

Edziban naa! Dzi dzi (It is food, eat it!)

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The most invigorating part of experiencing a new culture comes when one adapts a perspective similar to that of a young child. Not in the sense of regression, but the pure wide-eyed wonderment accompanying new environmental sights, sounds, tastes, and smells. Through this, an enhanced perspective will unveil itself as our viewpoint is often dulled in the security of our own society. I was given the privilege of spending two months in Ghana, West Africa, living and learning the art of Ghanaian cuisine from a beautiful Adele woman whom I referred to as Mama Esther.

The Adele tribe populates the Northern Volta region of Ghana where I was located for the duration of my stay, more specifically in the District Capital of Nkwanta. A popular staple dish for the Adele consists of fufu and light soup, which is eaten daily. From the standpoint of a Westerner, the consumption of this seemingly uncooked dough ball and eating soup with one's fingers feels worlds away from the comfort of mom's homemade chicken noodle soup, eaten with a spoon and sourdough bread. An adventurous eater by nature, I found it was an exciting opportunity to put aside everything I knew to be true about soup. I learned as a child would through observations and questions, which expanded my world view



Nkwanta outdoor market. Photo by: Julia Mallon.



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and taste palate to include one of my new favorite foods – fufu.

The main market day in Nkwanta is on Mondays. People from all over the town and surrounding villages come to sell, buy, bargain, eat, and most importantly, socialize. As I accompanied Mama Esther to the market, we stopped and greeted each friend we saw along the way. Ghanaians do not greet with a simple, “Hey, how are you?” in passing as Westerners often do. They take their time greeting through an extensive dialogue inquiring into all aspects of life. It was on these walks to the market where I met many of Mama Esther’s friends; and though they were from various tribes, they all welcomed me generously with familial titles such as Sister or Auntie. The time Ghanaians take to develop relationships, whether acquaintance, friend, or an outsider such as myself, is admirable and a reflection of their culturally innate hospitality. It is believed that their actions not only represent themselves but their family and tribe as well. This unspoken system of accountability held by tribal sentiments consequently results in a safe and highly moral culture.

When we first reached the outdoor market in the heart of town, I noticed it was segregated into different culinary sections for the purpose of organization



Gloria and Mama Esther pounding fufu with a mortar and pestle.
Photo by: Julia Mallon.

and ease of purchasing. To me, it seemed every stall overflowed with new exotic foods that were just flush with culinary possibilities; I could hardly contain my excitement. The produce section is a natural mosaic with an expansive spread displaying every color on the spectrum; the meat is so fresh it is cut right off the animal, a true custom cut for every customer. We stopped at several different vendors to compare prices and quality before purchasing yams, plantains, dried tilapia, tomato paste, onions, and various spices – while, of course, greeting friends and acquaintances along the way.

After visiting the market for about two hours, it was time to head home and start cooking dinner. We began by boiling the yams and plantains for about twenty minutes until they were soft. We then placed the boiled items into a large wooden mortar and pounded the starchy mass with a long pestle. During this process in the southern regions of Ghana, one person typically pounds the mixture while another is seated next to the mortar, turning the mixture in between strokes. In the northern region, however, it is commonplace for two people to pound the mixture in an alternating rhythmic motion. It will be pounded until a smooth and sticky, yet firm, consistency is reached. I quickly found that the soothing easy rhythm of pounding fufu was slightly deceiving; when it was my turn to pound I realized how much upper body strength was required. Since my endurance slowed after a mere few minutes, the children squealed with amusement as they were passed the

pestle to continue pounding which left me drained but thoroughly impressed with their strength.

Concurrent to preparing fufu, the light soup is also made. Water, tomato paste, dried tilapia, and spices such as salt, pepper, curry, and chili powder are slowly simmered together until the fufu is fully prepared. There are various types of soup that fufu can accompany besides fish such as goat meat, chicken, vegetables, and groundnut (peanut) soup. The “light” fish soup indicates a broth base where these other soups contain a higher viscosity. When the smell of our fish soup began to make my mouth water, I knew dinner was close to being served.

We ladled our soup over the ball of fufu and I immediately began to eat, not realizing that I was eating the dish all wrong. As my Ghanaian family stifled their laughter, Mama Esther explained that the first rule of eating fufu is there are no spoons allowed. She told me to eat the food with my right hand by pulling off a piece of fufu from the side to eat first since it had been marinating in the soup for the longest amount of time. I was surprised to find that much of the soup was absorbed in the fufu, yet it remained a firm consistency and was not soggy. Mama Esther continued to instruct that one does not chew as the fufu piece is put into the mouth, but swallowed whole since the flavor is in the absorbed soup and not in the yam/plantain mixture. The surprised (and probably slightly mortified) look on my face sent us both into hysterical laughter, followed with questions such as, “What if I choke?” and, “Is it safe to stick my fingers in this burning hot soup?”

I was assured that no one has ever died from choking on fufu and my fingers would get used to the hot temperature eventually.



Enjoying fufu and light fish soup. Photo by: Julia Mallon.

Even though I was still a little skeptical, I decided to do what every child does when learning something new – I jumped in without hesitation. The second I swallowed my first proper bite, my senses came alive. The warm feeling in my stomach from the still hot soup, the spice lingering in the back of my throat, the feeling of soft fufu in my fingers – I could not get enough! After discovering my new favorite dish, Mama Esther smiled from ear to ear like a proud mother. From that day on, I ate fufu regularly with the family. Each time I ate my plate clean, she would say, “Now I know you love me, you are a true Ghanaian now!” She would then pat my belly, relishing in the fact that I enjoyed her culture. After about a month of observing my host family preparing meals and then slowly assisting, I cooked a whole Ghanaian dish by myself with the oversight of my mentor. I was beaming with excitement as Mama Esther clapped in approval upon sampling my creation.

That small gesture of acceptance meant I had successfully set aside my own cultural preconceptions and used observation, questions, and my senses to learn and value the culture of my Ghanaian family. I used the comfort of something familiar, food, as a medium to adjust to my new and unfamiliar surroundings. Through the highly prevalent social aspect of Ghanaian cuisine, I was able to form a strong bond of love and understanding with Mama Esther, my new friends, and my host family that overcame any language barriers or cultural differences; for that lesson alone, I am eternally grateful.



Nkwanta outdoor market 7/11/2011. Photo by: Julia Mallon.



Children in Nkwanta loving the camera. Photo by: Julia Mallon.