



Food and Culture in Ghana

Fact Sheet

Ghana is a country of western Africa situated on the coast of the Gulf of Guinea.¹ While it is renowned for its diverse ecology and picturesque beaches, Ghana is celebrated for its rich history and deeply rooted cultural heritage that continues to thrive and permeate the lives of Ghanaians. Evidence of this deep cultural heritage remains most evident in the dietary customs and behaviors of Ghanaians today.

Staple Foods

Plantain and Starchy roots. Staple starchy roots consist of cassava, yams, and cocoyams (taro).^{1,2} Plantain is also a staple starchy food in the Ghanaian diet.^{1,2} Root and tuber crops are eaten mainly in the form of *fufu* (a dough-like food consisting of pounded boiled cassava and plantain, yams or cocoyams) and *ampesi* (boiled yam, boiled plantain, boiled cocoyam or boiled cassava or a mix of these, served with a spicy gravy, vegetable stew or soup).² Cassava is also traditionally eaten in the form of *Kokonte* (cooked, dried pounded cassava meal, mixed with boiling water and seasoned with salt), *gari* (grated and fried cassava), *agbelima* (fermented cassava meal), *banku* (fermented maize and cassava dough) and *kenkey* (fermented cornmeal dough steamed in corn husks).¹⁻⁴

Grains and cereals. Maize and rice are consumed the most frequently. Maize is most commonly consumed in the form of *kenkey* and *banku*.² Rice is consumed mainly boiled and served with stew or as *jollof* (a tomato-based rice dish).²

Fruits and vegetables. Consumption is only high when in season. Fruits that are typically consumed include mango, pineapple, papaya, and watermelon.² With respect to vegetables, Ghanaians generally consume peppers, onions and tomatoes on a daily basis.²

Fats and oils. Palm oil and palm fruits are the predominant sources of fat in the Ghanaian diet.²

Animal products. Fish is the major source of animal protein due to the geographic location of Ghana.^{2,5} It is consumed mainly in soups and stew or as an accompaniment to other staple foods.²

The Influence of religion

Almost two thirds of Ghanaians profess the Christian faith, while the remainder practice either Islam or a form of traditionalist indigeneous religion.¹ However, many who practice Christianity or Islam, still continue to practice traditional beliefs and customs. Subsequently, Ghanaians participate in many ritual systems and it not uncommon for these rituals to converge.⁶ The spirit of Ghanaian cuisine is tied to tradition and ritualized events such as naming ceremonies, weddings and funerals.⁴ A food commonly eaten at many of these events is *oto*, a sacred dish made from hardboiled eggs, mashed yam, and palm oil. After the first and thrid weeks of a death in the family, *oto* is also sprinkled around the house to “satisfy the dead”.⁴ *Oto* is always accompanied by hardboiled eggs as they are a key symbol in Ghanaian culture and are often used as sacrifices or gifts, thanksgiving, and purification rites.⁴

Christmas in Ghana. Christmas is one of the most significant holidays in Ghana, with celebrations lasting up to eight days.⁷ The most popular dish at Christmas is chicken, although goat and mutton may be prepared for the occasion.⁷ Yams and stew or soup are often served with the main dish. Fresh, seasonal fruits are usually served for dessert.^{7,4}

Traditional eating patterns

Ghanaians eat one to two main meals per day (usually lunch and dinner), supplemented by snacks also known as *small chop* or a lighter meal.^{2,4}

Lunch and Dinner:

- heaviest meals of the day²
- emphasize traditional foods and usually consist of a staple tuber, root or grain, with *sauce* (soup or stew) made with vegetable oil (palm oil, but sometimes peanut, coconut or corn oil), and vegetables (dark green leafy vegetables, tomato, onion, okra, peppers).⁷ Soup and *fufu*, rice and stew, or *kenkey* and fried fish are examples of main meals.⁷

Small chop:

- seasonal fruit (mango, banana, avocado, pineapple)⁷
- roasted plantain or peanuts⁷
- *chichinga* or *kyinkyinga* (a kebab of beef, mutton, lamb, or goat, seasoned with a mixture of ground peanuts, ground red pepper, salt and ginger)^{4,7}

Accompanying beverages:

- Due to Ghana's roots as a British colony in the late 19th to mid-20th century, British influence is seen in the preference for tea, although "tea" is often the generic word used for "hot drink".⁴
- Typically, only water is consumed with meals and soda may be consumed on special occasions.⁷

Food Preparation

Food is processed and cooked at home by women.⁷ Food preparation is done predominantly with the right hand in large pots with wooden utensils.⁴ The left hand is reserved only for personal hygiene.⁴ In Ghana, it is still considered an insult to hand a person something with the left hand.⁴

Dining

Family members seldom eat together, however, affluent households generally have a large dining table.⁸ Women usually eat in the kitchen with the children, while men eat in some other part of the living space.⁸ Subsequently, women and children will share a communal bowl, while men will eat independently.⁸ The sharing of food by the mother with her children is viewed as an opportunity to teach the children how to eat correctly: with the right hand and no utensils.^{4,8}

Traditional Health Beliefs

There are many traditional health beliefs in Ghana that are still observed today. For instance, overweight and obesity is considered to be a sign of good health and happiness in marriage.⁹ It is also believed that cocoyam leaves and the water used to boil *kenkey* can be used to treat fever.¹⁰

Table 1 outlines various food taboos in Ghana. In many circumstances, abstaining from certain foods classified as taboo according to traditional beliefs, results in malnutrition, particularly among pregnant women and for those already experiencing food insecurity.¹⁰

Food Taboo	Reason for abstaining
Dog	Causes rashes
	Possess evil spirits
Snail	Consumption results in a decrease of stamina
	Consumption during pregnancy results in offspring who drool
Pig	Pigs possess evil spirits
Banana	Causes premature labor during pregnancy
Okra	Reduces men's sexual stamina and causes weakness
Ripe plantain, pineapple, guava	Causes miscarriage

Table 1: Taboo Foods¹⁰

Current Food Practices of Ghanaians in the United States

Research shows that migration to the United States is associated with environmental and lifestyle changes that increase the risk for nutrition-related diseases. Healthy components of the traditional diet are often replaced by processed convenience foods.¹¹ Many migrants express a desire to maintain continuity in their diet.⁷ Dinner is still typically prepared and eaten at home, but made with slightly different ingredients such as canola oil instead of palm oil, powdered *fufu* instead of freshly pounded *fufu*, and seasonally available vegetables. While traditional ingredients are easy to find, they are often more expensive because they are imported.⁷ Specifically in rural Ghana, the diet is largely composed of starchy roots and tubers due to limited food availability.¹² However, significant diet diversification, as a result of increased food availability, is reported among migrants to more affluent countries.¹² Individuals who have close relationships with Ghanaians including friends and family, and church members experience better dietary continuity.¹¹