

Simple Cooking

Electronic Edition



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African Cooking... In A (Pea)Nut Shell

To this day, most West African cooks do not use recipes when cooking. In fact, until recently it was considered a disgrace in some areas of West Africa to write down recipes.

—Bertha Montgomery and Constance Nabwire, **Cooking the West African Way**

I spent the past few months leafing through a good number of African cookbooks, several of them privately printed, and while I think I know more about the subject than when I started, what I've learned has left me groping for words. First off, I should explain that what I mean by “African” is that part of the continent south of the Sahara, the Africa of savannah, jungle, bush land, and veldt. Even given this, the term embraces far too much territory to be anything but wildly impressionistic—which is fine, since some impressions are about all I have to share.

There are, of course, degrees of foreignness. Africans use the same basic cooking techniques found the world over. Like much Third World cooking, the primary form of nourishment is a starch. In Africa, this is often *fufu*, a slightly mucilaginous paste made from a variety of tubers such as casava root and yam, and also from plantain—or, lacking these, some other likely substitute.

Africans cook with ingredients familiar to us (corn, black-eyed peas, peanuts, millet), as well as others most of us have never heard of, like butterfruit, marula, lablab, yambean, celosia, and *acha*. Then there is “bushmeat,” the omnium-gatherum term for all kinds of wild game.

When it comes to this sort of thing, the interloper's course of action is clear enough: either the foods are available or not. Then, if they are available, we can choose to eat them or not. But for me, the real dissonance comes after that—when the actual cooking begins.

A foreign language is easiest to master when mostly what you do is remember equivalents for words you already know, then learn to put them into a readily comprehended structure. But in languages where nouns and verbs become slippery things, where the

slightest misplaced emphasis train-wrecks what you're hoping to get across—you can quickly find yourself in over your head.

This is just what happened to me when I sought to get some idea of African cooking as Africans themselves perceive it. The reason for my difficulty is simple enough to understand: traditional African cooking is resolutely local.* This means that available foodstuffs are in constant flux—there's no guarantee that what was available yesterday will be in the market today. Consequently, when Africans do write down recipes, these can often seem impossibly arbitrary. A recipe for beef stew is that only if you happen to have access to beef. Otherwise, you are told you can substitute pork, lamb, goat, or even fish. And since the market might just as well have a little of each, other recipes combine them, calling for chicken *and* beef, say, or lamb *and* fresh shrimp.

At first, this irritated me. If I'm going to make a stew, I want to start with the meat and work from there—a beef stew is one thing, a fish stew something entirely different. The whole point of cooking, as I saw it, was to make sure they were different. I saw these African recipes as hopelessly generic.

Still... Someone once defined American cooking as being made up of dishes from elsewhere indifferently prepared. There is a sting of truth in that observation, but it wasn't even nearly true. If I were going to be at least fair to African cooking, I had to do better, push myself harder, *think*.

In fact, there *was* a time in my life when the supermarket abundance I now take for granted was beyond my reach, physically as well as financially. This is a story I've told before. I was young and nearly penniless, summering on an island off the coast of Maine where the tiny grocery store carried a very limited number of items. Mostly I was on my own and, after my fashion, I managed. I foraged for berries and wild greens, dug clams, harvested periwinkles and mussels, picked crabmeat, and made my way through the staples left from years before on the kitchen shelves.

The soups, stews, and chowders I prepared were easily identified by any guests

*African cooks have much to teach the "Eat Locally" movement, especially those who want us to *only* eat locally. It can be done—and for centuries was done—but not without a significant amount of physical labor.



who ate them, even though the sort and proportions of ingredients were rarely the same. Furthermore, once I started to get into this kind of cooking, I learned to make these dishes tasty and satisfying, able to stand up to constant reiteration.

Those summers stand in sharp contrast to my cooking these days, when, if I happen to go to the store with a dish already in mind, I know I'm likely to find there just what I need to make it—the exact ingredients, the exact quantities. It is that sort of certainty that makes the luxury of recipe-inspired cooking possible. If I wanted to get hold of the essence of African cooking, I had to go up into my mental attic and dust off a mindset that I had long ago packed away in a trunk.



In Africa ... hours are spent choosing appropriate stones, weaving beautiful baskets, making sturdy clay pots, and carving and decorating gourds. Stones for cracking nuts are used for generations, their shapes evolving through continual wear.

— Josie Stow, **The African Kitchen**

During my summers in Maine, I learned much, but I could have learned so much more. Just like those stones for cracking nuts that Josie Stow mentions, African cooks are shaped by rubbing against the experience of generations, as well as the slow time necessary to gain an intimate relationship with every kitchen implement they own and every item of food they prepare.

In my world, boredom is kept at bay by seeking out the new; in African kitchens, the new comes from ingeniously expanding the boundaries of the old. For me, the most remarkable example of this culinary reimagining is the way African cooks have transformed that American familiar, the peanut.

Most of us have heard of George Washington Carver, who famously discovered many different uses for the peanut and who issued the influential Tuskegee bulletin: *How To Grow the Peanut and 105 Ways of Preparing It for Human Consumption* (1916). If



you track this publication down online, you'll quickly discover that those recipes are largely devoted to baked goods, desserts, and candy. By the turn of the last century, the American notion of the peanut was pretty much set: it was, first and foremost, a cheap kind of *nut*.

In Africa, however, while its “nutty” taste is liked and often taken advantage of, the peanut is mostly treated as what it in fact is, a *bean*, and something even more valuable than that—an *oil-producing* bean. Like olive and palm oil, peanut oil can be extracted locally, which is an enormous boon to a barter economy.

Of course, it was no news to me that the peanut is really a legume, but that bit of knowledge's most notable effect was to make me spurn any can of mixed nuts that included the imposter. And while it was also no news to me that the peanut plays a big role in African cooking—if you said “African cooking” to me I would answer “peanut soup”—I imagined this meant adding a dollop of peanut butter to whatever was in the pot.

I was wrong. The peanut isn't there to provide the grace note to a dish but its very foundation. Unlike American Southern peanut soup, which, good as it is, remains in essence a stock-based soup flavored with peanut butter, African peanut soup is a bean soup, with the multitude of possibilities those two words embrace.

Matt and I both realized this the first time I made peanut soup in the African fashion. It wasn't only delicious, it was redolent of possibility. I had hardly swallowed my first mouthful when I wanted to make it with lamb. I said this to Matt and discovered that she wanted to make it with fish. The presence of the peanut in this dish wasn't the end of the story, but the start of one.

Groundnut Stew

“Groundnut,” of course, is another word for peanut, the one most often used in native African cookbooks, where British English is the norm. However, I use it as the title for this recipe to remind you that to taste it at its best, this stew requires that you grind up the peanuts yourself instead of just using peanut butter. This is

because additional oil is added to that product to make it smooth and spreadable. That and the consequent processing will produce a dish with less peanut taste and too much peanut-oil richness. Grind your own and you'll be pleasantly surprised at the resulting nubby texture and uncloying depth of flavor.

[serves 3 or 4]

1¹/₂ pounds beef, pork, lamb, chicken, turkey,
white-fleshed fish—or no meat at all (see note below)

2 cups water

1 teaspoon kosher salt (or more to taste)

¹/₂ pound roasted peanuts in the shell

1 tablespoon peanut oil

3 or 4 red jalapeño or other chile peppers,
cored, seeded, and chopped

1 large onion, coarsely chopped

12 or so grape or cherry tomatoes, cut into quarters

chopped fresh cilantro or flat-leaf parsley

• **To make stock (optional):** If the meat you have chosen has bones, you might want to use them to make a simple stock. If they are poultry bones, use kitchen shears to snip them in half. Put these in a small pot with the 2 cups of water and ¹/₂ teaspoon of the salt, bring to a boil, cover, and let simmer until needed, at that point straining out the solids and skimming away any excess fat.

• Cut the meat into bite-size pieces. Shell the peanuts and slip off their skins. Pound the nuts in a mortar or grind them in a food processor fitted with its steel blade, stopping when they've been turned into rough-textured grit.

• Heat the peanut oil in a stew pot. Add the chopped chile peppers and onion and sauté these over moderate-low heat until the onion turns translucent. Stir in the meat and let this brown a little before adding the strained, skimmed stock (or, of course,

plain water) and the remaining salt. When the liquid comes to a boil, lower the heat until you have the barest simmer, cover, and cook for 20 minutes.

- Now sprinkle in the ground peanuts, mixing well. Add the quartered cherry or grape tomatoes along with the chopped cilantro or parsley. Continue cooking over very low heat, stirring occasionally, for another 10 minutes, or until the peanuts have mostly melded into a thick sauce. Taste for seasoning and serve over rice.

☛ **COOK'S NOTE.** For a vegetarian version of this stew use a green like spinach, chopped, and either bite-size pieces of sweet potato or soaked and parboiled black-eyed peas.



Groundnut stew, made with lamb and turnip greens.



This should give you some idea of peanut soup's fluid identity. Essentially, it's something you make with ground peanuts blended into a liquid. Add a lot of liquid and you have a soup or stew; add a little and you have a sauce. Look more closely and you may find the peanuts are coarsely chopped or ground into a smooth paste, or used raw instead of roasted.

Peanut sauce made from raw peanuts was a real revelation: delicate and creamy, with a fresh peanut taste. It is an especially appealing match when used with chicken or a white-fleshed fish—as in the following recipe, which is well-known across much of central Africa.

Fish in Raw Peanut Sauce

(Adapted from Zainabu Kallon's **Zainabu's African Cookbook**)

The African recipe for this dish calls for tilapia, a fish native to Africa (its name is a latinization of *thiape*, the Tswana word for “fish”) but now commercially raised around the world. This is not because of the fish's delicious flavor (it's actually rather bland, with a soft texture) but because it is supernaturally hardy and adaptive. I've even read that it can taste good, depending on the type of tilapia and the care with which it is raised.* We wish you luck finding some. We prefer to make this dish with catfish.

[serves 4]

* In **Bottomfeeder** (Bloomsbury, 2008), a book on eating seafood ethically in a world of rapidly depleting fish stocks, Taras Grescoe gives tilapia and catfish a qualified thumb's up, as long as they are raised in the United States. Tilapia from Asia, he writes, can be treated with antibiotics, pesticides, carbon monoxide, and a synthetic hormone that turns female tilapia into males (so they gain weight faster). I highly recommend that you read this book for a passionate seafood lover's cogent, clear-eyed, and occasionally chilling overview of the international seafood industry.

1/2 cup (3 ounces) shelled and skinned raw peanuts (see note)

1 cup water • 2 tablespoons peanut oil

4 to 6 scallions, trimmed of any wilted tops, then minced

3 or 4 red jalapeño or other chile peppers,
cored, seeded, and chopped

1-inch chunk ginger, peeled and minced

1 red bell pepper, cored, seeded, and chopped

1/2 teaspoon lime zest

1 teaspoon kosher salt (or to taste)

1 1/2 to 2 pounds tilapia or catfish fillets

to garnish: chopped fresh cilantro or flat-leaf parsley

- Using either a food processor fitted with its steel blade or a good-size mortar, grind the peanuts into a rough paste, working in the cup of water as you do.
- Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium heat. When the oil is hot, add the scallions, chile peppers, ginger, red bell pepper, lime zest, and salt.
- Stir in the peanut-water mixture and bring this to a gentle boil. Let the sauce cook for 5 minutes, stirring the while, so that the raw peanuts soften and begin to thicken it.
- Set the fish fillets into the sauce. They can touch but not overlap. Bring the sauce back up to a simmer. After 5 minutes, gently turn the fillets over. They are done when the thickest parts flake easily with a fork.
- Divide the fillets onto heated plates, then cover each with its fair share of the sauce. (If you'd like to thin the sauce, add another 1/2 cup of boiling water. Stir it in and touch up the seasoning if necessary.) Garnish with the chopped herb and serve with rice.

☛ **COOK'S NOTE: SKINNING RAW PEANUTS.** It's relatively easy to slip the skins off roasted

peanuts, but decidedly difficult to get them off raw peanuts—unless you know the trick. Actually, there are three tricks, and they all work, so choose the one that best suits your needs. (1) FREEZER METHOD. Freeze shelled raw peanuts for a few hours (longer is fine). Then remove them by the handful from the freezer and slip the skins off with your fingers. (2) OVEN METHOD. Preheat a cake pan in a 350°F oven for 5 minutes. Add the shelled raw peanuts, shaking the pan to distribute them evenly. Let them roast for another 5 minutes, then put them on a plate, slipping off the skins as soon as they're cool enough to handle. (3) STOVETOP METHOD. Drop the shelled peanuts into boiling water. After 3 minutes, pour them out into a sieve and start skinning them as soon as you can, spreading them on a paper towel to dry.

We'll get back to raw peanuts in a moment, but first it's worth noting that African cooks also add a handful of ground roasted peanuts to a vegetable dish to give it flavor, texture, and some necessary protein. In this instance, the peanuts aren't pounded into coarse grit but rather reduced to rubble—not unlike the bits in chunky peanut butter. Although spinach is called for in the following recipe, this approach works well with other leafy vegetables, such as collards or turnip greens.

Spinach with Roasted Peanuts

(Adapted from **The African News Cookbook**)

[serves 2 as a main course or 4 as a side dish]

1/2 cup roasted peanuts

1 tablespoon palm or peanut oil (see note)

1 onion, chopped

1 green bell pepper, cored, seeded, and chopped

1/2 cup water

1 tomato, finely chopped

2 10-ounce bags fresh spinach, picked over, washed, and finely

chopped

1 teaspoon kosher salt • ground black pepper to taste

pinch of nutmeg (optional)

- Using either a food processor fitted with its steel blade or a good-size mortar, grind the peanuts into tiny, chunky bits. If the result is noticeably uneven, spread them on a cutting board and even things out with a chef's knife.
- Select a large pot with a cover. Heat the oil in this pot over a medium low flame, then stir in the minced onion and chopped green pepper. When these are tender, add the tomatoes and the $\frac{1}{2}$ cup water.
- Turn up the heat to medium high. When the contents of the pot start to boil, add the spinach, cover the pan, and cook until the spinach wilts.
- Stir in the chopped peanuts, the salt and black pepper, and the nutmeg, if using. Reduce the heat to low and let the dish simmer for another 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add a little water if the contents seem to be getting dry. Serve hot—and over rice, if the dish is meant to be the main course.

☛ **COOK'S NOTE: PALM OIL.** The oil palm tree, *Elaeis guineensis*, originated in Africa but has spread to all tropical regions, where its oil is widely used for cooking and other purposes. It provides a cash crop for poor farmers, who can easily extract the oil themselves. Minimally processed palm oil comes from the fruit of the tree. It has a bright tomato-red color and a distinctive but delicate, pine-nutty taste, a characteristic presence in African dishes. It is rich in carotenoids and, despite being highly saturated (it turns solid at room temperature), is said to contain many health benefits. Palm oil's red color also distinguishes it from generic palm *kernel* oil, an ivory-colored oil chemically extracted from the palm fruit's seeds. The genuine article is easily obtainable at Latin American and Asian markets, or online (<http://tinyurl.com/7q934>).

Africans often treat unroasted peanuts as they would any other tender legume, such as black-eyed peas. I noted earlier the African penchant for adding more than one kind of meat to a dish; they do the same with dried peas and beans. One such

dish is *mutakura*, where dried corn, chickpeas, and raw peanuts are cooked together and served at room temperature as a sort of salad.

We tried making this by substituting canned hominy for the dried corn, but found the result too stodgy for our taste. So we replaced the hominy with fresh kernels of corn. This transformed the dish into something memorable, just the thing to serve as an accompaniment to whatever is being cooked on the grill.

Sweetcorn, Chickpea, & Peanut Salad

[serves 4]

1/3 cup (2 ounces) shelled raw peanuts

1 teaspoon kosher salt, plus more to season

6 sprigs of flat-leaf parsley or fresh cilantro, stemmed

2 scallions, cleaned and trimmed of wilted tops

2 tablespoons palm (or peanut) oil (see note above)

2 green and 2 red fresh chiles, cored, seeded, and minced

1/2 pound fresh or defrosted frozen corn kernels

1/3 cup canned chickpeas, drained

1/2 tablespoon fresh lemon juice

1/2 teaspoon hot pepper sauce (or to taste)

- Put the raw peanuts into a small pot, cover with water, add the of teaspoon salt, and bring to a boil. Lower the heat to a bare simmer and cook the peanuts for 30 minutes, or until quite tender. Drain and let cool enough to handle.
- Meanwhile, coarsely chop the parsley/cilantro leaves with the scallions. Heat the oil in a skillet, then stir in the chopped herbs, minced jalapeño, and corn. Cook, stirring, over medium-low heat, until the corn is cooked through and the chiles are tender but

still crisp. Remove from the heat and stir in the lemon juice and hot pepper sauce.

- Slip off and discard the skins from the boiled peanuts and toss these thoroughly in a salad/serving bowl with the contents of the skillet. Serve warm or at room temperature.



I haven't had the patience yet to extract my own peanut oil from ground-up peanuts (see [recipe on page 25](#)), but I have gone part of the way, soaking and squeezing them to produce, on the one hand, "peanut milk"—very similar to coconut milk—and, on the other, *kulikuli*, the mealy residue (see [page 24 for more on this](#)). Then I put them back together to create the fiery coating for *suya*, Nigerian meat kebabs.

Suya (Beef Kebabs)

These kebabs are supposed to be *very* hot, but feel free to adjust the heat to your own taste/tolerance.

[serves 4]

to be prepared in advance

1¹/₂ cups shelled roasted peanuts, skins removed

boiling water as needed

- Turn the skinned roasted peanuts into *kulikuli*, as directed in the recipe for *kulikuli akara* on page 3, reserving the extracted peanut milk.

to cook the kebabs

1¹/₂ pounds beef, suitable for kebab making (e.g., boneless sirloin, tri-tip, or London broil)

2 cloves garlic, minced • 1 teaspoon minced fresh ginger

1 tablespoon tomato paste

8 short bamboo skewers (or as needed)

Tabasco Habanero or other fiery chile-pepper sauce, added to taste
salt to taste

- Use a very sharp knife to cut the meat into bite-size scallops, sliced against the grain. Combine the minced garlic and fresh ginger with the tomato paste. Use your hands to thoroughly coat the pieces of meat with this, then let sit for 30 minutes at room temperature.
- Preheat the broiler to high. Remove the broiler pan and line it with foil. Take two wide soup bowls and put the *kulikuli* in one and the peanut milk in the other. Season this to taste with liberal lacings of the hot sauce.
- Use kitchen scissors or garden shears to shorten the skewers so they will fit into the soup bowls. Impale the marinated meat on the skewers, flat sides facing out, like multiple lollipops. Season these lightly with salt.
- Dip the skewered meat first into the hot-sauce-seasoned peanut milk, then coat them with *kulikuli*. Arrange them in a single layer on the foil-covered broiler pan and broil them about 3 inches from the heat source until the *kulikuli* coating is toasted but not burnt—about 3 minutes. Then turn the skewers over and repeat. Serve at once, on top of rice, if you like, with a salad.

If this taste of African peanut cooking whets your appetite, you'll find entire categories that I haven't even touched on—snacks, sweet stuff, and more complicated dishes in which peanuts are pounded with other things to make steamed cakes and the like—all well worth exploring. Either way, it's good to be reminded in these turbulent times how much ordinary foodstuffs have to offer if we pause long enough to give them their due weight. ♦



Akara

For there they all were, together, the *jogi* seller who passed in full lyrical cry beneath the backyard wall at a regular hour of the morning, followed only moments later by the *akara* seller, her fried beancakes still surreptitiously oozing and perfuming the air with groundnut oil. Even when the *akara* was fried without any frills, its oil-impregnated flavours filled the markets and jostled for attention with the tang of roasting coconut slices within farina cakes which we called *kasada*; with the hard-fried lean meat of *tinko*; the “high” rotted cheese smell of *ogiri*; roasting corn, fresh vegetables or *gbegiri*...

—Wole Soyinka, **Aké: The Years of Childhood**



I am drawn to all sorts of dishes, but the ones that excite me most are often unbelievably simple—the ones that take nothing and with a deft turn of the hand transform it into the memorably delicious. This always takes my breath away, and it’s why I’m able to write endlessly about—for example—the art of making toast, a subject that most would think painfully obvious.

It is just this sort of legerdemain that produces *akara*, incredibly tasty fried balls of ground-up black-eyed peas.* And I’m not the only one who feels this way. Thanks to the African diaspora, this delectable snack spread long ago all through the Caribbean and South America, changing its name as it did so, but never its MO.

In fact, despite their undisputed African origin, I first encountered them years ago when I came across this passage in Crosby Gaige’s **Dining with My Friends** (1949). The friend in this instance was Walter Palmer, a top executive at Schenley Distillers. He writes of a visit to Key West, where he and his wife

*Africa is a continent of many languages, and even those who speak the same language may use different terms for the same thing. In Africa, *akara* are also known as *accra*, *akla*, *binch akara*, bean balls, *kosai*, *koose*, *kose*, *koosé*, *kwasi*, *samsa*.

enjoyed a local delicacy called *Bollas*. We would take some champagne or beer and call at a Cuban's shack, where his wife sat on a little screened veranda dropping the mixture into boiling fat. Many people bought these and then went to a bar to eat them with their drinks. We would sit in the Cuban's shack and eat a dozen of them before going somewhere for dinner. This Cuban told me this recipe was brought to Cuba either by the African slaves or the Chinese. He did not know which.*

Oddly touching, this image of a liquor company exec and his wife snacking on freshly made *bollas* while they sip champagne and watch the sun setting over the Gulf of Mexico from the screened veranda of a humble fry shack—a rare glimpse of *temps perdu* in Key West.

Palmer got the recipe, but it was so simple that I couldn't believe it was complete. I was certain there had to be a secret that that Cuban couple refused to reveal... that some day I would stumble upon the hidden ingredient, the unrevealed trick, and make these delicious things then.

That wasn't what happened. Instead, I actually ate one of the things, and it was terrible. *Akara* have started to appear in this country as a vegetarian option, rather than as a tasty African snack. This means—at least where I live—you purchase them already made, spongy and cold, from a tray next to the salads at the deli, and find they are dotted not with bits of fiery chili but (I weep) corn niblets or green peas. I hate to put down a local enterprise, but these people have put *akara* on the same footing as supermarket buttermilk biscuits.

You don't have to romanticize the food of the poor (which, let's face it, has been throughout history—and at best—endless bowls of porridge and watery soup) to believe that culinary epiphanies happen to everyone, even those living in shattered societies, moments when the poorest peasant's taste buds jump up and down out of sheer delight. It was because I believe this—and not merely the persuasiveness of what I had

**Bollas* is one of many Latin American terms for *akara* (most of them close cousins—*bolluelos*, *bollos*, *bolitas*, *bollillas*). To this day, many Cubans are convinced that *bollas* originated in China, for reasons that I could pursue, but won't.

read—that I found these pallid things a wretched simulacrum of something that ought to have provided a momentary glimpse of heaven.



Traditional in western Nigeria, these bean fritters have crossed the nation's borders and the Atlantic Ocean to become one of the defining dishes of the African-Atlantic world. They turn up in Brazil as the ubiquitous *acarajé*. They are found throughout the Caribbean, and there's even a recipe for *acara* in the kosher cookbook of Curaçao's Mikwe Israel Synagogue, one of the Western Hemisphere's oldest!

—Jessica Harris, **The Africa Cookbook**

If one ever wanted a single defining example of third-world street food, it would be hard to find a better choice than *akara*. Their cost lies strictly in the labor it takes to make them. Their ingredients are basic and cheap. They cook quickly, and thus—especially per fritter—demand minimal fuel. The oil used to fry them—either red palm oil or peanut oil—is produced locally. And the required equipment comprises little more than a clean kerosene tin and a perforated ladle—with some large flat leaves to serve them forth.

The labor is something else. After the black-eyed peas (or other dried beans) have been soaked overnight, their skins are removed. The usual way of doing this is to rub them between the palms until the skins slip off, then submerge the peas in water so that the skins float free and can be poured off. Then the peas, still wet from their soaking, are put into a mortar and vigorously pounded into a paste, with seasonings worked in toward the last. Now all that remains is to scoop out the individual fritters with fingers or spoon and cook them in the boiling oil.

Doing this myself, I discovered that there was something sweetly peaceful about taking up a handful of black-eyed peas and rubbing them between my palms, again and again, and again, and again. Unfortunately, I'm not all that big on sweetly peaceful chores. I began to chafe. I wrapped up the black-eyed peas in a dish towel and

gave the bundle a few slaps against the counter—then, the results showing promise, quite a few more.

The next step was to put the resulting rubble in a bowl and fill this with cold water, letting the skins float away. Despite this being promised in almost every recipe for *akara* that I consulted, the skins did *not* float away. Happily, on my second attempt, I discovered that if I gently stirred the water with my fingers, the skins floated up just long enough for me to quickly skim some them off.

At last I was at the point where I could get to work with the mortar and pestle. Our kitchen contains a very large, very solid composite-stone Thai mortar, but while this made the task possible—at least once I thought to cover the contents with my friend Mr. Dishtowel to keep bits of bean from flying around the room—it was not exactly easy (and Mr. Dishtowel may never recover).

I did all this knowing full well that Mark Bittman offers a much simpler approach in **The Best Recipes in the World** (2005). The kitchen minimalist is not one to spend an hour massaging black-eyed peas; he simply dumps them, skins and all, into the food processor and—*whaaaapppp*—has his batter ... and I scorned him for it. I just knew the result couldn't have the delicacy you would get by painstakingly removing the skins.

However, it would have been remiss of me not to confirm this by making a batch of each side by side. It was no surprise that Bittman's method was ridiculously easy. What I hadn't expected was that the dueling fritters would prove equally if differently delicious. The traditional batch *did* have a pleasing lightness and sweet, clean taste. But the pulverized skins in the other version provided a texture and a robust flavor note of their own.

Of course, one method was more authentic than the other ... but what did that really mean? Put the unskinned beans into a mortar and you face a nearly impossible task: it's like trying to pound little bits of plastic wrap into porridge. So native African cooks *have* to skin their beans. But once they have access to food processors, will the time-consuming traditional method survive? I have no idea.

What I do know is that I really love the delicate fresh-bean savor of the skinless

paste. It's something you're tempted to just sit down and eat with a spoon. It makes *akara* essentially different from falafel, rather than just a variation of it. So ... please try them both ways. I hate wrestling with this conundrum all by myself.

Akara

Because *akara* still have a vital life outside of any recipe, native cooks go their own way when making them. You can find recipes using, say, double-acting baking powder or a beaten egg. The directions below give you the essence of the thing and produce truly delicious fritters. See this issue's annotated bibliography (online) for further exploration. Since *akara* are street food, the best way to serve them is with an assortment of different hot sauces (gently hot and fiery, red and green, simple and complex) and let eaters season to taste. I imagine *akara* would be very good served falafel-style, in a pita with chopped salad and hot sauce.

[makes about 48 fritters (see note)]

8 ounces dried black-eyed peas, soaked overnight

oil for deep frying (see note)

2 or 3 scallions, trimmed of any wilted ends

leaves from 3 or 4 sprigs of fresh cilantro

1 green and 1 red chile pepper, halved, cored, and seeded

1 teaspoon minced fresh ginger (optional)

1 teaspoon kosher salt

to serve: a variety of bottled hot sauces

- Drain the black-eyed peas, reserving $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of the soaking liquid. If you've decided not to bother removing the skins, skip past the indented instructions below.
- Wrap the damp black-eyed peas in a dish towel. Set this on the counter and, keeping hold of the twisted ends so nothing escapes, firmly (but not fiercely) pound

them all over with a rolling pin or other kitchen implement. Check the contents after every ten strokes, running your fingers through the beans. It's not necessary to remove every skin, just most of them.

- Turn everything into a mixing bowl and cover with plenty of water. Stir the mixture gently with one hand and use a small sieve to skim off the skins as they float free, discarding them as you do this. If you feel strongly about the matter, you can pinch off any remaining skins before draining the water away. See note below on using a mortar and pestle.
- Coarsely chop the scallions, cilantro leaves, and chile peppers.
- Put the black-eyed peas in the bowl of a food processor fitted with its steel blade and pulverize them into a coarse paste. Add the chopped flavorings and minced ginger (if used), using the pulse button to blend them in. They should look like a scattering of confetti. Next, add enough of the reserved soaking liquid, a tablespoon at a time, to make the paste just liquid enough to cling together but still dry enough to hold its shape. Finally, scrape the batter into a bowl and beat it vigorously with a large whisk for 3 minutes or so. This incorporates air and makes for a lighter fritter.
- Preheat the oven to low. Insert a cookie sheet covered with two layers of paper towels or brown wrapping paper.
- Pour the frying oil in a heavy, steep-sided pot to the depth of 2 inches. If you have one (and you should), attach a deep-fat-frying thermometer. Heat the oil to 365°F, or until the surface quivers and the oil gives off that fried-food aroma. Adjust the heat to sustain this temperature. If the oil starts to smoke it's too hot.
- Dampen the edge of a paper towel with a little (cool!) cooking oil. Use this to lightly oil the bowl of a regular teaspoon (not measuring teaspoon), repeating this process as needed so that the batter keeps dropping smoothly into the hot oil. Scoop out just enough batter to fit comfortably in the bowl of the spoon. (There is no set size. I find smaller—teaspoon-size—ones easier to deal with.)
- Test the oil by dropping in a single fritter. The oil should bubble up vigorously and the fritter should start turning color immediately. Cook it about 2 minutes to a side, turning once, until it is a nice hazelnut brown. Lift the fritter out with a slotted ladle

and, after letting it briefly cool, cut it in half. Make sure it has cooked through, then taste it for seasoning. Adjust heat and/or seasoning if necessary.

- Drop 6 or so spoonfuls of batter into the hot oil. Don't crowd the pan or the fritters will stick to each other. Also, too many fritters will cool the oil and slow the cooking, leading to greasy results. As soon as a fritter is cooked, transfer it to the paper-covered cookie sheet in the oven. When all are cooked, serve at once, as described in the heading above.

☛ **COOK'S NOTES: FRITTER COUNT.** Obviously your number of fritters may vary. However, this amount of batter will produce enough *akara* to serve three or four as a main course and up to eight as appetizers. **MORTAR AND PESTLE.** If you skinned your beans and have a large mortar and pestle, feel free to go whole hog in the authenticity department. Having done both, I recommend the food processor. **DEEP-FAT FRYING.** We do our deep-fat frying in a heavy, cast-iron, enamel-coated dutch oven, because it holds the heat and keeps the oil temperature from wildly fluctuating when the *akara* are added. However, you should use whatever vessel makes you comfortable. If you don't like deep-fat frying, form the *akara* batter into patties and fry these in 1/2 inch of hot oil in a skillet or wok.



Black-eyed peas with skins loosened.



Skimming the loose skins.



Black-eyed pea batter with chiles, etc.



Batter without skins on left; batter with skins on right.



Akara without skins in batter on left; akara with skins in batter on right.



Served with pita bread, chopped salad, and a chile-intensive avocado dressing.

In **Two Years in the French West Indies** (1890), Lafcadio Hearn gives us a vision of the *akara*—or, as he spells it, *akra*—sold by street vendors in Martinique that seems to embrace all edible things:

Everybody eats *akras*;—they sell at a cent apiece. The *akra* is a small fritter or pancake, which may be made of fifty different things—among others, codfish, *titiri* [tiny fresh fish], beans, brains, *choux-caraïbes*, little black peas (*poix-zié-nouè*, “black-eyed peas”), or of crawfish (*akra-cribîche*).

In Africa, too, there is more to *akara* than I could ever hope to encompass in a single essay. Even versions made of legumes range from soybeans to split peas. Still, while the beans may be different, the recipes are very much the same. However, one particular African fritter of this sort caught my attention because it is made from peanuts—or more precisely from the residue that remains after these have been processed to make peanut oil. In Nigeria, the resulting crumbly residue, technically “peanut cake,” is called *kulikuli*. When commercially produced, this is sold mostly as cattle feed, but when the oil is extracted in the home kitchen, various recipes have been devised to take advantage of it. One of the simplest is to mold it into little balls and fry these, sometimes in the just-extracted oil.

Kulikuli Akara

Because *kulikuli akara* are made just like the black-eyed pea version, the following recipe is abbreviated. After preparing the *kulikuli* itself, follow the above recipe after the indented instructions, replacing the ground black-eyed pea mixture with the *kulikuli*. Serve in the same way.

- 8 ounces roasted but unsalted peanuts
- boiling water poured from a kettle as needed
- oil for deep-fat frying (see note in akara recipe)
- 1 large egg (optional)

same flavorings/seasonings as in akara recipe

- Use your fingers to slip off and discard the skins from the peanuts. Put these into a large mortar or a food processor fitted with its steel blade and pulverize them into tiny bits. Drape a clean dish towel over a large mixing bowl and turn the crushed peanuts into this. Moisten them with the boiling water, wetting everything well without making the mixture soupy. Firmly knead the result with your hands or a flexible spatula for a minute or so.
- Gather up the ends of the towel and twist them together, capturing the peanut mixture. Holding this over the bowl, twist the towel ends as tightly as you can to extract as much liquid as possible. Use a flexible spatula to scrape away any liquid clinging to the outside of the towel.
- Transfer all the rendered liquid into a separate, smaller bowl, then spread the towel with the squeezed peanut mixture into the larger bowl as before. Repeat the wetting/squeezing/wringing process two times, scraping the extracted liquid into the separate bowl after each pressing.
- After the third time, reserve the (delicious) rendered liquid for another purpose ([see page 13 below](#)) and proceed with the *akara* recipe, pulverizing the *kulikuli* into a coarse powder in the food processor when that point in the directions is reached. I found the *kulikuli* mixture did not cohere into fritter balls as easily as the ground black-eyed peas, so I mixed in a beaten egg to help things stick together.♦



Out of Africa



Homemade Peanut Oil

From **The Gold Coast Cookery Book** (1933)

This recipe is included because you, like me, may have wondered how you might make peanut oil at home. The following method was contributed by “Miss Spears,” and while the *idea* is clear enough, I’m not sure how smooth the sailing will be if you try to follow her instructions.

6 pounds raw peanuts • cold water

- Pound the raw peanuts, then grind them into coarse meal and divide the result into two buckets.
- Gradually stir cold water into the buckets until both are full.
- Let the mixture stand for 8 hours to allow the oil to rise to the top.
- Skim this off and pour it into a small saucepan, along with 2 tablespoons of water. Heat this until the water boils off, leaving nothing but oil. Bottle this and cork it.



Lamb Stew with Squash and Black-eyed Peas

Adapted from **A West African Cookbook**, by Ellen Gibson

Astute readers (and haters of the stinking rose) may have noticed that this may be the

first issue of SIMPLE COOKING ever with no garlic in any of the recipes ... except this one. I gather that, on the whole, Africans have never warmed to garlic; dishes get their flavor jolt from chiles and ginger, and, occasionally curry powder. But the garlic works quite nicely here. • The cooking time of this dish depends on the black-eyed peas; you can speed things up by putting them in with the lamb bones—if you don't mind fishing those out and discarding them just before you add the stock and the peas to the stew pot.

[SERVES 4]

The night before:

8 ounces (about 1 cup) black-eyed peas

- Pick these over and rinse well. Cover with water and soak overnight.

To make the meal:

1¹/₂ to 2 pounds shoulder lamb chops

2 teaspoons kosher salt, divided • 4 cups water

1 tablespoon palm or vegetable oil

1 onion, chopped • 2 garlic cloves, finely minced

1 or 2 medium-hot chile peppers (like Serrano),
deseeded and finely chopped

1 tablespoon tomato paste • 1/2 teaspoon dried thyme

1/2 teaspoon **each** ground allspice and black pepper

2 cups cubed winter squash (see note)

- Cut the meat from the lamb chops and put the bones and trimmings into a saucepan. Add 1 teaspoon of the salt and 3 cups of water and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat until the water is at a simmer, skim away any scum, and let cook while preparing the lamb.

- Heat the palm or vegetable oil in a Dutch oven or similar heavy pot over low to moderate heat. Tip in the chopped onion, garlic, and chile pepper, and cook, stirring, until the onion is translucent. Add the pieces of lamb and sauté these for 5 minutes, turning them with a spatula. Reduce the heat to its lowest setting, cover the pot, and slow cook for half an hour. Check the meat once or twice during this time and stir in a few spoonfuls of the stock if it is cooking dry.

- At the end of the half hour of cooking, strain the stock (discarding the bones) and pour it into the pot with the lamb. Drain the soaking black-eyed peas and add these to the pot as well, followed by the tomato paste, thyme, allspice, black pepper, the remaining teaspoon of salt, and hot pepper sauce. Continue cooking until the beans are tender but not mushy.

4 Add the squash cubes and simmer until these, too, are tender, about 15 minutes. Serve with rice.

• **COOK'S NOTE: WINTER SQUASH.** The original recipe calls for pumpkin, but we rarely find any decent-tasting pumpkins on the market—even the so-called “sugar” pumpkins are lackluster in taste (and pathetically unsweet). Unless you’ve had better luck, we recommend using pared and seeded butternut or acorn squash.



Coconut and Kidney Bean Soup

Adapted from **A Taste of Africa**, by Tebereh Inquai

This tasty soup is ready to serve in about the time it takes the rice to cook. If you need a more substantial meal, add a pound of shrimp or bite-size pieces of a firm white-fleshed fish like catfish at the same time as the tomatoes and kidney beans.

[serves 4]

1/2 cup raw white rice

1 1/2 teaspoon kosher salt • 4 cups water

2 tablespoons palm or peanut oil

1 onion, finely chopped

1 green pepper, deseeded and finely chopped

1 or 2 medium-hot chile peppers (like serrano),
deseeded and finely chopped

1 teaspoon curry powder

1 pound fresh tomatoes, chopped

1 16-ounce can red kidney beans

1/2 cup canned coconut milk (see note)

- Rinse the rice well, put it into a small pot with 1/2 teaspoon of the salt and 1 cup of the water. Bring to a boil, cover, reduce the heat to the lowest setting, and cook for 15 minutes. Then turn off the heat and let it sit until needed.
- Heat the cooking oil in a heavy saucepan. Add the onion, green pepper, chile peppers, curry powder, and the the remaining teaspoon of salt, and sauté until the vegetables are soft. Add the tomatoes and continue cooking for a few more minutes. Then add the kidney beans along with their liquid, coconut milk, and remaining 3 cups of water, and simmer for 10 minutes. Stir in the rice, taste for seasoning, and heat thoroughly before serving.

☛ **COOK'S NOTE: COCONUT MILK.** Our local Asian grocery sells half-size cans of coconut milk that weigh 5.6 ounces, which is a perfect amount.



Egusi (Pumpkin Seed) Soup

The egusi melon (*Colocynthis citrullus lanatus*) is one of three hundred melon species found in tropical Africa. It looks like a small, round watermelon, but its flesh is dry and extremely bitter. The seeds are the important thing: they are eaten as snacks, used in cooking, and processed to produce cooking oil. Out of necessity, we substituted roasted and salted pumpkin seeds, which work quite well. If you have a source of raw hulled pumpkin seeds (or are prepared to hull them yourself), the result would be more authentic. Like peanut soup, *egusi* soup comes in many guises. But almost always they contain meat (usually stew beef), and shrimp (often the extremely pungent dried variety). This soup has become a favorite of ours, and has evolved accordingly—most conspicuously in the use of ground instead of cubed beef, which I think gives the soup a more interesting texture and a richer meaty taste.

[SERVES 4]

1/2 pound raw shrimp (any size) in shell

3 cups water • 2 teaspoons kosher salt

1 pound fresh spinach

2 tablespoons palm or peanut oil

1 teaspoon salt • 1 large onion, finely chopped

2 or 3 medium-hot chile peppers (like serrano),
deseeded and finely chopped

1/2 pound lean ground beef

1/2 cup roasted and salted pumpkin seeds

3 tomatoes, chopped

- Peel the shrimp. If large, cut each piece in half. Put the shells into a medium pot with the 3 cups of water and 1 teaspoon of salt. Bring to a boil and simmer until needed.
- Wash the spinach, drain it briefly, and transfer it to a Dutch oven or similar heavy, coverable pot. Set this over high heat until the spinach wilts and collapses. This takes about 5 minutes. Use a slotted spoon or spatula to transfer the spinach to a mixing bowl and pour the remaining spinach water into the pot with the shrimp shells.
- Wipe the Dutch oven dry with a paper towel and pour in the palm or peanut oil. Heat the pot over low to moderate heat. Add the chopped onion and chile peppers and cook until soft, then stir in the ground beef, using a spatula to break it up as much as possible. Continue cooking until the meat begins to brown.
- Meanwhile, put the roasted pumpkin seeds into a mortar or a food processor fitted with its steel blade and reduce them to a coarse powder.
- Strain out and discard the shrimp shells, then pour the stock into the Dutch oven. Add the pulverized pumpkin seeds, peeled shrimp, and chopped tomatoes to the pot, stir well, and cook for 10 minutes.
- Meanwhile, using a slotted spoon or spatula, lift the spinach out of the bowl and

onto a cutting board, pouring any remaining liquid into the soup. Coarsely chop the spinach and stir this into the soup as well. Continue cooking until the pumpkin seeds have slightly thickened the soup and the flavors are nicely mingled, about 10 minutes. Taste for seasoning, adding some hot sauce, if necessary, to give the dish some fire, and serve.



Sweet Potato Rice

Adapted from **Zainabu's African Cookbook**, by Zainabu Kallon

This side dish offers an intriguing balance of flavors and textures, as well as being a visual treat. The sweetness of the shredded coconut needs to be well balanced with the sharpness of the fresh ginger and the heat of the chile peppers, so don't stint on those. Zainabu adds sea scallops, as well, but we felt they were too delicately flavored for the dish. Double the amount of shrimp and add a side dish of salad or cooked greens and this could easily serve as a main course.

[SERVES 4]

1/2 pound raw shrimp (any size) in shell

2¹/₂ cups water • 1 teaspoon kosher salt

2 tablespoons peanut oil

1 cup raw white rice

1 small onion, finely chopped

1/2 cup unsweetened shredded coconut

2 tablespoons grated fresh ginger

3 or 4 medium-hot chile peppers (like serrano),
deseeded and finely chopped

1 sweet potato

4 scallions, trimmed of any wilted tops, and chopped



- Peel the shrimp, cutting their flesh into bite-size pieces if they are large. Put their shells along with any remaining liquid into a small pot. Add the water and salt, bring to a boil, and cook for 15 to 20 minutes to make a simple shrimp stock. Strain out and discard the shells.
- Heat the peanut oil in a pot over a medium flame. When it is hot, stir in the rice and the chopped onion. Keep stirring until the onion is translucent. Then add the strained shrimp stock and bring to a full boil.
- Add the coconut, ginger, and chile pepper. Cover, reduce heat to its lowest setting, and cook for 15 minutes.
- While this cooks, peel the sweet potato and shred it using a grater or the grating disk of a food processor. The result should be similar in size to cabbage grated for coleslaw.
- After the rice has cooked for 15 minutes, gently but thoroughly stir in the cut up reserved shrimp, shredded sweet potato and chopped scallion. Continue cooking until the rice is done and the shreds of sweet potato tender.
- **COOK'S NOTE:** The trick with this dish is to have the rice still wet when you stir in the shredded sweet potato. I find it helps to have some water boiling in a kettle when I add the last ingredients, so that I can splash some in if necessary.



Abala ~ Savory Cream of Rice

Adapted from **A West African Cookbook**, by Ellen Gibson

This dish, popular in Nigeria, Ghana, and Sierra Leone, is a variant of *fufu*, sub-Saharan Africa's signature starch dish. Serve as a side dish to, for example, groundnut stew or fish in raw peanut sauce. When you read that the recipe calls for cooking cream of rice for two hours, while the package (at least for the conventional kind) says 30 seconds, you'll no doubt mutter to yourself, "*Ça, c'est complètement fou!*" To which I can only reply, "*Mais non, c'est complètement fufu!*" The long cooking provides the dish with *fufu*'s distinctive slightly gummy texture.

[SERVES 4]

2 tablespoons palm or peanut oil (palm is traditional)

3 medium-hot chile peppers (like serrano),
deseeded and finely chopped

1/2 onion, minced

1 cup cream of rice (see note)

4 cups boiling water • 1 kosher teaspoon salt

• Pour the oil into a small pot and set over medium-low heat. Stir in the minced onion and chile pepper. When these have softened, pour in the cream of rice, mixing it well with the other ingredients as you do. Then slowly pour in the boiling water, stirring all the while. The cream of rice will gradually absorb all the water, thickening to the consistency of mashed potatoes.

• The mixture must now be steamed. In Africa, it would be wrapped in warmed banana leaves. Western cooks could substitute corn husks and prepare the batter like tamales, but the simpler course is to wrap the mush in lightly oiled aluminum foil, crimp the edges, and place in a steamer. Steam for 2 hours. Serve hot or warm, as preferred.

• **COOK'S NOTE: CREAM OF RICE.** For more flavor (and nutrition), use cream of *brown* rice—some brands to look for are Erewhon organic Brown Rice Cream, Bob's Red Mill organic Brown Rice Farina, and Lundberg Purely Organic Hot Brown Rice Cereal.



Green Lentil & Banana Salad

Adapted from **The African Safari Kitchen**, by Josie Stow

Bananas don't often find their way into savory dishes, but they work nicely in this one, where their sweetness is matched by the suave sharpness of the balsamic and the nutty chewiness of the lentils. Note that the salad should be served at "cellar temperature" but not cold.

[SERVES 4]

1 cup green lentils
1 tablespoon olive oil • 1 small red onion, chopped
1/2 red bell pepper, diced
1 teaspoon crushed garlic
2 semi-ripe bananas, peeled and sliced
2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
1 or 2 tablespoons fresh cilantro **or**
flat-leaf parsley leaves, coarsely chopped
salt and black pepper to taste

- Place the lentils in a saucepan, cover generously with water, bring to a boil, and simmer until just tender.
- Drain the lentils and transfer them to a mixing bowl to cool.
- In a frying pan, heat the olive oil and sauté the onion, bell pepper, and garlic for about 2 minutes, or until soft, then turn this into the cooled lentils. Carefully stir in the bananas, then lightly toss with the vinegar and minced herb. Season with salt and pepper to taste.
- Cool in the refrigerator for 1/2 hour before serving.



Tanzanian Pineapple Dessert

Adapted from **The African Safari Kitchen**, by Josie Stow

[SERVES 4]

1 ripe pineapple, peeled, cored, and cut into bite-size pieces
1/2 cup raw cashew nuts
1/4 cup unsweetened shredded coconut

1/2 cup cream

2 tablespoons raw granulated cane sugar

1 shot white rum, or to taste

- Put the pineapple cubes in a serving bowl.
- Separately toast the raw cashews and the coconut shreds in a dry frying pan over moderate to low heat, turning them into a plate when done. Set aside to cool.
- Mix the cream, sugar, and rum together and pour this mixture over the pineapple cubes.
- When the toasted nuts are cool, put aside a good pinch of each for garnishing, then stir the rest into the bowl.
- Chill in the refrigerator for 1 hour or so, stirring once or twice. Sprinkle with the reserved cashews and coconut shreds just before serving.



A Note on Moyin Moyin

African cooks take the same black-eyed-pea batter used to make *akara*, wrap it in banana leaves, and steam it to make a sort of pudding called *moyin moyin*, which is then eaten seasoned with various hot sauces. See the directions for making *abala* (directly to the left) for Western alternatives, but in this instance steam it for only 40 minutes. The result is not unlike a pease pudding, and quite delicious. If this seems a little too vegan-esque for you, Terebeh Inquai says that African cooks fold into the batter about 1/4 cup chopped sardines or crumbled canned corned beef. Give your imagination a prod and you could probably do better — if you decide that really needs anything additional at all.



Moyin Moyin (1) just out of the oven; (2) cut into cubes and served with a simple sauce of chopped tomatoes and chiles



Table Talk



Scrambled Eggs Q & A. CYNTHIA ALKIRE (Columbus OH) points out that the essay on scrambled eggs in the last issue never mentions “whether the eggs should be used right out of the fridge or allowed to reach room temperature on the counter. Do I recall that eggs for an omelet should be at room temperature?” Good question, and I should have thought of it myself. Omelets are supposed to come together very quickly, so it makes sense to get the chill out of the eggs first. You might argue that for scrambled eggs the opposite is true. However, as far as I remember, none of the recipes I read even brought the point up. I use eggs straight from the refrigerator. But if they happened to be already out, no doubt they would cook more quickly—and it would be the cook’s job to make sure it wasn’t *too* quickly.

Iced Coffee. Summer! Time of sweet corn, local peaches, and real, field-ripened tomatoes... and special agonies to the iced-coffee lover. Admittedly, those are nothing compared to the indignities heaped upon the iced-tea drinker, who can probably count on one hand, and perhaps one finger, locations where the iced-tea served is actually brewed, rather than reconstituted from citric-acid-lacerated warehouse sweepings. Since iced-coffee drinkers are few and far between, they are often treated to a cup of the eatery’s regular brew, poured over ice—which would be okay if the coffee wasn’t already weak. Add ice cubes and you have iced-coffee-flavored water.

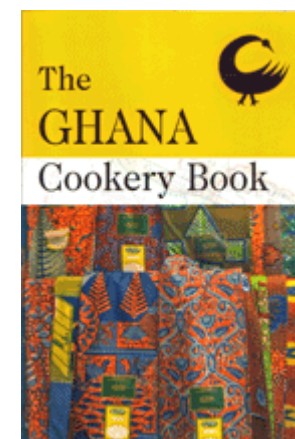
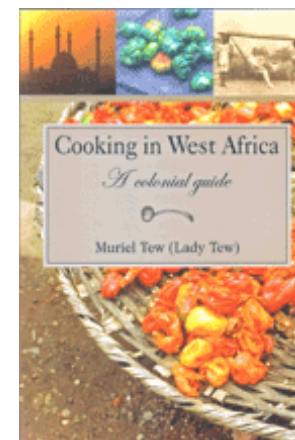
This doesn’t have to happen at home. The trick to awesome iced coffee™ is to filter-brew it right into a tall, thick-sided, ice-filled glass (adding the sugar and/or milk or cream first, if you use it), just as the Vietnamese do (who would know better?). I repeat: use a tall, thick-sided, ice-filled glass. Then adjust either the amount of coffee or of water to take into account the melting ice. I keep a 16-ounce capacity glass in the freezer just for this purpose, and still cut the water measure by a quarter, using, say, six ounces for

an eight-ounce serving. Be sure to add the water to the filter in little splashes—the more patient you are, the less the ice will melt. When that’s done, stir it gently with a spoon, and enjoy. My fantasy, though, is to brew the coffee, freeze it in ice-cube trays, and serve it just like that, a little cream and sugar stirred in to start the melting. The definition of a summer afternoon: big cold glass, endless tiny sips.

African Colonial Cooking. In my search for out-of-the-ordinary African cookbooks, I came across an obscure, London-based publishing house, Jeppestown Press, that specializes in vintage African reference and history books. They also offer several British colonial cookbooks that date back to 1890. Enormous difficulties of every sort faced the housekeeper wanting to replicate the English lifestyle in even the most urban African settings, let alone stations out in the bush. Supplies came from far away, local foods were unfamiliar, and servants and cooks were uncomprehending, especially when it came to baking. Muriel Tew, in **Cooking in West Africa** (1920), hints as much in sentences that begin “If your cook can made a spongecake...” and “If your cook is not a good pastry maker...” Even so, one learned, one adapted, and one made do. If the floor *had* to be dirt, a good wash with diluted cow dung hardened it and gave it a nice gloss. Above all, a stiff upper lip must be kept, at least in front of the natives.

Muriel Tew’s book was one of two sent me to review, the other being **The Ghana Cookery Book** (1933), compiled by the British Red Cross. Where Lady Tew only touches on African foods and dishes, the second book, with its individual contributions of over 800 recipes, is much more adventurous. There are three versions each of groundnut and palmnut soup; banana steak; palmnut hash; palm-oil corn cake; palm-wine bread; and “cangika,” an African sweet made of fresh corn, coconut, and sugar. There is much written on the influence of Indian food and cooking on the British during the Raj; this book gives us a fascinating glimpse into similar circumstances in colonial Africa.

Full Belly Project. No better place to write about this extremely worthy and successful village-centered aid project than in an issue devoted to Africa and peanuts. Put simply, Jeff Rose, retired and seeking to make a difference, invented a simple hand-operated



machine that quickly and efficiently shells lots and lots of peanuts. This has had a huge economic impact on the communities where it has been introduced, transforming an onerous and time-consuming task into something easily and quickly done—so much so that shelled peanuts have become a source of income as well as basic sustenance. Rose focused on peanuts because about half a billion people in the third world depend on them as their primary source of protein. However, further uses are being regularly discovered, like husking dried coffee beans and shelling *Jatropha* seeds (the oil of which can be used to power a diesel engine). Since its invention, the “Universal Nut Sheller” has been adapted to operate by pedal power and a small electric motor. Visit the website —www.fullbellyproject.org—to learn more (and see some fascinating videos); or donate directly: Full Belly Project, 1020 Chestnut St., Wilmington NC 28401 (910-452-0975).



3 African Cookbooks

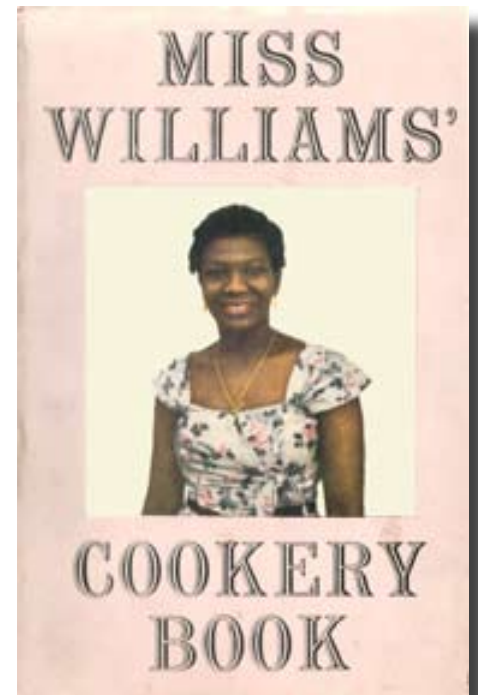
Not surprisingly, most African cookbooks are written by and for non-native readers; there are many of these, some, written for clueless English settlers, dating back a hundred years (see page 7 above). Far fewer and harder to find are the cookbooks written by and for native Africans. The pearl among these is **Miss Williams' Cookery Book** (Longmans of Nigeria, 1957), a treasure that I purchased years ago thinking it was a Caribbean cookbook, only later to discover it to be Nigerian.

For those who read cookbooks to feed the imagination, this one provides much to chew on. R. Omosunlola Williams, a teacher of domestic science, starts off by providing instructions on marketing (which stalls to frequent and how to pick from their offerings) and on equipping a kitchen (how to make a stove and/or a bake oven out of metal kerosene tins). Instead of cup measures, she uses Player's cigarette and Blue Band margarine cans—items easily accessible to even the poorest cooks.

The longest chapter is on root vegetables; the second longest is a tie between cereals (rice and corn) and fruits. Coconuts and peanuts get their own chapters. African greens are a world apart—*craincrain*, waterleaf, *sokoyokoto*; some (bitterleaf, for one) I'd rather not encounter in real life.

The recipes are generally simple and clear, but, as with many strictly foreign cookbooks, the familiar is too ordinary (fried chicken, cheese omelet) and the unfamiliar is often well beyond our reach (*sokoyokoto*, again) or requires an effort most of us reserve for special occasions, not everyday fare.

To my mind, though, this is the great value of the book. We almost always approach foreign cooking with the help of a translator/explainer, someone who knows how to rework a foreigner's cooking so that it more or less successfully aligns with our own. **Miss Williams' Cookery Book**, despite being written in plain English, puts us directly



into the mind of the native Nigerian cook, and leaves us to sort out what we find there, all on our own.

Which brings me back to the great effort and special occasions mentioned in the paragraph before last. One moment of almost dizzying recognition I had while reading this book came in the last chapter. It's about entertaining. When this is casual, appetizers (called chop) are passed around skewered with little sticks (called chop sticks). To make these "chop sticks":

Buy a new bunch of Nigerian brooms. Get the younger members of the family to scrape each stick cleanly, and break into pieces of about 3 in., and sharpen one end. Prepare many, it is usually a good plan to prepare these in hundreds when less busy...

A toothpick will never look the same.



Ronald Dahl, in his and his wife Felicity's charmingly quirky **Memories with Food At Gypsy House**, picked out one of the family's several cooks, Josie Stow, for special attention, calling her "breathtakingly brilliant" and predicting that she would end up running some "magnificent restaurant or a superb pastry-shop within a few years." Instead, she moved to Africa to cook on safaris, married a ranger, and ended up writing **The African Kitchen**.*

What little I know of safari food is that it is long on pampering and short on authenticity, let alone actually roughing it. But Stow established immediate empathy with her native African staff, learned as she taught, and soon made it her mission to introduce safari goers to as many flavors of Africa as possible.

Even those foods that came out of the universal challenges of outdoor camping are given an African twist, like *ashkoek*, a yeast-leavened bread baked in fire ashes; the

*A large-format paperback with stunning full-color photos, published in the US by Interlink Publishing (\$20, 144 pp.).

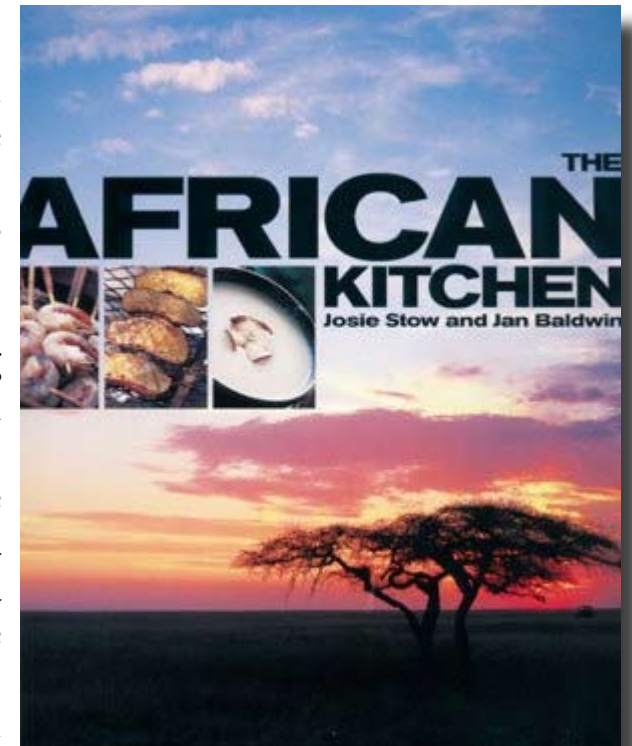
bacon-wrapped eland kebabs* on skewers from the wild raisin bush (*Grewia flava*); or the pizza oven created out of a vacated eight-foot-high termite mound.

The goal remains to tempt finicky appetites and satisfy ravenous ones. However, the restrictions of camp cooking keep things real, leading to imaginative but simple fare like sweet potato, onion, and thyme pancakes; green lentil and banana salad; and bresaola-style cured venison.

Most of Stow's pastry-making skills revolve around variations on the daily loaf, since all the bread is baked on location. There are some with an African twist— Ethiopian honey bread, *injira*, and some delicious-looking South African breakfast rusks. Among the desserts is an inspired bread pudding made of pumpkin bread cubes baked in a pumpkin custard.

The African element in main course dishes tends to be native meat or North African spicing. It is the side dishes and snacks that have the liveliest connections to sub-Saharan cooking: *goreme* (a tangy feta and yogurt dip), *charkalaka* (a spicy grated vegetable salad), *imfulafula* (a fermented pineapple “beer”), *msamba* (a vegetable dish of pumpkin—or sweet potato—leaves and crushed peanuts), *kifto* (an Ethiopian take on steak tartare).

This book is, obviously, about as far from the first as you can get and still have your feet on the same continent. But it would be unfair to dismiss it as “African Lite.” R. Omosunlola Williams and Josie Stow would greatly enjoy each other's company, for both are serious cooks in love with African cooking. They are just coming at it from very different places.



*Here Stow obliquely touches on a not uncommon safari activity otherwise curiously absent in these pages: hunting and killing wild game. Elsewhere, she simply calls for venison.



Zainabu Kpaka Kallon was born into a large family in Sierra Leone, and as soon as she could she found her way to the kitchen. There, watching, helping, and listening, she absorbed a world of flavor that spills out from the pages of **Zainabu's African Cookbook** (Citadel, 2004).

During my research, I came across many African recipes that were thought-provoking, but not all that many that made me want to prepare them for supper that very night. Not so in this book, where my appetite was whetted by such as spicy chicken wings with green mango sauce; shrimp and coffee rice; hot curried plantain with lamb; pork and red snapper in coconut lime sauce; and her sister's remarkably simple recipe for peanut brittle.

She also weaves stories throughout the book. Some of them are instructive—the importance of rice to the Mendes, an African people who, like the Chinese, consider a meal without rice no meal at all. Others are directly autobiographical—some about her African origins, some about the culture shock she experienced when she headed to the grocery store here in America. Sadly, the book is out of print, but inexpensive used copies are [available from Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) ♦



Market in Benin

Annotated Bibliography SC.91

These are the books I consulted while writing this issue, with reading notes appended to those that helped or interested me the most. Book titles that are underlined **in brown** are hyperlinked to sources where they can be purchased.

SCHOLARLY WORKS ON AFRICAN FOODS AND FOODWAYS

National Research Council. **Lost Crops of Africa. Volume I: Grains. Lost Crops of Africa. Volume II: Vegetables. Lost Crops of Africa. Volume III: Fruits.** Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1996. This impressive three-volume series seems to me to be seriously mistitled, since these crops aren't lost, or even mislaid. In fact, some are quite familiar (black-eyed peas, tamarind, amaranth; okra, sorghum); others, while not so well-known to the West, are not in any danger of being forgotten. This point aside, the three volumes, prepared from an enormous fund of research material, offer an overview of where and how over two hundred native African food products are grown, harvested, and processed; the benefits and limitations of each as a food source; and how they could be better and more profitably utilized both in Africa and beyond. I can't imagine many of my readers sitting down and plowing through all three volumes; I know I didn't. But once I did begin reading, I found it hard to stop... and I certainly came away from these books thinking that world hunger is much more about politics than agronomy. Fortunately, while the books can be purchased either bound or in pdf form, they can also be read online without charge by using the book title hyperlinks above or going to <http://tinyurl.com/5esk4n>.

Osseo-Asare, Fran. **Food and Culture in Sub-Saharan Africa.** Food and Culture around the World Series, Ken Albala, series editor. Westport: Greenwood, 2005. A concise, readable (and outrageously expensive) survey that touches on African history, religions, and regional crops, food specialties, dining habits, and food-re-

lated holidays, with a helpful glossary of African food terms. Recipes are scattered throughout the text, as are occasional black-and-white photographs.

AFRICAN COOKBOOKS WRITTEN BY NATIVE AFRICANS

Ayensu, Dinah Ameley. **The Art of West African Cooking**. Garden City: Doubleday, 1972.

Dyasi, Rebecca (compiler). **Good Tastes In Africa (African Outreach Series, No. 3)**. African Studies Program, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1983. A spiral-bound fund raiser for the African and African-Related Women's Association at the University. This short (sixty-six-page) but helpful book provides an introduction to African foodways, followed by approachable recipes contributed by cooks native to Nigeria, Tanzania, Gambia, Ethiopia, Zambia, Zaire, Senegal, and Kenya.

Essang, Raymond. **Principles of Cooking in West Africa**. Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2005. This self-published volume was written by a former Nigerian restaurant owner who immigrated to the United States and wrote this book to instruct Americans on the benefits (nutritional and economical) of West African cooking. A lot can be learned from it, but it must be approached cautiously, since the author is not a practiced food writer and his text lacks professional editing. Still, not many easily available African cookbooks offer recipes for *isi ewu* (goat's head snack), roasted meat cocktail (which turns out to be a simple beef kabob), or Bisquick foo foo. One of the book's several curiosities is the use of potash as an ingredient—there is even a recipe for *owo*, or potash soup. Essang is a potash enthusiast (its "importance cannot be overemphasized in this book") and explains that one of its uses is to meld oil with water when making soup. I was intrigued by this, but my Google search for "edible potash" resulted in one hit: "Guangzhou Chemical Reagent No 2 Factory Guangming Food Additive," and interest faded. Essang may not have landed his hammer squarely on the nail, but for serious African cooking fans, the book is relatively inexpensive and worth the effort to find it.

Haffner, Dorinda. **A Taste of Africa: Traditional & Modern African Cooking** (revised edition). Berkeley: Ten Speed, 2002.

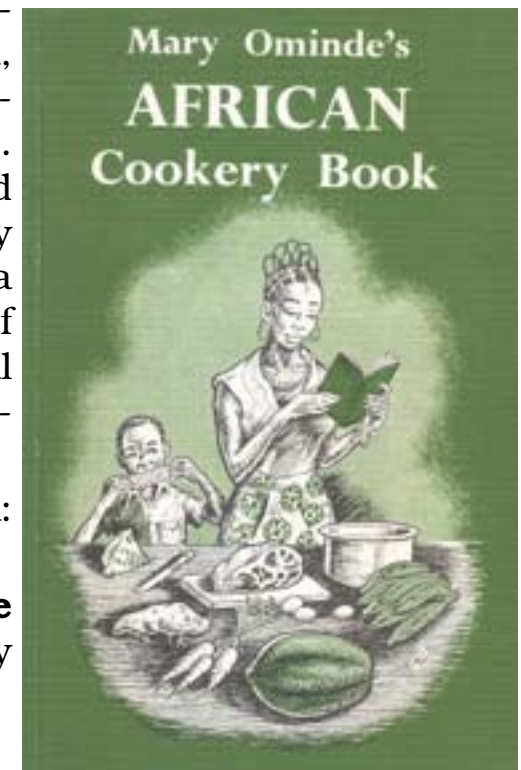
Inquai, Tebereh. **A Taste of Africa: An African Cookbook**. Trenton: Africa World, 1998. Tebereh Inquai was born in Ethiopia and worked there and in Botswana as a food and nutrition teacher. When she moved to Britain, she started her own African takeout place. In other words, she knows how to prepare her native foods to win over Western palates. She certainly won over mine with recipes like fish with greens (Congo), pumpkin and black-eyed pea stew (Ghana), a salad of chickpea sprouts (Ethiopia), chicken marinated in lemon and onion sauce (Senegal), meat and peanut stew (Zimbabwe), and lemongrass tea (Malawi). Excellent book.

Kallon, Zainabu Kpaka. **Zainabu's African Cookbook**. New York: Citadel, 2004. See page 8 of this issue.

Ominde, Mary. **Mary Ominde's African Cookery Book**. Nairobi: Heinemann, 1975. What Miss Williams is to Nigeria, Mary Ominde is to Kenya, although her book is shorter and, on the whole, aimed at a more cosmopolitan reader who is interested in European as well as African recipes. Even so, she offers lots of down-home African fare—cow blood cooked in sour milk, fried white ants, and stuffed *mutura* (what remains of fatty parts of sheep or goat after the fat has been rendered)—and devotes a chapter to dishes made with *matoke* (steamed and mashed plantain). Of special interest are crossover recipes like soybean scones, maize meal rock cakes, and groundnut bread, which show British dishes being absorbed into a Kenyan culinary sensibility.

Williams, R. Omosunlola. **Miss Williams' Cookery Book**. Ikeja, Nigeria: Longman's of Nigeria, 1957. See page 8 of this issue.

Van der Post, Laurens, and the Editors of Time-Life Books. **African Cooking (Foods of the World Series)**. New York: Time-Life, 1970. Not uninteresting, but very dated.



AFRICAN COOKBOOKS BY NON-AFRICANS

British Red Cross Society, **The Ghana Cookery Book** (facsimile edition of **The Gold Coast Cookery Book**. Accra: Government Printing Office, 1933). London: Jeppestown, 2007.

DeWitt, Dave, Mary Jane Wilan, and Melissa T. Stock. **Flavors of Africa Cookbook**. Rocklin CA: Prima, 1998.

Gibbon, Ed. **The Congo Cookbook**. 1999-2005. This substantial (481 page) cookbook exists as both a downloadable pdf document and a printed paperback (available from Cafe Press, <http://tinyurl.com/58lpnc>). It is a wonderful but confusing resource, partly because it is not a book at all. As far as I can determine, it started out as website where more and more recipes were added over the years. The result is less like a cookbook than a diligent and thoughtful final paper for a college course. It displays a prodigious amount of research—ranging from forgotten tomes by African explorers to the writings of Maya Angelou—decently organized and thoughtfully presented. There are many, many recipes here and countless fascinating tidbits of information. What's missing is a sense of the practiced hand of a cook or the reflective perspective of a writer who has mastered his material sufficiently enough to make something out of it.

Grant, Rosamund. **Caribbean and African Cookery**. London: Grub Street, 1988.

—. **The Essential African Cookbook**. New York: Lorenz, 2001.

Harris, Jessica. **The Africa Cookbook: Tastes of a Continent**. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998) is the most ambitious attempt so far to convey a coherent outline of pan-African cuisine. There is much here to admire, from the extensive introductory material to the long and helpful bibliography. Harris traveled all over the continent, where she collected many of the recipes that she shares. Unfortunately, her writing is almost always lackluster and too often surrenders to platitudes when there is interesting information she could convey. For example, while she visits the Ivory Coast during the height of avocado season, she doesn't mention that they are industrially farmed as a cash crop for the lucrative European market,

let alone explain what effect this alien interloper has had on the native cooking. Elsewhere, she fails to mention the fact that African eggplants really *do* look like eggs. These were the first eggplants introduced to England, hence their name. It was only later that they were edged out by the big purple bruiser that we know today—even though it resembles no egg ever seen since the age of the dinosaur.

Furthermore, while Harris may be interested in the dishes Africans prepare, her recipes for them rarely convey the thoughtful awareness of a cook intent on absorbing the processes that bring them into being. In one instance, after stating that “there are as many different methods for cooking rice as there are African grandmothers,” she goes on to give us her mother’s recipe. Even if it were a good recipe (which it isn’t), why on earth doesn’t she at least give us some sense of where exactly those African grandmothers differ? There are recipes here worth winnowing out, but on the whole this book is a great disappointment.

- **Sky Juice and Flying Fish: Traditional Caribbean Cooking**. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991.
- **Tasting Brazil: Regional Recipes and Reminiscences**. New York: Macmillan, 1992.

Hultman, Tami (editor). **The Africa News Cookbook**: African Cooking for Western Kitchens. New York: Penguin, 1986. Africa News Service is a non-profit news agency that provides information about Africa. This cookbook was first published under their imprint and was a staff project with many African as well as European and American contributors. The recipes, all reworked to be easily made in American kitchens, come from all parts of Africa and embrace a wide range of that continent’s regional dishes and cooking techniques. A useful and attractive cookbook, quite suitable for novices.

Montgomery, Bertha Vining, and Constance Nabwire. **Cooking The West African Way**. Minneapolis: Lerner, 2002. This and the following book are meant for students at middle-school level or higher. This means that the prose is simple and clear and the recipes simple and easy. Given this, the dishes are authentic and the written

text genuinely informative.

—. **Cooking The East African Way**. Minneapolis: Lerner, 2001. Same comments as above.

Sandler, Bea. **The African Cookbook**. Secaucus NJ: Citadel, 1970.

Tew, Muriel. **Cooking in West Africa: A Colonial Guide** (facsimile edition of **Cooking in West Africa Made Easier**. Liverpool: C. Tinling, 1920). London: Jeppestown, 2007.

Stow, Josie, and Jan Baldwin (photographer). **The African Kitchen**. Northampton US: Interlink, 2005. See page 8 of this issue.

Wilson, Ellen Gibson. **A West African Cook Book**. New York: Evans, 1971. This hard-to-find volume is one of the better non-native African cookbooks, and almost unique in its persuasive (and quite prescient) linking of certain West African dishes to familiar Southern ones, some of which you might never suspect came from that continent.

OTHER COOKBOOKS OF INTEREST

Bittman, Mark. **The Best Recipes in the World**. New York: Broadway, 2002.

Carver, George Washington. **How To Grow the Peanut and 105 Ways of Preparing It for Human Consumption**. Tuskegee Institute Experimental Station Bulletin 31.

Gaige, Crosby. **Dining with My Friends: Adventures with Epicures**. New York: Crown, 1949.

Grescoe, Taras. **Bottomfeeder**. New York: Bloomsbury, 2008.

Hamilton, Cherie Y. **Cuisines of Portuguese Encounters** (Expanded edition). New York: Hippocrene, 2008. Recipes from Portugal and (more interestingly) from former Portuguese colonies, several of them African. To be reviewed.

Hawkes, Alex D. **A World of Vegetable Cookery: An Encyclopedic Treasury of Recipes, Botany, and Lore**. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968. An unusually fine collection of vegetable recipes.

Hearn, Lafcadio. **Two Years In The French West Indies**. New York: Harper, 1890.

Hill, Harriet S. (compiler). *Wild Boar on the Kitchen Floor* (pdf format). Dallas: LinguaLinks, 1991. The author lived and worked for many years in West Africa, especially Côte d'Ivoire, and put together this "survival guide" for Americans and others working in West Africa who need recipes for familiar foods that can be prepared from what is available in African markets. This includes directions for making cream from butter and milk; homemade ranch-style salad dressing; corn dogs; and pita bread pizza. The book appears here because of the directions for preparing African game (gazelle, palm rat, monkey, snake, crocodile), and the occasional native recipes that take advantage of African (and sometimes familiar!) ingredients, like the ginger beverage *gnamakudji*). There is also a scattering of little glimpses into daily life: "Not wild about killing chickens and other animals? ... African children will be happy to do this work for a small monetary reward, or better yet, for the parts of the animal you don't eat anyway (head, feet, etc.)." The pdf can be obtained without charge by going to <http://tinyurl.com/6cmhc2> and looking for "[PDF] Wild Boar on the Kitchen Floor." (Don't click the link; download its contents.)

Smith, Andrew. **Peanuts: The Illustrious History of the Goober Pea**. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002. An easy-to-read, well-researched history of the peanut and its gradual evolution into an American icon, with period illustrations and an interesting collection of historical recipes.

Voltz, Jeanne, and Caroline Stuart. **The Florida Cookbook: From Gulf Coast Gumbo to Key Lime Pie**. New York: Knopf, 1995. Interestingly, in the preface to their *bollos* recipe, the two authors take opposite sides on whether to remove the black-eyed-pea skins, and the recipe itself is exemplary.

