

Scorched Earth: How Chiles Shaped a Continent



“On the black table, the pursuit of flavor is like a religion. From the days of slavery, when we made magic out of nothing, to the Jim Crow era, when food became a statement of dignity and self, to today, when food speaks to one’s place in the world, tastiness has always been the number one goal.”

-Therese Nelson, *Hot Sauce in My Veins*

From Moroccan Harissa and Ethiopian Berbere to South African Pere Pere and Nigerian Kilichili, chiles are a staple food in African cuisines. Whether turned into paste or sauce, or ground and used as a spice, nearly every region and culture across Africa has found a way to integrate these flavorful fruits into their kitchens. While indigenous to the Americas, in only the five hundred years since their introduction to the continent chiles have become nearly synonymous with Africa in the eyes of many. As the chiles spread east, and the people of Africa were forced

across the sea to the west, these integrating cultures have produced some truly spectacular dishes, and left a strong mark on dinner tables around the world.

Chiles were first introduced to the west coast of Africa by Portuguese spice traders in the early 1500s, spreading across their vast trading network along the coasts of Africa, and along African routes to the interior. The seeds grew readily and abundantly in their new home, producing fruit in only a few months. This immediately made the spice extremely valuable, as most other popular spices native to the area (such as the peppercorn) take multiple years to begin producing anything worth harvesting. The speed at which chiles bear fruit, the wide trading networks of both the Portuguese and Africans, and the hundreds of varieties of chiles already cultivated by the Native Americans made the adoption of chiles widespread.

This diverse and widespread acceptance led to a variety of different regional dishes, and a vast impact on the cultures of Africa still seen today. Pierre Thiam, a renowned West African chef, reminisces about the ubiquitous Ness of these little peppers in the cuisine of his homeland. He talks specifically about Pepe (Pepper) soup, remarking about how there must be as many varieties of it as there are regions of Africa. The common ingredient in all of these varieties, however, remains consistent: blisteringly hot chiles. Renowned as a hangover cure, many partygoers would end their night of revelry “sweating over a bowl of spicy Pepe soup.” The dish is so beloved by the people that in the late 1970s Cameroonian musician Manu Dibango wrote a song dedicated to the spicy stuff, and it quickly became a popular hit. Pepe soup is not the only beloved such dish, however, and the national dish of Senegal deserves its own special mention.

Thiebou Denne is a fish stew served over rice, and almost always served with chiles. So popular is this dish that Senegalese eat it multiple times a week, if not once a day, and laughingly joke that their version of the Lord’s Prayer replaces bread with Thieb. Eating is a communal act,

one that brings the family and any assorted guests around a shared bowl in the center of the gathering, with the host ensuring that everyone is given their preferred elements of the dish (Harris 57). In some Senegalese dishes, a sole chile is slowly simmered in the dish to impart just a hint of its flavor. The chile is placed in the center of the communal bowl, and the bravest among the guests is welcome to take on the challenge of consuming it.

While cooking directly with chiles may be popular, there is an even more popular way to use chiles. Turning chiles into hot sauce not only prolongs their shelf life, but also allows for a whole new realm of culinary experimentation, and the different regions of Africa certainly do not disappoint in their variety. In North Africa, along the Mediterranean coast, chiles tend to be turned into thick, chunky sauces as opposed to the more liquidly sauces more common elsewhere. Pastes, dips, and relishes dominate, none more so than the famous harissa. Incorporating cumin, garlic, caraway, and coriander with the chiles, this Tunisian paste stands as a fantastic testament to the wide array of flavors available to the trading posts of north Africa, as similar variants popped up in both Algeria and Morocco (DeWitt 101).

East Africa is home to a wide array of extremely potent hot sauces. Piri sauce (literally “pepper pepper”) appeared in Mozambique soon after the arrival of the Portuguese. This sauce was so popular that in no time the variant of chile that was used for the sauce became its own species, the African Birdseye chile. While the Portuguese colonists were reluctant to use chiles at first, eventually their culinary traditions intermingled. When the settlers returned to Portugal en masse in the 1970s, they brought their African influenced cuisine with them, sparking a surge in the cuisine’s popularity across the nation. Ethiopia, meanwhile, produces a sauce known as berbere, which can also come as a powdered spice mix. An integral part of the cuisine of the region, it is made of the hottest chiles available as well as coriander, garlic, ginger, and fenugreek.

Each household's secret recipe will vary slightly, as local folklore says that the more delicious a woman's berbere is, the easier she will win a husband (DeWitt 124).

Of course neither African people or hot sauce were left alone, as people were stolen away to foreign lands to be slaves. These people were able to forge something new out of their cruel situation, and build upon the traditions of their past. While it was European settlers who first created corporations to sell hot sauce, and founded plantations to grow chiles en masse, it was African slaves who perfected it and brought it to the American palate in the first place. One of the few places where there was some freedom of expression in the lives of slaves was the kitchen, and it was through this that many African traditions were able to survive. One example is the origin of Gumbo, and although it has borrowed heavily from Native American and French cooking techniques, it has its deepest roots back in Africa, with the Ghanaian okra based sauce "gombo" (literally meaning okra) being the base and thickener for the American soup (Dewitt 122). Another thing both of these dishes have in common? Chiles are a popular optional add-in to both.

Over time hot sauce became a symbol of black America, a calling card of the unique culture formed by these displaced Africans, not just a table sauce. Therese Nelson, African American chef and founder of Black Culinary History, says that African American women sometimes have carried hot sauce in their purses as an "emergency rescue elixir for blandness," and that attitude summarizes the impact hot sauce has had among the rest of the community as well. A spicy, powerful, celebration of life, a testament to the deep roots of the past and the innovation of the present, chiles are the way to make food sing.

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