

Afia Catering



Congo native shares foods of homeland

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By Suzanne Martinson, Post-Gazette Food Editor

Ruth Mundundu hopes to introduce the food she loves to people who might not know much about Congolese cuisine. Afia Catering reflects the healthful cooking style of Congo. *Afia* in Swahili means *feeling good or healthy*.

The diet of Congo is based on fruits and vegetables, with peanuts and small amounts of meat and fish as protein sources. Ruth cooks with peanut oil, as well as olive oil. Often there is the spicy flavor of cayenne or red cherry peppers. "We cannot have food without vegetables," she says. "It's really healthy, and we don't need supplements."

The flavors of central Africa are probably less well-known than those of western African countries, such as Ghana and Nigeria, she says. Like many tropical countries, Congo has a vegetable-based diet that uses peanuts for protein, and many of Mundundu's dishes have peanut sauces.

"People love my spinach with peanut butter sauce," she says. "The secret is fresh ingredients. Ginger, garlic, onion."

She is able to find the ingredients at such mainstream stores as Giant Eagle and Wal-Mart, though she might stop at an Indian grocery for basmati rice. She will prepare plain jasmine rice, as well as fried rice and rice with vegetables. There will be such American mainstays as beef, which is often marinated for Congolese dishes.

You will be introduced to such Congolese dishes as fumbwa, a type of vegetable, and fufu, a floury dough that may be made with cornmeal, plantains or semolina with some potato starch thrown in to "make the fufu a little stringy," she says. In addition to spinach, okra is another popular vegetable.

Seafood is also part of the cuisine, and there will be smoked salmon and smoked whiting in some dishes. Makayabo is salted fish, which is dipped in water all night to remove most of the salt, then fried. "I mix it with my own special sauce," she says. Mbika -- called *courge* in French -- is the seed from a melon, which is toasted and ground. As for sweets, there is mikate, a doughnut made with yeast, flour, sugar and sometimes a little ginger. Another sweet is coconut fried with milk and brown sugar.

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Suzanne Martinson can be reached at smartinson@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1760.

Afia Catering 412-362-4729; or

Gardenalia, Shadyside, 412-441-9611.

afia@bewell-drumon.com