

Safari Cooks: Cooking Out of Africa

In Africa's bush country, opportunities in the culinary field are opening doors—albeit slowly—for native African peoples.

By Marie Perucca-Ramirez and Julio J. Ramirez, CEC, AAC

An elephant traverses the banks of the Chobe River, Botswana, at sunset.

Marie Perucca-Ramirez and Julio J. Ramirez, restaurant consultants based in Carmel, Calif., visited Africa in July 2006 and went on safari in the African bush to explore one part of the country's diverse culinary landscape.

The cuisine of South Africa and Botswana, former British colonies, has been greatly influenced by settlers from Asia and Europe, as well as by native tribal peoples. Large metropolitan cities, such as Johannesburg, South Africa, boast internationally renowned restaurants, sophisticated menus, fine-wine lists and active chefs' associations. But the rural areas in Botswana and South Africa offer a great contrast to urban Africa.

In Botswana, a country of 1.7 million people spread across an area the size of Texas, the biggest economic mainstays are diamonds and safaris. With herds of elephant, impala and zebra moving through its sparsely populated areas, wildlife is a valuable national resource. Botswana is now actively pursuing the means to protect this resource and promote it as a tourist venue. In turn, the growing safari-tourism industry offers

employment opportunities—as trackers, drivers or cooks—to rural Africans who learned to hunt and track as children.

On safari

Wildlife safaris in Africa range from ultra-swank catered affairs to do-it-yourself camping trips, and from six-month expeditions crossing the African continent to overnight outings. Some safari companies offer “valet” camping that includes netted cots and tea

service on fine china. Others offer camping in national parks, where a uniformed crew at a stationary camp provides services to safari members who drive out each day to view game. Some safaris travel with a complete kitchen, including refrigeration, and are, essentially, satellites of a lodge. By keeping in radio contact with the lodge, staff can even have special orders flown in by helicopter.

But the most typical safaris are like the one we traveled with in Botswana: open vehicles pulling small trailers containing sleeping bags, tents, firewood, grills, camp chairs, water and provisions for several days. For a couple of weeks, eight to 12 people travel together in these self-contained units accompanied by a driver/tracker, a guide and a cook. Over dirt roads and off-road, the safari truck travels through grasslands, deserts and forests, through national game reserves and open country, stopping to view wildlife, break for lunch or make camp for the night. Every few days, the truck will pass through a town where the cook stocks up with fresh provisions.

The safari cook is in charge of organizing meals, getting the fire going morning and evening, and maintaining camp sanitation. The cook must be able to keep food safe while on the road: stored at the correct temperature, safe from foodborne illnesses and protected from marauding animals. The cook is also in charge of having camp showers erected and latrines dug. Because there is often no running water, sanitation is a big concern, and hands must be washed and dishes and utensils sanitized using fire-heated hot-water baths.

The cook, guide and driver on our safari were Tswana, which is one of the larger ethnic groups in Botswana. Our cook, Lesedi Keekae, spoke both Setswana and English. English is one of the official national languages of most southern African countries, and is often the language of school instruction. This bilingualism contributes to the ability of rural people to obtain jobs in hospitality and tourism, especially when foreign tourism is involved.

Cooking in the bush

When applying for a job with a safari company, candidates are interviewed, then asked to prepare a meal to determine their level of cooking expertise. Safari companies prefer to hire those who have had some previous experience, and cooking classes are available that teach the basics of cooking and sanitation. Cooks will also apprentice with a safari company to learn that company's recipes, and some companies even have a school for their employees. When a safari company hires cooks, it trains them to its standards, and the new hires must learn a set repertoire of meals.

Some safari companies are now computerized, and recipes are chosen for the length of the trip. Average meal portions are calculated, and provision lists are drawn up based on the number of people on the safari. The amount to be consumed at each meal is gauged to include the amount of leftovers expected. In this way, the cook can set up for the next day's cold lunch, which will use the leftovers from dinner, while preparing the evening meal. There are pickup points along the safari route where supplies are replenished, and where trucks can get water and firewood.



Julio Ramirez, left, and Lesedi Keekae barbecue local sausages and lamb chops at a bush camp in Botswana. Keekae, who has a university degree and speaks three languages, brings his knowledge of his country's cuisine to his job as a safari cook.

Some companies have depositories where supplies, including frozen meats, are stored.

The safari truck, along with its supplies of fresh produce and meat, carries the usual staples: vacuum-sealed milk, flour, cereal, grains, pastas, spices, sauces, and condiments such as ketchup, chutney, mayonnaise, vinegar, bottled dressings and Marmite. Cooking utensils and kitchen necessities include Dutch ovens, pots, kettles, grills, a chopping board and knife, dish soap, basins for washing and rinsing, and large jerry cans for water.

Safari cooks must know the art and science of efficiently feeding 12 people on a schedule without electricity or refrigeration. They must be ready to cook if it's raining, and they must be able to function in the dark. Light-emitting diode (LED) headlamps are used so that the cook can chop, mix, season and cook at night. At times, cooks must improvise. For example, when camping on an island for three days in the Okavango Delta without our safari vehicle, Keekae used an overturned *makoro* (canoe) as his kitchen worktable.

Meals on the go

At 5 a.m., when it's still dark and cold, the camp cook will have already started the fire, gotten the water boiling and set out breakfast.

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One-pot potjie—squash, root vegetables and meat stew—is a typical safari dish.

For breakfast, campers have rusks, muesli, and hot coffee and tea, as well as bread—which has been baked in a Dutch oven over the campfire the night before—spread with jam, peanut butter or Marmite. Some safaris offer a hot breakfast, including oatmeal, omelets and, occasionally, pancakes and French toast.

There is a schedule to keep if one wants to see wildlife in the early hours. Within an hour, camp is struck. By that time, campers and crew have finished their morning rituals, eaten, brushed their teeth, taken down tents, rolled sleeping bags and loaded the truck.

Lunch, usually eaten in a field along the road, features a pasta, rice or potato salad made from the leftover starch from the previous evening. A variety of canned vegetables—peas, beans and corn—tuna, olives, and some freshly chopped tomatoes, onions and cucumbers will go into the mix, which is seasoned with herbs and then tossed with bottled dressing. When available,

a green salad is served. Cold meats—chops, chicken and sausages from the previous night's meal—are served with cheese and the Dutch-oven-baked bread.

Dinner is cooked over a campfire. Stews, and casseroles such as scalloped potatoes, are made in large pots, along with pasta, rice or potatoes. Fresh vegetables and seasoned squash are cooked over the grill. Lamb chops, pork chops, steaks, chicken and sausages are barbecued. Dessert is usually canned fruit, such as guava, with chocolate sauce, or baked plantains or pudding. Occasionally, the cook will produce a cake baked over the campfire.

We found that safari recipes reflect the cultural and ethnic mix of southern Africa. During the Great Trek 200 years ago, the Boers migrated north from the Cape Town area to avoid British rule in South Africa, and they camped on their journey. Today, Afrikaners are great recreational campers. They load up the family car with blankets, sleeping bags, ice chests and tents, and head out to camp on the vast African savannahs. And much as Thanksgiving is a culinary celebration of Americans' historical past, for Afrikaners, the memory of the Great Trek lives on in *potjie* (one-pot meals), *braai* (barbecue) and Dutch-oven bread. This Afrikaans culinary legacy is incorporated into safari menus, as are the spicy curries of India and Malaysia and the traditional dishes of the Tswana people.

Ethnic cuisines

In Tswana cooking, the main course is mealie meal—unseasoned, unsalted cornmeal cooked to a gummy consistency. This is accompanied

by *seswaa*, beef or goat that has been braised and cooked in a rounded cast-iron pot then pounded with a heavy wooden spoon before removing the bones. *Dinawa*, another course, is made with black-eyed peas, sugar beans or lentils. The legumes are stewed with onions, potatoes, carrots and spices, then mashed. *Lephutshe*, a dish of butternut squash seasoned with butter, thyme and sage, is cooked over the coals and also mashed. Traditionally, Tswana food is eaten by hand; the mealie meal is used to scoop up the pounded meat and mashed vegetables, which give flavor to the bland cornmeal.

Safari cooks have often been inspired by their mothers, or learned to cook from necessity, or they found that they just have a love for it. Keekae told us his mother “had only sons for a long time, so when we were hungry and would ask her for food, she would say, ‘If there’s food in the house, there’s no excuse to be hungry.’ So we learned to cook.” Now training to be a guide, Keekae is an excellent cook.

To be a safari guide, a candidate must have mastered cooking for safaris, as well as be able to drive or be a mechanic, if necessary. Keekae has a university degree, has studied tourism and economics, and speaks Setswana, English and French, but there are limited job opportunities for him. Like many Tswana, he spent time in towns as well as in the countryside with extended family during his childhood, so he is familiar with the cuisine, customs and wildlife of his country.

Areas in Botswana that have been declared national parks and designated World Heritage sites have agreements with local peoples, who

are often displaced to create the parks, to give them jobs when companies come into their areas to develop lodges. But management is usually, if not always, brought in from out of country, for example, South Africa. So, although he is qualified, Keekae probably wouldn't be considered for a management job.

Into South Africa

South Africa, a more prosperous, industrialized country, offers safari cooks more opportunities for advancement in their careers. Edwin Sakhile Lukhele was hired away from a safari company and is currently a cook in a private game reserve. His duties include accommodating campers in the enclosed encampment, which includes a swimming pool and a wildlife-viewing platform, and making sure that ample provisions are on hand for guests. He cooks on-site, and the tourists return to the camp from game drives for their meals. The tourism department in South Africa trains cooks, and Lukhele had the opportunity to take classes. He worked for one safari, got a better job, and now he's moving up in the ranks. He enjoys cooking, and wants to stay in the profession.

Charity Mauunelza is a safari cook at Kruger National Park in South Africa. The campgrounds here are protected by electric wire. Campers are not allowed to leave their vehicles when driving outside, and vehicles must be back inside the camp by 5:30 p.m. Mauunelza's mother had been a cook for a wealthy family in the city, and Mauunelza learned to cook from her. She tried out for a cook's position, and was hired because of her skills. Like Lukhele,

Mauunelza works in a stationary camp, where she has regular days off and is able to go home to her family.

Future prospects

While today's bush-safari cooks must apprentice, pass a test and be certified, in Botswana, they are not usually considered for hotel positions. For those used to living on marginal village economies, the position is relatively well-paid; however, this is not an easy life. Along with the responsibilities of keeping the safari members fed, as well as safe, which often means staying up all night to guard the camp when elephants and hyenas are roaming close, safari cooks are on the road for weeks at a time. They finish one safari and pick up the next, often with no time in between for their families during tourist season.

But life is changing in rural Africa. Everyone seems to be busier, and time is in short supply. In Botswana, towns are opening more fast-food restaurants to serve locals as well as tourists. In Africa, it's the custom for schoolchildren to come home for lunch at 1 p.m. and return to school at 3 p.m., and for businessmen and shopkeepers to return home for the midday meal. Traditional meals take a long time to prepare, and even in smaller towns, people are having a harder time getting home for lunch, so takeout is becoming a more popular option. Hamburgers, curries, fried chicken and Western food in general seem to have the greatest takeout appeal; however, the most popular restaurant in Maun, a busy safari-tourism hub, was opened by Chinese. It

serves traditional Tswana food, and has lines of customers waiting outside.

As locals become accustomed to eating out, they will begin to seek out more full-service dining experiences. And the increase in tourism will only contribute to this demand. The creation of restaurants, lodges, and hotels—again, fueled by increased tourism—will require more culinarians to serve the hospitality infrastructure. This need should create employment and advancement opportunities for experienced safari cooks, those who have proven themselves under the challenging conditions of the bush and now want to transition into more stationary lifestyles, and perhaps even open their own restaurants.

Charity Mauunelza, a safari cook at a stationary camp in Kruger National Park, learned her cooking skills from her mother.

