Course Coordinators:
Veena Picardo
Sanket Gore

Submitted by:
Prasad Chavan (OSH2012GD-CA2F006)
Mahi Baid (OSH2012BA-CA2F014)
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SOUTH AFRICA AND ITS FOOD

South Africa cannot be defined as a singular culture. The centuries of colonization have rendered it so rich in diversity that now all the disarray in heritage has aligned itself to make it a unique country. The acceptance of the distinct heritages by people of the country does not comply with the discrimination of the apartheid that the country suffered for so long. But today, South Africa has a lot of culture to show and many experiences to share.

The Braai and the Potjiekos express the affection for meat; the Atjars and the Sambals show the appreciation of flavour; the Pap shows how a South African loves a hearty meal; and the homebrewed beer reflect upon the importance of social activity for a South African.

The country maybe associated with wild life sanctuaries and political convolutedness, but it has many more stories to tell, and many a palates to unveil. The tastes of the country reflect its history and demonstrate the way in which this complicated web of cultures was built. But like a snowflake, South Africa makes this “Rainbow culture” seem natural and yet intriguing, exceptional in all senses of the word.

Was it chance that brought all these cultures together, so that today it is a potful of flavours, simmering with the help of traditions that are rooted all over the world? It is like the Ocean itself, a culmination of many into one, and here we are, trying to understand how it came to be this way. What made South Africa’s Cuisine, South Africa’s Cuisine?
SUNNY SOUTH AFRICA: The Geography & Agriculture

South Africa is the southern most country of the continent, Africa. It lies between the equator and the Antarctic. The temperate climate that the country enjoys, which is warm and sunny, gives it the name, “Sunny South Africa” (Our Africa). Summer temperatures are between 25°C to 35°C and may even soar to 50°C. Winters see temperatures from 1°C to 10°C. Because the Indian and the Atlantic Oceans surround it, it has milder winters in the coastal regions compared to the inlands and the mountainous areas. The climate mainly affected by the Oceans and the subtropical high. A fifth of the lands in South Africa are arid while approximately half are semi arid, and farmers frequently face droughts and water shortage. Only 12% of the land has fertile soil with enough rainfall. KwaZulu-Natal and Western Cape Valley are the regions where the major agriculture comes from. The crops most commonly found are: maize, wheat, sugarcane, sorghum, millet, and grapes, apples, citrusy fruits are the majority of fruits produced.

Vineyards have a good potential in these climatic conditions and are the upcoming profitable produce.

Most of the land (69%) in the region is suitable for livestock grazing and this explains why a lot of the tribes used to rear cattle, and livestock farming is still the largest sector (Goldbatt, 2011). This makes meat and dairy another major agricultural produce here.

Although South Africa is one of the lands with the oldest human occupancy, cultivation of land is comparatively new to the country (Cowling, Richardson, & Pierce, 2004). Most of the population being hunters and gatherers, domestication of plant did not happen. Climate was the major factor for affecting plant species, not human. People would travel to where resources were better rather than create these resources. Fire was the only tool with which plant species were modified. Research tells us that fire was used to create land space for domestication, and sometimes to increase production of geophytes, which is a practice going on till date. When agriculture commenced with sedentary populations of different regions, wild species that were considered important food sources became the major crops. Today even with the introduction and commercialisation of foreign crops, territorial rights are based upon these wild species, which now have a symbolic and religious value.

After introduction of foreign crops around 400 years ago, the landscape of South Africa has deviated, but even today the indigenous crops have ritualistic value.

Commercialisation of the agriculture took place in the 1890s, after the discovery of diamonds. The urbanisation of South Africa made farming more of a trade, compared to the use of farming for self-provision hitherto. Today the agricultural scene is not very rosy. However, new and more sustainable techniques are trying to be implemented.
The agricultural and geographical scene explains the tribal cuisines of South Africa, with high importance of meat and starchy foods. Livestock being the major produce and starch being the major crop. The hunter and gatherer influences are reflected upon the high use of tubers, roots, and wild plants in the cuisine (Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2010). The high production of grains also reflects in the home brewing of beers, which are so common in South African households.
HISTORY: The Birth of a Cuisine

South Africa is lionized for its multicultural community, with each culture having their unique influences to the cuisine of the country. Because of the miscellaneous collection of cuisines and their interplay, indigenous cuisine is not the dominant variety of food found there. However, its influences mix with the diverse nature of South African gastronomy.

Prior to the discovery of the Cape of Good Hope by the Dutch, South African's were hunter and gatherers. They lived on game, fruits, nuts, berries and leaves. The use of fire was the only technique that indicated domestication. The Braai\(^1\) is the barbeque technique that comes from the indigenous people who had to cook the meat and fish that they caught on open flame. These techniques have lived to see the 21\(^{st}\) century and it is how most South African's today, like to have their meat on weekends with a chilled beer (Short, 2004).

The Bantu people of North Africa introduced modern farming techniques to South Africans. This is when they learnt how to harvest a lot of what would later become their staple diet (corn, sweet potatoes, squash, etc.). Domestication of animals for meat and milk also began then. Today Mealie-Meal, soft porridge of cornmeal is still had by the Zulu people.

When the Dutch arrived in the 1600s at Cape of Good Hope, they made South Africa their interval in the journey from Asia to Europe, which was made for the spice trade by the Dutch East India Company (Jackman, 2009). By placing a farm at the southern tip, they introduced new crops to South Africa such as pumpkins, watermelon, potatoes, etc. Other European colonizers were not far behind. British and German colonies added to the culinary history the meat pies and the baked goods, respectively.

The French Huguenots soon followed and added to the South African landscape several vineyards that make a go-to place when on a culinary visit to the country. The history of wines in the country can be pinned down to an exact date, February 2\(^{nd}\) of 1659, which Jan Van Reibeck documented as being the first time wine was made there. It was Simon Van Der, however, who rooted the wine industry in the country. He set up Contantia and the town of Stellenbosch, and both are the principal winemaking places. 18\(^{th}\) century saw the wine from Constantia gaining international popularity, and Stellenbosch became the centre of viticulture. 19\(^{th}\) century's outbreak of Phylloxera\(^2\) and the apartheid limited the growth of the industry. After the country became a democracy, and the new co-operative of farmers known as South African Wine Industry promoted the transformation, more Africans are willing to invest in the industry. South African wine is considered to be unique because it has both New World and Old World tastes and flavours (SouthAfrica.info). As people are beginning to accept the wine from this country world wide, the industry may turn out to be very profitable.

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\(^1\) A structure on which a fire can be made for grilling of meat outdoors.  
\(^2\) A pest that infects vines.
These colonies and new settlers added to the demographic of South Africa a mixture of slaves from India, Indonesia, Java, Sumatra and Madagascar. While the slaves were used for farming and fishing purposes, they also introduced new techniques and tastes to South Africa, which till date define the cuisine there. The Europeans hoped that bringing in foreign slaves would render work easier and maintain the division between them and the Africans. Today the culture shows a strong marriage between these influxes of Asian cultures, the African ways and the one that has European background, and this helped create the “rainbow cuisine” (SBS Food, 2013) of South Africa.
THE RAINBOW CUISINE

Although the cultural assortment added depth to the cuisine, indigenous traditions hold its ancient influence on the food. Just like the diversity in foreign cultures, African tribes provide a range of cuisines. Although these rural or tribal foods are similar in nature, each tribe has their own traditions. Maize or corn is the staple cereal of South Africa, and it can be found across tribes. It is said to have been present even before the colonization of the country. Maize porridge is the most common concoction and is existent in almost all meals. However there are variations in the porridge.

•  The Zulu Tribe

The Zulu tribe from KwaZulu-Natal, regularly eats Pap, porridge made of ground maize. It is also known as Mealie meal. Amahewu is the non-alcoholic beer made from meaile pap. The Phutu is another drier and crumblier version, while Samp is like the American grits3 (Cornelius, 2013). These types of porridges are normally had with some form of gravy and occasionally accompanied by meat. Spinach, beans, squash, tubers and beets are the types of vegetables generally had in a meal. For the Zulu, chicken is the most common form of meat, but slaughtering of cows and goats is frequent. Like in the Braai, the meat is cooked over open flame. Historically, the Zulu are known for their large number of cattle, and this reflects on their cuisine, which features dairy strongly. Amasi is a type of fermented milk similar to cottage cheese and yoghurt, which is consumed often by the tribe members. For the warm climate, fermented dairy would be the ideal form. In fact, they have fermented porridge too, Isbhede, which has an aftertaste (South Africa, 2011). The customs of the Zulu also reflects on the cuisine. It is customary to divide the meat according to the status, gender and the age of the consumer. The head of the animal is considered the best part, and thus goes to the leader; boys are given the lungs, the lower leg and the feet. The women have the tripe and the ribs.

•  The Xhosa Tribe

The Xhosa, the Bantu speaking tribe from the south-east, in the manner of the Zulu have maize as their staple, but in the culinary sense, they are the ones that have mastered the art of making it (South Africa, 2010). Umngqusho is the combination of Samp and beans that is frequently compared with the Italian risotto. It is served with a meaty stew and is popularly known as Nelson Mandela’s favourite dish. Isopho, a corn soup, and Umphoqholo another maize porridge are staples that show the importance of the grain in the food. Dishes made with vegetables and indigenous plants are fairly common as well; Rhabe is a lemon scented wild spinach, Imvomo, the sweet sap of aloe and Ikhowa the wild mushroom appear frequently in the meals. Like the Zulu, the Xhosa divide their meat according to the status of the consumer. Bantu use clay pots and ostrich shells for utensils, ox horns are made into flasks, and tortoise shells as

3The Native American food made out of ground corn.
bowls, this shows how efficient the Bantu people are in their use of resources (Afolayan, 2004).

• **The Sotho Tribe**

The Sotho tribe again, uses maize as its staple. Pap-pap, corn meal porridge, served with vegetables such as roots, potatoes and wild spinach, or chopped greens is a part of the daily meals. Mostly the vegetables are grown in their own gardens (Lapierre, 2011). They also grow their own corn and wheat, enough for the entire family. Makoenyana is common fried bread made of wheat flour. While chicken is a regular addition to the stews, cow meats are only had on special occasions. Owning a cow is directly linked with wealth in this tribe. Locally brewed is the normal drink if the tribe. The women grind grain, mix it with water and cook in the open fire, and then this is cooled and fermented. The grain is then mashed and the low-alcohol drink is squeezed completely off it.

• **Tribal Food and its Benefits**

The symmetry between these tribes is palpable. All of them use maize extensively, brew their own beer and have similar vegetables that they eat. However, they are distinct from each other and add to the palate of the country, their own singularities.

There are many nutritional benefits in the indigenous cuisine of South Africa. The starch dominant food with maize, millet, sorghum, barley, cassava, improves the cholesterol, keeps weight in control and prevents constipation. Originally the food was cooked without salt, retaining natural flavours, hence was low in sodium (The African Pot Nutrition, 2010). Genetically speaking South African have a tendency to develop hypertension, and a low sodium diet is essential for this. The food is also low in fat, due to the paltry use of meat, as it is mostly cooked with starches and vegetables. When used, meat tends to be free range⁴ and thus, leaner. Food also is mostly organic, with seeds being derived from plants of the previous harvest, and aided with animal manure.

The tribal food, however does not define the cuisine of the multicultural country. The slave and colonizing immigrants brought with them an array of new techniques and flavours in to the country. Their presence has been so prominent for so long their cuisine neither remains authentic to their own origins, nor is it possible to separate it from the cuisine of the country.

• **The Cape Malay Cuisine**

The Cape Malay food is one such example of the perfect integration of African and Malay tastes. This cuisine, found in Cape, is part Asian, part African and somewhat European. As mentioned above, it originated with the Dutch East Indian Slaves, but the original cuisine was tampered to suit the indigenous conditions of the locality. Today it is common street food in Cape, but nowhere

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⁴ Although now livestock rearing is more commercial now and this is not as common anymore.
else in the country is this cuisine as good (South Africa, 2012). Some examples of the African and Asian blend are Geel Rys, yellow saffron rice made with cinnamon and raisins is had with Briedie\(^5\) lamb casseroles. Condiments such as Sambals, Chutneys and Atjars, without which the Malay cuisine is incomplete, have found a definite place in the cuisine. Because the majority of the population in Cape is Muslim, the food is generally Halal and the restaurants do not serve alcohol.

- **The Indian Influence**

Indian cuisine was also introduced to the country via slavery, however it has become popular during the Apartheid. Anti-apartheid activists used to meet in Indian households as Indians were given more privileges than the Africans and meeting in “white” neighbourhoods would be suspicious. Here they were regularly served Indian foods by the women of the house. The commonly found Bunny Chow was invented during this very time (South Africa, 2012). Zulu’s were not allowed in eateries then, and the Indian Gujarati Bannias\(^6\) sold them loaf that had been plucked from the middle and had bean curry added in the hollow. This takeaway item is today an adored dish. The regular “white” crowd also enjoyed the Indian curries, and it has become so popular and prevalent that the national South African dish is Indian rice and curry. The curries are very well spiced and the use of Indian spices is common today too. The Zulu have adapted this curry (they removed ginger from the recipe) to their cuisine with Indian vegetable relishes known as Chakalaka. Breads like Naan, Roti and Poori are easily found as well (South Africa tours and Travel, 2005). Indian Samosas with Cape Malay style sweet potatoes are a common finding in Indian eateries. Also the Bombay Crush, a South East Asian drink originally known as Falooda, is a drink not be missed on the streets of Cape (National Geographic).

- **The Afrikaans Cuisine**

European influences to the cuisine are the most prominent in the Afrikaner food known as Boereros\(^7\). This is the culinary tradition of the Afrikaners that rebelled against the British Colony of Cape in 1835 and trekked away to the places we know today as KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng, and Free state (South Africa, 2013). The food that they ate developed from the need to survive in harsh conditions. They relied on hunting of venison and they are the ones that introduced the popular technique of drying, seasoning and preserving meat, Biltong. The use of Mealie meal in their food proves that they must have been in proximity to the Zulu and Sotho. Bobotie, the best example of European and Cape Malay food, is curried meatloaf. The use of cinnamon and nutmeg reflects their original influences from Dutch cuisine. Tarts and desserts like Beskuit and Koekisters are also borrowed by the cuisine of their European predecessors (Rosmarin & Rissik, 1996). From the Khoikhoi they took the Rooibos tea and the use of Waterblommetjes, or edible water lily. They have Malay influences too, because Cape kitchens regularly employed Malay women thanks to their culinary dexterity. These

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5 South African stew made with meat.
6 The merchant caste of India.
7 Farmer food in Afrikans.
women introduced spices such as fennel, turmeric, cardamom, tamarind and ginger, which the Boerekos cuisine took.

Globalisation has introduced many more tastes to the South African Palate. Japanese and Chinese ingredients are a common sighting in supermarkets (Cheifitz, 2009), now that the Asian cuisines are easily found in the country. North African cuisine, which is majorly influenced by Mediterranean palate, and East African cuisine with Indian influences, is widespread in South Africa.
SOUTH AFRICA CELEBRATES

Because the majority population of South Africa is Christian, the holidays most prominent in the country are Christian too. Christmas in South Africa comes in the middle of the summer. It is not customary to have Christmas trees or other such traditions, however (Barnes & Barnes, 2007). South Africans celebrate Christmas with their family with *braais*, or open barbeques, in the backyard or at the beach. People come together, relaxes and enjoys the barbeque throughout the afternoon.

The Zulu however, have some unique type of celebrations for Christmas. One house is decided upon, where the get together will take place. The women then clean up the house and then work on making the homebrewed beer (Buthelezi). Then, as customs require them to, they drink some of the beer to test it for poisoning and in the process are intoxicated. The men then bring in the meat, and cook it, which is significant of manliness. In the evening the children perform folk dances with the women singing and playing music. Christmas is mainly about the group activity and coming together of family.

Some Muslim customs are prominent in the Cape, such as the naming ceremony, the wedding, the funeral, etc. (Osseo-Asare, 2005). All these traditions call for feasts that are normally indulged in *Biryani* and meat dishes. The Muslim festival, *Ramadan* also has an assortment of food items being made.

Some tribes, such as the Bantu speaking tribes have elaborate customs for boys transitioning from adolescence to adulthood. Animals are slaughtered in the process and once the rites are over, the people feast in celebration.

Tribes like !Kung, that are still hunters and gatherers do not have such elaborate celebrations seeing as how much food would be required and ultimately wasted (Osseo-Asare, 2005). They have the custom to share whatever food is found with the entire tribe.

There are several other festivals happening year round in South Africa for music, dance and other such cultural activities. But the customs discussed above are the ones that are generic to the country.
BRAAI AND POTJIEKOS

The Bantu people, who had learnt it from Arab traders and Portuguese settlers, introduced the use of caste iron pots for cooking to South Africa (South Africa Tours and Travel, 2005). The Dutch settlers were the ones that made it widespread. *Potjiekos* is a stew made from venison and vegetables, which was invented by the *Vootrekkers*. They trekked and travelled plenty and hence carried these caste iron pots in their wagons and put them on fire whenever they stopped. The game that was caught during breaks from the treks was added to the pot, with wild plants and bones to make the stew thicker.

It is the ultimate type of slow cooking and is still very much a part of the South African palate. Cooking the *Potjiekos* is now a social activity where the family sits around the pot that is slowly cooking the flavourful meat with the vegetables. While they wait, they drink and converse.

However simple it may seem, there are some technicalities linked with making the perfect *Potjiekos*. The fire is an essential part of it. The stew is supposed to continuously simmer, and regulating the heat can only do this. Because the stew is cooked over open flame, coals are added and removed as per the requirements. The meat, which is special in the sense that it gets tender as it is cooked, is the first to go into the pot. Then follow the vegetables in the sequence of the time they would take to cook. All this while the food is not stirred or hampered with. The flavours are completely brought out, and very little water is added, in order to be able to retain them. The caste iron pot is an important element in the process because it retains heat and allows the simmering. The round, pot bellied nature of it is ideal for this type of cooking. The pot is to be layered with lard so as to not let it rust, or let the metallic flavours seep into the meal.

*Potjiekos* is a dish that demonstrates best what it is to cook with simple and minimal ingredients and what a dish can be when it is allowed to cook at its pace.

Just like *Potjiekos*, *Braai or Braaivleis* is derived from the technique of cooking meat over open flame. However this technique is more like a barbeque (South Africa Tours and Travels, 2005). It is an extremely common and the most enjoyed social activity of South Africa. It has its origin with the Bantu people, and the *Vootrekkers*, who had no choice but to cook over open flame because they were always on the move. It was initially associated with simple grilled meat served with other porridge staples like *Miellepap*. Today however, a large variety of meat is used and in many different ways. One will find marinated steaks, venison, pork chops, lambs, etc. had with a variety of salads, bread, and other accompaniments. Not so much of a necessity anymore, *Braai* is a very prominent social activity where many guests are invited over for and people chat and drink. The technique of *Braai*, like that of *Potjiekos*, is to be patient with the meat, to let it soak up all the smoky flavours of the open flame.
TOURISM AND SOUTH AFRICAN DELIGHTS

Food always is a big part of any tourism industry. South Africa is emerging as one of the most popular destinations and its cuisine is a big part of that. The new age travellers are open to new tastes and are curious. They want to have authentic culinary experiences. KwaZulu-Natal and Franshhoek, both have become the hub for tourists that want to have the amazing cuisine of the cities due to their extensive produce (South Africa, 2011). The government of South Africa is encouraging this trend and is ready to invest. Programs to train locals for these culinary skill is already in place. This will not only make South African cuisine large scale for tourists, but will also give an opportunity for people to work and learn what they are passionate towards.

Compared with culinary tourists, tourism attracted by the wine of South Africa is at a completely different league. South Africa has been named the best-developed wine tourism destination in the world (Pillay, 2012). The vineyards that are located in the Western Cape help create US$590 million each year through tourism. Wine tourism is one of the main ways in which South Africa has a competitive edge against neighbouring countries.
THE STORY OF THE CULTURES

What this extensive analysis of the food culture of this wonderful country shows is that food is not just something that came to be. It is rooted in our ancestors’ need to provide for something visceral: hunger, nourishment, and the need to survive as a species. Food is the basic requirement, and the choices made by the ancestors reflect the survival instinct. But it is also rooted in our interactions with each other. The interaction of the Dutch East Indian slaves with the indigenous group, the interaction between the Afrikaners and tribal people, the interaction between the individuals of the same heritage, all of it together created what is today this robust and diverse cuisine.

South African food does not just reflect on the cultures that make the country, but on the stories that create those cultures. It is a direct result of the people of the country and is the neutral reflection of them. There might be many more changes to come, which will affect the cuisine of this country. But just like it has incorporated all separate the flavours presented to it, it will do so again, and come out, steaming, as a better version of itself.
Bibliography


