

DIEUVEIL MALONGA THE PIONEER

Dieuveil Malonga in his restaurant's farm

Right: Beef in honey and palm wine sauce, sweet potato puree with Cameroonian njanga (an oilseed) and peas with Ghanaian dawadawa, also known as locust bean

IMAGES: CHRIS SCHWAGGA



AT HIS RESTAURANT IN RWANDA, CHEF DIEUVEIL MALONGA COMBINES LOCAL INGREDIENTS WITH EUROPEAN TECHNIQUES AND A DESIRE TO PUT AFRICA FIRMLY ON THE CULINARY MAP. WORDS: LAUREN JADE HILL

Dieuveil Malonga may just be Kigali's most creative chef. At his restaurant, Meza Malonga, in the Rwandan capital, he uses ingredients from cassava leaves to sorghum, and draws on cultures including Bantu and Xhosa for a regularly changing Afro-fusion menu that might include plantain-stuffed ravioli or mango sorbet with potato foam. But this chef's top priority isn't simply putting together interesting flavours — it's to raise the profile of African gastronomy.

Malonga's culinary journey began in the town of Linzolo, just outside Brazzaville, capital of the Republic of Congo. "It starts with my grandmother, who I grew up with from the age of nine," he says. "She had a restaurant for people travelling from north to south along the road it was on. People were always welcomed in to share something to eat and drink — and I think that's why I'm now a chef."

After joining his older sister in Warstein, Germany in 2004, at the age of 13, Malonga began missing Congolese flavours, so started cooking for himself. He went on to study gastronomy in Münster, fusing African influences with the techniques he was learning. But it was only after working in top German kitchens, including at Michelin-starred Schote, La Vie and Aqua, and at the InterContinental in Marseille, that he decided to return his focus to the continent where he was born.

In 2015, Malonga set off on a two-year journey around Africa, expanding his knowledge of its various culinary traditions, before settling in Kigali. "I started in Cameroon, which has amazing diversity in its ecosystem and food, and after that went to Madagascar and Morocco, continuing until I'd visited 48 of Africa's countries," he says. "When I travel, I learn by going to the restaurants that are still run by the communities' grandmothers, because they're the ones with the original recipes and traditional cooking techniques."

During this period, Malonga was inspired to set up a programme cultivating culinary talent in Africa. "During my travels, I met many farmers and companies, who were searching for chefs, and also chefs who were searching for them," says Malonga. "At that time, Africa didn't have a platform that brought these people together." In 2016, he set up Chefs in Africa, which has several aims, including helping young African chefs develop their careers, connecting producers directly with chefs, and leading masterclasses on innovation with African ingredients, among other topics.

Since launching in 2016, the platform has grown to represent 4,000 chefs, and has earned support from the World Tourism Organisation and UNESCO, with which Malonga has run events. He's also been recognised by The World's 50 Best Restaurants for his efforts: in

2021 he was listed among the organisation's '50 Next' as an 'Empowering Educator', and in 2022 was named its Champion of Change for his efforts in nurturing African culinary talent.

Malonga's endeavours are currently all run out of Meza Malonga — 'meza' means 'table' in the Bantu language — which opened in 2020. "It isn't just a restaurant, I think of it more as a laboratory," he says. "I continue to travel and bring back the ingredients of the different countries I visit to experiment with them back here." This experimentation results in a no-menu meal of up to 12 artfully presented courses. Each day's dishes are designed around what's available on the restaurant's own three-acre farm. "We have amazing maize and honey and, as the farm is on a lake, we also get a lot of crayfish," says Malonga. "I recently came back from Cameroon with some new spices, so we're working around those, too." As well as using an array of African ingredients, Malonga combines traditional methods — such as fermentation, commonly used in Bantu gastronomy — with the cooking techniques he honed during his time in Europe.

While each dining experience is unique, a tasting menu could feature dishes such as Four-Spices Pineapple — caramelised pineapple with cinnamon, cardamom, penja pepper and vanilla, topped with coconut meringue, ginger caramel, locally picked flowers and moringa leaves. Another of Malonga's creations, titled Homeland, brings together Nile perch, Ugandan avocados, Ghanaian chilli sauce and mango rougail — a zingy Creole sauce popular on the island of Réunion. Soon, Malonga hopes to pair his dishes with liquors he's making by fermenting grains and fruit, such as tree tomato, using old Rwandan recipes.

In May 2023, the chef plans to open an offshoot of his restaurant in Musanze, a city in the foothills of Rwanda's Virunga Massif. The site will offer a farm-to-table experience, with Malonga and his team promising to tell the stories behind the ingredients as each dish is served. The new venue, Meza Malonga Musanze, will serve a seasonal menu of produce indigenous to the volcanic location. There will be an open kitchen, a 'culinary innovation laboratory' for dish development, a fermentation house and guest accommodation — as well as experiences from cooking classes to fishing. "I want to make African cuisine a part of tourism in this region and have a positive impact by creating jobs and promoting green agriculture in the area," says Malonga.

The site will also offer training to local young people in entrepreneurship, gastronomy and more, in the hope they'll become ambassadors for African food. "African cuisine is still something people aren't talking about much," says Malonga. "My goal is to promote the continent's outstanding chefs and show people the diversity of cultural influences and unique ingredients in what they're cooking. This is an important time for African gastronomy." □



Homeland

This dish is made with perch, but red snapper is a good alternative.

SERVES: 4 TAKES: 1 HR
PLUS 6 HRS MARINATING

INGREDIENTS

600g perch fillet, skinless and boneless,
cut into 5cm pieces
juice of 1 lime
1 tbsp olive oil
1 mango, peeled and cut into small cubes
edible flowers
cress

FOR THE MARINATED CUCUMBER

2 cucumbers, peeled, deseeded and
chopped into small pieces
juice of 3 limes
2 lemongrass stalks
2 tbsp olive oil
2 tbsp honey

FOR THE SHITO SAUCE

50ml vegetable oil
3 red onions, peeled and chopped
70g black (or red) dried chilli
8 garlic cloves, peeled and chopped
50g dried shrimp
50g smoked fish powder
100ml chicken stock
8 guinea pepper grains (or peppercorns)
1 tbsp grated ginger
pinch of thyme leaves

FOR THE AVOCADO PUREE

1 avocado, flesh scooped out
1 tsp moringa powder
1 tbsp honey
1 clove garlic

1 tbsp grated ginger
small handful basil leaves

FOR THE MANGO ROUGAIL

2 mangoes, peeled and cut into small cubes
½ (about 10g) red onion, finely chopped
1 fresh red chilli, finely chopped
small handful coriander leaves, chopped
small handful basil leaves, chopped
juice of 1 lime
1 tbsp olive oil

METHOD

- ① Add all the cucumber ingredients to a bowl with a pinch of salt and marinate in the fridge for 6 hrs.
- ② For the shito, add the oil to a pan on a medium heat. Fry the onion, chilli, garlic, shrimp and fish powder for 3-5 mins, then add the stock, guinea pepper and a pinch of salt. Simmer for 30 mins, then add the ginger and thyme. Transfer to a blender and blitz until smooth.
- ③ For the avocado puree, use a stick blender to blitz all the ingredients along with some salt and pepper.
- ④ For the mango rougail, add all the ingredients to a bowl with a pinch of salt and mix well.
- ⑤ When the cucumber is ready, heat grill to 150C, gas low-medium. Toss the fish with lime juice and a pinch of salt, then brush with oil. Grill for 2 mins per side, or until cooked through.
- ⑥ Arrange all the elements on 4 plates, drizzle with the shito sauce and garnish with mango pieces, flowers and cress.