



Food for Thought: Culinary Cultures and Their Discontents

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Meals, beyond meeting our dietary and nutritional needs, is pretty much one of the most telling signallers of Kenya's social sensibilities, in which food preparation, serving, availability, and taboos give insights into our people's histories, geographies, ethnicities, tragedies, and self-perceptions.

That we're a crop people, with crops making up 81% of our food output and yet milk products records the highest consumption belies the fact that our supply systems are still better geared towards industrialized supplies.

Still, maize and wheat and their related products come in at a close second and third respectively in national food consumption. According to [the status of traditional vegetable](#) report, 200 species growing naturally in Kenya are used as leafy vegetables. About 10 more exotic species introduced during the pre-colonial period have been integrated into the traditions of various communities and can therefore be regarded as traditional vegetables.

Ethnobotanist Patrick M. Maundu's research documented 10 exotic species introduced into Kenya in the pre-colonial period of which the top three of maize, milk and wheat have recorded higher profitability pegged on the large scale technological production. Consequently this has entrenched the food industries the primary arbiters of Kenya's culinary aspects with the resultant cartelism,

artificial shortages, oligopolies, market inefficiencies and food safety issues. Food occupies this complex place in society and social order, a fact that led the pioneer gastronomy Jean Brillat-Savarin to remark 'Tell me what kind of food you eat, and I will tell you what kind of man you are.

Pretty much all indigenous foods chiefly Cassava (8th), Sorghum (15th), and Millet (19th) position, have been edged out of the primary consumption basket. Mass production of the top industrial food items, pegged on their mass marketing, industrial production and the resultant lower prices put them at the top of the totem pole of food intake. Even then, the distinction between foreign and indigenous foods is fluid and often tentative given the transitory nature of ethnic cultures including food and culinary habits among ethnicities over time.

Food and Meaning

Food, therefore as a cultural and ethnic text, expresses the truism that man, since his prehistoric times, was able to link nutritious foods not just with robust health but also its capacity as a social marker, cultural identity, and [insight into the economic, myth-making, and resource constraints](#) of his immediate ecology.

Peoples are what they eat and the dietary consumption and what we choose to imbibe, or not consume based on habits, health, religion, or taboos symbolically reflect this dynamic. Our respective food traditions communicate to others, our beliefs, cultural and social backgrounds, incomes, and experiences. Granted there are many reasons why we exclude certain foods from our diet, from basic health issues to deep cultural and personal beliefs.

An intuitive survival need such as eating, that all humans share, is also something that we use to differentiate ourselves; our psychologies, anthropologies, individual preferences, desires, sense-making, economic capacity, health concerns, farming practices, and social limitations.

Food political Failure

At the economic level, resource constraints and starvation occasioned by the current political failure, limits dietary choices in terms of available food, pricing, alternative meals, and future food needs, [with drought warning mechanisms estimating](#) one-third of the 4 million Nairobi residents as starving.

In many ways the frequent food shortages and the attendant perennial famine are reflections of political and policy failure to modernize our supply systems, audit our food systems, and mainstream food security initiatives. This phenomenon isn't just a city problem as shrinking land sizes have necessitated the need for food purchases even in rural Kenya.

New City Norm

The average Kenyan therefore, robbed of the capacity to consistently afford, and access quality variety of meals is forced to a primary dependency on the Kibanda food stall culture. These Kibandas as profit-making ventures definitely go for the cheapest easy-to-mass-produce foods on the menu item.

Their lack of proper food safety notwithstanding, the Kibanda culture plugs the gaps in urban food supply systems, and shortens the elaborate process of food production at home, for an exhausted and fast-paced urban dwellers.

Grocerants and delis in supermarkets meanwhile play the same role Kibanda do but for the middling and upper classes. Keenly aware of the changing lifestyles of the ingredient shoppers, supermarkets

shifted from only selling ingredients and recipes to also fixing the meal and selling it like a restaurant. This trend started with the retail outlet Tuskys supermarket in 2014 before their competitors caught on, buoyed by the convergence of tech and hospitality, and the desire for fresh food, access, and convenience at decent prices.

Cucumbers on Sale

What's never obvious to the average Kenyan is that the structure of society closely correlates to the nature of its status foods. Societies with small social classism tend to have more elaborate staple foods and go for larger portions, while highly unequal and stratified societies place inordinate emphasis on [culinary style, quality and even presentation](#). Hence, depending on the society's structure, food either becomes a bonding mechanism for neighbours and friends, or a signifier of exclusivity, distance, class, and prestige.

Further to that, culturally homogeneous communities designate uniqueness of an occasion based on quantities of foods served. Meanwhile the interactions in heterogeneous cultures say during inter-ethnic dowry negotiations, special occasions are designated uniqueness based on the variety of cuisines served. Despite the stratified nature of our local society haute cuisines and fine dining haven't taken root since Kenyans-even the elite strata-still prefer foods they know. This lack of experimentation with food has curtailed fine dining restaurant culture even as casual dining, kibanda culture, and fast food outlets continue to grow and expand.

The underlying issue here could be that Kenya lacks a notable process of aristocratic acculturation such as can be spotted among Rwandese, Ugandan, French or South African nobilities. Hence we're stuck with a financial and economic elite who besides monetary outlay do not have any binding social sensibilities, dining rituals, and any unique markers of identity formation outside of high incomes.

Markedly, in cultures where there is an abundance of food, slender bodies are associated with privilege and status, while in societies where food is scarce, there is the perception that being chubby is a status marker. However body image, in relation to food, has increasingly lesser social meaning, given that we're more inundated with Euro-American notions of fitness, beauty, and bodily aesthetics.

Eat Your Caviar

These Euro-American notions do not stop at how we perceive bodies, even what's often considered good food whether in movies or Instagram is mostly white food, American food or generally processed foods. While I'm focusing on white foods here, coffee, tea and alcohol are also used in similar ways. Brand name Euro-American beverage and food varieties pasted on our digital profiles are overtly supposed to signify prestige and implicitly convey taste and status.

[Indigenous Kenyan foods](#) are then exoticised within the make-believe Kenyan high-society and sold as special cuisines. These classists and racial notions of food hierarchy relegate local dishes to healthy but low-status meals best left to the sick, the aged and those in the rural enclaves.

The politics of food much more poignantly plays out even locally with the Kikuyus and their stereotypical soupy foods, political connotation of wishy-washy politician as watermelons, and the signifier of tribal rank in the disdainful phrasing *uthamaki ní witù*, *thamaki ní ciao*, as well as Luhyas and their typecasted food quantities.

Who Moved My Cheese?

Further away from tribal stereotypes foods as religious markers distinguishes local sects, genders and communities who are bounded by certain edicts. The growing yoga community in the country designates certain food consumption so does the vegan society, as well as the vegetarian communities.

Adventists relation with red meat, Halal foods for Muslims, Kosher for the Jewish community and the organic feeders work within a [wider framework of food censures and freedoms for](#) cultural, health, ideological or religious reasons.

Eat of the Ground

The organic food network is gradually gifting a growing cluster of health and safety conscious Kenyans with a healthy and well-curated food system. The Kenya Organic Agriculture Network (KOAN) has designated the organic markets in Nairobi to include the Organic Farmers Market next to Hillcrest, US Embassy Organic Farmers Market, Kids Ventures Garden Estate, and Karengata Farmers' Market both in Karen, Community Sustainable Agriculture and Healthy Environment Programme (C-SHEP) farmers market in Rongai Township.

Grocery stores such as Kalimoni Greens in Karen, Zucchini at ABC Place, The Corner Shop at Diamond Plaza also sell organic food products. Chandarana Foodplus, Carrefour, and Tuskys retail outlets have organic food sections. Where tech meets food distribution deliveries; Mlango Farm, Sylvia Basket, Greenspoon, and Kalimoni Greens make doorstep deliveries.

The conservative dietary streak however, has not stopped a small but growing cluster of Kenyans who've begun exploring foreign dishes, newer urban cuisines, and flavours made accessible by online recipes, specialty meals, food carnivals and galas. For such a complex society Kenya makes up for a lack of unique and authentic Kenyan dish by constantly evolving its servings to meet the demands of a diverse community.

The Semiotics of Kitchen tools

Curiously, unlike in large swaths of the urban homes where citizens lay out elaborate cutlery, in many rural homes, eating with the hands is the norm in many households. That even pop culture icon Oprah Winfrey couldn't fathom such cultural differences through her now infamous phrase "I heard Indian people eat with their hands still" belies the hard to discard stereotypes.

The underlying belief being that eating with well-set cutlery as is the norm in modern homes is superior, [more culturally evolved and sophisticated](#). These attitudes towards eating with hands is grounded in the never-ending war on germs and hygiene-related Non-Communicable diseases especially in our informal settlements.

This health concern isn't farfetched given that the rapid growth in the use of cutlery partly acted as the definer of space among diners, and later on as a means of dealing with the disease outbreaks that hit rapidly urbanizing metropolis. Cutlery therefore went beyond practical consideration to being an indicator of space, safety, class, cultures and the relationship between man, place and food.

The kids too need to eat

The place of children in the food system is significantly evolved from the traditional open homes setups that had no delineation or gender. Progressively most modern food outlets have had to develop manned indoor play area with small pitches, swings, huts, and ball games to accommodate

family and kid's needs.

Children are major influencers on where a family eats, wine and dine in which little attention given to amusement, food variety, space, gifts, and furniture, paying off hugely. The centrality of the kid's concerns to [parents elevate their comfort](#) as among the primary determinant of whether the family will patronize a food outlet.

Food considerations built for convenience of toddlers equals happy family dining experience, a key premium for most parents that equals great returns for the food business. Kids nutrition, their allergies, preferences are front and centre in the Kenyan family dining experience and while the children may not have the most sophisticated tastes they are very discerning eaters. The modern day dining experience whether in restaurants, homes or events have to prioritize the kids comfort, and palate, especially child-friendly focus over the weekends.

Eat Your Heart out

In the midst of all this Kenyans have to contend with the implication of industrial mass food production model of their top food preferences maize, milk, and wheat. Whether out of modern speeds, convenience or prices we've come to believe that we can feed our bodies industrial, processed foods in perpetuity.

It's this prospect replicated over large swaths across the world that columnist Mark Hyman remarked,

'In the 21st century our tastes buds, our brain chemistry, our biochemistry, our hormones and our kitchens have been hijacked by the food industry.'

The Kenyan food industry tries to minimise losses even at the expense of consumers even as regulatory systems and institutions mandated to guarantee food safety such as Kenya Plant Health Inspectorate Service (KEPHIS), Kenya Bureau of Standards (KEBS) have capitulated to the tyranny of the rogue market. A core issue many Kenyans have to grapple with is the institutions mandated to monitor and ensure [food safety understand that food systems](#) are a national security issue.

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