

CHEF AIMS TO CREATE MOST SUSTAINABLE RESTAURANT IN AFRICA

January 16, 2024



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.

“MOST OF THE BIG RESTAURANTS IN AFRICA AREN'T AFRICAN. EVEN IN AFRICA, THE AFRICAN FOOD IS NOT PRESENT, IS NOT VALUED.”

CHEF MICK ÉLYSÉE

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.

“I FELT SOMETHING WAS MISSING. AFRICAN FOOD WAS NOT VERY ON THE MAP. I DECIDED TO CREATE MY OWN STYLE, INTRODUCING AFRICAN CUISINE TO NEW AUDIENCES.”

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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.

“IN AFRICA WE HAVE SOME OF THE OLDEST GRAINS. I BARELY USE WHEAT. I USE SORGHUM FLOUR TO MAKE MY PASTRY AND MY PASTA.”

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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.

“I WANT PEOPLE TO UNDERSTAND THAT IT’S NOT JUST A PLACE WHERE YOU COME AND EAT. THE RESTAURANT HAS A MISSION.”

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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.

**COOP MEMBER BREWS THE RADICALLY SUSTAINABLE "TESLA OF BEER."
NOW THE COOP JUST NEEDS TO STOCK IT.**

January 16, 2024



By Liz Welch

It was June 2020, peak-Covid, and John Midgely, the Brooklyn-based London-born art and fashion photographer was restless. He'd spent nearly four decades shooting celebs like Mos Def and Ozzy Osbourne for magazines, as well as the legendary Bethann Hardison in an iconic Gap campaign—but the industry had “changed radically,” he said over sandwiches at Park Slope’s Simple Loaf. “I was looking for a transition.”

He was in lockdown chatting about new possibilities with his cousin, Doug, who lives in London and who had worked in mergers and acquisitions for the multinational beverage company Diageo before leaving to become a consultant in the beverage industry. The two share a love of lager and Doug suggested that John take an online brewing class. It was called “The Science of Brewing,” and along with how to brew beer, John learned that the malting process, which is how beer is made, uses a tremendous amount of water and energy to turn barley into malt.

“High consumption of good-quality water is characteristic of beer brewing,” John, a Coop member, explained. “More than 90% of beer is water and an efficient brewery will typically use between four and six liters of water to produce one liter of beer.”

John also learned that most of the waste happened during the malting process, as it involves germinating the barley, then making a mash and finally separating the particles from the warm sugary water to get the maltose necessary to make beer. This made him wonder: Was there a more efficient way to extract maltose from barley?

He began Googling around and quickly learned that there was: adding enzymes to the raw barley would cut out all the germinating and water waste involved in the malting steps. The result would be a “raw” beer.

John called Doug to bounce the idea off him.

“The beer industry is ripe for a renewal,” John explains. “It worked with electric cars and solar panels, which are industries that have been revolutionized as a result.” Why not beer? Doug agreed that it was worth investigating. Not long later, Cool Cousin Brewing was born.

John set up a home brewing station on the top floor of his recently renovated Bedford-Stuyvesant home. He ordered the enzymes online and started experimenting by adding them to the raw barley, and forgoing the multi-stepped malting process. It was all very exciting. There was only one problem: the beer did not taste good.

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“After three months of tinkering, I got closer with taste,” he said. “But it still needed

color.” So he toasted some raw barely and tossed it into the mix, which produced the pale lager golden glow he was looking for.

By then, he had joined a Brooklyn group of home brewing beer aficionados called “Brewminaries” who regularly met up in Park Slope to share stories and taste one another’s samples. “There was a generous and bright high school teacher whom I would lean on all the time,” John said.



John was making a Kolsch lager, which has a lighter crisper taste than the pungent hop heavy IPAs that were all the rage. He continued to tinker and perfect his recipe and, once he was satisfied, even entered a few home-brewing competitions. After he won two—and proved his hypothesis that he could make a raw beer that was delicious—he was ready to move the Cool Cousin operation beyond his home.

He first went to Strong Rope, a small local brewery in Gowanus, whose owner Jason Sahler was a big supporter of sustainability. “He uses 100% New York state ingredi-

ents and wants to help grow the industry,” John explained. Sahler connected John with Rich Michaels, a well-respected master brewer who worked at FXMat, a 500-barrel system in upstate New York that brewed Saranac Beers, among others. Rich had long been interested in making a sustainable beer and agreed to work with Cool Cousins.

“The concept of trying to make beer out of unmalted grain is not new,” Rich explained. “People have been looking at doing this for 40 years—to save both energy and cost. But no one has been able to make it taste like beer.”

Rich was intrigued by John’s recipe, and dedication. “I’ve been brewing commercially for 31 years,” he explained. “Brewers are sustainably-minded, so we are always interested in changing our practices. There have been breweries who have tried to do this but have struggled to make it taste like good beer.”

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By August 2023, they had a Kolsch lager that they felt was ready for prime time. John began reaching out to potential customers and Cool Cousin’s first sale was to Dan Barber’s acclaimed Blue Hill at Stone Barns restaurant in Tarrytown, New York.

“I emailed the website and was invited to bring a sample,” John said. That lead to his first sale—ten cases—and the restaurant remains Cool Cousin’s most consistent customer. Currently, the brand is available in 35 places throughout New York State including Total Wine in Westbury, Long Island. But shockingly, not the Coop.

“As long as Cool Cousin can work with a distributor, we’d be happy to stock the brand,” says Kusi Merello, the Coop’s beer buyer and a receiving coordinator. Known for its eclectic and wide ranging beer selection, the Coop sells more than a hundred

brands of beer. Their best seller is Brooklyn-based Sixpoint, but they also offer small independent brands like the women-owned TaLea. Kusi and her co-beer buyer Brian Robinson are constantly on the lookout for new brands to put on the shelves and Cool Cousins certainly aligns with the Coop's sustainability values. The issue, Kusi maintains, is how the beer is sold.

"The loading zone is not just ours, so we have to consolidate our purchase through one of the six distributors. Otherwise it is too much work for individuals," she explains.

This basic rule is summarized in the Coop's "new product consideration" protocol, which states:

"Product must be sold through a distributor. While we understand that many independent food producers do not use distributors, there are several important reasons for this requirement. Direct shipments increase the number of orders that have to be placed, the number of deliveries to the store, the number of invoices that have to be verified and received, and the number of invoices that have to be processed through our bookkeepers. Additionally, we are beyond capacity with the traffic from the hundreds of deliveries we already receive each week. We seldom add a distributor to bring just one or two products. However, we do *occasionally* make exceptions for local independent producers selling a *completely unique* product."

John has tried to get Cool Cousin distributed through one of the six distributors based in New York City, but it is not easy. "Most want you to be selling at scale," he explains. Hopefully, this will change as the company continues to grow. It just added a hazy IPA to its offerings.

And yet, one could argue that Cool Cousin *is* completely unique. At least according to journalist Don Tse, "the baron of beer" who reached out to Rich Michaels in August 2023 looking for anyone who was brewing with enzymes as he was looking to do a story on sustainable beer.

“We were the only one,” John said.

The story, “This New York Brewery Hopes to Revolutionize the Way Beer Is Made” ran in Forbes magazine on September 2, 2023 with the opening line: “New York’s Cool Cousin Brewing is the first commercial brewing company in America to make beer entirely from unmalted barley, saving water and carbon dioxide with each brew.”

Proof of John’s hypothesis: there is space in the beer industry for raw sustainable beer. And soon, one hopes, there will be space in the Coop’s shelves for the product.



PHOTO BY JACKSON KRULE

Liz Welch re-joined the Gazette as a reporter in August 2023 after a hiatus. She is a longtime journalist and author/collaborator whose work can be seen at <http://www.lizwelch.com>.

THE VIEW FROM HEPWORTH FARMS

January 16, 2024



Nearly end-of-season cherry tomatoes (and some heirloom tomatoes) from Hepworth Farms for sale on the shopping floor at PS-FC.

COOP PROVIDERS REFLECT ON A RAPIDLY CHANGING MARKET

By Frank Haberle

We are just a few years away from the 50th anniversary of the Park Slope Food Coop

(PSFC). For almost as many years, the Coop has relied on Hepworth Farms, a 500-acre Hudson Valley agricultural farm that stood with us for decades, and continues today as our largest single farm partner. Through times of prosperity and economic downturn—and through climate crises like Superstorm Sandy and recent flooding—Hepworth Farms and PSFC have worked together to ensure that fresh, organic produce at affordable prices remains a privilege available to PSFC’s working members. In planning their growing season each year, Hepworth Farms’ “tell-us-what-you-want-and-we’ll-grow-it-for you” relationship with PSFC has ensured that an amazing assortment of fresh tomatoes, zucchinis, lettuce and other produce—grown locally, organically, and lovingly—can be served to our families on our dinner tables, in some cases on the same day they were picked from the vine.



Stacks of Honeycrisp apples from Hepworth Farms, in the walk-in at the PSFC.

In the past 18 months, this balanced, mutually supportive partnership has been tested by the onset of the COVID-19 crisis which, for the first time in our history, severely limited our members' access to our shopping aisles and decreased demand for fresh products. The same limitations were felt on the supply side, by every farm and business that brings products into PSFC. For Hepworth Farms, the challenges of the 18-month slowdown demanded that they quickly pivot to meet changing needs, supply

shortages and a more limited market at PSFC and elsewhere, while also facing the urgent need to protect the health and safety of their workers. Much like PSFC, which is still struggling to get our members back in the habit of shopping in our aisles, Hepworth Farms faces a new business landscape that has shifted considerably. They have adapted to meet changing trends in the organic food market, the supply chain, the workforce, and the economy. However, like every other part of the food chain, they face a shifting market and an uncertain future.



Six 1/2-bushel boxes of Devoe Pears and one case of Cape Gooseberries, all from Hepworth Farms, in a walk-in at the PSFC.

COVID has taken a toll on both PSFC and Hepworth Farms, challenging both organiza-

tions to shift and adapt. “For years, PSFC has been a huge success,” Gail Hepworth, one of three co-operators of Hepworth Farms (along with Gerry Greco and Gail’s twin sister, Amy), observed. “Then, suddenly, the model was disrupted. The impact of COVID-19 was felt very deeply. Suddenly PSFC wasn’t able to cycle its members in like it used to. There were long lines and people didn’t want to wait in lines, and the member work shifts were suspended. Suddenly people were changing their habits and shopping elsewhere. PSFC needs to come back. It may need to make changes to be more appealing to a shifting market, but PSFC needs to come back and, again, serve as a robust success model for the whole world.”

A RELENTLESS COMMITMENT TO SUSTAINABLE FARMING PRACTICES

A seventh-generation farm that was first established in Milton, New York in 1818, Hepworth Farms transitioned in 1982 from traditional farming to dechemicalization and wholly-organic farming, under Amy’s guidance. Hepworth Farm’s methods are constantly evolving to ensure that the best practices in organic and sustainable farming are applied in each step of the food cycle. “For 40 years we have been building our understanding of what being a sustainable farm really means,” Amy said. “We’ve always been committed to a whole-farm-alive systems approach. This has only become more intensified in recent years with our commitment to biological farming [the creation of a sustainable soil system]. Today, biological agriculture teaches us to introduce microbes to improve the soil. It’s a steady, time intensive process to influence biology. It’s a complex dynamic that you have to navigate in the dark. You can’t see what’s going on in the soil beneath each plant, but you can see it in the health of the plant itself. Biological farming is going to take another decade to fully understand. For example, we’re now taking steps to introduce parasitic neomodes [tiny worms into our soil that attack beetles that harm produce. We’re introducing things into the soil to make it more balanced.”

“THE PARK SLOPE FOOD COOP MAY NEED TO MAKE CHANGES TO BE MORE APPEALING TO A SHIFTING MARKET, BUT IT NEEDS TO COME BACK AND, AGAIN,

SERVE AS A ROBUST SUCCESS MODEL FOR THE WHOLE WORLD."

As Amy put it, "This work is about the acknowledgement and respect of the life force and the interconnected reality of life itself." Gail adds that "Amy's practices are putting things into the soil that prevent disease, that create healthy soils and build protective colonies around roots that allow our plants to be as healthy as they can be. Our practices keep evolving alongside the latest science, so that we can deliver the healthiest produce while taking care of and nurturing the soil. It's more expensive and time intensive to grow plants this way, but it's the right thing to do. We are committed to continuing the mission of organic farming: better soil means better food, which means healthier people. We still have a lot to learn about the evolving biology of farming this way. The more we learn about the soil the more we realize we don't yet know."



Devoe and Asian pears for sale at the PSFC.

NEW CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Fewer members shopping at PSFC has meant lower revenues for the Coop and for Hepworth Farms alike. Hepworth Farms has had to face a range of challenges in order to survive the COVID-19 crisis, and now faces numerous questions on how to move forward in a new market and a changed world. For the first time in its history Hepworth Farms faced a labor shortage, in part reflecting—as Gail pointed out—the general devaluing of work in our society. “Through this pandemic, people should have become more aware of the amazing work that goes into their food systems, and the essential role that farm workers play in their food systems. But farm workers are still extremely undervalued in our society. As farmers we are now paying a living wage to our workers, but people still can’t live decently and fully independently on these wages. There’s been a big culture shift in the last couple of years where real work, the practice of working hard, is being undervalued. People should be more aware of where their food comes from and they should buy their food from places where workers are valued and supported. The relationship is important but people don’t seem to value it.”

Amy adds that the people who do come to work at Hepworth Farms—who can number up to 200 during the busiest seasons—quickly learn to appreciate the work and the role it plays in others’ well-being. “The best part of my day is getting to work with the beautiful people who work here. I am so thankful for them. We all share a collective mindset of doing good work for others. The workers here know that they are really a part of something special. I think it’s really important for people to understand where their food comes from, and it’s just as important for them to understand that the people who plant, grow, pick, pack, and deliver their food love doing this work for them.”

“ALL FARMERS ARE TRYING TO SURVIVE. WHEN YOU’RE IN SURVIVAL MODE, OTHER PEOPLE MIGHT DO FUNNY THINGS. BUT WE’RE NOT COMPROMISING WHEN IT COMES TO AMY’S PRACTICES.”

The economics of an independent farm are always challenging, especially during a pandemic. Amy said, “[PSFC General Coordinator] Joe Holtz once told me that ‘from seed to sale, you are the creditors of the food system. You bring us the food, we sell it, and then we pay you.’ We don’t get paid until food is in the consumer’s stomach. From seed to sale, we are creditors of food system.” Added Gail, “We begin working on producing the food in March. We plan what we’re planting and when. Then we plant the seeds. Then we grow the product, pick it, and deliver it. But we don’t get paid until 30 to 60 days after someone has eaten it.”

Inflation and supply chain concerns that have impacted all levels of the economy have hit family-run farms like Hepworth Farms especially hard. “The cartons we needed for our cherry tomatoes, we could not get in time to sell them,” Gail said, “When we need parts for a tractor that breaks down, it takes longer to find them.” Inflation is creeping up, without changing the prices the farm can charge for its products. “Everything we have to purchase,” Gail adds, “is more expensive. But the price of food we sell does not match this rise. The increased pricing is still not filtering back to farmers.”

Amy added that “the worst thing this year was when we couldn’t afford to glean for the food bank—everything became so financially stressful. We have felt so good about harvesting and giving food away in the past. We have to do what we can, but this was the most internally disruptive thing that happened on the farm this year.”

“Right now, all farmers are trying to survive,” Gail said. “When you’re in survival mode other people might do funny things. But we’re not compromising when it comes to Amy’s practices, and our commitment to producing the healthiest produce possible. Three years ago we thought this was sustainable. But sustainability is expensive.”



PHOTO BY MICHAEL BERMAN

REFORGING CONNECTIONS

As the Coop continues its efforts to bounce back fully and resume our success as a model of cooperative partnerships, local farmers are eager to see members recommit to shopping and working here. “The great thing about our relationship with PSFC,” Gail said, “has always been that people had the opportunity to know who their farmers are, and where their food has come from. This relationship has been such an anchor for our farm, but the pandemic has separated us from you, and you from us. We want to partner with you, to reconnect with your mission, to have you reconnect with our mission. Be connected to our mission—you have a profile population that’s perfect. We need to reestablish relationship. Amy has taken our farm through many generations of changes. Tell us what you want us to grow and we’ll grow it!”

To learn more about Hepworth Farms and the work Gail and Amy Hepworth are doing in the Hudson Valley, please visit www.hepworthfarms.com.