


# ft

Food Technology™

Fueling Food Innovation  
www.ift.org | May 2025

 Sugar  
Reduction  
Strategies

PAGE 22

A Swallowing  
Solution From  
Cornell

PAGE 29

Plant-Based  
Eating Trends

PAGE 38

What  
Rethinking  
GRAS Will  
Require

PAGE 48

# The Emerging Flavors of Africa

PAGE 16

 IFT



Still largely undiscovered by U.S. consumers, the ingredients and cuisines of Africa present opportunities for product developers seeking to create novel food experiences.

# The Emerging Flavors of Africa

by Jeffrey Spear



**E**very year, CPG companies are eager to know which flavors and cuisines will be the ones that capture the attention of consumers, allowing them to better formulate their offerings. While global flavors, especially those emerging from southeast Asia, have been performing well, the question is which region, country, or cuisine will influence the next culinary trend.

Recently, a few spices, spice blends, and prepared dishes from the African continent have been attracting attention. Before any discussion of these foods or an emerging African trend can begin, however, it's important to know what U.S. consumers understand about the continent.

## Unfamiliar Territory

To be clear, Americans have a limited understanding of Africa. Most are not aware of the 54 countries that call this continent home, each with its own history, culture, and foodways. Many perceive Africa as the place where lions, giraffes, and elephants roam the countryside. Occasionally, they'll acknowledge a relationship between slavery and foods such as okra, watermelon, and fried chicken, all having a profound impact on American foodways. Contributing to this lack of awareness is the fact that very few restaurants, outside of a small number operating in major

© MONIKA GRABKOWSKA/UNSPLASH





West African soups from Egunsi Foods are ready to heat and eat; they're also suitable for use as a simmer sauce. Photo courtesy of Egunsi Foods

Faso, Guinea, Senegal, Mali, and Nigeria, is the company's flagship product, it also produces fonio pilafs and fonio chips. Across them all, fonio is the primary ingredient coupled with a variety of flavorful African ingredients such as Moringa and baobab.

#### A Reliable Supply Chain

To meet the needs of large-scale commercial clients and ensure a reliable supply of fonio, Yolélé has been working directly with smallholder farmers in West Africa, helping them develop the skills and obtain the equipment needed for increased production, transforming what used to be a small, locally produced crop into a large-scale, commercially viable ingredient. Most recently, the company partnered with Brooklyn Brewery and Guinness, each producing its own version of fonio-inspired beers, Fonio Rising Pale Ale and Fonio Stout, respectively.

Challenges associated with ingredients sourced from Africa include varying seasonality, traceability, climate change, short harvest and processing windows, and food safety regulations. In addition, political instability can add any number of variables into an already complex equation.

According to Ethan Frisch, cofounder and co-CEO of spice company Burlap & Barrel and producer of single-origin, Afrocentric spice blends, "We invest in relationships to ensure the quality, consistency, and reliability of our products. Our producers, many smallholder farmers, recognize the opportunities we offer and are eager to do everything they can to scale production for larger manufacturing needs. Plus, we help

them work out issues related to logistics and compliance, making sure the supply chain operates efficiently and seamlessly."

#### Catering to a Diverse Audience

For most African products, end users in the United States fall into one of three categories. Some are African expats familiar with the ingredients and formulations. For them, the need is simply gaining access to authentic African foods. While this audience is important, there's even greater interest and demand from individuals described as "culinary curious." These are the people who see Africa as a distant land with undiscovered and exotic foodways. No matter the point of origin within the continent, ingredients and prepared foods from Africa represent exciting new experiences that can be shared with friends and family. Lastly, there are buyers who appreciate the healthful benefits of African foods and are motivated to purchase products that are gluten-free (ancient grains including fonio, sorghum, and teff), low glycemic, or simply recognized as wholesome.

Brands such as Adùn, Taste Africa, Egunsi, and Ayo are producing a variety of soups, sauces, and frozen



Burlap & Barrel Baobab Fruit & Vanilla Black Tea includes ingredients sourced from Tanzania. Photo courtesy of Burlap & Barrel

foods, leveraging a culinary heritage that originates in West African countries. It's important to recognize that consumers find many of the ingredients frequently used



Tigadegue-Na from Taste Africa is a frozen meal that features a sauce base made from peanuts. Photo courtesy of Taste Africa

in West African cuisines, including sweet potato, okra, leafy greens, peanuts, rice, onions, peppers, and grilled meats, relatable. When you consider that many popular African foods incorporate ingredients that feel familiar, generating trial is a reasonable expectation. Think jollof rice, which is similar to paella and is seasoned with onion, tomato, and chili pepper; egusi, a thick soup made with ground melon seeds, red bell peppers, and spinach; and tigadeguena, a beef stew made with a peanut and okra sauce that is the national dish of Mali.

#### Bring on the Heat

African cuisines tend to be spice forward, finding parallels with other global cuisines that have already won over a sizeable customer base. This is especially true for spice blends such as berbere, an Ethiopian favorite, and kan kan kan, popular in Burkina Faso. Each of these, and many other spices and spice blends of African origin, contributes remarkable flavor, depth, and heat.



Za'atar from La Boite combines the flavors of za'atar leaves, sumac, and sesame seeds. Photo courtesy of La Boite

At La Boite, a celebrated spice blending enterprise in New York City, chef and owner Lior Lev Sercarz creates unforgettable spice blends, many that reference the noteworthy flavors of Africa. "I'm excited that there's a conversation about African foods moving into the spotlight," he says. "After all, it wasn't that long ago that Chinese food was a new thing. A few of La Boite's more distinctive African blends are Egyptian Spice Crunch, Moroccan Spice Crunch, and Marrakesh.

In many situations, African cuisines are recognized for their use of chilis and hot sauces. While the condiment aisle is already packed, consumers have shown an insatiable appetite for new and different flavors and points of origin, especially those displaying both depth of flavor and heat. Inspired in part by the popularity of sriracha, POKS (maker of spicy West African seasoning blends) and African Dream (creator of hot sauces that reference multiple points of origin on the African continent) have been incorporating African ghost, habanero, peri-peri, and bird's eye chili peppers into their products to entice customers.

Without a doubt, culinary cultures from the African continent are emerging, albeit a bit sluggishly. Regardless, consumers are gradually embracing the intriguing ingredients and flavors that the continent has to offer. While they may not fully understand their culinary attributes, they are enjoying the adventure and developing a greater appreciation for a wide variety of African foods. ■

Jeffrey Spear is a freelance food writer and cookbook author (jeff@spearwrites.com).



Yolélé Foods has teamed with Brooklyn Brewery on Fonio Rising Pale Ale. Photo courtesy of Yolélé Foods

Consumers have shown an insatiable appetite for new and different flavors and points of origin, especially those displaying both depth of flavor and heat.