

Greetings from Ghana #24
Join Me at the Table

I have mentioned the food that is here before. Most of it is completely new, but then you hear something and think, “Oh. That’s familiar” . . . and be wrong. If I was to mention “yam” some of you would see this orangish-looking, potato-like thing that comes in a can of sweet, sticky syrup that is served along with the turkey holiday meal. If you are more of a healthy, fresh veggie kind of folk you might think of the yams in the grocery or farmer’s market that are about a foot long and not quite as wide as a baseball bat. And in either case you would be very surprised by what is here in Africa.



A yam here is typically about 18 inches or longer and about as round as a softball. Hawkers carry about six at a time and you will see trucks loaded with them stacked like little logs. They are grown all year long but there are times when supply out does demand and the price drops. Locals call this, “in season.” In season, yam is about 7 cedis (50 - 75 cents) for a yam weighing 10 - 15 pounds. (That’s a lot of tuber)! Out of season it could go as high as two dollars.

Yam is used in a large variety of dishes and also boiled or fried. Sturdier than potatoes, the chips come out very crispy and also very light when fried.

Yam can also be pounded into a gelatinous paste called fufu. Fufu can also be made with yam and plantain pounded together. Now if you would like to try fufu and do not want to spend an hour helping someone pound it, you can buy it powdered, in a box. And like most manufactured foods, it loses its true character. You would know the powdered version. We call it tapioca. Because it takes two people to make it; one pounding and the other turning the dough, it is regarded as a special dish. Fufu is usually served in a light goat soup. And yes, you are expected to eat the hide,



chew the gristle, and gnaw the bones. You eat with your fingers by sticking your fingers in the fufu and pulling off a small section, forming it into a small ball and popping it into your mouth with some of the soup. The soup is made with tomatoes, peppers, and spices. It is a proud dish of the Akan tribe, the predominate tribe in this area.

TAKE TWO

Ghanaian cuisine varies by where you are in the country and what the local foods are but it is grain based, by and large. Rice is a big part of the diet. Maize (corn) also plays a big part.

There is Kenkey (fermented corn dough), Banku (corn dough and cassava), and Omo Tuo (rice balls). Banku is often served like a ball with tilapia, onions and different pepper sauces.

If you are wanting a similarity with Kenkey, have a tamale. Kenkey is corn dough wrapped in a corn husk and boiled. Unlike a tamale, kenkey is just the fermented dough. It is often served along a side of sardines and a sauce made from tomatoes, peppers, and onions that have been mashed together.



OmoTuo is real easy to make. You overcook the rice a bit and then mash it and form it into a ball. There is a technique to mashing it, but it is just boiled rice. It is usually served with a groundnut (peanut) soup. Caution: Ghanaians do not like chunky peanut soup!



Jollof rice is rice with tomato and spices served with chicken, fish, or a hard boiled egg. It takes time to cook it right and many people just buy it from a streetside vendor.

My housemate, John, is an excellent cook and delights in local dishes and stews. He cooks Ghanaian and I cook, well, American and a mishmash of recipes I know. John accuses me of trying to Americanize any recipe I lay my hands on, except one. Not only am I good at making rice balls, I have learned a recipe I fell in love with from fork one. It is called Red Red. It is made with palm oil (red oil) and tomatoes. There is also ginger, garlic, onions, peppers, paprika, and dried fish – all simmered in a light chicken stock.

I am not someone who typically likes to eat the same thing over and over. (They say the definition of “forever” is one couple with a turkey). But with this recipe you learn quickly that there is no such thing as “Red Red for One.” But I do not mind. . . not in the slightest.



TAKE THREE:

Some of these dishes may have caught your attention, but one that everyone should try – for both the taste experience as well for their health (and a favorite of John's to make) is Kontomire Stew. It is also known as Palava Sauce. No one has yet to explain why two such different names are for the same dish.

Ghanaians use a lot of leafy vegetables in their dishes and Kontomire stew is made with leaves from the cocoyam (see picture on Page 1, if you missed it). Boiled tender cocoyam leaves, mixed with boiled eggs, salted fish, momone - also known as Stinking Fish - tomatoes and powdered pepper. The big thing is the kontomire, the cocoyam leaves.

Kontomire is loaded with nutrients. One cup has 86% of all the vitamin C you need in a day. It also helps prevent cancer by fighting free radicals. That one cup also has 123% of the vitamin A you need for healthy eyesight. It is high in fibre and helps digestion. It reduces cholesterol, helps in weight loss, has lots of Omega 3 and a vitamin B complex of thiamin, riboflavin, niacin and vitamin B6 to boost the immune system and help protect the nervous system. And. . . while not trying to sound like a late night TV commercial. . . I have to tell you, "But wait! There's more!"

The Omega 3 in cocoyam leaves helps produce hormones that control blood pressure. Kontomire has calcium for healthy bones and helps with fetal brain and nervous system, as well as fetal bone and tooth, development. Cocoyam leaves also contain iron which helps prevent anemia. And they have an amino acid called threonine that helps in formulating elastin and collagen for healthy skin.

Another amino acid found, tyrosine, minimizes the effect of caffeine, nicotine, and cocaine and is said to help people kick whatever habit they are trying to get rid of. Dopamine is released by eating kontomire and that in turn is synthesized by phenylalanine and enhances your memory and mood. Histidine, an essential amino acid serves as a detoxification agent in removing heavy metals from your body. And last, but definitely not least for the male population, cocoyam leaves contain arginine, an amino acid that helps increase sperm production.

So why not just whack it up for salad? Because in addition to all that fun stuff that is in there, in their raw form cocoyam yam leaves have a toxin in them. You have to first soak the leaves for 10- 15 minutes and then boil them to remove the toxins before the leaves are added to the stew. A scratchy throat means the cook did not get all the toxins out. I have never had that happen. John makes a killer kontomire stew with a side of boiled yam. And it, like Red Red, is a welcome multi-meal dish. So. . . what's on your plate?



