



Emma's mutton curry



From plague village *to* PLANTAINS

An Eyam farmhouse is serving up the bold flavours of Cameroon – and creating one of Derbyshire's most unexpected dining experiences

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Flicking its head from side to side, a black-speckled chicken waits in hope at my feet. Scooping up the last mouthful of rice, I give it a sideways glance. 'You're not getting any of this,' I say quietly. It must have understood, as it turns and totters off to continue inspecting the garden with a white-feathered friend.

'It's just like Africa,' Stella beams as she walks past. 'Chickens everywhere!'

I close my eyes and try to picture myself there as the summer sun warms my forehead and spicy scents drift from the nearby kitchen.

But I'm nowhere near Africa. I'm in Eyam at Stella's Kitchen, where Afro-Caribbean feasts are served up from a farmhouse overlooking the Derbyshire countryside.

In a region better known for pies and pub lunches, it might be one of the most unexpected places to eat in the Peak District.

Wearing a colourful African print dress and apron, Stella Kisob is already busy in her barn-turned-kitchen when I arrive. Originally from Cameroon in West Africa, cooking has been part of her life for as long as she can remember.

As a child, Stella was more interested in making mud cakes from empty milk and margarine containers than in traditional

toys, all the while absorbing the sights and smells of her mother's Cameroonian dishes.

She was also fortunate enough to have a family cook, known fondly as Mr Philip.

'He did all this wonderful English food like roast beef, scones and sausage rolls. Things that normal African children in those days did not have,' she explains while stirring a large pot of simmering mutton.

Her only formal training came later, at an all-girls Catholic secondary school run by Irish nuns.

'You could choose between food and nutrition or physics... as you can see, I chose physics!' she laughs. Her fun, flamboyant energy fills the kitchen, and it's clear her personality is as much of a draw as the food itself. 'I just love seeing people enjoy what I cook.'

Outside, her first customers of the day arrive, one wasting no time in asking if she has any cake. Alongside her African dishes, Stella serves an array of bakes inspired by Mr Philip's home baking all those years ago.

There's her 'everything cake' with flaked almonds, coconut and banana, as well as ginger scones that once won first prize at a local competition. All pair well with a refreshing hibiscus brew or mint tea made

from leaves plucked straight from her garden. Stella grows a range of other herbs and vegetables on the farm, while her husband Patrick keeps busy tending to the sheep and cows.

Stella came to the UK over 25 years ago to study, and it was here that she met the man who would later lead her to Eyam.

When she needed a way to work from home to care for their young son, she began trialling a restaurant business from her kitchen table, cooking for just six people at a time. What started as a handful of neighbours has since grown into a much wider operation.

Today, a bright conservatory holds five tables topped with African print cloths, while picnic benches outside accommodate extra guests when the British weather allows.

Alongside lunch, coffee and cake, Stella also hosts Afro-Caribbean buffet nights on Fridays and Saturdays, intimate supper clubs, cooking classes and corporate catering, with a book also in the works. There's even a campsite and shepherd's hut accommodation for those who aren't quite ready to leave.

'Cameroon is my number one home, no doubt,' she says. 'But this is also my home. I like Derbyshire because the people are so friendly. We are all friends.'



Diners at Stella's Kitchen eat in the conservatory of her Eyam home



Stella picking mint from her garden



Releasing flavour



Service with a smile

Back in the kitchen, Stella shows me some of the flavours that underpin Cameroonian cooking, a cuisine shaped by more than 200 ethnic groups and built on peppery stews, grilled meats, plantains and yams.

She grabs a handful of what's known locally as 'button spice,' named for its shape, which gives soups a strong, aromatic flavour. Then country onion, a prized wild seasoning with a garlicky, earthy aroma often described as truffle-like, and used in many traditional dishes.

'I love Cameroonian cooking because you can play with different seasonings,' she says, slowly crushing her selection in a pestle and mortar. 'People are sometimes frightened of the spices, but I tell them all the same thing: it is not hot, but it is flavoursome.'

Mbongo is another traditional Cameroonian ingredient and the base of mbongo tchobi, a rich, intensely dark-coloured stew. It's not the most visually appealing dish, she admits.

'For somebody who eats with their eyes... yeah, it doesn't look good!' she smiles. But Stella wasn't afraid to cook it alongside celebrity chef duo Dave Myers and Si King when they visited in 2021 to film an episode of BBC Two's *The Hairy Bikers Go North*.

'They had never heard anything about Cameroonian cooking,' she tells me. 'I wanted to portray my Cameroonian background, because I'm so proud of our food.' Needless to say, they loved it.

Inspired to try something new, I order mutton, the curry of the day.

'That's what I like about the British,' Stella says. 'They like to try.'

I head outside with a glass of homemade fruit punch and scan the rest of the menu: Cameroonian-style scrambled eggs, crispy plantain, 'better than Nando's' chicken, seafood, saucy pots, soups and plenty of vegetarian options.

Turning to the group who'd come in for cake, I ask if they've been before. 'Yes,' one of them quickly replies. 'The food is delicious!'

By now, the conservatory and garden have filled up with hungry guests. Stella pokes her head out of the kitchen and shouts: 'Five more minutes!'

The sound reminds me of home and my mum shouting up the stairs that dinner was ready.

'People love it because it's just ordinary. I don't make any fuss. You come, you sit where you like'

That same casual, homely feeling runs through everything Stella does here: the shared tables, the chickens pecking around ankles, furniture getting shuffled to make room for one more person. It's an informality that's rare in restaurants.

'People love it because it's just ordinary. I don't make any fuss. You come, you sit where you like. You want to come and cook with me in the kitchen? You come. People like that freedom and the simplicity of it.'

Stella shrugs off the idea of being a chef altogether, insisting she is a cook.

'I like amateur cooking,' she says. 'You go to some Michelin-star restaurant and you're frightened to disturb the food.'

But that's not the case here. 'It's not polished or perfect. It's proper cooking.'

It's what you get at home', she adds. A generous, steaming plate of mutton curry is set down in front of me alongside a fresh salad. The meat falls apart with the slightest nudge, the sauce rich and deeply flavoured. After the first mouthful, I can't help but let out a quiet 'wow.'

I spoon on some of Stella's Scotch bonnet chilli sauce with considerable confidence. Another, louder 'wow' follows as my eyes start to water.

An African kitchen on a Derbyshire farm may seem like an unlikely match, and you might not recognise every dish on the menu, but Stella's warmth, generosity and the simple comfort of being well fed make it feel like home, wherever you're from. ●