

IYARE! Splendor & Tension in Benin's Palace Theatre

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University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology

Food and Cooking in Benin



The Edo have a varied diet, and most meals consist of a starch with “stew” (a tomato-based sauce) or “soup” (what Americans would call stew; a thick liquid with vegetables), and some bite-size chunks of meat, fish, or chicken. Pats of starch are served on plates or bowls, then broken into bite-size balls and drug through the soup; these are sometimes in communal dishes, and only the right hand is used. Stew with rice or spaghetti is served individually as a main dish and eaten with a fork. Breakfast today has expanded to include options such as bread, oatmeal, cereal, and chocolate drinks such as Bournvita or Milo.

Although most Edo prefer to eat at home, fast food restaurants such as “Mr. Biggs” have sprung up in Benin City, and snacks are popular. Frozen yoghurt and popsicles are available though bicycle distributors.

Meat, vegetables, and fruits are usually purchased in open markets, but supermarkets sell dry and canned goods.

Although varied foodstuffs have expanded in Benin in the past century, due to trucked produce from other parts of the country and importation of packaged foods, most food is grown or raised in Benin and nearby parts of Nigeria. This agricultural region is rich in fruits and vegetables, and local livestock includes chickens, guinea fowl, ducks, and goats. Sheep and cows are usually herded into town by Northern Nigerians, and are readily available. Fresh fish are brought in from the rivers and Delta region, but dried smoked and “iced” (frozen) fish are also available. Hunters sell “bush meat,” which is also usually smoked and dried; this might be antelope, grasscutter (like a groundhog), porcupine, or other wild animals.

Meat and chicken are usually pieced, boiled, then fried. This is necessary because the animals are not grain fed, and are physically active—which makes them too tough to eat without breaking down the tissues further.

The traditional staple is yam (not what Americans know as sweet potatoes, though they are also available). Yams are a large tuber with a thick bark that must be removed with a knife; several varieties of yam are available in Benin. Though this tuber can be found in the Americas, particularly in areas that serve Puerto Rican customers (“iname”), they are much smaller in the U.S. than in Nigeria. Coco-yams (also available in Puerto Rican stores) and water yams are also popular. Cassava (available in Puerto Rican stores) is a second staple, and can be prepared in various ways, including a dried powder which is soaked in water (*igari*), combined with hot water and whipped up into a fluffy form (*eba*), or with its starch extracted. Starch is particularly popular in Benin and the Niger Delta region. Although rice is not native to Benin, it is one of the most popular staples available.

Vegetables include water leaf, *efo* (a spinach-like green), and okra. Cabbage, cucumbers, potatoes, and carrots are available, but still considered foreign food.

Popular spices consist of a variety of dried leaves (some thyme-like) and seeds such as *egusi* or *ogbono*, as well as prepared materials, such as “local Maggi,” a dried paste made from fermented locust bean (*Parkia filicoidae*). Potash is added as a cooking agent, as is dried crayfish (actually dried shrimp, often available at Asian markets). Bouillon cubes have become constant flavoring additions. Both palm oil and peanut (“groundnut”) oil are used extensively in cooking.

Many popular food items are non-African, but were introduced centuries ago. They include pineapples, tomatoes, hot peppers, papaya, and lemons and limes. More recent popular introductions (many now made in Nigeria, as well as imported) include pasta, tinned tomatoes, curry powder, condensed and powdered milk, cereal, baked beans, corned beef, ketchup, cookies (called biscuits in the British usage), crackers, Ramen-style noodles, and juices.

Local snacks include salted plantain chips, roast plantain, boiled or roasted peanuts. Suya, a Hausa-made delicacy consisting of thinly sliced beef, dredged in dried hot pepper, ginger, and ground peanuts, is available in Benin City. *Akara* and *moi-moi*, fried and steamed snacks made from black-eyed peas, are of Yoruba origin but popular in Benin as well, as is chin-chin, fried dough that serves as a kind of cookie snack. In general, sweets were not part of the traditional diet, except for fruit, but candies, cookies, and chewing gum are very popular now. Pepper soup, a broth made with special spices and either chicken, meat, or fish, is a popular delicacy served as an appetizer.

Water or palm wine were traditional drinks, but have been joined by bottled water, orange, pineapple, or other juices, sodas such as Coke, Fanta, Schweppes Bitter Lemon, ginger ale, or non-alcoholic malt drinks, and beer, stout, wine, gin, and other alcoholic beverages. Both Nigerian Breweries and Guinness have factories in Benin City.

Wealthy Edo often hire cooks, frequently from the Ibibio area. Their training includes foods from the Cross Rivers area, as well as fried rice, spaghetti Bolognese, and curried rice, expanding the palates of their employers.

Breakfast:

Breakfast might consist of any of the lunch or dinner dishes below, for most meals are actually interchangeable. Breakfast has, however, adapted more than the others in its adoption of foreign tastes. It might consist of tea with milk and sugar, Corn Flakes, and bread. Another popular combination is an omelette with slices of salted fried plantain (*dodo*). A few pieces of *akara* make a light meal, and poor students often resort to soaked garri (powdered cassava) with peanuts.

Lunch:

Lunch tends can be lighter fare, or identical to food served at dinner. Rice with stew is extremely popular, as is Jollof rice. Spaghetti is popular, and substituted for rice in numerous dishes.

Dinner:

Pounded yam—sliced, boiled, then mashed till smooth and elastic with a mortar and pestle—is a typical Benin dish, served with a soup such as *egusi*. Equally typical is starch served with *banga* soup, often with boiled and fried giant snails. A third meal might be *ogbono* soup with *eba*.

Recipes:

Many of these are tricky to adapt without all the ingredients; stew is the simplest.

Nigerian stew: Tomato-based stew is popular throughout Nigeria; the Yoruba tend to use more pepper than the Edo, and some cooks will throw in additional spices, such as dried ginger, thyme, or oregano. Served over boiled white rice with cubes of boiled then fried beef or chicken, it can be accompanied with salted slices of plantain as well. The amount of pepper depends on its strength. The pepper known as *ata rodo* in Nigeria is necessary for stew; in the U.S. it is known as habanero or scotch bonnet, available in stores with West Indian customers. This makes about 4 servings.

8 plum tomatoes
1/3 a good sized purple onion
3 *ata rodo*/habanero peppers
about ¼ to ½ cup peanut oil
1 beef bouillon cube
salt to taste (usually about ½ a teaspoon)

Start by liquidizing one plum tomato, then add the others to the blender till smooth. Add the onion and peppers till smooth. Heat oil in a saucepan till very hot. Carefully pour in liquid; it may spatter. Cover. Let it boil at high heat about 5 minutes, then turn down to simmer. Add bouillon cube, salt, spices (a combination of about ¼ teaspoon dried thyme and ½ teaspoon basil plus a dash or two of dried ginger is good). Cook about 20 minutes at low heat, but check to be sure it isn't overdrying. Some cooks like to add one small can of tomato paste to intensify the red color; this may require adding water and adjusting the time. Serve with boiled rice or spaghetti; boiled then fried chunks of meat or chicken should be placed on top.

Banga soup: This is a very typical Benin dish. The palm fruit is available canned in some Chinese groceries. It is served with cooked cassava starch, often with boiled then fried giant snails, or with beef.

Palm fruit pulp

1 tsp. dried red pepper

1 small purple onion

1 small can tomato paste

4 fresh habanero/scotchbonnet/*ata rodo* peppers

thyme (traditional spices add the delicious scent and flavor, but *rigije* and *atariko* seeds are not readily available outside southern Nigeria)

Boil strained palm fruit pulp with the snails or meat with water, covered, on low heat till meat is tender. Liquidize onion and pepper in the blender and add to pulp mixture. Turn up heat and cook for 15 minutes uncovered; serve with starch.

Egusi soup: Though this soup is associated with the Igbo to Benin's east, the Edo consume it as a regular menu item. It can be eaten with meat or chicken—boil either, then the following will be added to the boiled liquid.

1 ¼ cup *egusi* seeds (available in many African or specialty food stores)

palm oil

2 *ata rodo*/habanero/scotchbonnet fresh peppers

thyme & salt to taste

½ Roma tomato

1 small purple onion

greens (water leaves are best; can try to substitute fresh spinach)

Grind *egusi* seeds dry in a blender adapter or spice mortar. Fry at moderate heat in palm oil 2 minutes. Liquidize tomato, onion, and peppers in blender and add to *egusi*; add all to meat pot with broth. Boil 15 minutes uncovered, add washed leaves and boiled meat for final 5 minutes of cooking and serve with pounded yam.

Ogbono soup with fresh fish: Popular with fish, as well as meat.

Fresh fish

15 *ogbono* seeds (available in specialty markets)

1 teaspoon dried red pepper

1 small purple onion

2 Roma tomatoes

¼ cup palm oil, plus a tablespoon

1 tsp. "local Maggi"

¾ cup dried crayfish

salt to taste

pinch of *kaun* (potash)

Grind *ogbono* dry in special blender adapter or with a little palm oil in a spice mortar. Clean fish and cut into serving pieces. Grind pepper, onion, tomato, and crayfish in blender. Put palm oil,

potash, and 1 ¼ cups water in a pot; boil. Add all except fish and boil low for 20 minutes. Add fish and cook till tender.

Akara: This snack is very popular with Nigerians and those Americans who have tried it as well. Though of Yoruba origin, it is consumed by all.

1 ¼ cups black-eyed peas
¼ or less of a red onion, chopped (to taste)
½ teaspoon dried red pepper
salt to taste
peanut or other oil to deep-fat fry (traditionally palm oil)

Soak black-eyed peas about 1 hour, drain, and rub peas together to slough off hulls. If you pour water in the bowl repeatedly, hulls will float to the top and are easier to get rid of. Drain and grind peas in a blender till smooth. Add as little water as possible to aid grinding. Remove paste, then whip with an electric mixer. Add warm water slowly to get a thick, but dripping batter, almost like biscuits. Fold in chopped onion to taste, a little dried red pepper, and salt. Heat oil in a deep skillet or pot until VERY hot. Drop into oil by spoonfuls, flip when golden brown till other side is same. Drain on paper towel and eat immediately.

Links to other sources:

(Not all these foods are popular in Benin, but many are; travel and local restaurants run by non-indigenes have expanded food tastes):

<http://www.foodbycountry.com/Kazakhstan-to-South-Africa/Nigeria.html>

http://www.cooks.com/rec/search/0,1-0,nigerian_food,FF.html

<http://www.motherlandnigeria.com/food.html>

<http://www.folklife.si.edu/africa/recipes.htm>

http://recipes.wikia.com/wiki/Category:Nigerian_Recipes

<http://emeagwali.com/nigeria/cuisine/nigerian-jollof-rice.html>