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From Lagos with love



MOUTHFEEL, CONSISTENCY, TERROIR: Tunde Wey believes the plethora of nouveau terms and buzzwords that have come to describe modern cuisine are, well, a buzzkill. “People are no longer enjoying food. They enjoy the idea of food.”

Growing up in Lagos, Nigeria, food, he contends, was described with simplicity. “When you take ebà [cassava flour, hot water and palm oil], scoop up some egusi [a savoury stew made from the ground seeds of melons from Nigeria] with ebà and put it in your mouth, it’s one flavour. Everything has come together to form this one thing. You can’t distinguish one thing from the other when it’s done well. And I think maybe that’s my problem with these words and these abstractions,” he says. “I certainly understand it” — “it” being the intellectualization of food, which Wey chalks up to the multifaceted nature of modern gastronomy — “but I condone it less than most people do,” he admits.

The self-taught chef would like to push for a more holistic, conscious approach to dining. Lagos, Wey’s contemporary Nigerian eatery at posh food hall St Roch Market in New Orleans, offers unfussy, uncomplicated West African fare in “hearty,” “sloppy,” “spicy,” “greasy” and “f***ing delicious” spoonfuls.

Wey’s journey to culinary success, however, was not as straightforward as his dishes.

First came Revolver, an experimental restaurant of revolving chefs and menus, which he opened with friend Peter Dalinowski in 2013 in Hamtramck, Detroit, the city he moved to from Nigeria at age 16. Seeking a more creative outlet, Wey then taught himself to cook his mother’s and his aunt’s recipes. Many a YouTube tutorial later, he launched the first of four monthly pop-up dinners in Mexicantown, Southwest Detroit.

“Sometimes, the food got worse before it got better,” he concedes, though the overall concept was well received. After

hosting as many as 100 hungry diners at a time, Wey challenged himself creatively with a small, intimate party of 12. Emboldened by the experience, Wey, who had since left Revolver, travelled to New Orleans to visit a friend — and try his hand at cooking for pay. And so Lagos: Nigerian BBQ, a traveling dinner series, was born. Wey’s casual Nigerian culinary affair has since travelled to eight cities, including Washington, DC, Philadelphia and New York City.

“The preponderance of Nigerian restaurants caters to Nigerians. I think there hasn’t been a conscious, intentional effort to mainstream Nigerian cuisine, having it at least be part of the vocabulary of ethnic food in the country,” says Wey.

Approached by St Roch Market in January, he has since put down roots in New Orleans where he now has a kitchen to call his own — and experiment in, unbridled. “I personally don’t follow recipes and try to cook more intuitively, adjusting flavour as I go.”

So how does Wey’s West African cuisine differ from that of his brethren?

“My voice is more contemporary, more reflective of my experiences of somebody born in Nigeria who grew up there but also grew up here [the United States], who’s trying to create a space in this country where I can be Nigerian and comfortable while still being accessible to people. Opening a kitchen in New Orleans seems to have fine-tuned my mission, which is to mainstream Nigerian cuisine without making it pedestrian.”

Future plans include a stand-alone brick-and-mortar Lagos and more pop-up dinners across the United States and farther afield. Nigerian fusion: not so much. “My philosophy is always being refined,” says Wey. “Who knows, maybe I’ll go to culinary school and do some African fusion stuff, but I hope that never happens! ✦