

The politics of street food: the South African chef championing Zulu cuisine

For Mmabatho Molefe, whose Cape Town restaurant reinvents 'peasant dishes', cooking is a way to fight prejudice

When Mmabatho Molefe was growing up in the South African province of KwaZulu-Natal, Friday was a special day, when her parents would give her pocket money to buy food rather than take a packed lunch to school. On a good day, she would spend it all on a vetkoek – traditional doughnut-like fried bread stuffed, in her case, with chicken.

“For me, it just represents a really good Friday afternoon,” says the 28-year-old chef, chuckling. For 12 days from 27 June, her version of that beloved South African street food is set to wow British diners as Molefe becomes the latest guest chef in the “open kitchen” of the London restaurant Carousel.

Part of a new generation of African chefs celebrating the continent’s cuisine – people, in her words, “who are just unapologetically representing themselves” – Molefe is keen to bring the food she grew up eating at her mother’s table to the rest of the world.

Diners at Carousel, where more than 300 guest chefs have taken up residencies since 2014, will be served a seven-course romp through the Zulu diet, taking in dishes such as sweetcorn custard with chickpea shoots and mealie bread, seared scallops with corned beef tongue and spicy tomato broth, and ending in a fermented maize porridge with lemon verbena ice-cream.

“The idea behind the menu itself was to represent memories of my childhood, and that’s just based on dishes that my mom would prepare for me or instances in my childhood that revolved around food – because my sister says I would only remember things if there was food involved,” says Molefe.

To varying extents, the dishes have been reimagined for a wider audience. One is inspired by a sumptuous chicken-neck stew she remembers her mother making but, as she did not want to “put an entire chicken neck on a plate”, it has been reworked as a dainty tartlet, the gelatinous neck bones ground into a “light, meaty mousse”.

The chef’s easy, self-deprecating humour belies the serious status she has built up in just a few years on the international food scene, last year earning herself a place on the World’s 50 Next list of the most dynamic players on the global food scene.

Her Cape Town restaurant Emazulwini only opened in 2020 – and had to close three

weeks later owing to Covid restrictions. But in that time she has made a name for herself as a talented, playful champion of meat cuts, indigenous staples and so-called “peasant dishes” that have long faced prejudice.

Molefe dropped out of the politics, philosophy and law course she started at university (“I think I spent more time cooking than studying,” she admits). But there is a fire to her cooking that is indisputably political. By bringing the food of rural South Africa to the fine dining tables of Cape Town – and London – she is “fight[ing] prejudices and misconceptions”, she says.

“One of the reasons why we champion cuts such as offal and ‘lesser’ cuts of meat is not only because of sustainability, but also just [because of] prejudice: people just saying, ‘No, this isn’t a good cut of meat, so we’re going to discard it or use it for dog food.’ It’s just us saying: ‘This is an unappreciated cut: treat it well and watch it flourish.’ And that’s how I feel in terms of socioeconomic issues, racial issues and other political issues.”

It is not just on the plate that Molefe’s politics come through. A “lifetime goal” is to create a recreational centre for homeless people in Cape Town, and to help them retrain for work in the hospitality industry.

Moreover, she recognises that, in the culinary industry of South Africa, still largely “dominated by white males”, the decision to hire an all-black and, for a time, all-female staff to run Emazulwini has been vital. As the restaurant has expanded, she has hired some men, she adds – but only those who “have learned how to respect women”.

Molefe started cooking – after a fashion – at a young age, playing a game in her back yard inspired by a love of the BBC show *Ready Steady Cook*. “But obviously my parents were like: you’re not going to waste food,” she says. “So we used to ‘cook’ with banana leaves and mud cakes and it just grew as an interest.”

By the age of 10 she was allowed to make one dish: flapjacks, which she “continuously made for years until I found the perfect recipe”. Her mother remembers her bowing over the plate as she had seen the chefs doing on TV. In her head, she says, she is still on a quest to recreate “the perfect cooking-show moment”.

For now, she is excited about bringing her gastronomic vision to London, a city where she knows she will have little trouble sourcing good African ingredients. If there is one dish on her Carousel menu that embodies her desire to revalidate the food of her youth, it is the ipapa neklabishi: braised beef heart, maize and cabbage with sweetbread.

In South Africa, cabbage is considered “a low-income household staple”, she says.

“So to be able to fully represent it and cook it internationally and have people say, ‘OK, I’d be willing to pay this much to try it,’ when normally it wouldn’t be seen as something worthy. That says, ‘this is me, this is who I am, and this is where I come from.’”