

CHEF AIMS TO CREATE MOST SUSTAINABLE RESTAURANT IN AFRICA

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By Leila Darabi

Although foodie culture is evolving, the consensus in cities like New York, London and Paris has historically been that fine dining means European food—not non-Western immigrant cuisine. In 2016, the popular food podcast *The Sporkful* produced a six-part special series titled *Other People's Food*, covering several themes, including why we expect Mexican and Chinese food to cost less than Japanese and Italian food.

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Even in countries like Ghana, European cooking techniques often eclipse indigenous food culture. Congolese-born chef Mick Élysée is on a mission to change that—and to elevate African ingredients and cuisine in the eyes of the world. His restaurant Nsuom-Nam in Accra, Ghana, showcases sustainable seafood, local ingredients and traditional methods of preparation.

“Most of the big restaurants in Africa aren't African,” he said in a video interview. “Even in Africa, the African food is not present, is not valued.”

A CHANCE RECOMMENDATION

Before diving into Élysée's culinary history, let me first explain why I requested an interview from him. In October of 2023, members of the *Linewaiters' Gazette* squad gathered for the first-ever “Gazette Fall Mixer.” The event brought together editors, reporters, photographers, illustrators and Coop staff who had worked together remotely for years—many without ever meeting in person.

Upon receiving my invitation to the mixer, I immediately reached out to my developmental editor at the *Gazette*, Petra E. Lewis, to see if she would be attending the gathering. Lewis, a member of the *Gazette* since 1999, has edited my articles since I joined in 2016. I had hoped to finally connect live, but she informed me that she was headed out of the country to a wedding in Accra.

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Lewis’ destination piqued my interest, in particular because I myself have spent time in Ghana through my day job in global health. As luck would have it, I had seen friends in Accra post mouth-watering photos of seafood on Facebook that same day.

Knowing Lewis to be a fellow foodie, I sent her the name and Instagram account of the restaurant my friends had tagged on the off chance she would have time to check it out during her trip. That restaurant was NsuomNam, which Élysée heads.

While in Ghana, Lewis did eat there—twice. When she returned, she suggested that the *Gazette* feature NsuomNam and Élysée.

INTRODUCING AFRICAN CUISINE



Photos provided by NsuomNam Seafood and Fish Restaurant.

Born in Brazzaville, Congo, Élysée left in 1993 at the age of 13 when his family fled the first Congolese civil war and relocated to Toulouse in southern France. At 16, he entered culinary school, where he gained a foundation in classical French technique. At 22, he opened his first restaurant, as he put it, “not because I love to cook, but because I love to eat.”

Three years later, he sold that restaurant and, still only 25, set out to travel the world and explore what it has to offer. He lived and cooked in London, Japan, Brazil and Canada, before returning to London to work under master chefs at well-known institutions, including Soho House and the Haymarket Hotel.

For 12 years he worked as a consultant, helping restaurateurs open new establishments. Yet, despite the professional success, Élysée remained frustrated with the culinary world.

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“I felt something was missing. African food was not very on the map.” To rectify this, he explained, “I decided to create my own style, introducing African cuisine [to new audiences].”

He began to experiment with applying his classical culinary skills to preparing menus featuring African staples. “I had popups and local events [in London], so people could start to understand what my mission was.”

It was in London that he met Edwina Akufo Addo, daughter of the current Ghanaian President, Nana Akufo-Addo, who was interested in the growing Ghanaian food scene. With Akufo Addo as lead investor, Élysée relocated to Accra and launched Nsuom-Nam, which means “food from the sea.”

FARM AND SEA TO TABLE



Gazette editor Petra Lewis (left) with Chef Élysée and friend. Photo provided by NsuomNam Seafood and Fish Restaurant.

When Lewis visited NsuomNam for the first time, she was struck by the restaurant's open layout. "The ceiling was very, very high. And a large, spacious, grass-filled outdoor lounge dotted by chic, modern outdoor furniture appeared to be a happening scene," she said. The day her dining party ate there, Lewis described "a young, well-heeled crowd dining and enjoying each other's company in the yard, including a group that were Black and British. The crowd that night was an African diasporal mashup."

Her party sat inside, on high-back chairs in the restaurant's large dining room. "The service was fantastic—impeccable." Lewis said. "We had prawns, kelewele [a spiced plantain dish that's a Ghanaian specialty], jollof rice, and the best calamari I've ever tasted in my life."



Photo provided by NsuomNam Seafood and Fish Restaurant

When she returned a second time, Lewis and a friend had sorbet served on a bright red bed of reconstituted millet, a form of alchemy that reminded her of wd~50, the New York restaurant that popularized molecular gastronomy in the early 2000's, where Lewis and members of Chew, the dining club she founded, had once eaten.



Photos provided by NsuomNam Seafood and Fish Restaurant.

“In Africa we have some of the oldest grains,” Élysée noted, via Zoom. “I barely use wheat, he added. “I use sorghum flour to make my pastry and my pasta.” His menu features what Élysée calls smarter cereals: sorghum, millet and fonio, all gluten free, rich in iron and budget friendly.

Élysée speaks English with a Francophone West African accent, slipping between English and French when searching for the most vibrant possible descriptions of his food. He is quick to laugh, and, as evidenced by his personal Instagram feed, well-coiffed and a sharp dresser. A recent post featured the chef taking followers behind the scenes as he sourced millet from a local farm and transformed it into a starter on the menu.

The clip starts with Élysée visiting a rural setting, milking a cow, pounding grains in a traditional pot and interacting with men, women and children in traditional dress. It ends with Élysée back in his kitchen in the capital, dressed in his chef's uniform, using tweezers to position elements of the final dish—including edible flowers—to put the

finishing touches on the plate. The value proposition of NsuamNam lies in connecting - worlds: traditional African cuisine and staples with European and Asian culinary techniques.



Photo provided by NsuomNam Seafood and Fish Restaurant.

When asked about his intended clientele and whether Ghanaians or Western tourists make up the majority of his lunch and dinner crowds, Élysée is quick to insist that he attracts a diverse crowd. He prides his restaurant on being “in the middle—” not as inaccessible as fine dining in London or Paris, but also intentional in its mission of “elevating African cuisine.”

“When they see the design, it looks a bit too posh and people are scared,” he said, noting that most are pleasantly surprised by the prices, especially for seafood. Being owned by the Ghanaian President’s daughter has also prompted some accusations of high prices at NsuomNam, though a Google News search found an equal number of reviewers who called the prices fair.

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Élysée is also clear that in elevating African cuisine, he aims to stress local ingredients and traditional methods of preparation, not fancy food for the sake of fancy food.

“I cook my fish in banana leaves, using the old technique. And I use a lot of smoked fish, which we prepare a lot in West Africa,” he clarified. “I want people to understand that it’s not just a place where you come and eat. The restaurant has a mission [to showcase local ingredients and African cuisine].”

A recent post on the restaurant’s Instagram features a tantalizing plate of locally sourced prawns served on a traditional clay platter. Local pride is just one part of the values Élysée seeks to advance. His restaurant features local seafood in part to promote environmental sustainability. From the relationships he has built with local fish-

ermen to highlighting locally grown produce, each item on the menu serves Nsuom-Nam's multi-pronged mission—ranging from sustainability, to locavorism, to furthering the reach, and appreciation, of African cuisine.



Left: char-grilled organic and wild lobster with spicy pasta. Photos provided by Nsuom-Nam Seafood and Fish Restaurant.

“I’m hoping that more Americans, and non-Ghanaians, will get hip to him,” Lewis said of Chef Élysée, “because he really needs to be in that class of people who are called upon as international culinary thought leaders.”

Leila Darabi joined the Gazette as a reporter in 2016. She is the cohost of the feminist TV podcast Cringewatchers and shares photos of the things she cooks with Coop ingredients via @persian_ish on Instagram.