

Spice and all things rice: Lagos pays homage to jollof

By [Gregory Walton](#)

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LAGOS, Nigeria - In Nigeria, jollof rice isn't just a tasty West African dish - it's a national obsession. Dozens of top chefs gathered at the weekend for Lagos' inaugural jollof festival, showcasing their personal twists on the tangy tomatoey rice to a crowd of hundreds of hungry hipsters.



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Imoteda Aladekomo, a 31-year-old chef who has been making jollof for four years, has led the way in reinventing the national staple, creating several pioneering variants through her company Eko Street Eats.

"It's so popular because it's easy to customise," she said while preparing take-away boxes at the jollof fair, staged at a former railway yard complete with disused train tracks, blaring Nigerian music and a giant version of Scrabble.

"Rice is really easy to get here whereas other ingredients aren't. Every party has to have jollof rice and every Sunday people will have it, having looked forward to it all week," she added, her plastic gloves caked in rice.

"Jollof rice will always reign supreme - even compared to McDonald's or whatever, your jollof rice captures people's childhoods."

Her flagship version, deep-fried in breadcrumbs and served with plantain sauce and a fiery red pepper coulis, drew a

steady stream of jollof aficionados.

Mo Alatise, a self-taught chef, also drew a crowd with her distinctive fusion-style jollof offerings.

"We try to do a mix of really local recipes, but I imagine it with things from other countries - like very traditional gnocchi from Italy with jollof," the 30-year-old told AFP.

"Or a rice bowl from Asia -- but instead of white rice, I made it with jollof," she said, wearing oversized sunglasses and a hat decorated with a feather. I've been to Italy and I read and researched a lot. It's literally our staple, we're so proud it's the nation's favourite dish. We're literally obsessed."

The origins of the distinctive, deceptively simple dish are hotly contested. The word *jollof* is related to "Wollof", a language spoken in Senegal where the dish is also popular. As well as Nigeria and Senegal, variants of the recipe are enjoyed across West Africa.

"There's this big battle about where it came from. I've tried jollof from Senegal and it wasn't great. I think ours is best - but I'm a little biased," said Alatise.

But the divisions were set aside in 2014 when British celebrity chef Jamie Oliver adapted the local favourite with alien ingredients including parsley and lemon - inspiring Ozoz Sokoh, a Lagos food blogger, to set up the festival this year.

"There was this whole brouhaha when Jamie Oliver made it and it didn't look like jollof," said Sokoh, a 42-year-old geologist and author of the Kitchen Butterfly blog. "Despite the jollof wars between Ghana and Nigeria, they came together to say: 'You cannot colonise our plates'."

The "jollof wars" reached fever pitch last year when Ghanaian singer Sister Deborah released a song called "Ghana Jollof" that accused the Nigerian recipe of "tasting funny".

Controversies aside, Sokoh said the universal affection for the dish helps to unite the Nigerian diaspora and people with West African roots around the world. "It brings many countries together - it's not just West Africa, but countries where the slaves went, like the American south and parts of Mexico," she said.

And while food delivery services offering international favourites like sushi and pizza are expanding rapidly in Nigeria's big cities, jollof has retained a special place in the hearts of the country's huge youth population.

"Most of us young people forget about our traditional food," said Jane Ibitola, a 32-year-old financial adviser from southern oil city of Port Harcourt. "But whenever you move away from it, you cherish it again."

Source: AFP.