

# Maize, It's What's for Breakfast, Lunch, AND Dinner

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<https://mariahandcollin.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/a-typical-zambian-meal-of-nshima-fish-cabbage-and-pumpkin-leaves-i-added-the-hot-sauce12.jpg>

A typical Zambian meal of nshima, fish, cabbage, and pumpkin leaves (Plus atypical hot sauce).

Nshima is the staple food of Zambia, as well as many other African countries. While this food, called “ubwali” in local language, is all but unknown in the States, after eating it two meals a day during pre-service training, and still a few times a week in village, we now know it very well.

Zambians don’t just eat nshima out of necessity, they truly love it. One of the best jokes you can tell a Zambian is that we don’t have nshima in America. They simply can’t believe it. Once their laughter stops we tell them that they will need to pack plenty of “mealie meal,” used for making nshima, with them if they ever visit America. All Zambians want to visit America and are very thankful for the advice, as they would not tolerate a lack of nshima. In fact, if you ask a Zambian if they have eaten today, the answer will be “No,” until they have taken nshima, even if they have already eaten something else. Nshima is always a topic of conversation. We are always asked if we eat it, often get invited in to eat it with others, and get concerned looks and gasps when we say we don’t cook it everyday (in fact we never cook it, but it’s best to not let that rumor out).

A typical rural Zambian family eats nshima for dinner, lunch, and even at late breakfast if they didn’t already make maize porridge or boiled pumpkin. However, to become a proper meal, nshima must be served with relishes, collectively called “umunami.” These side dishes are usually made from the leaves of pumpkin, rape, cabbage, Chinese cabbage, cassava, okra, sweet potato, and beans, just to name a few, and are boiled with water, oil, salt, tomato, and onion. Families that can afford meat may also serve chicken or fish (usually dried), and rarely people may have goat or even cow.

In the interest of sharing our daily eating experiences, we'd like to start sharing some recipes, both Zambian and what we piece together as "American food."

What better recipe to start with than nshima. In our part of Zambia it is made from maize and/or cassava root and water. We prefer the maize nshima as cassava root smells like a mix of gym socks and 'what did I just step in?' while being dried after being soaked to remove the arsenic compounds. This smell mostly goes away after cooking.

If you are brave enough to try and attempt to make nshima at home, your first challenge will be finding or making something similar to mealie meal. This is the product of maize after it is harvested, dried and pounded into flour. Under no circumstances substitute corn meal. We tried that once before leaving... don't make the same mistake.

Zambians don't use recipes per say. They explain how to cook with a little of this and a lot of that. So the best I can do is describe how we learned. To make a pot of nshima: fill a pot with water and heat. As it gets hot add in a handful or two of mealie meal, stir and put the lid on. This should boil for a while and eventually thicken into a thin porridge consistency. At this point slowly add more mealie meal while stirring. It is of utmost importance not to get any clumps, so we're told. Simply keep repeating these steps, slowly adding more mealie meal, stirring, and boiling. It will eventually start to thicken quite a bit, and at this point weak American arms will find it difficult to stir. This means you are not done yet and need to keep adding more mealie meal. But Zambian "Bamayo" have no problem stirring this super thick mixture. We've been laughed at by children as young as seven, as that's when they learn to cook. All that's left now is to spoon it out into lumps in a communal serving bowl, and "capwa," you're done.

Nshima is always the last thing cooked so it can be served fresh and scalding hot. Under no circumstances is it ever served as a leftover. The final difficult part of this meal is eating scalding hot nshima with your bare hands, we call it getting your "Zam-hands." No utensils needed, just dive in, shape the nshima in your right hand and use it to scoop up relishes.

We'll continue to describe some of the relishes and other important Zambian foods in more detail along with another recipe soon.



(<https://mariahandcollin.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/dinner-nshima-rape-leaves-and-soya-a-very-common-product-similar-to-tofu-but-sold-dried.jpg>)

Lunch ~ nshima, rape leaves, and Soya (a very common product similar to tofu, but sold dried).



