

Customs and Cuisine of Niger

By Linda McElroy, curator

I have to admit it's been a bit of a challenge to find information about Niger; half the time websites bring up information about Nigeria instead. So I had to pay close attention to the distinction between Nigerien and Nigerian cuisine! Niger is still dominated by a rural cuisine where recipes are passed down orally from mother to daughter and very few recipes are documented in writing. This is undoubtedly one reason why I had trouble finding recipes to adapt for the American kitchen.

Culinary influences in Niger come from European as well as Arabic traditions. Since Niger was once a French colony (and French is still the official language) there is a good deal of French influence in the cuisine, especially in the larger cities. That could explain the presence of crusty bread in the diet instead of the usual flatbreads typically consumed in African countries.

Unfortunately Niger chronically suffers from drought, making fresh produce scarce and erratic. Millet is a versatile grain that originated in Africa, where it was prized for its drought resistance and quick growth even in poor soil. It is the staple diet of most of the rural population of Niger, and is often served with goat or camel milk. The millet is pounded into flour by women and girls and made into a paste or stiff porridge dough and covered with a stew or a sauce.

Rice is more of a "status" food, and saved for special occasions. Meat is for special occasions as well, usually grilled and eaten on the side. Although I found this information on many different websites I was not able to find any evidence of "Niger grilled meat recipes." So I resorted to nearby Nigeria to bring you a recipe for just such a grilled meat skewer. Pork is not common as most of the population is Muslim. Traditional vegetables are yam or cassava root. Surprisingly, most of the recipes I encountered for Niger food were spice-free, meaning they usually just called for salt, and maybe a chili or two.

Tea is the most common drink as alcohol is not easily available in this predominantly Islamic country. It is often served in an elaborate ceremony of three rounds of tea. The same tea leaves are used for all three rounds, with increasing amounts of sugar added to each round; therefore, the first serving is "bitter as death," the second serving is "mild as life," and the third serving is "sweet as love."

Dining Etiquette

- Men, women, and children usually eat apart.
- When offered a drink it is impolite to refuse. It is also unusual to eat in front of another person without offering to share.
- The right hand is always extended for touching other people, handing over objects and eating, as the left hand is used for hygiene purposes.
- When approaching a home clap your hands to announce your arrival.
- General rules of conduct include the importance of greetings, many of which are elaborate. It is considered rude to start a conversation without first inquiring about the health and wellbeing of a person's family.



Tomato and White Bean Stew (Togola) Tested
(serves 4-6)

This dish is to be accompanied by crusty white bread torn into pieces and stirred into the finished dish.

Try [Jim Lahey's No-Knead Bread](#) with this stew.

Ingredients

1 large onion
4 large cloves garlic, chopped
1 medium red bell pepper
1 medium green bell pepper
3 tablespoons olive oil
2 ½-3 pounds tomatoes
2 teaspoons salt
1 15-oz can white beans, drained and rinsed
large handful fresh basil leaves

Directions

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Start by cutting the onion in half, slicing through from root to stem, and then cut vertically into thin slices. Dice the bell peppers into one-inch squares. Place into a 9" x 13" baking dish and coat with the olive oil and one teaspoon of salt. Bake for 30 minutes, stirring once halfway through.

Core the tomatoes and cut them in half, then slice the halves into thin wedges. Remove the baking pan from the oven and add the tomatoes, one cup of water, and another teaspoon of salt; continue roasting the mixture for another 30 minutes. Halfway through this cooking time remove pan again and press on the tomatoes to help break them up a bit. If they are not looking really juicy, add some more water. Remember, you want this to be a very saucy dish so that there is ample liquid for the bread to absorb.

July 2014



Now add the white beans and large handful of basil leaves and continue to roast for 15 more minutes, just until the beans warm up and the mixture is hot. Taste and adjust seasoning. You may need more salt - tomatoes and beans can absorb a lot of salt. Garnish the top with extra basil leaves.

Notes and Instructions

Serve with crusty white bread, either torn into bits and stirred into the sauce, or serve the bread on the side for mopping up the delicious juices. If you serve the bread in the sauce (which I highly recommend) make sure you don't

add too much bread, as it will double or triple in volume once it absorbs the juices.

[Read Linda McElroy's take on this recipe](#)

Jim Lahey's No-Knead Bread

This bread requires special equipment: a 5 to 8 quart pot with lid – Pyrex glass, Le Creuset, [cast iron Dutch oven](#), or ceramic.

Jim Lahey is the owner of Sullivan Street Bakery in New York. He made a [three-minute video](#) that shows how easy it is to make this bread. You'll notice that he puts the bread dough on the lid of the Dutch oven, not in the pot itself. My guess is he does that so there's less risk of burning your wrist by lowering the dough into a burning hot pot. But if your Dutch oven has a handle on the top you won't be able to do this, you'll put your dough into the pot, so use caution!

Ingredients

3 cups all-purpose unbleached white flour
1/2 teaspoon yeast (see note)
1 1/2 teaspoons salt
1 1/2 cups water
olive oil (for coating)
extra flour, wheat bran or cornmeal (for dusting)

Directions

Mix all of the dry ingredients in a medium bowl. Add water and incorporate by hand or with a wooden spoon for 30 seconds to 1 minute. Lightly coat the inside of a second medium bowl with olive oil and place the dough in the bowl. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap and let the dough rest 12-24 hours at room temperature (approx. 65-72°F). This is

July 2014



referred to as the fermentation period.

Remove the dough from the bowl and place on a floured work surface, fold in on itself once or twice. Let the dough rest 15 minutes on the work surface.

Generously coat a cotton towel (not terrycloth) with flour, wheat bran, or cornmeal. Next, shape the dough into ball, place the dough seam side down on the towel and dust with more flour. Cover the dough with a cotton towel and let rise 1-2 hours at room temperature, until more than doubled in size.

Preheat oven to 450 degrees. Place the pot in the oven at least 30 minutes prior to baking to preheat. Once the dough has more than doubled in volume, remove the pot from the oven and place the dough in the pot. Make a couple of slits in the top of the dough. (If you watch this video they instruct you to make a couple of slits in the bread with a very sharp knife—I find the bread dough is too soft to perform this task, so I use a kitchen scissors to snip a couple of slashes on top of the dough.) Cover with the lid and bake 30 minutes, then remove the lid and bake 15-30 minutes uncovered, until the loaf is nicely browned.

Notes and Instructions

There is quite a flexible window of time for the fermentation period. If you think your timing will be such that the bread will be sitting out closer to 24 hours before you are able to bake then I recommend you only use 1/4 teaspoon of yeast. When you use more yeast the dough will be ready for final baking sooner.

This bread can be made one day ahead of time and it will still be fresh and delicious the next day as long as you don't cut into it. Once cut, wrap loosely and it will keep for a few days. You can also make and freeze up to a week ahead of time.

If you don't own a Dutch oven or covered pot that would work for this bread, there is a video showing [how to make this bread using a simple skillet](#).

Recipe source: [Sullivan Street Bakery](#)



Ginger-Mint Lemonade

A popular Nigerian beverage is a lemon and ginger drink.

Ingredients

1/2 cup packed chopped fresh mint leaves
1/3 cup sliced fresh ginger (no need to peel)
1/3 cup honey

2 cups boiling water
1/3 cup fresh lemon juice
1 1/2 cups cold water

Directions

Combine chopped mint, ginger, and honey in medium bowl. Add boiling water. Let steep 30 minutes. Strain into 4-cup glass measuring cup, pressing on solids to extract liquid. Add lemon juice and enough cold water to measure 4 cups total.

Fill glasses with ice cubes. Add lemonade. Garnish with mint leaves and lemon slices and serve.

(Can be prepared 1 day ahead. Cover and refrigerate.)

Recipe source – Epicurious.com



Millet-Coriander Carrot Cake
Serves 8

I really wanted to include a recipe with millet since that is a staple grain in Niger. Given that there was

a total lack of dessert recipes related to Niger I decided to share this light and tasty millet cake with you. This simple cake recipe is one of my new favorite recipes, as a snack cake, breakfast treat, or a simple dessert.

Ingredients

1 cup all purpose flour
1 teaspoon baking soda
1 teaspoon baking powder
1/2 teaspoon kosher salt
1 tablespoon ground coriander
2 eggs
1/2 cup coconut oil, melted
1/4 cup brown sugar
1/4 cup maple syrup
1 cup grated carrot
1/3 cup millet, uncooked

Directions

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Grease an 8x8' cake pan and set aside.

In a medium bowl, combine the flour, baking soda, baking powder, salt and coriander.

In a large bowl, whisk together the eggs, sugar, maple syrup and coconut oil. Gently fold in the flour mixture. Then add the grated carrot and millet. Stir until just combined.

Spoon the batter into the pan, it will be quite stiff and you will have to spread it out, bake for 30 minutes, until the center of the cake springs back to the touch. This cake will not rise that much so don't worry if you take it out of the oven and it looks flat.

July 2014



To serve I cut the cake in half, and then sliced the halves into 6-8 fingers and piled them up on a plate. Watch them disappear!

Notes and Instructions

Coconut oil seems to be the new darling of the food world. From what I've read there seem to be many healthy properties contained in it. It is available in my area at Trader Joe's and Costco. To measure coconut oil (which comes in solid form), scoop the amount needed into a measuring cup. Then transfer to a microwave-safe container and melt on low heat, if you can see that it is almost melted take out and let finish melting.

If you can't find coconut oil or don't want to use it I would imagine you can substitute vegetable oil instead. But coconut oil lends a delicious perfume and flavor to baked goods and I recommend you use it!

This recipe calls for a large amount of coriander, one tablespoon, don't be afraid to use the full amount. Coriander is extremely fragrant when fresh, so if yours doesn't have a wonderful smell it's time to purchase a fresh supply. I buy all my spices in bulk so that I can buy very small amounts at a time.

Recipe source – [Silk Road Diary](#)



Nigerian Grilled Kabobs (Suya)

Suya is a very popular Nigerian barbecued street food that you can mainly find at night. What makes it unusual from typical kebobs is the ground peanuts used to coat the meat. Often it is made with thin sliced beef, but chicken and fish can be used as well. This recipe calls for chicken.

Ingredients

- 1 cup roasted peanuts
- 1/2 teaspoon onion powder
- 1/4 teaspoon chili powder
- 1 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon paprika (smoked is great if you have it)
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 2 tablespoon ginger, minced
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 2 large chicken breasts cut into cubes or strips
- red onion to garnish
- skewers

Directions

Add one cup roasted peanuts to the food processor and pulse several times until you end up with a coarse powdery substance. Be careful *not* to overdo it or you'll end up with peanut butter.

Now add the dry spices, pulse once or twice to mix, and then add the ginger and garlic, give it one more pulse and your spice mix is ready.

Turn the mixture into a bowl and use a fork to mix or break it up a bit, it will still be a bit coarse or chunky.

Pour a little oil over the chicken so that the spices will stick, thread your cubes or strips onto skewers, and then sprinkle and press the spice mixture onto them. Let marinate 30 minutes.

Now there are several ways to cook Suya. Traditionally they are (slowly) roasted over charcoal fire. You can use a BBQ, or you can cook them in a preheated oven (400F) for 30 minutes, or grill them on a stovetop grill. Just be sure your heat is not so high as to burn or char the peanuts.

Serve your Suya covered with the thinly sliced onion - traditionally you should also serve them with thinly sliced tomato on top.



Recipe source – [Kayotic Kitchen](#)