



STYLE

<http://www.chico.mweb.co.za/art/2007/2007mar/070323-politics.html>

March 23 2007

## Eating Africa: politics of the stomach

Local knowledge of the eating habits of faraway cultures, and their adaptability, reflects suburban South Africa's inadequate knowledge of its own indigenous eating culture, writes **Matthew Krouse**



Images from *Beautiful Ugly*: banquet in Cameroon

**T**he trouble with the contemporary culinary experience, as portrayed by major television networks, is in the packaging. Programmes blare from designer kitchens -- a fabulous place from which to begin a grand departure from South Africa to the Mediterranean or South-East Asia to follow international trends.

Sadly, local knowledge of the eating habits of faraway cultures, and their adaptability, reflects suburban South Africa's inadequate knowledge of its own indigenous eating culture. Or perhaps it is just that we haven't found a suitable range of dishes to market proudly. The widest access we have to truly Southern African cuisine can be found in Nando's fast food outlets, which sell chicken inspired by the Portuguese-African fusion of a neighbouring state.

Neither Cape Malay cuisine nor Durban's now ubiquitous bunny chow have lived up to their promise. There's definitely more piri piri chicken out there than loaves of white bread stuffed with bean curry.

A new book of essays, edited by Sarah Nuttall, titled *Beautiful Ugly: African and Diaspora Aesthetics* (Kwela Books and Duke University Press) doesn't deal with our low sense of culinary esteem square on, but it does give clues as to why African food is suffering such low ratings.

Nuttall is associate professor of literary and cultural studies at Wits University and her collection advances discussion around the power structures inherent in the African eating experience. Cheryl-Ann Michael of the University of Western Cape, who grew up in Durban, had to do time in London to get to know okra stews and plantain recipes from West Africa.

Back home, she recalls an adventurous grandmother who took her shopping in the city's old Indian business quarter, and her experience was otherworldly. "We drank travel," Michael concludes her thoughts about Indian and Chinese teas. These days, in Johannesburg's Chinatown one eats migration, and in every dish one can almost taste the alienation.

Two other essays -- in the chapter about food, which sits as a metaphorical centerpiece in Nuttall's collection -- focus on excessive banqueting in the Cameroon (*Let's Eat: Banquet Aesthetics and Social Epicurism* by Célestin Monga) and the experience of street food while growing up on Réunion Island (*Let's Cook!* by François Vergès).

Vergès writes that "food is a territory on which history and politics fight their battles. Food has always been used as a weapon in wars."

Vergès and Monga both observe that during conflict food is used as a tool of manipulation and that water is often a source of conflict in land distribution. Then there are the famines, the politics around food distribution to the starving by ideologically laden NGOs.

Vergès writes about the bittersweet history of sugar cane on Réunion Island and the colonial cook once employed to reproduce the "civilised" cuisine of Europe who, unwittingly, created the fusions of a new age.

Today, Monga writes, the vulgar champagne and caviar feasts of the new African elite "command respect and admiration, not contempt. For beyond the apparent superficiality of the act, there is essentially a desire for self-affirmation and a need for the recognition of one's humanity. The message is clear: misery will not frustrate our dreams, nor our unquenchable quest for dignity and respect."