

GO WEST

From Nigeria to Senegal and everywhere in between, West Africa is home to a rich culinary culture that transcends national borders and combines comfort cooking with bold flavours

WORDS: TOYO ODETUNDE



Smoky skewered meat, browned over flames, dipped into a zesty mustard at a *dibiterie* (grilled meat restaurant) in Dakar — or wrapped in newspaper and dusted with bright copper *yaji* spice amid the busy Lagos traffic. Yam or cassava pummelled into plush, stretchy mounds of *fufu*, dipped into Ghanaian *kontomire* or Nigerian *esa* — both stews of leafy greens, salted with crushed seeds and umami-rich fermented locust beans. Stubbornly thick *asaro*, known as *sese* yams in Cameroon or *mpoto mpoto* in Ghana — a porridge of mashed yam scented with tomato, peppers, onions and scotch bonnet, with the floral tang of unrefined red palm oil. Tennis ball-sized orbs of dough — called *puff-puff* in Nigeria, *botokin* in Togo, *kala* in Liberia and *bofloto* in Cote d'Ivoire — kissed with nutmeg and gently bouncing like buoys in hissing hot oil.

The diversity within West African cuisine speaks to the varied landscape — from the rugged Atlantic coastline to the tawny fringes of the Sahara, from the pulsing urban areas to the placid mountain plateaus — as well as to the region's cultural abundance. With over 500 languages spoken across multiple distinct communities, West Africa is no monolith. However, there are commonalities in the cuisine. Neighbouring peoples have always exchanged recipes, and dishes transcend the colonial borders that cut across ethnic identities.

Non-native ingredients assimilated through trade, slave routes and colonialism are now indispensable to modern West African cookery. Cinnamon and cloves from ancient commerce with the Arab world, chillies from 16th-century Portuguese and Spanish traders, and indigenous spices like herbal *melegueta* pepper and woody *selim* pepper combine to create a distinctive, multidimensional heat. And in the UK, a new generation of chefs are being inspired by their West African heritage to push the region's gastronomy into the mainstream. Here, they discuss the iconic dishes that best represent West Africa.

Peanut stew

Known by many names across the region, this dish also varies in consistency, ingredients and sides wherever you go

“This is our Sunday roast,” says Akwasi Brenya-Mensa, founder of Tatale restaurant, which recently wrapped up a year-long residency at London’s Africa Centre. He’s detailing the post-church ritual of diving into restorative bowls of nkatenkwan (also known as nkatsenkwan) — Ghanaian peanut stew. The dish is built upon a base of fragrant seasonings such as onions, garlic and ginger, sautéed in oil, with fresh or pureed tomatoes. Peanut butter is folded in, giving the dish its distinctive sweet and earthy flavour and creamy mouthfeel.

Believed to originate from the Mandinka and Bambara people of Mali — where it’s known as tigadegena — peanut stew is a dish, like many in West Africa, that crosses modern political borders. You’ll find it everywhere from Senegal (where it’s called maafe) to Gambia (domoda), with consistencies ranging from brothy to velvety. Cooks will often add meat, such as chicken or lamb, and vegetables, all of which become tender and soak up the flavours of the stew as it simmers.

Peanuts are a prime example of a food introduced to West Africa through trade and slave routes that has gone on to become a bedrock of the cuisine. Similar to the native Bambara groundnuts already used in stews, peanuts were quickly integrated and are now widely cultivated, which explains the plethora of peanut dishes and snacks, such as kuli kuli — a seasoned peanut paste fried into crunchy bites.

“We really enjoy peanuts in West Africa, and this is a way to savour them in soup format,” says Akwasi, who serves his version of peanut stew with omo tuo — pillowy balls of pulverised rice. “Across West Africa we mop up soups and stews with fufu, but mashing rice and pounding yam are two different types of effort. Omo tuo is a great, less-strenuous alternative to fufu,” Akwasi explains. “We were taught to eat [this dish] with our hands,” he adds. “It’s only when you go to other places that you’re made to feel weird about that, but it’s how I’ve always enjoyed it.”

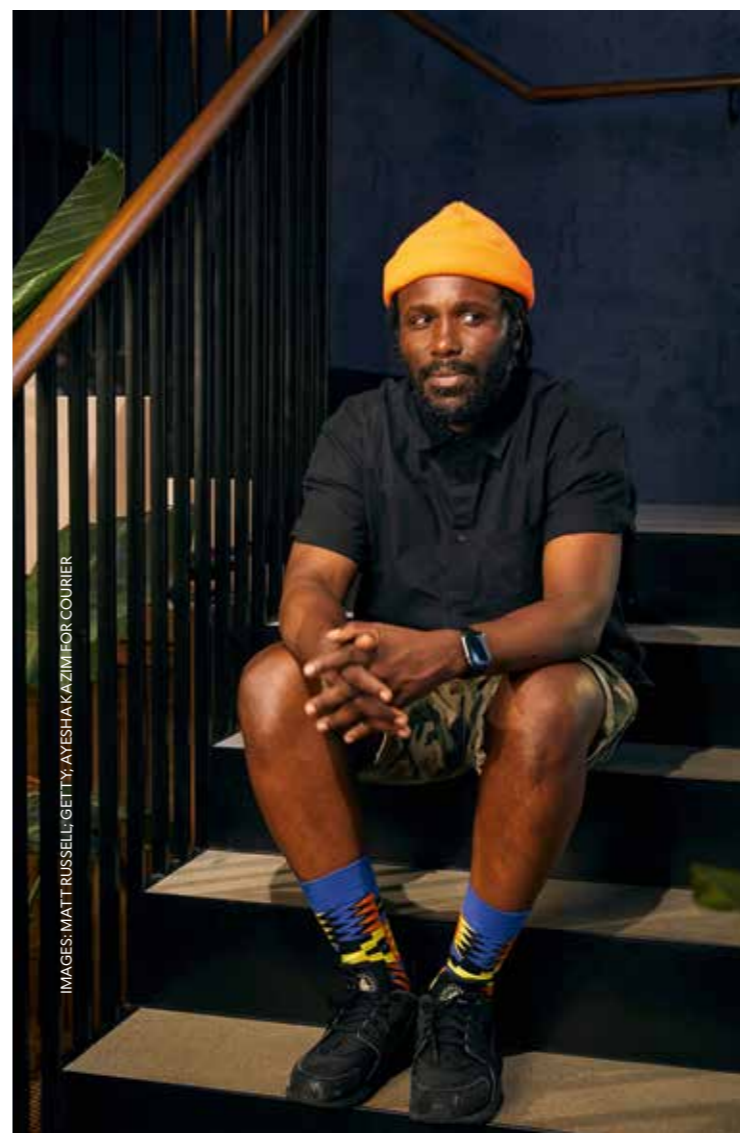
WHERE TO TRY IT

CLOSE TO HOME: 19FiftySeven, London. This intimate, modern dining room in South Bermondsey showcases works by up-and-coming Ghanaian visual artists, while the food focuses on traditional and reimaged Ghanaian classics. 19fiftyseven.co.uk

FURTHER AFIELD: Mawuli Chop Bar, Accra. Chop bars (‘chop’ being Pidgin for ‘eat’) are casual canteens popular in southern Ghana. Mawuli is a buzzy, no-frills spot renowned for stove-fresh, classic stews paired with omo tuo. A stop here is a weekend ritual for many locals. [instagram.com/mawuli_chopbar](https://www.instagram.com/mawuli_chopbar)



Zoe Adjonyoh's peanut stew
Below, from left: A view of the beach at Fort Good Hope, on Ghana's Atlantic coast; Akwasi Brenya-Mensa, founder of Tatale restaurant, grew up eating peanut stew and now serves it to diners
Previous pages, clockwise from left: Fishing boats on the Volta River at Ada Foah, Ghana; Goree Island, Senegal; Nigerian puff-puff, balls of deep-fried dough; peanut and sweet potato stew



IMAGES: MATT RUSSELL-GETTY; AYESHA KAZIM FOR COURIER

Zoe Adjonyoh's peanut stew

Nkatsenkwan, as this dish is known in Ghana, is usually eaten with fufu (pounded green plantain or yam with cassava), but can also be served with boiled yams, cassava, rice or fried sweet plantain. This recipe is for lamb (or mutton), however, it can be made with any combination of meat or seafood.

SERVES: 4-6

TAKES: 2 HRS

INGREDIENTS

2kg mixed bone-in lamb (or mutton) neck and shoulder, cubed
500ml good-quality vegetable stock (or water)
1 onion, finely diced
5cm piece fresh ginger, grated
1 garlic clove, crushed
8 green kpakpo shito chillies (or 1-2 scotch bonnet chillies), pierced (adjust to desired level of heat)
1 tbsp extra-hot chilli powder
1 tbsp curry powder
2 tsp sea salt
1 tsp freshly ground black pepper
100-200g peanut butter (adjust to your preferred thickness)
1 red scotch bonnet chilli, pierced
3 tbsp crushed roasted peanuts or gari (fermented, dried and ground cassava), to garnish (optional)

FOR THE CHALÉ SAUCE

400g tinned tomatoes or 600g fresh tomatoes
2 red peppers, roasted
30g tomato puree
1 small white onion, diced
5cm piece fresh ginger, grated
1 small red scotch bonnet chilli (use half and de-seed for less heat)
½ tsp dried chilli flakes
3 garlic cloves (optional)
1 tbsp cooking oil
1 onion, finely diced
1 tsp curry powder
1 tsp extra-hot chilli powder

METHOD

1 Start off by making the chulé sauce. Put the tomatoes, roasted red peppers, tomato puree, ginger, scotch bonnet chilli, chilli flakes and garlic cloves (if using) in a blender and blend until you have a fairly smooth paste. Heat the oil in a pan and sauté the white onion until soft, then add the curry powder and chilli powder and cook until melded together. Add the blended tomato mix and simmer gently for 35-40 mins, until the tartness of the tomatoes has cooked out. If you're not using the chulé sauce straight away, leave to cool then store in an airtight container in the fridge for up to 3 days, or freeze for future use.

2 Put the lamb in a large, heavy-based saucepan, cover with the stock or water and add the onion, ginger, garlic, kpakpo shito chillies, chilli powder, curry powder, salt and pepper. Bring to the boil, then reduce the heat and simmer over a medium heat for 25 mins until the lamb juices run clear, skimming off any froth that rises to the surface.

3 Stir in the chulé sauce, then add the peanut butter 1 tbsp at a time while stirring until it's all dissolved. Add the scotch bonnet and cook for a further 45 mins-1 hr over a low heat, stirring regularly so the sauce doesn't stick to the pan, until the peanut oil has separated and risen to the top (this means that it's done). You should have a soupy consistency and super-tender meat falling away from the bone. Serve with your choice of side dish, or simply with crushed roasted peanuts or gari sprinkled on top.

Taken from *Zoe's Ghana Kitchen*, by Zoe Adjonyoh (£20, Mitchell Beazley)



Thieboudienne

Jollof rice is arguably West Africa's most iconic culinary export, but this is its Senegalese predecessor, bolstered with an array of seasonal veg, fish or meat

Described as the original jollof rice, the ubiquitous red, fragrant West African dish, thieboudienne is a one-pot wonder of rice stewed with firm, fleshy white fish. It's a Senegalese speciality, to which vegetables ranging from aubergine, okra, cabbage and peppers to chunky roots like carrots, squash and cassava add layers of texture. The tart pinch of tamarind and the peppery bite of green hibiscus leaves provide additional hits of flavour.

Thieboudienne may owe much of its popularity to the availability of fresh fish, but there's also a lamb variety (thiebou yapp), and other meat versions, known as benachin, which are common in Gambia.

"In my opinion, thieboudienne is the best jollof," says Khadim Mbamba, founder of Senegalese restaurant Little Baobab, in London. "It's a source of pride for the Senegalese community. You'll find it everywhere — it's our national dish. We cook it for any ceremony — births, deaths, weddings — but it's also a daily meal, you never get bored of it."

The dish — listed as Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO — has its roots among the Wolof people. By oral tradition, broken rice is the base of more modern versions because of Penda Mbaye, a 19th-century cook in the fishing region of St Louis,

who used fragmented grains imported by French colonialists. "That's why we call a really good thieboudienne a 'thieb Penda Mbaye'," Khadim says, thieb being a general term for this type of stewed rice.

For him, the secret to a great thieboudienne lies in the nokoss, the dish's explosive lime-green base made of blended spring onion, garlic, salt and black pepper. "That super fresh aroma of the nokoss as it hits the pan will tell you if it's going to be good."

Khadim remembers "sprinting home from school at lunchtime to make sure I didn't miss Mum's thieboudienne". At 12.30pm, he says everyone would return home to eat, "gathering around massive bowls, scooping with hands or spoons. Workers go to small canteens during breaks and eat it together around a giant bowl, too."

In this way, thieboudienne is the embodiment of teranga, the Senegalese spirit of community and hospitality. "In Senegal, people welcome you with thieboudienne. Eating it together instils a strong sense of belonging; that's what I'm trying to emulate here in the UK," says Khadim, who each week invites friends to eat the dish with his family around a big plate. "It's important to preserve these traditions for the next generation."

WHERE TO TRY IT

CLOSE TO HOME: Little Baobab, London. Beginning as a much-loved live music pop-up, Little Baobab is a casual spot within the Peckham Levels food hall, serving an uncomplicated menu of soulful cooking. From this September, the team will also take over a more formal setting at The Africa Centre in Southwark. littlebaobab.co.uk

FURTHER AFIELD: Le Ngor, Dakar. This beachfront spot is praised for the freshness of its fish and seafood dishes. As well as scenic views of the Atlantic and fishing boats, take in the unique and intricate shell-studded interiors. [instagram.com/restaurantlengor](https://www.instagram.com/restaurantlengor)



Khadim Mbamba's thieboudienne. Above, from left: The island of Goree, Senegal; Khadim Mbamba, founder of Little Baobab restaurant, who makes the dish weekly for family and friends

Khadim Mbamba's thieboudienne

This is the national dish of Senegal, consisting of fish with vegetables and jollof rice. Originating in historic Saint Louis, it has spread far and wide since, and in Senegal it's still made at all important ceremonies and events.

SERVES: 4 **TAKES: 1 HR 15 MINS**

INGREDIENTS

4 garlic cloves	½ cassava, cut into quarters
½ green pepper, chopped	½ aubergine, cut into quarters
1 spring onion, chopped	½ small white cabbage, cut into quarters
2 tsp salt	2 whole sea bass or similar white fish
1 tsp black pepper	2 okra
1 medium onion, chopped	5 tbs vegetable oil
5 tbs vegetable oil	1 scotch bonnet chilli
1 fresh tomato, chopped	100g tamarind paste
4 tbs tomato puree	500g basmati rice
1 carrot, halved or quartered	½ lime, to serve

METHOD

- 1 Tip the garlic, green pepper, spring onion, salt, pepper and half of the chopped onion into a food processor and whizz until finely minced (alternatively, chop everything very finely and mix together).
- 2 Heat the vegetable oil in a medium-sized pot, then fry the tomato and remaining onion for around 5 mins. Once cooked, add 3 tbs of the tomato puree and stir well. Add 1 tbs of the green pepper mix and cook, stirring constantly, for around 15 mins until it's a dark-red colour and the oil has risen.
- 3 Pour in 800ml water and bring to the boil. Reduce the heat and add the carrot, cassava, aubergine and cabbage. Leave to cook on a low-medium heat for 15 minutes.
- 4 Add the rest of the green pepper mixture to the pot along with the fish, okra and chilli. Cover and cook on a low heat for a further 10 mins.
- 5 Heat the oven to its lowest setting. Remove the fish and vegetables from the pot with a slotted spoon and place on an oven tray, then put in the oven to keep warm. Scoop 4 tbs of the liquid from the pot and transfer to a small bowl. Add the tamarind to the bowl and mix together.
- 6 Wash and drain the rice three times, then add to the pot and stir well. Cover and cook on a low heat for around 20 mins. Stir once, turning the rice, and let it cook for a further 5 mins.
- 7 Transfer the rice to a large serving bowl and top with the warm fish and vegetables and the lime. Serve alongside the tamarind mix.

Cassava leaf stew

Said to be Sierra Leone's national dish, this stew exemplifies the root-to-leaf philosophy that runs through West African cooking

"Anyone who tries it is instantly hooked," says Maria Bradford, author of the cookbook *Sweet Salone*, describing cassava leaf stew (sometimes called cassava leaf sauce), which originates in her homeland of Sierra Leone.

The stew combines the tender leaves of the cassava plant and meat (or smoked fish in coastal areas), with the savoury stock of the protein adding depth to the dish. Peanut butter or ground peanuts enrich the dish texturally while adding a nutty flavour. "It's a formidable delicacy because of how it's seasoned," Maria says. "It's flavoured with things like ogiri — fermented oil seeds with an intense miso-like taste. These ingredients work really well together, completely lifting these humble greens."

Also known as saka saka or pondu, the stew is also made in various forms in Liberia and Guinea, as well as in Central Africa. The dish exemplifies the nose-to-tail, root-to-leaf philosophy that's always defined West African cookery. Rather than being discarded, these unassuming leaves are developed into a meal of their own. The same approach is applied to the leaves of other crops, such as cocoyam (a type of root) and okra.

While raw and unprocessed cassava leaves contain naturally occurring forms

of cyanide, they're perfectly safe to eat once boiled down. "It's mind-blowing, how a toxic plant was transformed into Sierra Leone's most-loved dish," says Maria. The pulpy sauce, usually served with rice, also demonstrates the role of leafy veg in West African cuisine. Greens like spinach, amaranth leaves and jute leaves aren't only nutritionally valuable, they also add bulk and a mellow grassiness to balance out many unctuous stews. Some are used for their distinct, complex notes, such as bitter uziza, or liquorice-y African basil.

"Cassava leaf stew also demonstrates our connection to our land and our tradition of experimenting with what it gives us," says Maria. "Cassava is a constant feeder. Back home, my mum plants her own; it's a reminder of how much the Earth provides."

Maria explains that plasas (leafy stews) are associated with the Mende people — one of Sierra Leone's two largest ethnic groups — but cassava leaf stew is a daily staple across the country. "It's so popular, people really eat it every day," she says. "When I cook it, the fresh smell of the leaves transports me to an outdoor kitchen in Freetown. As I speak, I've got four vats in the freezer. The whole family loves it — it's our Friday night treat."

WHERE TO TRY IT

CLOSE TO HOME: Shwen Shwen Studio, Kent. Look out for events hosted at Maria Bradford's smart studio (whose name is Krio for 'fancy'), or book a private dining experience to enjoy a combination of traditional and fusion dishes, executed with finesse. shwenshwen.com

FURTHER AFIELD: Cole Street Guesthouse, Freetown. Set in a bright courtyard, the restaurant at this boutique hotel is said to be the country's first place dedicated to serving refined takes on traditional cuisine, made using local ingredients. colestreetguesthouse.com



Maria Bradford's cassava leaf stew

Dried smoked fish fillets and frozen goat meat are often available in African shops, but the former can be swapped for dried anchovies or dried mackerel here. If using anchovies, soak for 30 mins and rinse a couple of times.

SERVES: 6-8 **TAKES: 1 HR**

INGREDIENTS

100g ogiri (fermented sesame seeds)
3-4 tsp salt, or to taste
2kg goat meat on the bone, diced
700g packet ground cassava leaves
1.5 litres beef stock
500g dried smoked fish fillets, such as barracuda or snapper
350g sugar-free, smooth peanut butter
400g can butter beans, drained
400g onions (about 2 medium), finely chopped
500ml coconut oil
6 scotch bonnet chillies, seeds left in, to taste, ground to a paste in a pestle and mortar
3-4 tsp dried okra powder
plain boiled rice, to serve

METHOD

- 1 Grind the ogiri and 1 tsp of the salt in a pestle and mortar. Put the goat, ground ogiri, ground cassava and stock in a large stock pot. Bring to the boil, then reduce to a simmer, cover for 30-40 mins, or until the meat is tender.
- 2 Rinse the fish. Add the peanut butter and fish to the pot, stir well and cook on a medium-low heat for around 20 mins.
- 3 Add the butter beans, onions, coconut oil, chillies and 2 tsp of the salt. Stir to incorporate and cook for 20-30 mins more, or until the sauce is thick.
- 4 Add the dried okra powder to the sauce, 1 tsp at a time. Continue adding the okra powder and stirring in until the sauce has a thick consistency. Cover and cook for 5-10 mins more, then turn off the heat and leave for 10 mins. Taste, adding more salt if needed, and serve with plain boiled rice.

Taken from *Sweet Salone*, by Maria Bradford (£30, Quadrille)

IMAGES: YUKISUGIURA/ALAMY; GETTY; DAVE BROWN

Houses on a lush hillside in a suburb of Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone
Below, from left: Cookbook author and chef Maria Bradford describes cassava leaf stew as a delicacy; cassava leaves are only edible once cooked





Akara

An essential component of the region's cuisine, beans are celebrated through an array of dishes such as these popular fritters

Beloved for their crisp, golden exterior and spongy interior, akara bean fritters originate from the Yoruba people, who live largely in Nigeria, Togo and Benin. However, akara are found across the region and beyond, having reached Brazil (where they're known as acaraje) and the Caribbean (bollitos de carita in Cuba and cala in Aruba) due to the slave trade — and they've come to represent West Africa's resilience and culinary influence.

Made from soaked and peeled black-eyed beans that are whipped into a thick batter and fried, akara vary in consistency from fluffy to dense. Today, they're embellished with onions, peppers, chillies and, sometimes, smoked fish. However, historically, they relied on the earthy flavour of the beans alone.

"Beans are essential to West African cuisine," says Aji Akokomi, founder of Michelin-starred restaurant Akoko and its sister establishment, Akara, both in London. "They feature in dishes like ewa aganyin (mashed beans with hot pepper sauce), moi moi (steamed bean puddings) and gbegiri, a bean soup paired with amala (yam flour fufu)."

However, certain dishes, such as akara, have added significance. "Our foods

aren't just sustenance," says Joké Bakare, founder of Michelin-starred restaurant Chishuru, in London. "They have specific meanings, like ewa ibeji — spicy beans cooked to celebrate twins."

Yoruba people prepare akara to commemorate births, deaths and memorials, while "Muslims share akara at Asalatu, Sunday prayer meetings, or seven days after a person has passed," says Joké. The dish is also made for celebrations such as the Olokun Festival in Ile-Ife, and offered to orishas (Yoruba deities) in Bahia, Brazil.

At Chishuru, the fritters are served with a stuffing of battered okra — a modern take on an old recipe. However, Joké has a fondness for the akara of her childhood, too. "Nothing beats my grandma's. Hers were solid — a whole meal," she recalls, adding, "My mouth is watering."

As for how they're made, according to Joké, "Akara is all about technique: the oil temperature, the batter's consistency and handling it carefully to get the right shape. I put it on the menu because of how significant it is. By modernising older dishes, we keep those parts of our culture alive." □

WHERE TO TRY IT

CLOSE TO HOME: Akara, London. This stylish restaurant in Borough Yards pays homage to the culinary connections between West Africa and Brazil, and to West African cuisine more broadly. akaralondon.co.uk

FURTHER AFIELD: NOK by Alara, Lagos. In a nod to the traditional breakfast of akara and ogi (fermented cereal pudding), the brunch menu at this Victoria Island spot includes shrimp akara and coconut ogi. alaralagos.com/nok-by-alara

Clockwise from top left: A fisherman in a wooden canoe on Lake Nokoué, Benin; akara is a dish served to commemorate special occasions; Akara restaurant in London is named after the bean fritters; Aji Akokomi, the restaurant's founder

Aji Akokomi's akara

This savoury black-eyed bean fritter can be sliced and stuffed with various fillings, such as barbecued prawns. If you can't find cooking kaani, substitute it for 10g scotch bonnet chilli, crushed with a pestle and mortar.

SERVES: 6

TAKES: 20 MINS PLUS 8 HRS SOAKING

INGREDIENTS

250g soaked black-eyed beans
100g yellow onions, chopped
10g cooking kaani
5g coarse salt
vegetable oil, for frying

METHOD

- 1 To make the black-eyed bean paste, soak the beans in cold water for around 8 hrs until they soften slightly and the skin starts breaking away from the bean. Once soaked, divide the beans into batches and rinse each batch 10 times. Blitz all the beans in a food processor for around 2 mins until very smooth.
- 2 To make the akara seasoning, add 50g of the black-eyed bean paste, the onions, cooking kaani and salt to a food processor and blitz for 2 mins. Set aside.
- 3 Combine the remaining black-eyed bean paste with 3½ tsp water in a small jug. Blitz with a hand blender for 3 mins, then add the akara seasoning and blitz with the hand blender for 1 min more.
- 4 Divide the mixture into six, then form each section into a ball. Pour enough oil into a pot to submerge the balls and heat to 195C. Transfer the akara balls to the pot, making sure not to overcrowd it. Fry for 4 mins until golden-brown, then use a slotted spoon to remove the akara from the pot. Serve warm.

