A taste of HOME

Paris-based chef Khloe Fearnley-Derome left the Democratic Republic of the Congo when she was eight years old – but her deep love for the nation's cuisine has long nourished her. Now she is on a mission to bring Congolese flavours to France.

Photographer —— Nathalie Mohadjer
Writer —— Anubha Momin



At ease in the kitchen of some close family friends, Khloe Fearnley-Derome moves swiftly. The clinking of the thick bangles on her wrists marks the rhythm of her work as she shuttles between gas hobs and an old farmhouse table in a stately residence in Paris's 18th arrondissement. She is hosting a lunch of Congolese home cooking, a homage to her country of birth; she spent the morning sourcing leafy greens and spices in Barbès. The scent of warming peanuts softens the sting of raw onion, which moments earlier had broken her composure. "One of my first jobs for my dad was chopping onions," she says, wiping her eyes. "And I'm still crying."

Fearnley-Derome's adoptive father is Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, the British chef and cookbook author. Growing up at his River Cottage farm and restaurant amid the rolling hills of Dorset's Axe valley, she learnt to cook and respect the ingredients that she uses. Despite this quintessentially English setting, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) never left her palate. Fearnley-Derome was born in Kinshasa to Congolese parents. Her mother died when she was six months old and her father, a BBC cameraman, left the country when she was three, leaving her in the care of relatives and friends. "I think that I lived in 50 different places in five years," she says.

During this time, her maternal grandmother's kitchen was an endless source of inspiration. Fearnley-Derome recalls playing as a child using charcoal fires and old tomato tins to mimic her grandmother's movements. "Even now, when I eat Congolese food, I feel warm inside," she says.

Fearnley-Derome left the DRC at the age of eight, moving first to South Africa and then to England, where she was adopted by Fearnley-Whittingstall and Marie Derome. As a young cook, she worked at London restaurants including Scott's and Moro. In October 2023 she moved to Paris and created her food pop-up, Nzoto (the Lingala word for "body"), a culinary exploration of her memories of her birth country.

Congolese food is built around ingredients such as cassava, nuts and leafy greens, and involves a lot of slow cooking. *Chikwangue* (cassava bread) is eaten alongside stews thickened with okra. Cassava leaves are cooked down into *saka-saka*, a dish that Fearnley-Derome makes weekly. The cuisine, she says, balances bitter, spicy, sour and rich elements. "People here don't really know this food," she ays. At Nzoto, she pairs it with beautiful plating and locally sourced ingredients, introducing Congolese flavours to fresh audiences. Her work has earned her guest spots at celebrated bistros such as Les Oeillets and residencies at hip restaurants such as Chop Chop Love. "It's my dream to put Congolese food on the map," she says.

At the farmhouse table, she shakes crispy fried anchovies onto a ceramic plate that was handmade by her adoptive mother. It's a perfect synthesis of her life and ethos: to make food that nourishes the body while telling the stories that we hold close. ——— K

1

MANGO NA PILI-PILI

Fresh mango with chilli and herbs.

Serves 4

Ingredients
2 ripe but firm mangoes
½ tsp fine sea salt
½ tsp chilli powder or crushed dried chilli
Small handful fresh coriander or parsley, finely chopped

Method
1. Peel the mangoes and slice into thick batons or wide wedges.
2. Place in a bowl and season with the salt and chilli powder. Toss gently to coat evenly.
3. Finish with the chopped herbs.
4. Serve chilled with cocktail forks or toothpicks. This dish works well as a fresh palate opener before richer courses.



"I have many memories of eating mangoes from the side of the road in Kinshasa. We usually eat them with salt and chilli – a bite of freshness with a bit of kick. The salt brings out the juices and makes it a little acidic. Somehow this makes it taste more like mango."

2

MANIOKU YA SIKA

Fresh cassava salad with onion and herbs.

Serves 4

Ingredients
600g fresh cassava root
Salt
2 tbsps oil
½ red onion, thinly sliced
Fresh parsley or coriander, finely chopped

Method
1. Peel the cassava root, removing both the brown skin and the pinkish layer underneath.
2. Cut into large chunks and remove the fibrous central core if present. Rinse well.
3. Place the cassava in a large pot of salted water.
4. Bring to a boil and cook for 20 to 25 minutes until very soft and easily pierced with a knife. Raw cassava must always be cooked thoroughly to remove natural toxins.
5. Drain and allow steam to escape. Cut into chunks while warm.
6. Toss gently with oil, onion and salt. Finish with the fresh herbs. Serve warm or at room temperature. This dish can be prepared ahead of time; dress it just before your guests arrive.



"In the DRC, we eat cassava regularly: either the leaf (*pondu*) or the root, which we call manioc. It's best when it's freshly boiled, as in this recipe. Combined with a nice vinaigrette, it's a perfect accompaniment to any meal."

3

DINDE FUMÉE YA MBOKA

Smoked turkey with tomato, peppers and onions.

"One way of preserving food is by smoking it. Turkey rump has quite an intense, smoky taste. The peppers, onion and tomatoes calm down the flavours a little bit. I don't add any salt – the turkey flavours the whole dish."

Serves 4 to 6

Ingredients
2 tbsps oil
800g smoked turkey pieces
1 large onion, sliced
2 garlic cloves, crushed
2 tomatoes, chopped
1 red pepper, sliced
1 green pepper, sliced
1 bay leaf
Black pepper, to taste
Fresh parsley, for garnish

Method
1. Heat the oil in a wide pan. Lightly brown the smoked turkey to release its flavour, then remove and set aside.
2. In the same pan, sauté the onion and garlic until soft.
3. Add the tomatoes and cook until broken down and glossy.
4. Now add the peppers, bay leaf and black pepper and toss for a few seconds.
5. Return the turkey to the pan and add a splash of water to loosen the sauce.
6. Cover and simmer gently for 20 minutes until the vegetables soften and the sauce coats the meat.
7. Garnish with the parsley, then serve. For generous sharing portions, you can pair this with cassava or rice.



4

MBISI YA KOKAWUKA

Crispy dried fish with peanuts, chillies and herbs.

"The DRC is a big, mostly inland country so it's difficult and expensive to source fresh fish. That's why you mostly find it in the markets smoked, dried or salted. Dried fish has a concentrated taste. It has enough umami and saltiness to season the rest of the dish."

Serves 4 to 6

Ingredients
200g dried small fish (such as anchovies)
Oil, for frying
2 garlic cloves, crushed
1 small onion, thinly sliced
Red chillies, to taste
1 spring onion, roughly chopped
50g roasted peanuts
Salt, to taste (optional)
Fresh dill or coriander

Method
1. Rinse the dried fish thoroughly under cold running water to remove surface salt and dust. If it's very dry, soak in fresh water for 10 to 15 minutes.
2. Drain and pat dry.
3. Heat the oil in a wide pan over a medium-high heat.
4. Fry the dried fish until golden and fully crisp.
5. Remove and briefly drain the oil on kitchen paper.
6. In the same pan, sauté the garlic and onion until softened. Add the chillies and spring onion.
7. Return the fish to the pan with all of the other ingredients, add peanuts and toss gently for a minute or so.
8. Taste before adding salt as dried fish is naturally salty.
10. Add the herbs just before serving to retain their freshness and colour.



5

CRÈME BRÛLÉE YA BISSAP

Hibiscus *crème brûlée* with caramel crust.

Serves 4 to 6

Ingredients
400ml full-fat cream
2 tsps dried hibiscus flowers or hibiscus powder
1 tsp vanilla extract
4 egg yolks
60g caster sugar
For the caramel topping:
60g white caster sugar
Orange slices, to decorate

Method
1. Gently heat the cream with hibiscus and vanilla, ensuring that it doesn't boil.
2. Remove from the heat and allow to infuse for 10 minutes.
3. Strain to remove hibiscus solids.
4. Whisk the egg yolks with the sugar until pale.
5. Slowly pour the warm cream into the yolks while whisking.
6. Strain into ramekins.
7. Bake at 140c in a water bath for 35 to 40 minutes until softly set with a slight wobble in the centre.
8. Cool at room temperature, then chill in the fridge for at least 4 hours.
9. For the caramel topping, sprinkle a thin, even layer of white sugar on top of each custard.
10. Torch until amber and glassy – just before your guests arrive for the best crack and contrast.
11. Decorate with orange slices.
12. Allow to set for 2 minutes before serving.
13. For an optional finish, dust a light pinch of hibiscus powder over the hardened caramel for colour without affecting texture.



"I love *crème brûlée*. It's not Congolese but in this version we use hibiscus, which we eat across Africa. I thought that those two flavours would be a good combination. I love its colour and flavour. Hibiscus is tangy but when you add the cream and sugar, it's sweet – the best of both worlds."