

Benin Customs and Cuisine

May 2018



Local Cuisine of Benin

The Batonga Foundation's staff in Cotonou, Benin compiled this list of dishes, which are all uniquely Beninese and West African:

- Le Mantindjan: Mantindjan, which means "Sauce when there is no more room," originates in southern Benin. This sauce is often cooked "as a sign of love from a wife to her spouse." This thick sauce is a mix of multiple meats and cheeses that "your pantry no longer has room for." The sauce can be eaten on a corn paste, a cassava paste, or amalla (yam chips).
- Le BlocOtto: Prepared with cow feet, the BlocOtto is a sauce which is eaten on many different pastes, such as corn or cassava pastes. Easier to prepare than many sauces, this cow's feet sauce is incredibly popular across Benin.
- Le Dakouin: A dish typical in southern Benin made with cassava accompanied by fried tomatoes and fish sauce.
- Le Agoun: Crushed yam with peanut sauce, served with bush meat or cheese.
- Le Piron: Cassava paste accompanied by pork juice
- L'Ablo: cake or paste made from rice with cooked vegetables accompanied by a seasoned fried fish.
- Atassi: a mixture of seasoned rice and beans with fried tomatoes and hot chilis, from northern Benin. It can be accompanied by "Peul cheese," meat, or fried fish.
- Le Toubani: Prepared in northern Benin, toubani is made from bean flour or cassava flour (the flavor is lighter and sweeter when made with cassava flour). It must be consumed warm and is accompanied by dried peppers and oil.
- Le Tchatchaounga: Grilled mutton which is often sold in markets and near bus or taxi stations. It is frequently a traveler food and is much loved by ex-pats.

Cultural Rituals of Benin

Benin is considered to be the cradle of Vodoun (or Voodoo) and more than 80 percent of the Beninese population practices some form of traditional religion (or animism). These

practices have been rooted in Benin's traditions for centuries and for many visitors they are some of the most fascinating aspects of Beninese culture to explore.

- Many animist rituals are accompanied by songs, drum beats, dances, prayers and offerings to fetishes.
- Benin is incredibly diverse, and each ethnic group has its own specific traditions and beliefs.
- The country is made up of two geographical regions: The North (bordering Niger and Burkina Faso) and the South (including the coast and the central regions bordering Togo and Nigeria).
- Before the 15th century there was significant migration from savannah regions to the north of Benin. The ethnic groups making this migration were the Bariba or Baatombu, Dendi, Djerma, Groussi, Haoussa, Mossi, Paragourma and Peuls.
- The southern, coastal region of Benin was settled by other littoral ethnic groups such as the Fon and Aja or Adja, Ewe, Gen, Mina and Yoruba.
- The Egungun Ritual allows participants to reminisce on the memories of their dead loved ones through acrobatic dances performed during funerals and other major cultural events throughout the year. These dances show the respect that the community has for the spirits of the deceased, but above all they serve as manifestations of these spirits in the world of the living. The dancers wear costumes composed of fabrics of various colors and materials.
- The Temple of Pythons: Baston of voodoo culture, Ouidah is famous for its religious traditions. On the outskirts of the village of Ouidah, you can visit the Temple of Pythons, dedicated to the sacred animal. In 1717, following a war between the kingdoms of Danxome and Houeda, the defeated king of Ouidah took refuge in the forest to escape the warriors who pursued him. He was protected by the pythons who attacked the mercenaries of the Danxome kingdom, and he was saved. In honor of his protectors, the pythons, he erected at Ouidah three huts and a totem. If you travel there today you can explore the temple, inhabited by pythons all sizes, snaking freely through the halls and alleys. The boa or the royal python are two of the most represented species and are the object of the greatest celebration. The death of a python is the subject of an elaborate death ceremony.
- The Rituals and Ceremonies Surrounding Twins in Benin: In Benin, twins are celebrated as being divine. Families, particularly in southern Benin, view the birth of twins as a divine gift or sign rather than simply chance.
- The Consultation of the Oracle Fâ: Fâ is the oracle which families of twins can consult about the meaning and reasons for the birth of their twins. Since the birth of twins is seen as a sign from the divine, families can ask the oracle to communicate with the spirits to tell them why they have been sent twins. Often the spirits of the twins give directives concerning the different rituals their families need to perform in order to please them and to bring good fortune. Families visit the oracle in the early morning.
- Upon their return home from the oracle, parents are obliged to strictly follow the directives of the spirit of the twins. These prescriptions vary from one twin to

another and from one family to another. But what remains constant is that at the ceremony of the twins, the twins' spirit will appoint godparents, usually their aunts and uncles. Special meals are prepared from palm oil and corn flour called "awouanzi".

Celebrations and Festivals of Benin

- **The Voodoo Festival** is celebrated annually in Ouidah on Jan. 10. This is an opportunity for the dignitaries and followers of voodoo to express their faith in their gods in the eyes of the public. This celebration of traditional religions is often marked by folk dances, colourful ceremonies. This day is also a national holiday in Benin.
- **The Yam Festival:** On the 15th of August each year, the town of Savalou celebrates the Yam festival; this traditional celebration originally organized by the Salman tribe is to give thanks for a good harvest. The yam species 'Laboco' is especially celebrated, because it is allegedly the first tuber cultivated in this region. This Feast of the Yam has become an opportunity for the people of the Mabou de Savalou (socio-ethnic group based in the centre of Benin) to worship and thank the Ancestors for the good season which allowed good Yam harvest. To complement this celebration, the people of Savalou organize several traditional activities from the different cults including public prayers, animated songs, praise and cultural dances.
- **The Festival of Awilé:** Each year, the festival of Awilé , the goddess of the lake, brings together the inhabitants of the nearby villages to chase away the evil spirits.

(Source, photo credit: The Batonga Foundation)



Sweet Potato and Kale Salad (Tested)

Serves 2 to 4

Ingredients

1 tbsp. oil (peanut or palm oil if you have it) (Learn about buying sustainably produced palm oil at www.cmzoo.org/palmoil)

2 cloves garlic, peeled and smashed

1 lb. sweet potato or yam, peeled and diced (3 cups)

½ tsp. kosher salt

½ tsp. black pepper

2 cups chopped kale, any kind

¼ cup sliced red onion

juice of 1 lime

¼ cup roasted peanuts

¼ cup dried cranberries

Directions

Heat up a large sauté pan with the oil, then add the smashed garlic cloves. Give them a minute in the hot oil, then add the potatoes, salt, and pepper. Give everything a good stir to coat with the oil. Cover and continue to cook over medium heat until tender, about 10 minutes, stirring frequently.

Add the chopped kale and sliced onions, stir-fry for 2 more minutes, until the kale is starts to wilt just a bit, you don't want it completely cooked. Taste for salt and pepper and add more if needed.

Tilt out onto a platter. Squeeze the juice of one lime over the salad, and garnish with roasted peanuts and dried cranberries.

Recipe contribution by Linda McElroy, adapted from:
<https://afrovitalityeats.com/recipe/sweet-potato-kale-salad/>
Photo credit: Elise, from www.afrovitalityeats.com



West African Peanut Stew over Rice

Serves 4

Ingredients

For the stew:

- 2 tbsp. oil (palm oil or peanut oil if you have it) (Learn about buying sustainably produced palm oil at www.cmzoo.org/palmoil)
- ½ medium onion, (½ sliced, ½ chopped)
- 2 roma tomatoes, diced (about 1½ cups)
- 1 cup roasted peanuts
- 3 cloves garlic, peeled and roughly chopped
- 1 habanero chile*
- 4 sprigs cilantro
- ½ inch piece ginger, roughly chopped
- Lime wedges for garnish
- Cilantro for garnish

For the tofu:

- 1 block of extra-firm tofu
- 1 tbsp. oil
- 1 tsp. kosher salt
- ½ tsp. onion powder
- ½ tsp. garlic powder, or garlic salt (reduce regular salt instead)

½ tsp. black pepper
½ tsp. chili powder

Directions

For the tofu:

Preheat oven to 425 degrees.

Remove the tofu from the packaging and slice horizontally. Place the tofu on paper towels or a tea towel, with more towels on top and weigh it down with a heavy pan. Let tofu stand this way for about 30 minutes. This will help drain excess moisture and ensure a crisper product.

Dice the tofu into 1-inch cubes and place on a baking sheet. Drizzle the tofu with the oil and all the spices and mix thoroughly right on the baking sheet. Bake in the pre-heated oven for 20 minutes, remove and set aside.

For the sauce:

While the tofu is baking, heat the oil in a large sauté pan, add the sliced onions. Sauté for about 2 minutes, until the onions become transparent. Add the tomatoes and cook for 5 minutes, until the tomatoes start to break down.

In a blender container add the peanuts, remaining diced onion, garlic, habanero chile, cilantro and ginger, along with ½ cup of water. Blend to a smooth paste. *Note: if you're concerned about the heat of the chile, you could just pierce the chile and put it into the sauté pan whole, then fish out when the sauce is ready.

Pour the contents of the blender into the sauté pan and add 2 cups of water, bring to a simmer. Cook for about 20 minutes on low heat, until foam clears, stir occasionally. Arrange baked tofu on top.

Serve over rice.

Recipe contribution by Linda McElroy, adapted from:

<https://afrovitalityeats.com/recipe/african-peanut-stew-with-tofu/>

Photo credit: Elise, from www.afrovitalityeats.com