



Nigeria on a plate

When you think of this West African country, food doesn't usually come to mind. However, cuisine plays a major role in its culture, and there's rarely a social gathering not accompanied by culinary delights. **Lizzie Williams** gives us a taste of some of the nation's traditional dishes



The variety of peoples and cultures within the continent's most populous nation – roughly 186 million – gives Nigerian cuisine a wonderful diversity of dishes and flavours. While some common foods such as rice, beans, peas, plantains and yams are eaten all over the country, many ethnicities, such as the Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa, have their own favourite style of cooking. Ingredients differ because of climate too – fish, shellfish, fruit and green vegetables are most abundant along the forested coast, while beef, goat, grains and pulses are more readily found in the less-watered open north. Recipes can be simple or complex, but a Nigerian meal usually consists of a starchy staple accompanied by a 'soup' – really a comforting thick stew. Generous doses of herbs and spices are used in conjunction with orange-coloured palm oil or groundnut (peanut) oil to create rich flavours for vegetable-, meat- or fish-based dishes, often made very (very...) hot with a lot of chillies ground into a red powder – known simply as 'pepper'. This is one ingredient that unites the myriad of peoples. Nigerians love their pepper – a Yoruba proverb says, "The man that eats no pepper is weak" – but everyone else should administer with care.

All Nigerians, whether at home or abroad, are undeniably passionate about their food and meals are an important part of family time and social gatherings. Eating on-the-go is popular too, and street vendors and informal hawkers sell delicious snacks and steaming plates just about everywhere – signs saying 'food-is-ready' need little explanation. In Pidgin English, the term 'chop' means a meal, a 'small chop' is a snack, or canapés at a fancy party, and a restaurant or stall is a 'chop house'. If you're hungry, simply say, "I wan chop", which means, 'I want to eat'. →

CLOCKWISE FROM THIS PICTURE: Jollof rice with grilled chicken and fried plantain; palm-oil sellers; deep-fried puff puffs, a popular snack in Nigeria; a trader in Old Watt Market in the city of Calabar; waitresses in a local restaurant in Lagos; a heap of chillies

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Best bites

■ **Jollof rice**, the flavourful one-pot rice dish popular all over West Africa, is thought to be the origin of the Cajun dish *jambalaya* — slaves carried their culinary influences across the Atlantic. It's cooked down with palm oil, tomatoes, onions and 'pepper', giving it a bright-reddish colour and fiery kick. It's often accompanied by salad and *dodo* — deep-fried slices of yellow plantain — or meat or fish are added to the cooking process.

■ **Egusi**, a spicy yellow soup, is thickened with the seeds of the egusi melon (a sort of wild African watermelon), which add a sweetly nutty flavour to the tomato-based stock. Meat, red chillies, onions, ground dried shrimp and greens are added. Similar stew-like soups are cooked with okra, pumpkin leaves or bitter leaf (a type of spinach) before meat or fish is added; all Nigerian soups are named after the thickener used.

■ **Pounded yam** is used as both a starchy side dish and a utensil — much like *injera* bread in Ethiopian cuisine. White yams are boiled, pounded with a pestle and mortar into a soft dough-like mound, and then chunks are torn off as edible spoons to scoop up soups such as egusi. Pounded yam is one of the fufu recipes — a generic name for the starchy accompaniments — and others include boiled and pounded *àmàlà* (yam peels), *garri* (cassava), *agidi* (cornmeal) and *tuwo shinkafa* (rice flour).

■ **Obe ata**, or pepper soup, is among the nation's favourite dishes thanks to its intense (usually super-hot) flavour enhanced by 'pepper', ginger and garlic. A thinner soup or broth eaten with a spoon, it's chock-full of assorted cuts, and goat is the standard protein — though you may choose to pass on *isi ewu*: goat's head pepper soup. Oxtail, catfish and tilapia are tasty alternatives, and added extras include chunks of plantain or yam and a dash of palm oil.

■ **Akara** is a tasty any-time snack — protein-packed fritters of ground black-eyed peas that puff up when fried and have the same texture as falafel. At breakfast, they can also be dipped into *akamu* or *ogi*, porridge sweetened with condensed milk. Many Nigerians also eat fried eggs and bread or *ewa agoyin* (beans and bread) for breakfast, accompanied by a cup of sweet milky tea.

■ **Moin moin** is a savoury pudding made of brown beans mixed with onion, bell pepper, palm oil and spices, then blended into a fine paste and steamed in banana leaves. Any combination of extra bits can be added for flavour such as flaked fish or crayfish, slices of hard boiled eggs or corned beef. *Ukwaka* is a similar steamed pudding made from corn and ripe plantain.

■ **Suya** is loved by all Nigerians. Not unlike Thai satay sticks, these beef, chicken or fish kebabs are grilled on skewers, with a seasoning that makes them especially tasty — groundnuts (peanuts), chilli, cayenne pepper, ginger and paprika. *Kilishi* has similar flavours but is thinly sliced and dried — a bit like beef jerky or biltong. Both are served wrapped in newspaper with slices of tomato and onion, and 'Suya spots' are often places where people meet for a cold beer or malt drink too.

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: A bowl of egusi (a spicy yellow soup) with pounded yam; a handful of kola nuts, used as a flavouring ingredient in drinks; a sign points to a restaurant selling Nigerian speciality, goat's head soup; a man pushes a wheelbarrow piled high with cassava in the city of Abuja's Garki District



4 fun facts

1 Nigeria's favourite beers are Star and Gulder, and ice-cold Guinness is hugely popular too. Palm wine, or *emu*, is a naturally sweet, frothy juice made from the sap of palm trees.

2 Unlikely snacks popular in Nigeria are meat pies, sausage rolls and Scotch eggs — a leftover from cuisine introduced by the British during colonial times.

3 If you have a sweet tooth, try chin chin, crunchy cubes or strips of sweet, deep-fried pastry, or puff puff, deep-fried, light-as-air dough balls sprinkled with sugar. Both are dangerously moreish.

4 A carbohydrate alternative for busy families, instant noodles were introduced to Nigeria in the 1980s. Today, more than 70 per cent of the population are consumers.



SAFARI PLANNER

■ **Getting there** Murtala Muhammed International Airport in Lagos and Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport in Abuja are major hubs for West Africa and served by numerous airlines.

■ **When to visit** Nigeria's climate is tropical at the coast, sub-tropical further inland and arid in the north. Seasons depend on region but generally it's hot and dry, with a humid rainy season in the south from February to August and in the north from June to September.

■ **Where to stay** All of Nigeria's cities have hundreds of hotels — it might be a good idea for first-time visitors to stick to a familiar international chain until they find their feet; try Best Western, BON Hotels, Radisson or Sheraton.

■ **Where to eat** For a taste of authentic dishes from across Nigeria in sophisticated settings, try Yellow Chilli on Victoria Island, Lagos, and Jevnik Restaurant in Wuse 2, Abuja. But you don't have to go to Nigeria to sample tasty cuisine — millions of Nigerians live overseas or are of Nigerian descent and vibrant communities can be found in every major world city. As well as great restaurants, you'll find shops and markets selling the likes of yams, plantains, cassava flour, dried fish, even goat's feet and palm wine. In London, upscale Enish restaurant has branches in Hampstead and Lewisham and also offers cookery classes.

■ **Further reading** *Nigeria* — Bradt Travel Guides (3rd edition) by Lizzie Williams; *Lonely Planet West Africa* (9th edition).

