



Influencer Culture and Food Habits in Urban Nairobi

By Darius Okolla



In June 2002, veteran Kenyan chef Ms Alice Taabu bagged the prestigious Gourmand-World Cookbook Award in recognition of her two-decade-long career on the famed KBC TV cookery show *Mke Nyumbani*. Founded in 1995 by Chef Edouard Cointreau, the Gourmand Award marked a critical turning point in Kenya's food conversation as historical dishes found their place on the global stage, and within a fast-evolving online life and culture spaces.

On June 5th Gourmand will be awarding their 2021 winner amidst a shifting influence in global food tastes, in an event that's dubbed "the Oscars" or "the Olympics" for food enthusiasts, and one that has been increasingly dominated by chefs from the South and East, notably the Chinese. Alice Taabu's versatile feature on our TV shows marked a gentle and progressive expression of our food habits within inter-webs that in hindsight we take for granted.

And it's out of Alice Taabu's years of pioneering work that now there's a growing Kenyan culture of cooking shows, online recipes, and marketing of new social trends in food consumption in the internet streets. With their origins in broadcast television in Kenya, they have evolved tremendously with the growth and uptake of Instagram and YouTube.

This includes the adaptation of television food show formats onto multi-platform content channels

such as Netflix, Pay-Tv, Amazon Prime, brand websites and digital platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram.

Yet, even as the ever versatile chef Alice stuck to the time-tested free-to-air TV model, younger, more boisterous incomers like Arthur Mwai were pushing beverage and culinary options away from the mainstream into newer spaces, including setting up the famed Psys, first on Langata Road and later in Westlands.

Since the mid-2000s the online food culture has evolved and birthed offshoots of *Mke Nyumbani* with varying shelf lives and scope. Buoyed by both the growing ease of content creation, falling cost of internet connectivity, and increasing demand for more local content and local delicacies, recipes increasingly find their way online and into the watching experience of Kenyans within ever-expanding digital ecosystems.

The 2010s saw the explosion of the online world as local content creators consolidated their influence, benchmarked against each other, and set-up entire platforms for curating similar content. It's no wonder then that Yummy was launched a year later, in 2012, Eat Like a King in 2013, [Kaluhi's Kitchen](#) in 2014, Get in The Kitchen on K24 in 2015, and Shamba Chef in 2017.

Kenya's Anita Kerai secured a 7-part food series on Amazon Prime, and published her 170-page *Flavours from Kenya* cookbook. Then there's *The Great Kenyan Bake Off* which is based on the British Version *The Great British Bake Off*, Ali Mandhry's *Tamu Tamu*, and Martin Munyua of *Dads Can Cook* who pioneered the conversation around the legal protection of food TV formats 2013.

A 2015 survey by the Communications Authority of Kenya (CAK) showed that the country has 64 TV stations, and that a majority of local TV viewers preferred local content to foreign programmes. So starting in mid-2016 onwards, the state agency mandated all local broadcasters to start airing 40 per cent local content, increasing gradually to 60 per cent.

The preferred formats are usually semi-structured discursive models involving cooking competitions, instructional methods, light entertainment, storytelling, global cuisine tours, and celebrity guests.

Food Shopping Apps

Locally, a February 2021 poll showed that nearly 4 in 5 shoppers are spending more on online shopping with data top-ups (92 per cent), clothing (67 per cent) and electronics (56 per cent) topping the list of products bought. Meanwhile services sought online include cooking recipes and techniques, dancing classes, learning languages, and mastering DIY projects. That number has inched even higher as COVID-19 restrictions closed down brick and mortar outlets across the country.

The music/movies segment tops the list of online search content, followed by electronics with fashion in third position. But the food segment is growing rapidly; online food stockists and delivery firms including E-Mart, Glovo, Chandarana FoodPlus, UberEats, Yum Deliveries, as well as Green Spoon and Jumia Food have recorded spikes in their online demand.

Twiga, Kalimoni Greens, Kibanda Online, Gobeba, and a host of other online platforms have embraced digitisation and online payment systems to cater to the expanding palate of a tech-savvy society. As online food shopping gains traction, the numbers are bound to surge forward as consumers develop trust and make buying decisions based on the online visual displays, coupled with a seamless product and user interaction.

The influencer culture covers both cooking shows, shopping, dishes, recipes, and food markets in

short simple, accessible TikTok and YouTube clips, and often highlights both exotic and local ingredients.

In typical *Mke Nyumbani* format, such shows offer useful tips on cutlery, techniques, recipes, hygiene, new appliances, first aid, or even what to do if things go wrong. The foodie culture blurs the lines between the food reality TV show and the everyday feeding choices of people and families at home.

Then there is the rise of “Indomie Twitter”, a subculture on Twitter which promotes the growth in the variety of foods consumed, sharing of recipes, online food delivery stores, and outlets.

Psychology of food influencer marketing

The question still remains though: why and how does the psychology of food influencer marketing work? What makes *Mke Nyumbani*, or Dads Who Cook, Shoba’s Cookouts or Indomie Twitter such a social phenomenon. The short answer is that influencer marketing plays directly into the human desire to belong. It amplifies our proclivity towards that which we already are familiar with.

Behavioural psychologists and neuromarketing experts call this the Mere Exposure Effect. All else being equal, the more we’re exposed to something that’s relatable, the more we like it. And fascinatingly, this preference for the familiar often appears to operate outside of our consciousness.

It appeals to our need for social conformity, and our mental processing functions. Basically, our brain is wired to respond to stimulation from influencer marketers whom we already trust at a virtual interaction level. We find their persuasion more authentic, more fun, and more attractive than other types of persuasions. The link is optimised when the awareness and affinity of the consumer gels with the creativity of the influencer.

Hence, for example [Shoba Gatimu](#)’s earthy humor, the ingenuity of the Indomie Twitter crew, [Hannah Thee Baker](#)’s digital influencing makes food products look good on set, given they are agile chefs who’re good at their craft.

The psychological terrain of the food influencer market is what happens when social users follow friends and famous users rather than corporate brands. These consumers turn to social platforms to connect and find out how people they look up to build their lifestyles and to look for relatable figures to help them filter through the hundreds of choices in the online markets. In turn they consume lots of visual content which food influencers are primed to optimise.

Research shows that well thought-out visual influencer marketing in the food industry incentivises an engagement rate of 7 per cent and can imply conversion rates of up to Ksh7 for every shilling spent. Ultimately, the partnership between brands and influencers is built on the social ingredient that their personas brings, while building up significant returns on investment (ROI).

To understand the psychology of persuasion, author Robert Cialdini places the construction of influence under six metrics: Reciprocation – the internal pull to repay what another person has provided us with. Consistency – we work to behave consistently towards a choice we’ve already made. Social Proof – when we are unsure, we look to similar others. Liking – the propensity to agree with people we like and the desire for others to agree with us if we like them. Authority – we are more likely to say “yes” to others who are authorities. Scarcity – we want more of what is less available or dwindling in availability.

The overall group psychology that happens ends up creating *consumer tribes* in which the pursuit of consumption of certain meals or dishes built into our ethnic, class, religious or moral influence is

reinforced. This isn't hard given that the need for social conformity is already hardwired into our brain's reward system.

The evolution of the kitchen influence

An even bigger influence in group-wide food tastes and preferences among Kenyans stems from social sharing. Influence at that level is therefore built into our deep networks of trust, approval, love, companionship and even identity. The most enduring influence on our food tastes therefore comes from the social affections that we've built with our friends within family and friendship set-ups.

In the modern family kitchen, efficiency has gradually eroded camaraderie, as technology reorients and at times replaces our cooking traditions. Meanwhile convenience has become king, as cookware, countertops, drawers, ovens and cabinetry signal the gradual evolution of both the home, the consumer society, and technology.

Your typical modern Kenyan kitchen now bears little resemblance to the home kitchens of old. Before the dawn of modernity, human life revolved around the kitchen and the farm, and the roles that defined kitchen life were often assigned to the women in the community. This lent the home life to critical contestation at the dawn of modernity as family life shifted away from those two domains and into the urban environment.

The traditional designation of the kitchen as a place for mothers and women in general was challenged by the industrial revolution that drove the locus of civilisation away from the kitchen — and by extension the home — and into the milling factories miles away.

And as Ally Matsoso opines, "As men began to accumulate excess wealth and power, they gained freedoms women lacked. Survival and family stability were no longer their sole motivators. Women, as Nourishers of the family, decreased in influence as the family's importance decreased, crowded out by commerce. Local bakers could now supply our bread. The spiritual center, the home, had to compete with a material culture, capable of satisfying needs the home once met, and of creating new needs as well."

What we are seeing at the tail end of capitalism as we know it, is a major shift in food cultures and the nuances built around them. Male chefs grace our TV shows and Instagram food influencers represent a wide range of ages, gender, sexes, class, and persuasion.

There is increased diversity in meal plans, and orthorexia is now a prevalent habit that is defined as a genuine and critical concern about what someone eats. This could range from giving up sugars or oils or meat as a matter of preference. It can also be seen in veganism, vegetarianism or pescatarianism, diets that are adopted either because of health concerns, ecological issues, religious beliefs, or a myriad other social, cultural, moral or personal desires. Entire groups like Hindus, Adventists, Muslims have given up certain foods for one or more of the aforementioned reasons.

Recipes are getting increasingly local as health concerns, and choice of nutrition over taste gives preference to local delicacies once considered not cool enough for our social media streets. Nduma, ngwaci, boiled/roasted maize, bean bread, osuga, banana bread, githeri, chicken and ugali, fish, groundnuts, vegetable dishes, irio, kimanga, cassava and bean mash, matoke, mbaazi, njahi, porridge — to name just those — are sneaking their way back onto our dinner plates, Tiktok, YouTube, and Gram.

In this sense, the growth of cookery shows and food influencers is not so much the ultimate co-option of the home kitchen by modernity, as it is an imperfect recreation of what was, until the dawn

of modernity, the soul of the home.

At the end of the day, the ultimate food influence in our lives may not be the familiar and likable chefs on TV, but our mothers and fathers, their recipes, the dinner table, and the food rituals in our family kitchen.

-

This article is part of [The Elephant Food Edition Series](#) done in collaboration with [Route to Food Initiative \(RTFI\)](#). Views expressed in the article are not necessarily those of the RTFI.

Published by the good folks at [The Elephant](#).

The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.

Follow us on [Twitter](#).

