

RESTAURANTS

## Dishing With Chef Ayo Balogun

The chef behind Brooklyn's Dept of Culture talks jollof rice drama, Junior's cheesecake, and a dish that forever changed him.

WORDS BY SOPHIE MANCINI, ILLUSTRATION BY ORIANA FENWICK



Photograph by Javier E. Piñero

**THE HARDEST RESERVATION** to get in New York City? Dept of Culture. Serving a tasting menu of North-Central Nigerian cuisine, Chef Ayo Balogun's 16-seat, communal-style restaurant in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood has had the city buzzing for a taste since it opened last year. Around the corner from Dept of Culture, Chef Balogun also runs a neighborhood cafe, The Council Cafe. As for his latest venture: This past July in Clinton Hill, he debuted a second Nigerian restaurant, Radio Kwara, inspired by the pepper soup of the chef's native Kwara State.

### How do you define delicious?

You know those moments you spend with somebody you fancy or admire, and everything is magical? When you're with interesting company, it goes beyond taste. Sugar is sweet. But good company — that's part of the element of deliciousness. A tasting menu by yourself, it's not not delicious. But in good company, you have a back-and-forth going. "What do you think about that?" It exaggerates the deliciousness.

### What is a nostalgic flavor for you?

Suya. It's a dry rub they use in parts of West Africa on beef, and chicken, and all of that. It's got a savoriness with hints of sweetness — some add cloves too. There's pepper, there's peanut, maybe a curry. Some put fermented locust beans. It just creates this wealth of flavors.

### Share a food memory that shaped you.

One of my grandmothers we called Mama. Mama has been old since I was born, almost like a legend. She once served me this dish: amala, made with jute leaf and fermented locust beans, cooked slowly over a wood fire. It was one of those dishes I'd always imagined to be old people's food. But it was the most delicious food I've ever had — the pinnacle of softness, details. When the James Beard [Foundation] called us to come and cook for them, that was what I made. They had to actually pay us extra because people kept eating more.

### Where do you eat on your days off?

I'll go to a bodega and have an egg sandwich. But you don't go to any bodega. You have to be loyal to one bodega — to the guy who knows what he's doing. Once that artist is gone, you move on. I also hunt pancakes. The best pancakes right now? Pastis. I really wish it was a mom-and-pop. But no, it's Pastis. In this neighborhood? Saraghina Caffè. In Dumbo, Clinton St. Baking Company. In Boerum Hill, East One Coffee Roasters for these malted-milk pancakes that are badass.

### What's a food or drink not enough people know about, but really should?

There's this yogurt drink called fura. It's a Nigerian drink made out of millet and pepper. So it's got a little tanginess. Smooth. Brilliant in hot weather.

### What's a woefully misunderstood food?

Jollof rice. People talk about Nigerian jollof rice and Ghanaian jollof rice. It's an evolution of one dish. When the Nigerians make jollof rice, we like it *smoky*. The Ghanaian jollof rice is a little closer to the traditional one — made by the Wolof people in Senegal and Gambia. But for some reason, the Nigerians and the Ghanaians are fighting over who makes better jollof rice. I can't imagine what the Senegalese and the Ghanaians are thinking. Imagine New Yorkers being like, "We make the best tacos." And the Mexicans are like, "What?" (Although, to be quite honest, Nigerians make better jollof rice, don't let the Ghanaians tell you otherwise). But now the *Liberians* are talking about jollof rice. I'm like, "Stop." There are levels to the game. Stay out of it.

### What's the best jollof rice in New York?

There's a lady who makes this jollof rice at a spot called African Pride in East New York. Sometimes you'll see me in their kitchen. She's from the same part of the country as me so we have similar sensibilities in terms of flavors. She makes the best jollof rice in New York.

### What do you bring to a dinner party?

Go to Junior's, grab a cheesecake, and everybody will be happy. There's this quote by the writer Tom Robbins: "Who knows how to make love stay? Tell love you are going to the Junior's Deli on Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn to pick up a cheesecake, and if love stays, it can have half."

### What's your go-to good-mood music?

There's this music preceding Afrobeat called Fuji. It's a genre of Nigerian music in the North-Central or Southern part of Nigeria. As a kid, I hated it. Now I like it, even the crass ones. (If your parents caught you listening to that, they'd kill you!) When I'm getting sluggish, the front of house will play this music and I'm like, "My secret pump-up song!"

### Which restaurants abroad have shaped or inspired you?

There's a place called Lyle's in London. Absolutely brilliant. That pomp. I also like this place called Kol. There's something about the British sensibility that's a little different from what we do here that can be kind of cool.

### What's your typical uniform?

All white — white T-shirt and white jeans from Industry of All Nations. It's natural fabrics, not bleached, not dyed. Everyone is like, "How come you don't have stuff on yourself?" The minute somebody says that I'm like, "Well, now a stain is brewing."

### What objects are you loyal to?

I like to write so I bought a reMarkable. It's a tablet — you just keep writing and keep everything in one place. But sometimes, you'll find me with a pen and paper. I'll sit in a café and try to reflect on one thing or another, trying to put it in writing.

### What do you miss the most about home?

I don't miss home. I miss time — that time I can never have again: When you're 12 years old and you think you're the smartest creature in the universe. Before all your siblings were married and went and did their own thing, and there was that truth to a nuclear family. I miss that time. ●

### Our Contributors

#### Sophie Mancini Writer

Sophie Mancini is an editor at Departures. Born and raised in New York City, she holds a degree in creative writing from Johns Hopkins University and has a background as a writer in brand and editorial.

#### Oriana Fenwick Illustrator

Oriana Fenwick is an illustrator from Zimbabwe currently based in Frankfurt, Germany. Her pencil illustrations marry classic analog drawing techniques with her interest in establishing surprising relationships between compelling objects and fascinating subjects. Her diverse body of work includes editorials, book illustrations, product packaging, and film posters.