Eating Fish Soup

I sat in the hot, sterile living room—on a cold leather couch, opposite a steaming bowl of a deep red broth, speckled with crushed chillies with a whole fish, bones intact, staring blank at me in the face. There was a TV mounted on the ceiling in the corner where one mint green concrete wall met another playing Tella Novella's in Twi, one of the native languages. I had been invited to dinner at the twins' extended family home on the outskirts of Accra, Ghana. I knew them through a friend of a friend back home in Ireland, so they were no strangers. But to assume myself an insider would have been wrong. Helena Tuomainen, food anthropologist, writes about the idea of commensal circles in her work, which are "networks of relationships that define the range of people with whom individuals could, and do, eat". As a 20-year-old college student living in the United States I was on the outside, looking in. I was sitting, drawing short, shallow breaths at intervals; a tray with a large bowl of fish soup sitting knee-level on the coffee table in front of me.

I debated the fish soup just as I had the first day I arrived. For my first meal, I had eaten groundnut stew with my right hand, out of a plastic baggie with a handful of clotted rice. Six Ghanaians sat with me at the picnic table in the marketplace, where a maze of tiny alleyways led to stalls of delicacies, sewing shops, and hand washing stations where men would practice *Wudu,* a ritual purification before prayer. Women had their babies swaddled in cloth on their backs. They would work the outdoor kitchens while their babies slept, stirring pots with large ladles. Children chased one another or sat on a stoop, waiting for something spectacular to happen. As I ate, I jumped a little when I saw a large rat sitting near my feet, and covered my mouth with my hand, an automatic reaction: my companions heaved into laughter, bending over and holding

onto their knees for support. “You don’t like the rat?!” one lady asked me, hardly able to speak with residual laughter. It was then I realized I was unprepared for this trip for a myriad of reasons, dining with rats included.

I was jolted away from my memory of the marketplace and found myself back in the present. “Why can’t I bring myself to eat this?”, I thought. I grew up eating everything. I mean, *everything.* As a child, no food was off limits. I ate anything that was given to me. Pesto pasta when it was dad's night to cook, lamb burgers from the Kinvara butcher with mint sauce, and duck eggs fried in kerrygold butter. I even survived my mom’s Weight Watchers stint, and swapped mayo-laden sandwiches for dry salad without protest for months.

I can remember ordering espresso at the age of eight and pouring eight packets of sugar into the tiny teacup at a dimly-lit restaurant with my parents. They didn’t even cast so much as a glance to my section of the table. My parents didn’t object when it came to culinary experiences. In fact, they encouraged it. “Try everything, and if you ever don’t like something, just spit it out in your napkin”, they told me as a toddler. That encouraged my culinary exploration as a four-year old when I was facing a heaping pile of steaming broccoli, however, it didn’t really serve me in the present moment. I couldn’t do the spit and napkin trick, not now. This dish had taken all day to prepare in the hot sun, and I was in no place to refuse the food in front of me.

Initially during my stay in Ghana, I was drawn to the chicken stew with a deep red sauce served with Jollof rice, a traditional rice dish cooked with tomatoes, scotch bonnet peppers, and hot spices. The soup would be poured into a plastic baggie and tied on the end to be eaten later. For the health conscious, there were streetside salad stalls with young women making hand-tossed, lettuce-based bowls with boiled eggs, onions, and ketchup and mayo as the dressing. Then there were the drop doughnuts made by the man up the street, which consisted of

balls of pillowy dough thrown into hot oil in a large pot over a makeshift streetside stove. He would let the excess oil fall to the ground, shaking the doughnuts with a slotted spoon, then place them in a bag and sprinkle them with powdered sugar. I remember the grilled pig feasts. You would start by choosing which organs of the pig interested you most, all on display on a folding table. Then, a dry rub of chilli powder, cayenne and salt would be applied to the raw organs, which would then cook on a steaming hot grill. It's a pick and mix of sorts of raw pig flesh: intestines, ears, or perhaps the odd nose thrown in there, all to be eaten with a bottle of beer, or two, alongside friends. At night, the streetside restaurant owners work under LED lights on the dark streets in the late after-work hours serving Ghanaians wearing business suits and holding flip phones.

Up until now, I had avoided most fish. Something about the slimy, boney carcasses had evaded me. When I lived in Ireland, the culinary scene had not really taken off yet. Living in the seaside town of Ballinderreen, a blip on a map in Galway, you would think I knew seafood. However, all I knew of was the parsley butter it was served with. When fish came to the table, say, in the form of a haddock or cod fillet, it resembled nothing like its original form. Mussels were even served with a heavy breading, speckled with green herbs and garlic. Of course, there was always the infamous Fish n' Chips, fried in a heavy batter with grease seeping out onto the newspaper it lay on.

In older, more traditional Ghanaian homes such as the one I found myself in, it is custom for guests, particularly Westerners to eat alone. They are ushered to a formal room, usually with a television, and told to wait. Meanwhile, the host plates a dish that has likely been bubbling on the propane stove for many hours on end. The spices have been ground by hand, with crushed

crustacean shells, black pepper, and chillies in a large mortar and pestle outdoors. This was the case with the red fish soup.

First, you flash-fry the fish with sea salt in oil. The broth is then emboldened by hand crushed garlic, slivers of onion, a tomato base, and birthed into existence with the addition of animal bones, or fish. The result is a deep, spicy flavor with speckles of spiced oil dotting the surface of the soup. It's eaten not with a spoon, but with your right hand. You take a ball of what's known as fufu, and scoop up the cloud of carbohydrates with a bit of soup and fish. The fufu has been prepared with the muscle of the twins Auntie, a labor-intensive affair of cassava and green plantain powder ground thoroughly with water in a large pestle using a heaving wooden mortal. It's familiar, much earthier and more complex than mashed potatoes. Then, once you finish the broth and the fufu, you eat the fish with your hands, biting the meat off the larger bones, and removing the micro-bones as you eat. It's a delicate meal, eaten with the precision of a surgeon.

The hosts, meanwhile, eat on the porch of the house, a dusty concrete place with faded, mismatched furniture scattered about. They eat in shifts: women first, then men, and children last. According to Tuomsinen's ethnographic study, commensal relationships indicate social positioning. Dining, then, reveals an individual's place in the collective, locating them in a social system. In Ghana, shift eating reflects the commensality amongst social networks: women, children, and men. They eat without talking, squatting around a large communal mess of stew, scooping stew up with wads of sticky rice or fufu. The act of eating, in Ghana, is something to be done with purpose and intention.

This contrasts starkly with what I had known of eating in my small corner of the world: leisurely cutting up bits of food whilst conversing at a table, with meaningless small talk about

the goings-on of life, taking breaks in between to let the food digest. It's all just an excuse to make friends with food, to remove any ceremonial tact from the event altogether and to make it a casual, entertaining affair. In Ghana, eating is a daily ritual which involves the intent of a monk. This is refreshing, considering back at my university in America, I'd been eating amongst heathens at the university cafeteria, eating old grilled cheese during thirty-minute breaks between classes and munching on stale cereal straight out of the box at three in the morning. I, a migratory creature of sorts, a moocher of food, company, and culture was in no position to turn down the fish soup.

I felt awkward eating in the room alone. I wanted to sit in a circle with the twins and the other women, eating from the same bowl with my left hand. But I decided that I wanted to be as unobtrusive as possible while I was there. I remember my first morning while staying with the twins in their apartment. When I heard the morning prayers on the loudspeaker from the neighboring mosque at dawn, I laid in bed with beads of perspiration on the surface of my skin. I tiptoed down the hallway to the balcony. I sat in a plastic chair, with my feet up on another plastic chair, reading Bill Bryson's *A Walk in the Woods.* One of the twins brought me a plate filled with fruit: watermelon, mango, pineapple and guava. I felt my face flush red. I thought that weeks later, I would be eating with the twins.

Instead, I was being waited on, and I felt the familiar face flush as I realized the lengths that had been taken to serve a young, impressionable college student such as myself. At home, we served ourselves. We would line up at buffets and pile the food onto our plates, only to eat half of it and leave pizza remnants on a conveyor belt to the dishwasher. As kids, when we weren't singing or performing plays we had invented, my siblings and I used to build a General Mills fortress around our cereal bowls at 7:00AM. This was an act of private solitude in the ten,

sometimes eleven rushed minutes we had to eat our breakfast. My mother, an inspired but laid-back cook, always prepared the food but would encourage us to serve ourselves. We would scoop out as much as we wanted and eat it around the table, making painful conversation about our days. Often, we played snakes on our Nokias under the table as my parents discussed the two-party system.

Back in Accra, there were no theatrics. Only me, the fish soup, and a television in a language I couldn't speak. I brought a spoonful of the broth, with tiny fish bones peeking out, closer to my mouth, and I felt my stomach do aerobics within my gut. The spicy, fishy aroma filled my nostrils. I breathed in and out. I thought of the fish I had grown up with, lathered with herbs and butter. "You failed me", I secretly said to the salmon wrapped in pastry and a bechamel sauce I grew up with. Here, I had no accomplice kneeing me under the table with a glint in their eye, as my sister did when we ate boiled parsnips at Aunt Nellie's cottage in County Clare. It was me and the soup.

It was time to eat. I breathed deeply, and I did what any good guest would do. I stared into the side eye of the fish, called him dinner, and proceeded with the mindfulness of a monk. I ate the fish soup, without chatter, without distraction, one bite at a time.