

Heavy on the Starch

Every country and every area has their own dishes. In the southern coastal regions of Ghana and Togo fish is an important part of the diet. With the lack of refrigeration available the fish you find, unless you buy frozen, has been smoked and dried whole/ Mackerel is the most common followed by tilapia. Shrimps (as they say) are also available dried. Canned fish is served regularly. Sardines are common. Salmon, not so much. Some restaurants serve goat and pork dishes as well.

Ghanaians have different eating habits than Americans. Ghanaians eat bones. Fish bones, chicken bones (or at least the joint ends), pork bones and even smaller beef bones. It is not surprising then that they put up with meat that Americans would not. I was having lunch with a friend one time and asked the waitress if the cow (beef) served in a bowl of soup was tender. She assured me that it was.

To a Ghanaian, perhaps. To me, well I thought the digestibility of the sneakers I had was right up there with that remnant of cow staring at me from my bowl. Ghanaians can actually buy cow feet in the freezer section of a supermarket. To them it was probably close to butter soft. I could not get through it no matter how much I tried. I yanked and pulled to remove it from my fork in an effort to have more than one piece of meat. I finally grabbed it with my fingers before I resigned myself to the fact that I was fighting a battle beyond my means.

My friend was surprised that I was not devouring the chunk of vulcanized heifer and asked if he could have it. He said he thought it was fine as he spent the next several minutes separating it with his molars. (I was to learn later on that cow hide is also considered a good entree and enjoyed by many). After my education the lesson I learned was, "if you are going to ask, be prepared for "Ghanaian tender" versus the American idea." If you don't want to chance it – get the fish.

A report came out recently that showed Africans are some of the fittest people in the world. I think their diet – at least what I have observed – is one of the primary reasons. Since I have been here I have lost about 15 pounds in five months.

Ghanaians are more affluent than their neighbors to the east, the Togolese. One of my favorite dishes is called Waakye (pronounced 'wah-chee'). It is rice with tomatoes, peppers, garlic, smoked paprika and beans. In Ghana it is similar except the Ghanaians use more beans. (Beans are more expensive than rice). But beyond that, in Ghana rice is the grain of choice. Maize (corn to us) is usually served as a ground grain and used in recipes. Other grains like oats (corn to them) are also used in dishes but rice is the biggie.

There are some 145 words for "snow" worldwide. I get the feeling "rice" in Ghana would come in second. There is fried rice, plain rice, jollof rice, rice balls. . .billboards proclaiming rice will make your family love you. Thai, Vietnamese, Ghanian, Japanese, Indian, Jasmine, Fortified. . .each one superior to the other. There is so much emphasis on the rice that the meat is considered a side dish. Jollof rice always comes with a chicken leg or hind quarter unless you want some other meat. It is not even mentioned.

There are dishes like fufu (pulverized yam or cassava), Kenkey, (almost like kinky, but pronounced ken-kay) which is fermented maize flour, and Banku (bahn-coo) a blend of maize and cassava. Cassava is also known to us as tapioca.

Fufu takes a long time to do right and done well it is a delightful, gelatinous starch served swimming in a large bowl of light broth and can be served with cow, or fish, or

both depending on your preference. Kenkey and banku can be served in a variety of ways. In our house if we are having kenkey, you get a ball of the starch about the size of a small grapefruit that has been heated in gently boiling water. It is served with tomato, red onion, and small peppers that have been ground together with a mortar and pestle device used to blend to a mash. It also come with sardines, It is finger food,

Banku can be served in a similar fashion and any of the starches can be and often are served with a soup or stew. (and still considered a finger food - eaten with your hand).

Lettuce, and the like, is available but primarily in stores. The street shops do not carry it. And the prices for what we consider “average” vegetables would make you pause. There was the 25 cedis (\$5) for a bag of five carrots and the 90 cedis (\$15) for a bunch of celery that recently had me skirting the produce section at ShopRite.

My diet is full of watermelon, bananas, mangos, avocados, apples, onions, tomatoes, hot peppers, bell peppers, pineapples, and fresh coconut. There are not a lot of baked goods. In fact some stores do not even have flour in stock. (Trying to find baking powder was a chore). There are other fruits and vegetables that get added in, so variety is there.

I still cook some of my favorites like porkolt (a Hungarian dish I like), pancakes and coffee cake, but for the most part I eat like the others – discovering that I look and feel better by going a little lighter on the meat and sweets . . . and heavy on the starch.