

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Internationalization of African ethnic cuisine: A situation analysis

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## Abstract

Despite a number of benefits, “African food” is not as widely served in public eating places world wide as many others, a situation reflected in the near-total absence of international literature on African cuisine. As a result, African ethnic cuisine is less internationalized. The paper reports on a case study undertaken in one African country Uganda, to assess international visitors’ exposure to African cuisine and their perceptions of requirements to effectively internationalize African ethnic cuisine. The study confirms that international visitors’ exposure to African ethnic cuisine is low and the level of Internationalization primarily influenced by perceived food quality although other aspects also play a part. The paper identifies managerial and policy implications for promoting Internationalization of African ethnic cuisine.

**Keywords:** Internationalization, African Ethnic Cuisine, Africa, Brand strength, international visitors.

## INTRODUCTION

The level of Internationalization of most African Cuisines has remained low. African food has remained largely “local” and is not as widely served in public eating places world wide as many international cuisines. This situation has been largely reflected in the near-total absence of international literature on African cuisine (Osseo-Assare, 2006). Food as a cultural commodity if accepted internationally helps promote a people’s culture globally. It boosts a country’s image, national pride and cultural nationalism. Effective Internationalization of ethnic cuisine also helps promote cultural and gastronomic tourism (Sunanta, 2005). Other economic benefits include accelerated value addition on local agricultural and food products, and generation of international currency earnings through sales and service of food in international markets. Despite these benefits, African cuisine seems to lag much behind in the level of Internationalization compared to several ethnic cuisines worldwide. For instance, most of the literature on international cuisine refers to five main cuisines – French, Italian, Chinese, English and Indian dishes (Sunanta,

2005; Tamar et al., 2001) suggesting that these are among the most internationalized and internationally popular. However, although there is generally no international consensus on the most tasty among the most internationalized cuisines, recent surveys of ethnic cuisines suggested that by 2008, the top ten most rated and (internationally popular) cuisines were as follows, in that order: French cuisine, Italian cuisine, Chinese cuisine, Indian cuisine, Thai cuisine, Mexican cuisine, Japanese cuisine, Spanish cuisine, Greek cuisine and Lebanese cuisine (Source: <http://blog.hotelclub.com/top-10-international-cuisine/>).

According to recent literature, Internationalization of ethnic cuisines has generally followed a sequential process characterised by:

Stage1: Exposure to, and acceptance by foreign visitors in the home country, either as tourists, business or with foreign armies during wars

Stage2: Opening of ethnic restaurants in metropolitan cities across the world by either nationals or others (Van Esterik, 1992) and raising international popularity

Stage3: Increasing concentration of ethnic restaurants in metropolitan cities and globally marketing to non-ethnic audiences (Sunanta, 2005)

Stage4: International publication of cuisine cookbooks and other literature (Osseo-Assare, 2006) In

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general, it is clear that internationalization of cuisines has emphasized the “*authentic taste*” but at the same time, restaurants have had to adapt the recipes, serving processes and service systems to suit the local cultures’ dining customs. Adaptation is, according to ethnic restaurant owners, a necessary step taken to ensure business survival and sustainability (Sunanta, 2005). None the less, a key feature is that traditional terminologies for various dishes are largely maintained and any adjustments made are not allowed to compromise the original flavours. Additionally, to further increase the level of Internationalization of ethnic cuisines, there has been liberalisation of ownership of restaurants serving ethnic cuisines. According to Sunata (2005), ethnic restaurants are not necessarily owned by ethnic people but sometimes by non-ethnic owners. This has helped to increase restaurant numbers serving ethnic cuisines in different metropolitan cities of the world. Another key factor that has helped increase the level of cuisine Internationalization has been an emphasis on creating and maintaining a unique cultural identity of the ethnic restaurants. Sunanta (2005) and Tamar et al. (2001) point to this fact. Referring to Thai restaurants abroad, Sunanta (2005) observes that the restaurant atmosphere in ethnic restaurants emphasize the traditional (home) atmosphere and maintain a cultural touch at all times. The restaurants are often decorated in ways that emphasize traditional culture. They also tend to display traditional paintings, sculptures, furnishings, and pictures of people and places in the home countries. Most restaurants play home music and serve food in attire that reflects the home cultures. The serving equipments and ware, designed to ensure artful presentation of food, are often decorated with traditional design to ensure food presentation reflecting the home cultures (Sunanta, 2005).

It is also possible to pinpoint the role of governments in promoting traditional cuisines as a key factor for the successful Internationalization of some cuisines. For example, the participation of the Thai government (Sunanta, 2005) in deliberately promoting the establishment of Thai restaurants abroad, setting goals to increase them three fold by 2008, quality certification of Thai restaurants abroad through the “Thai Select” label, organisation of promotional events such as *Kitchen of the World* events in 1998 that aimed to promote Thai restaurant business overseas, linking the operations of Thai airways to the transportation of raw materials for Thai restaurants abroad were key initiatives that contributed significantly to Thai cuisine exports (Sunata, 2005). Therefore, it appears that government promotional efforts are salient to successful Internationalization of ethnic cuisines.

In light of the afore going, therefore, the internationalized cuisines, individually and collectively, seem to be characterised by following:

- Brand strength – food quality appeal, consistency,

- presentation attractiveness, attractive restaurant environments, et cetera- (Pierson et al. 2005)
- Systematic documentation (Osseo-Asare, 2006)
- International entrepreneurship - opening up ethnic restaurants in metropolitan cities abroad (Sunata, 2005)
- Cultural marketing – Systematic efforts by respective governments to support cultural marketing abroad (Sunata, 2005)
- Adaptation to suit international demand and standards (Tamar et al., 2001; Sunata, 2005)

While the foregoing relates to already well established ‘international cuisines, the situation of ‘African Cuisine’ seems to be slightly different. The brand strength of most African cuisines seems to be low with no significant international appeal (Gonahasa, 2002; Otengei and Bakunda, 2010). There appears to be very limited systematic documentation of traditional African cuisines (Osseo-Asare, 2006) and cultural marketing by many African governments seem to be non-existent, as such efforts are not reported any where. There appears to be minimal adaptation of African cuisine to suit international demand and standards, coupled with relatively limited entrepreneurship focusing on establishing “African restaurants” abroad (Tamar et al., 2001; Otengei and Bakunda, 2010). The net effect seems to be a low level of Internationalization of African cuisines despite the numerous cultures and languages that offer a greater potential for attracting a varied clientele around the world. Only the Ethiopian cuisine seems to be the most accepted outside Ethiopia and Africa and therefore more internationalized (<http://www.ethiopianrestaurant.com/>). Ethiopian cuisine is served in ethnic restaurants in major cities worldwide while Ethiopian restaurants exist in all the major cities in the USA and in Africa. Only recent efforts have been recorded to export and internationalize South African cuisine (Tamar et al., 2001) but this seems to have remained at a minimal scale.

The situation of many African countries such as Uganda further illustrates the low level of Internationalization of African ethnic cuisine. For example, African ethnic cuisine in Uganda has limited international presence within and outside Africa, there seems to be a trend whereby food served in local restaurants is prepared and served based largely on recipes, ingredients and technology drawn from outside Africa and as a result, international dishes and cuisines have slowly replaced African dishes in hotels, restaurants and other public eating places (Gonahasa, 2002). Most chefs are reported to have trained on curricular termed by Foskett et al. (2003) as “traditional classic cooking” that is based on foods, dishes and gastronomic practices as well as culinary techniques of Europe and to some extent oriental cooking. The training curricular for chefs is based on textbooks that do not cover African dishes and cuisine. In addition, the French culinary history and language still dominates cookery and hospitality training. As a result, little research and training has been

conducted on traditional cookery methods keeping the local ethnic cuisine and dishes largely undocumented. Up to date, there is limited literature that is elaborate enough on local recipes (Gonahasa, 2002). The foregoing combined with the absence of systematic documentation, analysis and refinement of the local cuisine appears to have further limited international exposure to the cuisine, hindering Internationalization both within and outside Africa.

### Cuisine Brand Strength and Internationalization

Recent literature on brand strength refers to brand strength as a measure of the strength of consumers' attachment to the brand, synonymous with brand loyalty (Wood, 2000). According to Keller (2003), it is the power of the brand that lies in what customers have learned, felt, seen or heard about the brand as a result of their experiences over time. A strong brand is highly appealing to customers and implies that the promises to the market as well as their expectations are consistently met (Reid, 2002). Brand strength also implies that a high level of trust has developed with regard to the brand and some level of preference has been established in favour of the brand. There is also little or no confusion and uncertainty associated with the brand (Rooney, 1995) and generates significant repeat sales through brand loyalty. Once brands attain a high degree of strength, they become assets to the brand owners (Feldwick, 1996; Simon and Sullivan, 1993) and for ethnic cuisines; strong brands are national assets and act as umbrella brands for individual restaurants in different markets (Sunata, 2005; Tamar et al., 2001). All in all, brand strength can therefore be low or high but is built over time. Brand strength is built through creating a high level of awareness and familiarity with the brand so that consumers hold some strong, favourable and unique brand associations in memory (Reid, 2002; Keller, 2003).

With regard to cuisine brand strength, Pierson et al., (2005) points to food quality – in terms of the consistency of taste and presentation attractiveness as key aspect of a cuisine's strength. Food quality appeal in form of positive sensory experiences, particularly a sense of sensory excellence must be generated in order to have positive effects. Pierson (2005) argues that each culinary experience should result in sensory excellence in order to generate acceptance of the dish. Sensory excellence, in form of a unique taste and flavour, in turn depends on the quality of ingredients that contributes to the *sensory quality of the product*. In addition to the sensory quality of the product, quality of ingredients used (freshness), the process of preparation and cooking, the quality of equipment used as well as dish presentation attractiveness that artistic and innovative contribute to the overall *food quality*. In addition to food-related factors, a number of restaurant-related factors are important

ingredients of the brand strength of a cuisine. These include effort required to purchase a food item (Pierson, 2005), ethnic decor and music (Sunanta, 2005), degree of formality of the restaurant environment and price differential offered by the restaurant (Pierson, 2005). However, consistent with Keller (2003), product awareness i.e. what customers have learned, seen or heard about the product is also an essential element. In particular, the amount of international literature available about a cuisine together with the strength of its cultural association i.e. the cultural uniqueness of the cuisine ((Osseo- Assare, 2006) influence the extent of its Internationalization. Therefore, the amount of information and literature available about a cuisine and its accessibility is an important aspect of cuisine brand strength.

The above discussion suggest that cuisine Internationalization depends largely on how much international visitors are aware of the cuisine, the proportion that get into contact with the cuisine, their assessment of food quality after a dining experience and how it compares with other cuisines and finally the quality and uniqueness of restaurant environments that support the cuisine. The above seems to relate to most ethnic cuisines African ethnic cuisine inclusive.

### The Uganda Case Study of African Ethnic Cuisine

A strengths and weakness assessment of African ethnic cuisine was undertaken in one African country Uganda. In addition to strengths and weaknesses, the assessment aimed at determining the perceived improvements required to effectively internationalize the cuisine. Drawing on recent literature on cuisine brand strength and Internationalization, focus was put on one aspect of cuisine brand strength - food quality appeal that was examined through a survey of the perceptions of international visitors dining experiences with African ethnic cuisine. More specifically, the study sought to determine:

- What proportion of foreign tourists chose to dine on African ethnic cuisine as opposed to western or oriental dishes served in local restaurants?
- What strengths and weaknesses of African ethnic cuisine regarding the food quality appeal were perceived by international visitors after dining experiences in African restaurants, and what improvements were considered necessary to enhance effective Internationalization?

Using *three* case studies of local Ugandan dishes that are popular and extensively served in Ugandan restaurants, the study focused on 'international' restaurant clientele as the respondents. In order to obtain a high concentration of international visitors, restaurants in major tourist areas were covered as these presented the highest concentration of international visitors. Purposive sampling was employed in identifying and

**Table 1.** Level of Patronage to African ethnic dishes by international visitors (Export Intensity) (N=30)

<i>Case1: Meat</i>	%	<i>Case2: Vegetable</i>	%	<i>Case3: Dairy</i>	%	<i>Average %</i>
6	20	24	80	9	30	43%

**Table 2.** Current Strengths of African Ethnic Cuisine according to International Visitors(N=30)

<b>Case1: Meat</b>	%	<b>Case2: Vegetable</b>	%	<b>Case3: Dairy</b>	%
Good taste -tasty	70	Nice taste	80	Well prepared dish	20
Unique taste and flavour	20	Nice flavour	80	Used to eating it - addiction	30
Standardized recipe consistency	40	No fats	10	Good taste when properly prepared	90
Food temperature steaming hot	70	Attractiveness/appearance	60		
Portioning-size of food	20	Served hot, not cold	70	Nutritious (expected nutrition)	50
		Good portion size	70	Attractiveness – appealing, nice looking, good colour	60
Good accompaniments	20	Consistency	20	Safe (no health hazards)	20
Good food hygiene	30	Good presentation	40	Hygiene –served in good containers	20
Attractive presentation	20	-	-	Easy digestion	10
Nutritional value	20	-	-	Good process	10
Attractive – good color	40	-	-	Original, local, authentic	10

locating respondents and data was collected from international visitors after they enjoyed their meals in the restaurants. A semi-structured questionnaire was used and respondents were asked to give their perceptions of the local dish, the restaurant environment and what they thought was needed to increase the international appeal (brand strength) of the local dish. Data analysis employed qualitative techniques suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) to try to capture the “lived experience” of the respondents and to summarise and present that experience graphically. Description and interpretation were thus relied upon as the main methods of analysis by which the written experiences were interpreted, categorised around key statements and themes and thereafter frequencies of similar experiences generated.

## FINDINGS

### Level of Patronage by International Visitors

In order to internationalize, any particular ethnic cuisine must be patronized and later accepted by a significant representation of international clientele within a specific country and also outside. The proportion of international visitors that patronize a cuisine is a good indicator of export intensity and the extent of Internationalization of the cuisine. As export intensity helps determine how

much is sold or or consumed abroad, it is a common indicator of the degree of Internationalization (Bakunda, 2002; Sullivan, 1994). The proportion of international visitors in local restaurants that had ordered for and patronized African dishes as opposed to western or oriental dishes was determined and the results are reported in table 1 above.

The results in table 1 above suggest that overall, the international visitors' patronage of African ethnic cuisine in Uganda is fairly low with an average of 43% of international visitors patronizing the cuisine. However, the results further indicate that 80% of international visitors patronized vegetarian dishes and only 20% and 30% for meat and dairy dishes suggesting that patronage of African cuisine varies significantly between vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes. International patronage of vegetarian dishes is significantly high while that of non-vegetarian dishes is significantly low.

### Strengths and Weaknesses of Ugandan Cuisine

A strength and weakness analysis was undertaken for three dish types, namely meat, vegetable and dairy dishes with a view to determine the strengths, and weaknesses of the ethnic cuisine and perceived improvement requirements to enhance Internationalization. The results are presented in Table 2 above

**Table 3.** Current Weaknesses of African Ethnic Cuisine according to International Visitors (N=30)

<i>Case1: Meat</i>			<i>Case2: Vegetable</i>			<i>Case3: Dairy</i>		
<b>Cuisine Weakness</b>	<b>Improvement Requirement</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Cuisine Weakness</b>	<b>Improvement Requirement</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Cuisine Weakness</b>	<b>Improvement Requirement</b>	<b>%</b>
Unstandardized cooking time	Establishing appropriate cooking time	10	Old leaves used	Use young and tender leaves	60	Limited preparation skills	More skills training for chefs	50
Non-existent recipes	Develop standard recipes	10	Appearance	Finer preparation and ingredient choice	10	Little flavouring	Seasoning	20
Inconsistent service temperature	Always serve hot	100	Adulteration	Careful sorting and washing	10	Colour	Authentic white	20
Dull appearance	Brown meats and other ingredients	10	Poor hygiene	Ensure good kitchen/food hygiene and general cleanliness	50	Consistency and appearance	Careful processing and choice of ingredients	20
Poor Service plates	Use artistic traditional plates	50	Poor plates used	Use good traditional plates	40	Service pots	Improving presentation through creativity	20
Hygiene standards low	Improve food hygiene/Cleanliness	40	Poor presentation	Use Traditional bowls with under-liners	20	Dull colour	Check quality of core ingredients	20
Poor quality of ingredients	Purchase and use good quality ingredients	20	Flavour	Add herbs and traditional flavourings	70	Not ISO certified	ISO certification	40
Flavour poor	Add vegetables, herbs and spices	60	Service Temperature	Always serve steaming hot	60	Cultural barriers in preparation process	Provide chefs with wider exposure	20
Tenderness	Meat ageing/maturing	80	Flat taste	Seasoning/flavouring	60	Very plain	Improve seasoning and variation	10
Presentation	Use plate under-liners	20	Salt	Just to taste	10	Consistency	Develop recipe	10
Taste	Correct seasoning	30	Poor customer care	Training and use of qualified staff	20	Service Temperature	Best served cold	10

Tables 2 and 3 above present the perceived strengths and weaknesses of ethnic cuisine in Uganda by international visitors/clients who patronized the cuisine. These strengths and weaknesses vary per dish type but at the same time, there are strong similarities. Attributes scoring 50% and above were considered to have strong occurrence while those with less than 50% score were considered to have mild occurrence.

From the profiled strengths, the strong positive factors for meat-based cuisine were: good unique taste and food temperature at service while the mild factors were: colour attractiveness and appearance, good portion size, good packaging and presentation; good hygiene, and expected nutrition value. For the vegetarian dishes, the strong

positive factors were: nice taste, nice flavour, temperature at service, and good portion size. The mild factors were: presentation attractiveness, fat absence and consistency. For the dairy dishes, the strong factors were: good taste, expected nutrition and colour attractiveness. The mild factors were: hygiene and safety, digestiveness, originality.

From the profiled weaknesses, the strong and mild factors of each dish type were as follows:

### **Vegetarian dishes**

The strong factors were: lack of tenderness of ingredients

poor hygiene, inadequate flavouring and seasoning, inconsistent service temperature. The mild factors were: cultural attributes of service pots, hygiene and cleanliness, tenderness of ingredients.

### **Meat dishes**

The strong factors were: inconsistent service temperatures, poor or lack of meat tenderness, low spicing and flavouring, inadequate cultural attributes of service pots. The mild factors were: poor taste due to poor seasoning, poor presentation, poor colour attractiveness, hygiene standards, unstandardized cooking time, non-existence of recipes.

### **Dairy dishes**

The strong factors were: limited preparation skills for chefs. The other factors were mild namely: cultural barriers of staff, absence of ISO certification, poor colour attractiveness, inadequate cultural attributes of service pots, lack of consistency due to absence of standard recipes, and poor color attractiveness.

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

African ethnic cuisine is largely at stage one of Internationalization. Evidence from the Uganda case study suggests that African ethnic cuisine still has limited exposure to international clientele and by implication low levels of acceptance. African cuisine still largely relies on international visitors to Africa for tourism, business or foreign armies to obtain exposure. As a result, African ethnic cuisine, on the whole, still has three more levels of Internationalization to achieve namely: opening of ethnic restaurants in metropolitan cities across the world (Van Esterik, 1992) to raise international popularity; increasing concentration of ethnic restaurants in metropolitan cities combined with global marketing to non-African audiences (Sunanta, 2005) and lastly, international publication of cuisine cookbooks and other literature (Osseo-Assare, 2006).

Additionally, it is suggested by the case study evidence that the brand strength of African ethnic cuisine is still weak to very weak. Brand strength mainly in terms of the food quality appeal, presentation attractiveness and consistency, as well as cultural identity of restaurant environments and service facilities (Pierson et al. 2005) were mainly mild across all the three cuisine types implying improvement in Internationalization prospects requires addressing those key aspects. Furthermore, other restaurant factors mainly poor quality of customer care, low level of training and use of unqualified staff appeared as strong weaknesses

suggesting that international clients place a high premium on their presence in all restaurants including African restaurants. For instance, it is suggested that restaurant staff were perceived by international clients to exhibit a lot of 'cultural barriers' i.e. limited cultural awareness which negatively impacted on the appeal of African ethnic cuisine to international clients and thereby posing additional hindrance to cuisine acceptance and Internationalization.

Other aspects characteristic of highly internationalized cuisines also seem to be grossly missing for African ethnic cuisine. The evidence from Uganda seems to suggest limited or no existence of standardised recipes that are well documented to engender consistency in preparation and service. Osseo-Assare (2006), emphasized this aspect as critical to successful Internationalization and an aspect where the most internationally popular cuisines have succeeded. Similarly, the strength and weakness assessment pointed to limited or no evidence of systematic cultural marketing (Sunanta, 2005) by African governments that could drive Internationalization of cuisines. As a result, there seems to be, also, limited adaptation of the cuisines to suit international demand and standards (Tamar et al., 2001; Sunanta, 2005). Consequently, the brand strength of the ethnic cuisine in terms of what international clients had learned, felt, seen, heard and experienced, and consequently its appeal, trust, level of preference all appeared to be very low. For instance, nothing could be inferred that the ethnic dish types assessed were regarded by international visitors as national assets of Uganda as for example in the case of Thai cuisine (Sunanta, 2005). All in all, absence of the above elements seem to clearly indicate that on top of improving the brand strength of African ethnic cuisine in terms of food quality appeal, improvement action is also required in the critical aspects of systematic documentation and publication of cuisine literature, systematic cultural marketing by governments and deliberate adaptation to suit international demand and standards.

While this assessment would have benefited from multi-country data, it is clear from the foregoing that improving the brand strength through the food quality appeal of the respective national cuisines will require addressing at least four major elements namely: standardization of recipes including service temperatures, research and documentation of preparation processes of ethnic dishes; improving the colour and presentation attractiveness of dishes through art and creativity, and lastly emphasis on promoting vegetarian dishes. Additionally, as part of international adaptation to international markets and international clientele, African ethnic cuisine will have to increase openness to international flavours and other ingredients as currently, the level of flavouring of African dishes seems to be comparatively very low. This calls for action from hospitality managers and chefs on the one hand, as well

as those involved in exporting African ethnic cuisine beyond the African continent on the other. Moreover, given that African ethnic cuisine in general is less internationalized compared to other continental cuisines especially European and Asian, there seems to be a need to identify the cultural aspects of African ethnic cuisines that would facilitate promotion of the cuisines as cultural commodities. Further Internationalization might depend not only on improving the food quality experiences that African ethnic cuisines offer but also restaurant-centred factors particularly those that improve the cultural association of African restaurants in addition to increasing the number of ethnic African restaurants abroad.

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