Rwandan Cuisine & Etiquette

Rwandan cuisine features simple meals made with local ingredients produced by traditional subsistence farming. The Rwandan diet consists mainly of potatoes, beans, plantains, cassava, peas, mille, sorghum, and fruit. Tropical fruits such as avocados, bananas, mangos, pineapple, passion fruit, and papaya are abundant in Rwanda.

Many Rwandans do not eat meat more than a few times a month. For those who live near lakes and have access to fish, tilapia is popular. Brochette is the most popular food when eating out in the evening, usually made from goat but sometimes beef. In rural areas, many bars have a brochette seller responsible for tending and slaughtering the goats, skewering and barbecuing the meat, and serving it with grilled bananas or fried potatoes.

Rwandans add a lot of milk and sugar to their tea. In rural areas and especially among farming families, it is also common to be served milk, sweetened with sugar, upon being welcomed into someone’s home.

At almost any gathering, guests will be offered food, tea, or “Fanta” (which refers to any soft drink brand or flavor); the same can be said for any drop-in visitor. It is important to accept it, as it is a sign of friendship and welcome, even if one is not particularly hungry or thirsty. This is especially important when one is served meat; it is expensive for many Rwandan families and is often a rare treat. It is considered respectful to leave a small amount of food on your plate when you are full—it shows you are satisfied.

Rwandan Cultural Information

Greetings

The greeting in Rwanda is a beautiful display of human connection and tells us much about the culture. When two people meet, they start with a verbal greeting (like “Muraho!”), followed by a handshake with the right hand or arm and the left hand embraces the left shoulder. Most commonly while shaking hands, Rwandans embrace lightly when touching cheeks - right side first, then left - for a total of three times before exchanging more verbal greetings. It’s very warm and welcoming. The local language is Kinyarwanda, with English as the national language taught in schools.

- **Muraho** (MooRahHoh) - Hello!
- **Amakuru** (AhMahKooRoo) - How are you?
- **Ni meza** (Nee MAYza) - I am fine.
- **Murakoze** (MooRahKohZay) - Thank you.
- **Yego** (YAYgo) - Yes.
- **Oya** (Oya) - No.
- **Ndu mnyamerikakazi** (NDOOmnyaMayreekah KahZEE) - I am an American (woman)
Music & Dance

Music and dance are an integral part of Rwandan ceremonies and festivals. The most famous traditional dance is *Intore*, a highly choreographed routine consisting of three components: the ballet, performed by women; the dance of heroes, performed by men; and the drums, played with sticks. Female Intore dancers wear traditional dress, called the mushanana, which consists of a floor-length skirt with a sash draped over one shoulder, worn over a tank top. A traditional hairstyle is a bun decorated with beads and tied in place by two ribbons that pass across the forehead and over the bun, crossing above the ear. This is no longer common daily wear but is often worn at weddings, church services, and other formal events. Male Intore dancers wear grass wigs, a wrapped skirt without a shirt, and beaded straps that cross over the chest. They carry spears or drums. The background is a dance performed by returning warriors, celebrating victory in battle. The dancers move from side to side, combining grace and complex choreography with a raw aggression. At certain stages the dancers stop and make battle cries, with arms outstretched. These calls are individual to each dancer. Battles traditionally involved Hutu, Tutsi and Twa ethnic groups fighting alongside each other against a common enemy. The performance of Intore therefore has always consisted of warriors of all three groups dancing together.

Local girls performing Rwandan traditional dance during a Global Grassroots visit to Hard Worker

Our special thanks to Global Grassroots for contributing this information. Also for the recipes below, with the exception of the Rwandan Chicken which was contributed by Karen O’Brien, DFW Contributing Writer.
Rwandan Recipes

Goat or Beef Brochettes

1 lb goat meat or beef, cut into 1-inch cubes
1 onion, quartered
5 fresh, ripe plum tomatoes, crushed
1/2 small tin of tomato puree
1 bouillon cube (Maggi)
Handful of pili-pili chilies
Vegetable oil
Salt, to taste

Soak the wooden skewers in water and form the brochette by alternately threading meat and 2 to 3 pieces of onion onto the skewer. Then lay the skewer on the grill and brush with vegetable oil. Allow it to cook for about 3 minutes. Meanwhile, mix the crushed tomatoes, a small handful of the onions (finely diced), and the pili-pili chilies (pounded to a paste) along with the tomato puree. This should create a medium-thick sauce; add a little oil and water to attain the desired consistency. Brush the sauce on all sides of the brochettes, adding more of the sauce as you turn them. Turn them about 3 times. The brochettes are ready when just cooked through (about 8 minutes) and should be a nice reddish color, due to the sauce. Serve with fried potatoes or white rice. Use any remaining sauce for dipping.

Rwandan Rice

1 cup white rice
3 T cooking oil
½ onion, chopped
1 ½ cup water

Wash the rice, then let dry for 3 minutes. Heat cooking oil and add the half onion. Add rice and mix with the onion and oil for 3 minutes. Add water and salt, then boil for 20-30 minutes.
Rwandan Vegetable Stew

½ lb green beans
½ lb tomatoes, chopped
3 carrots, chopped
1 onion, chopped
1 or ½ green apple
½ cup cooking oil
2 cups water

Heat cooking oil. Add green beans, carrots and apple, cut into small pieces. After 3 minutes, add chopped onion and tomatoes. Once the tomatoes are cooked and produce a kind of sauce, add water and salt to taste. Cover for five minutes on low heat.

Rwandan people like more than three meals on a plate. So, some people may add French fries or boiled Irish potatoes. Others may also add red beans either boiled or cooked in oil with just onion.

Fufu

4 cups water
2 lb cassava flour

Boil water, then add flour. Wait for 1 minute; mix with a wooden spoon for 10 minutes. Eat with peanut sauce or meat sauce.

Peanut Sauce

½ lb peanuts, ground into a powder
1 onion, chopped
5 small eggplants, chopped
2 carrots, chopped
salt
¼ cup cooking oil
1 or ½ green pepper

Heat cooking oil. Add small pieces of eggplant and carrots and cook for 2 - 3 minutes. Add onions and green pepper and cook for 1 - 2 minutes. Mix peanuts and water, then add to pot and cook for 5 minutes.
Isombe
1 lb cassava leaves, washed and chopped (or other greens such as kale or collard greens)
6 spring onions, chopped
2 medium eggplants, cubed
1 lb spinach, washed and chopped
2 green bell peppers, sliced into pieces
3 T palm oil
3 T natural peanut butter

Add the cassava leaves (or other greens) to salted water and boil until tender. Add the chopped onions, eggplant, spinach, and green peppers then cook on medium heat for 10 minutes. Add the palm oil and peanut butter and stir to form a smooth paste. Simmer for about 10 minutes, or until the sauce thickens. Serve over rice.

Kachumbari
5 tomatoes, thinly sliced
2 small onions, very thinly sliced
1 red chili, cut length-wise into 5 strips
Handful fresh coriander, finely chopped
Juice of 1 lime
3 T olive oil
Salt and freshly-ground black pepper
Cayenne pepper to decorate

Layer the tomatoes, sliced onions, chili and coriander in a large serving bowl. Mix the lime juice and olive oil together and toss this mixture through the salad. Season with salt and black pepper, sprinkle some cayenne pepper over the top, and serve.
Rwandan Salad Relish
This salad is a typical side dish at lunch or dinner.

2 cups cabbage, finely shredded
1/2 cup carrots, julienned
1/2 cup sweet onions
1/4 cup green pepper, in thin strips
1 avocado, sliced
1 tomato, sliced

Mix all ingredients (except for the avocado and tomato) in a large bowl, dressing the mixture lightly with olive oil and vinegar, to taste. Place the slices of avocado and tomato on top, as a delicious garnish.

Fruit Salad
Combine any of the following for a sweet ending to your Rwandan meal:
Bananas
Mangos
Pineapple
Passion fruit
Papaya

Rwandan Chicken

1 large chicken, cut into serving pieces
3 T oil 1 onion, thinly sliced
3 large tomatoes, blanched, peeled and mashed
2 celery sticks, cut into thin rounds
1 t salt
1 hot chili pepper, pounded to a paste

Method: Fry the chicken in hot oil until golden brown all over. Remove from the oil and set aside then fry the onions in the same pot until golden brown. Now return the chicken to the pot and add the tomatoes, celery, salt and chili. Reduce the heat to a simmer and cook until the chicken is done (about 40 minutes). Serve on a bed of rice.

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