

# Sub-Saharan Sweets

A savory African culture gets its just desserts

by Amber Gibson



For most of sub-Saharan Africa, dessert is a foreign concept. “We just use fresh fruit instead of dessert,” says Chef/Owner Marco Senghor of San Francisco’s Bissap Baobab. “You get more vitamins and it’s cheaper. Mango sorbet from France is good, but mangoes from my tree are much better. I’m not that impressed with French desserts.”

Senghor, born and raised in Dakar, does serve one traditional Senegalese dessert at his restaurant. *Thiakry* is a couscous and yogurt mixture, served at large celebrations (\$4.75, recipe, p.

73). “When you have a newborn or when people get married, that’s when we do these big desserts,” he says.

Although *thiakry* is traditionally made with milk fermented for four or five days, Senghor uses sour cream at Bissap Baobab. “I love the sour milk better,” he says. “The thickness is wonderful, and it’s more sour. But there are too many liabilities. I don’t want anyone getting sick.”

## SWEETS FROM THE SOUTH

South Africa has one of the richest dessert traditions on the continent, thanks

to the Dutch Boers, who arrived in the 17th century with plenty of recipes to satisfy a sweet tooth.

Executive Chef Ami Vicars at Maremoto in Cape Town, South Africa, makes a traditional Afrikaans *melktert* (milk tart), but instead of a puff pastry, which tends to turn soft, she uses a shortbread crust (recipe, [plateonline.com](http://plateonline.com)). The ingredients are simple; they were available during the early period of Dutch occupation.

Vicars grew up on a cherry farm and ate *melktert* with her family every Sunday for tea. “Just the smell of a freshly baked



Sago and condensed milk pudding, dried apricot and buttermilk cannelloni, Pastry Chef Nichole Holloway, Ryan's Kitchen, Cape Town, South Africa. **RECIPE, p. 85.**



Thiakry: Senegalese yogurt infused with vanilla, nutmeg and couscous, \$4.75, Executive Chef/Owner Marco Senghor, Bissap Baobab, San Francisco. **RECIPE, p. 73.**

*melktert*, with hints of cinnamon, sends me straight back to the farm," she says. "It has such a wonderful, delicate flavor." Cinnamon is just one of the exotic spices the Cape Malay community contributed to South African cuisine.

Malva pudding is another classic Afrikaaner treat, said to be Nelson Mandela's favorite dessert (\$4.33, recipe, [plateonline.com](http://plateonline.com)). At Franschoek's Monneaux,

Chef Louis Jansen makes it with just a hint of brandy. "It adds a kick," he says.

#### MODERN TWISTS

As good as well-made classics are, it's the personal twist that makes a dessert special. Jansen also makes an *amarula* and chocolate parfait that is distinctly South African, if not entirely traditional. *Amarula* is a cream liqueur made with

*marula*, a fleshy African stone fruit (recipe, [plateonline.com](http://plateonline.com)).

"The fruitiness of *amarula* adds more character to the parfait," he says. "Chefs have used *amarula* in a sauce, but I wanted to incorporate it as a key ingredient."

#### STATESIDE ADAPTIONS

Almaz Yigizaw, chef/owner at Ethiopian Diamond in Chicago, didn't eat many sweets as a child. However, her customers were clamoring for dessert and she wanted to give them something more original than ice cream and chocolate

**I want to show how versatile African flavors can be.**

- Nichole Holloway

cake. Using Ethiopian flavors, Yigizaw created a dessert named *destaye*, which translates from Ethiopian to “my happiness.” This medley of pistachios, almonds, fruit and spices wrapped in phyllo (\$5.25, recipe, [plateonline.com](http://plateonline.com)) has been the most popular dessert at Ethiopian Diamond for the past 16 years, and is the only one made in-house. “Cardamom gives it a nice, toasty flavor,” Yigizaw says. “Nowadays, people eat more sweets. So I came up with this dessert. Even our Ethiopian diners love it.”

Senghor is open to updating his Senegalese *thiakry*, too. “We’ve tried mixing a couple scoops of ice cream in,” he says. “Pineapple-coconut was very good.”



**Thiakry: Senegalese yogurt infused with vanilla, nutmeg and couscous**

*Executive Chef/Owner Marco Senghor, Bissap Baobab, San Francisco*

*Yield: 4 servings*

*Menu price: \$4.75; food cost/serving: 26%*

Plain yogurt	32 Oz
Sour cream	8 Oz
Sugar	2 TBS
Honey	2 TBS
Raisins	2 TBS
Couscous, cooked	4 TBS
Vanilla extract	dash
Vanilla ice cream (optional), scoop	1 each
Strawberries, sliced	as needed
Mint leaves	4 each

1. Combine all ingredients and serve in a glass bowl garnished with sliced strawberries and a mint leaf on top.

When Christina Brault, catering chef at the University of Connecticut, was charged with making African desserts for a student affairs dinner, she and her colleagues did some digging.

“We put ideas down for notes of flavors, herbs, spices, fruit, anything that could possibly be used in dessert,” she says. “We researched for a good month, accumulating different ideas and trying to be as authentic as possible.”

Ultimately, Brault served sweet potato crème brûlée and banana coconut crumble (recipes, [plateonline.com](http://plateonline.com)). “Yams are a big part of African culture, but we had to use what we had on hand, so we went with sweet potatoes,” she says. Similarly, she swapped plantains for bananas in a riff on a tropical fruit crumble. “The coconut added a crunch factor,” Brault says.

At Ryan’s Kitchen in Franschhoek, South Africa, Pastry Chef Nichole Holloway challenges herself to make boring desserts extraordinary. “(Sago pudding) on its own is stodgy, with an unattractive texture, like rubber in the mouth,” Holloway says. “I wanted to take something that everyone has a horrible memory of and turn it into something a little bit fabulous.” Her solution? Add a condensed milk filling to the pudding and serve it with a side of tart dried apricot and buttermilk cannelloni to cut through the thick sweetness (recipe, p. 85).

Holloway also makes an ostrich egg floating island (recipe, [plateonline.com](http://plateonline.com)). “Originally this was my take on a toffee apple,” she says. “We poached the meringue in molds and filled it with caramel. It looked like a giant egg.”

Holloway says working at a restaurant that bills itself as ‘contemporary South African cuisine’ affords her plenty of room to play. “Dessert used to be a luxury,” she says. “I want to show how versatile African flavors can be.”

Amber Gibson is a Chicago-based food writer.

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