



Chapter 8: Culinary tourism: Exploring Africa through its flavours and stories

African culinary tourism is emerging in forms as diverse as the hundreds of cuisines across the continent. From food movements to test kitchens to tours that reveal the history of Africa through its spices, they are as cutting-edge as they are extraordinary in their origins.

There is one thing that stands out as common ground when you start digging around Africa’s food scene – the focus on sustainable, ethical, and healthy eating, and the people and their histories behind each ingredient and every meal.

What is culinary tourism in Africa?

Culinary tourism encompasses:

- **Farm-to-table dining:** Enjoying dishes made with locally sourced organic ingredients at eco-lodges and food events.
- **Cooking classes:** Learning traditional recipes and techniques from local chefs and residents.
- **Food tours and safari:** Exploring local markets, spice and cocoa farms, and more through curated food journeys.
- **Cultural experiences:** Gaining insight into Africa’s cuisine and food culture through storytelling, music, dance performances, etc.

What makes Africa unique?

- **Sustainability:** Africa’s strong focus on local, ethical organic farming appeals to eco-conscious foodies.
- **Authenticity:** The chance to taste unique hyper-local and seasonal delicacies not found elsewhere.
- **Diversity:** Exposure to the myriad of under-explored cuisines, ingredients, dishes, and food traditions spanning the continent.

- **Adventure:** The buzz of bustling markets combined with relaxing rural escapes off the beaten track.

Most Western food culture involves highly processed, packaged foods disconnected from their origins and stories. Africa has a very different food ethos, says Lerato Umah-Shaylor, an author, chef, food writer, TV presenter, and Founder of Lerato Foods & Naturals.

A key aspect making African cuisine special is its strong ties to local communities and ingredients. As Umah-Shaylor recalls, “plucking a mango from a tree” was an imprinted childhood memory yet seems unthinkable to someone elsewhere.

Ghana Food Movement events also take people back to the earth. Abdallah Smith, Co-director of the movement, explains: “We curate an experience that would take someone who doesn’t know anything about, let’s say, plantain, and by the end of the safari, not only have they tasted dishes with different forms of plantain, they’ve also gained an understanding of where it comes from and how it passes through the food value chain before it reaches their plate in whatever shape or form that it does.”

Why is it resonating now?

The growing demand from across the globe for healthy, sustainable food is undeniable. People want to know where their food is coming from and how it’s affecting not only them but the planet. Africa is exceedingly well-positioned to meet these needs.

“Africa is playing a very important part in the global conversation about ethical farming and sustainable cooking,”

says Umah-Shaylor. “We don’t have a wasteful culture. When people use greens,



Lerato Umah-Shaylor
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perhaps spinach or a type of vegetable, they use it from the stalk to the leaves. In the West, I would see people remove the stalks and throw them away. So, in fact, the West is becoming more like Africa. People are realising that the African way was always the better way – farm-to-table-type concepts and a focus on hyper-local and hyper-seasonal foods.”

Smith agrees: “I think everybody who is on the continent knows the potential. We haven’t homogenised our agricultural systems; we haven’t fully become the industrial agriculture behemoth that, in some respects, the world wants us to become, which is good to an extent because in that lies potential.” Referring to his mother’s cooking, he goes on: “If you come to my house, what we cook in our kitchen, all of it is ingredients that a lot of people will not even know about; they won’t know where they came from. And all of these [ingredients] have immense nutritional benefits.”

Mama food

Mamas play a big role in African cuisine; they are its heart and soul. It is safe to say that wholesome, homecooked meals using indigenous ingredients and centuries-old techniques and rituals hold pride of place across the continent and are a continued inspiration to the most modern of food entrepreneurs.

Dieuveil Malonga is the founder of Meza Melonga restaurant in Kigali, Rwanda and an award-winning Congolese chef. He speaks of his experience of African food: “I worked in many different countries in Michelin-star restaurants. But, on that journey, something was missing – what I like to call ‘Mama Food’ or ‘Grandmother Food.’” Malonga points out that often African food, especially in its villages, is organic by its very nature. He has remained true to his roots. 80% of the cuisine at Meza Melonga is plant-based.

How can travel suppliers embrace food tourism?

“People don’t often know what to expect from African food,” notes Ja’Vonne Harley, travel podcast host, radio personality, and Owner of Advantage International, LCC, an American event and group travel company. “People with little to no expectations or experience don’t break down the 54 different countries of Africa; they simply think, ‘What’s the food like in Africa?’. And then, of course, once they’ve been there, they’re really blown away with the variety and diversity of cuisine.”

Herein lies the potential. The fact that African cuisines are not yet mainstream internationally is a huge opportunity – the element of surprise and delight is incredibly powerful. In fact, it is so profound that word of mouth alone has driven demand sky-high.

The next big thing?

“There are amazing hotels and the most beautiful resorts and safaris across the continent, but identifying Africa as a culinary destination is the new frontier,” says Umah-Shaylor.

“Two West African restaurants just got Michelin Stars in London. There’s an appetite for African food, from home cooking to high-end cuisines and restaurants. And I think that’s also translating into people wanting to explore these cuisines in the countries they come from.”

Umah-Shaylor has experienced this growing interest first-hand, with people who have gone on her previous retreats coming back for more. “The fact that they come back is everything. It’s major validation,” she says.

Guidelines for memorable culinary travel

- **Go local:** Focus on ethical, small-scale farmers and food artisans within the community.
- **Keep it small:** Limit group sizes to allow more immersive cultural exchanges.
- **Tell stories:** Spotlight personal histories and food traditions via local guides.
- **Make it interactive:** Have hands-on cooking demos, tastings, harvest participation, etc.
- **Surprise and delight:** Wow guests with unexpected flavours, dishes, ingredients, and techniques

As Smith says of this trend: “Africa is not being seen as a foodie destination yet, but there’s an undercurrent that is slowly changing the wave. And I think this is tied to not just food, but the cultures, the arts, and the music scene. So, it’s not there yet, but there’s a rhythm. There’s something that’s happening, something that’s intangible, but I can feel it.”



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