

An Ode to the Fat Cake

Botswana has little gems scattered about that drive a significant portion of the economy and offer livelihoods for its residents. You might find them at one of the mines, but you would never need to travel so far. Composed (like a sonata) of wheat flour dough with the air kneaded out, rolled into a ball and deep-fried, these precious darlings keep it golden and crispy-leathery on the outside, soft and dense on the inside. A true fat cake is sturdy enough to stop a bullet.

These little dough balls sit in your stomach like bricks. Yet, it has what the deep parts of your brain have been craving, so they beg for a sequel. And another, and so on, until your stomach feels like a neutron star (dense). You might get to the point where you have to adjust your belt, or just take it off altogether and lie down for a little while. But that is a sacrifice i am willing to make for these golden, crispy, doughy foodstuffs.

Sometimes people get so audacious that they cut open a big fat cake and stuff it with mince meat or chicken (unconfirmed). Storefront menus label this a “mince cake” or some such innocuous term. But it has earned more colorful appellations: “Hunger Buster,” for its ability to bust hunger, and another anatomical word from Setswana. But do not order one with that term. “Hunger buster” will suffice.

Yum. i need one more of those.

Six fat cakes later they are still yummy:

Oof. i feel my heartbeat in my fingers and toes.

At least i will die with a full tummy.



An Ode to Mageu

I have described mageu as “a corn yogurt,” “a sweetened fermented corn smoothie,” “sort of tastes like the banana Runt[®],” and “fermented corn porridge with sugar and artificial flavoring.” My first trepidatious sip gave the impression of a smoothie. But the ingredients list declared nothing that i could categorize as a fruit. Made with water, maize, sugar, wheat flour, and lactic acid-producing cultures, mageu offers a wholesome texture and sweet-tangy taste.

People always ask me: “You drink mageu?”

I drink mageu.

Yes, and i choose to.

No this was not a mistake.

I happen to like the taste,

though the texture has room for improvement. Some batches contain unblended porridge fragments that storm your tongue in an amphibious assault. Those fragments are an affront to my palette each time, but i have come to accept the costs of smooth.



An Ode to Matapa

Note: not found in Botswana. Found in Mozambique, with analogues in other parts of the Lusophone world.

Matapa is a sauce which often bathes chicken, shrimp, or vegetables. It performs equally well when mixed into rice. Cassava leaves, peanuts, garlic, and coconut milk join to form the matapa megazord. Imagine a creamy, tropical twist on pesto sauce; in a similar way, the fresh leafy high notes pull on your olfaction while nutty, earthen tones fill the back of your tongue. But, distinctly, creamy coconut milk moderates the event.

Like a palm-laden island,
milky Matapa,
soothe my throat and worries.
Supreme Sauce.

An Ode to Tikka Paneer

One cannot simply find this one on the street in Botswana. You can find it, however, at food festivals among the Indian diaspora. It is often associated with Diwali, the festival of light. I found some, on a kebab between little grilled pineapple cubes at a Diwali bazaar in the International Society for Krishna Consciousness temple next door.

Abhay Charanaravinda Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada founded ISKCON, a new religious movement which draws from ancient hindu texts, in 1966 in New York City. They worship the Lord Krishna Balaram one plot over from my homestay and feed me delicious vegetarian meals on Sundays.

But to be honest, i harbor a stronger belief in the spiritual power of tikka paneer. This is a farmer's cheese into which you can sink your teeth. It emerges from hot, acid-curdled milk. Then it receives a dry rub incorporating the entire spice cupboard: ginger, garlic, cumin, coriander, and a whole lot that you have never seen before. Skewered, a sprinkle of chaat masala and a slather of mint chutney top it off.

All of those spices move on your tongue like the 2008 Olympics Opening Ceremony: in constant flux, colorful, and dumbfoundingly complex. The hearty cheese keeps your feet on the ground, but pulls a double shift as a tangy sour. These ingredients hit dozens of notes, but not in a familiar, diatonic way; they eschew twelve-TET Western harmonies to play you the traditional ragas in stere-ereo. As the waves of flavor crash and roll, your brain rewires, and, after much confusion, the world begins to make a little more sense.

Tikka paneer, where have you gone?
I was savoring, but then—om-nom-nom.
Sure as the dharma wheel spins,
Our paths will cross again.