to the winds. Important crops in this region include alfalfa, potatoes, and wheat.

## AFRICAN INGREDIENTS, STAPLES, AND CUISINES

A **staple** is a food or dish that is basic to a region's diet and eaten regularly in large quantities. The diet and nutritional health of a region is often dependent upon these staple foods: the staff of life. African cuisines combine locally available fruits, cereal grains, and vegetables, as well as milk and meat products to create their regional dishes. In some parts of the continent, the staple foods are milk, curd, and whey products and in others, fruits, vegetables, and grains are the staples. Eating and drinking habits, dishes, and preparation techniques can be very unique to a region.

### North African Cuisine

North Africa is diverse geographically, politically, socially, economically, and culturally. The cuisine and the culinary style are equally diverse.

- ◆ **Ingredients:** The most important ingredients in North African cuisine is seafood, goat, lamb, beef, dates, olives, almonds, and a variety of fruits and vegetables. The most popular spices used in the region are cumin, ginger, paprika, cinnamon, peppermint, parsley, coriander, saffron, turmeric, dried chilies, dried mint, and sesame seeds. [NOTE: Pork is not an important ingredient in this cuisine due to the number of Muslims who live in the north.]



FIGURE 2. Couscous is a staple food in North African Cuisine. Other than olive oil, what else is being served with this couscous?

- ◆ **Dishes:** A staple food in North African cuisine is couscous. **Couscous** is steamed semolina typically served with stews and meat dishes. It's made with semolina, flour, boiling water, and spices (including saffron and cinnamon). It is a national dish in Algeria, and is a popular accompaniment in traditional Berber dishes. [NOTE: Ready-to-eat couscous is available in most of our Western supermarkets, however, authentic couscous always tastes better.] Many North African countries have dishes that share the same name but they differ significantly from one another, for example tajine. In Morocco, **tajine** is a slow

cooked stew made with various meats or fish and vegetables stewed with spices and dried fruit. In Tunisia, tagine is similar to frittata or quiche.

- ◆ **Cooking Styles:** There are noticeable differences between the cooking styles of different nations within this region: Moroccan cooking is sophisticated with full-bodied flavors and Tunisian cuisine is fiery, while Egyptian and Algerian cooking styles are simple.

## Central African Cuisine

Central African cooking remains very traditional and close to its roots while still providing a wide variety of dishes. This fact is due in part to their geographic location: many food trends have been unable to penetrate their culture and cooking habits. A daily diet consists primarily of milk, curds and whey, and meats. Beef and chicken are the most common meats consumed, but it is not unheard of to find crocodile, warthog, monkey, or even antelope on the menu. Cassava plants are consumed as cooked greens.

- ◆ **Ingredients:** Staple ingredients include plantains that may be eaten ripe or unripe and are generally starchy. A **plantain** is a banana cultivar (a plant selected and grown for human use) often called a “cooking banana or ogede.” The term cooking banana indicates they are different than most other bananas in that they are usually heated before eating. **Cassava** (AKA yuca or manioc) is an edible starchy tuberous root (a carbohydrate) that produces tapioca. In fact most is consumed as tapioca. **Fufu** is finger food that is formed into a ball and dipped into soup or sauce before eating. Fufu is made by mixing and pounding starchy flours (cassavas, plantains, yams, cocoyams) with water to produce a white, sticky product.



**FIGURE 3.** Tajine gets its name from the conical baking dish in which it is cooked. A tajine is often served with couscous and bread. The dish pictured here is meatballs, egg, and olives.



**FIGURE 4.** Fried slices of plantain (cooking bananas or ogede) are a favorite food of Central Africa.

- ◆ Dishes: Stews are popular in Central Africa: spinach, peanut, and vegetable stews are common. **Groundnut stew** is peanut stew made with chicken, okra, ginger, and other spices. **Bambara stew** is a porridge of rice, peanut butter, and sugar; another favorite of Central Africa.
- ◆ Cooking Styles: The cooking traditions, practices, ingredients, and foods of the Central African Republic are basic: boiling, marinating, deep-frying, drying, and steaming.

## East African Cuisine

East African nations include Kenya, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Somalia, and Uganda. Foods from this region are typically dishes made from grains, flours (for breads), and sweets with cooked meat and vegetables.

- ◆ Ingredients: The inland regions of East Africa consider cattle, sheep, pigs, and goats a form of currency wealth. As a result, meat products are generally absent from the diet. In some areas the milk and blood of the cattle are consumed but rarely the meat. In other areas, farmers grow a variety of grains and vegetables: maize and green bananas. Butter and milk are also featured ingredients in several authentic East African dishes.
- ◆ Dishes: **Ugali** is a starchy, corn-meal porridge served with meats or stews. Maize (corn) is the basis of ugali. In Uganda, **matoke** is a dish of steamed green bananas that provides the starch in many meals. In Ethiopian and Eritrean cuisines, **injera** is a pancake-like flatbread often served as an accompaniment to stews. Injera is made with **teff**: a grain that is a healthier substitute for rice, maize, and corn. Teff is widely grown in East Africa. Injera is made by mixing teff flour and water, and letting the mixture sit for up to three days to ferment. Then, the batter is fried in a cast-iron skillet.
- ◆ Cooking Styles: East African cooking styles include stewing, marinating, roasting, and frying.



**FIGURE 5.** This traditional East African dish—ugali—is served with fish and greens.

## West African Cuisine

West Africa, made up of 16 nations situated closely together geographically, is one of the main areas of European colonization on the continent. While the region's flavors have been

greatly influenced by the colonizing nations—especially Britain, Portugal—there are examples of distinctive and traditional West African cuisine. Arab cuisine is also an influence here.

- ◆ **Ingredients:** The use of starches as the primary filler is fairly common among West African cuisine. Starchy plants are abundant and easy to grow, making them inexpensive: yams, millet, corn, rice, black-eyed peas, and sweet potatoes. These plants provide quick-energy carbohydrates that expand in the stomach and ease hunger. Along the coast, fish and other seafood are the main source of protein. Beef is rare in the region, as cattle are expensive. However, chicken, goat, and pork are popular proteins. Due to West Africa's location and climate, the region produces many tropical fruits. Fresh fruits are purchased from roadside vendors, and dried fruits are common in desert regions. Fruits and vegetables common to the region are: avocado, mango, melons, coconuts, pineapple, bell peppers, tomatoes, okra, and tough greens (Swiss chard, mustard, and cabbage).
- ◆ **Dishes:** Fresh and dried fruits are cooked in rice dishes, served as a side dish, or blended into a drink. Along with varieties of fruit production, tropical, sun-loving vegetables grow easily in West Africa. Vegetables are main components of cooked stews, rice dishes, and sides. A high level of spice is used in West African dishes: ginger, cayenne, and chilies are common flavorings. Peanuts, other groundnuts, and peanut oils are also used in many West African dishes. **Egusi soup** is a stew of ground and fried egusi (melon) seeds, dried seafood, leafy vegetables, and beef. The soup is native to Nigeria. **Kloui kloui** is ground peanuts (similar to peanut butter) formed into a ring and deep-fried: a favorite dish of Benin. **Jollof rice** is similar to paella made with seafood, chicken, tomatoes, and spices.
- ◆ **Cooking Styles:** Common preparation methods include grilling, steaming, stewing, boiling, and deep-frying.



FIGURE 6. Jollof rice is a traditional West African dish served here with chicken and fried plantain.

## Southern African Cuisine

Southern Africa is located at the tip of the continent and includes numerous wine growing regions near the Atlantic and Indian oceans. The cooking of Southern Africa is a blend of many

cultures: indigenous peoples (Zulu, Tsonga, Swazi, etc.) and non-indigenous peoples (Europeans, Asians, etc.). Today, South African wines are very popular across the world.

- ◆ **Ingredients:** Common ingredients in both the indigenous and non-indigenous dishes are seafood, meats, wild game, poultry, fresh fruits and vegetables, and grains. Due to a general lack of refrigeration, hunting occurred daily in early Southern African homes and villages. Fruits plentiful in the area are: apples, grapes, mangoes, bananas, papaya, oranges, peaches, and apricots.
- ◆ **Indigenous Cooking Styles and Dishes:** Roasting and drying are common ways to prepare meats. In fact, barbecue is very, very popular along with making beer: fermentation is a typical skill of most households. A typical family meal is **pap**: a stiff, fluffy porridge, similar to American grits. Pap is often accompanied by well-seasoned stewed meat gravy. Traditional rural families often ferment pap for a few days to give it a tangier flavor. Pumpkin varieties are an often-served vegetable. [NOTE: Dishes of rice and beans are very popular but are not indigenous fare.]
- ◆ **Non-Indigenous Cooking Styles and Dishes:** Non-indigenous cooking influences include German, British, Italian, Greek, Indian (curries and chutneys), French (wines), and Dutch settlers. **Cape Dutch** is a distinctive regional cooking style characterized by the use of spices, especially nutmeg, allspice, and chili peppers. **Koeksisters** is fried dough infused in syrup or honey, similar to cookies and to deep-fried pastries. **Bobotie** is meatloaf with raisins and often a baked egg on top: it's usually served with yellow rice, coconut, banana slices, and chutney. **Bunny chow** is an Indian-inspired dish of mutton curry served inside a hollowed out bread bowl.



**FIGURE 7.** Bunny chow is a popular South African street food. The dish originated in the Durban Indian communities in South Africa. Workers needed a way to carry their curry lunch and the hollowed-out bread became the ‘take-away’ container. Find out how ‘bunny chow’ got its name.

## Summary:



African cooking enjoys spices: from West Indian jerk seasonings to aromatic North African spices. African cooking styles are similar to the comfort and soul foods of North America. Many African foods are centered on staple starches or cereals that are paired with fruits, vegetables, meats, herbs, and spices. Native African crops—yams, sorghum, and millet—are widely used in their cooking, as well as culti-

vated imports like wheat, rice, and corn. Starches for breads and a common African foods, such as fufu or ugali, are derived from these crops.

## Checking Your Knowledge:



1. List five unique characteristics of African cuisine.
2. Describe the role of Africa's climate on the various cuisines of the continent.
3. Describe how the term 'rainbow cuisine' fits the foods and dishes of South African.
4. What role does Africa's geography play on regional cuisine?
5. What other countries have influenced the available food and ingredients on the African continent?

## Expanding Your Knowledge:



A New York City festival is held to bring dishes from different regions of the African continent to one setting during the "African Food/Restaurant Festival." During this two-day event, chefs and restaurant owners from Africa host cooking demos and special dinners featuring traditional regional meals and modern takes on these servings. Research "NY African Restaurant Week" to get a big picture of what African cuisine is offered and demonstrated. What is Afro-Fusion? Begin your research using the Web Links.

## Web Links:



### African Restaurant Week

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=etGxkJN5hNs>

### Africa in the City: Eating African Food in Little Senegal, NYC

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3-HiBFdCqsg>

### Harlem African Market

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tt3N09yfnN0>

### New York African Restaurant Week

<https://nyarw.com/>

### Top 10 Best African Restaurants in NYC

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/faraigundan/2014/09/22/top-ten-african-restaurants-in-new-york-city/#32c666e61443>