The Art of Making Fufu

Shakima Tozay

This piece is for my Dad (1942-2006)

Fufu, when prepared right, is a thick starchy ball made using Bisquick, potato flakes and a little boiling water. Fufu is a West African dish my father would prepare when I was a young girl. It takes some skill to cook it to just the right consistency. If the Fufu is too thick it is impossible to swallow and falls into the Gee Bee category (another African dish my father cooked only on special occasions). If it's too mushy, it resembles lumpy, badly cooked Cream of Wheat, which makes it more difficult to shape into a small ball or fist. Fufu is never eaten without a “gumbo” style stew that is comprised of any combination of meat: beef, goat, lamb, fish, or poultry. Vegetables such as spinach, tomatoes, and cassava may be thrown in as well. I remember my father preparing stew for Fufu using chicken legs, chicken feet, chicken gizzards, tripe (cow’s stomach), onions, carrots, potatoes, crab, fish heads, goat’s meat, beef tips and hot peppers. Some dishes he’d prepare even called for unusual ingredients like peanut butter, palm butter oil or okra; nonetheless the stews always turned out delicious.

There were three very important tools my father would use to prepare Fufu: two pots and a large wooden spoon. While preparing Fufu in the cramped kitchen of his small two bedroom apartment in Staten Island, my father would retrieve from the bottom kitchen cabinet an old silver soup pot, beaten, blackened, battered, and scratched all over at the bottom and a medium sized frying pan in equally bad condition used specifically for Fufu. Making Fufu in a frying pan required setting it upon high flames so that it cooked faster. My father would keep handy his large wooded spoon nearly faded, bleached, and cracked from years of stirring, rolling, and forming the starchy thick mixture in the frying pan. As the stew simmered, for what seemed like hours sometimes, my father would sit down at the foot of the couch to rest his back and turn the TV on to watch baseball (his favorite sport) all while keeping an eye over the food as it cooked. He was single at the time; he didn't have a wife to cook Fufu for him so he relied on his own cooking skills to get him
through his hunger spells.

I always compared my father to Bill Cosby, not because he was funny like Cosby, but because I thought my father looked just like him: he had the same large nose, small lips, wrinkly forehead, medium build, and short black hair. As far back as I can recall my father always kept his weight down. His small gut now growing from the many nights of watching baseball and drinking Guinness Stout was about as much fat as I ever saw on his medium frame at one time. He also dressed conservative and wore a suit and tie to work everyday where he has been a sales clerk at a high-end men’s shoe store in Lower Manhattan ever since I was a little girl. It’s always an interesting sight to see my father, a man with very little personality who always seemed to be in a bad mood, cook Fufu for me and my sisters. It was as if cooking Fufu made him happier or something, maybe because cooking Fufu in some way reminded him of his home.

When my father cooked Fufu the aroma of hot peppers, onions, seasoned chicken and all together goodness filled the air. Waiting long hours to eat often made for an impatient twelve-year-old. Without the stew Fufu is useless; it tastes like a thick batch of mashed potatoes without the salt and butter. I guess the point of eating Fufu is to balance out the diet with just the right carbohydrates, fats, and protein. And, it’s affordable too.

Cooking is an important skill in Liberian culture. A woman who doesn’t know how to cook is frowned upon. For this reason, I was obligated to learn how to cook before I got married. But I was a kid, what did I know or care about cooking rice, making Fufu, or cleaning chicken? Living with my mother never required me to learn how to cook, as it was more important for me to look after my youngest brother or keep the kitchen clean.

Eating with my Liberian family was also much different than eating with my American family. Liberians eat together, literally. I remember eating out of one giant bowl with my sister (who had just come to the U.S.) and two younger cousins. We ate together; each one of us had our own corner and we dared not invade the other’s corner without permission. So if a juicy chicken leg lay helplessly atop a bed of steaming white rice directly across from me in the bowl, I’d ask one of my cousins or my sister if I could have it before anyone else claimed it. However, for Liberians sharing didn’t seem to be an issue, at least when it came to food.
Eating with my American family was like playing Russian roulette because getting everyone together under one roof at the same time was a gamble. My mother worked nights and would leave dinner waiting for my sisters, brothers and me before she went off to work. We didn’t eat like a family because everyone was either coming or going. The only time my American family actually sat down together to share a meal was on special occasions like for my great grandmother’s birthday (she loved to order a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken or after a wake when a relative has passed away).

My father learned how to cook Fufu when he was a young boy in Liberia and he has insisted that I learn how to cook it too. Cooking Fufu was no easy task. It took a lot of upper body strength and speed to stir the starchy mixture into a smooth, thick ball while under high flames. Trying to avoid burning the Fufu before it thickened was the real trick. Besides, who would want to eat a ball of burnt starch anyway? It had to be smooth and formed to perfection to be truly good.

Some rules you must follow and adhere to while making Fufu determine your skill and qualifications: no lumps, add just enough hot water, and stir it up using the one and only large wooden spoon. Cooking Fufu even involved teamwork, one person to stir and another person to hold the hot pot steady on the stove. Because Fufu is traditionally eaten with the right hand and not with a spoon, my father was adamant about teaching me how to eat Fufu the correct way.

He’d say in a pronounced African accent, which at times I didn’t fully understand. “No, use yah right hand not yah lef,” he’d command. “Yah lef hand is fa-h wiping yah bot-tum and yah right as for e-teeing.” He would continue to instruct me saying “Yah don chew Fufu, yah muss swah-llo it.” His stern ways as a father showed through in his teaching style. But, ironically I always compared my father’s attitude to a banana: tough on the outside and soft on the inside, a trait he evidently passed on to me.

Westernized Liberians eat Fufu with a spoon. My father would laugh at me when I used a spoon instead of my hands, but I thought eating Fufu with the hands was too messy. When I did use my hands, out of sheer embarrassment that I didn’t eat Fufu the “Liberian” way, I’d use my right hand to pick off a small piece from this perfectly rounded concoction and immediately roll the white, sticky mixture in between my fingers and palm. After it’s forced into
a small knot I’d dip it into the hot stew making sure to grab up a few pieces of meat along the way. Then I’d open my mouth really wide and dunk the mix into my mouth paying close attention not to chew too obviously. At twelve this process didn’t make much sense to me. Why someone would want to purposely swallow something without chewing it first and why on earth would someone pass up a perfectly good fork to eat instead with their hands, I often asked myself. But what did I know about the Liberian way.

Making Fufu stew also calls for using a lot of hot pepper. The more pepper that was used in the stew the better. If you weren’t crying your eyes out from the surge of the hot pepper on your tongue or running to the sink to douse your mouth and face with cold water it wasn’t cooked right. Thinking back, I should have realized why there was always a tall pitcher of ice cold water in the fridge that my father requested be refilled after every meal. He’d drink a tall glass of cold water with his Fufu, a habit I always equated with being a healthy eater. I suppose the sucking sounds that came from my father’s partly closed mouth as he gulped air and clinched his teeth just after ingesting a fist full of Fufu and hot pepper stew didn’t occur to me at the time. Another reoccurring episode was that my father always let out a great big sigh after his feast.

I don’t even have an inkling of a time when my father cooked Fufu while my parents were together. This experience was all new to me and it took my parents getting a divorce for me to even notice. I was only eight or nine when they split. Their divorce was all a blur to me and I don’t remember much; I do recall one day driving in a car with my father’s sister who had just flew in from Liberia to visit the family had asked me how I felt about their break up. She was the aunt (I have so many) who’d come to visit just about every year and she’d bring with her the most beautiful hand-made Liberian dresses and shoes for my mother and me to wear.

I remember she asked me in the same awkward Liberian accent as my father’s, “Who do yah wan-ta lee-ve wit?” I guess she meant, who do I want to live with my mother or my father? I wasn’t conscious of my decision at the time as I was trying to grasp the whole logic behind choosing which side I wanted to be on. I loved my mother and I loved my father, I remember thinking to myself. I don’t remember what I told my aunt that day, but what I do remember is that it wasn’t until my mother planned summer vacations
for me to spend at his house in Staten Island that I was able to recognize the impact it had on me. I was introduced to the Liberian way, a way of living that I had never really known before. I handled the divorce better than most kids although the transition to my father’s house during the summers never really gave me the time I needed to learn how to cook Fufu the right way. He worked most of the day and didn’t really have time to teach me the tricks of his trade; but, I didn’t mind it because I saw the change as an opportunity to have individual time with my mother and my father. The logic went: when living with my mother, sister and irritating brothers became unbearable; I knew I always had another place I could call home.

Making Fufu for those who visit is sort of a treat, an expression of love. Now as much as thirteen years have gone by and my father is still preparing Fufu for me when I come home to visit. He has since remarried and I have a thirteen-year old sister too. This past summer I visited my father and I was shocked to find that a lot has changed with my father’s cooking style, particularly when it comes to Fufu. This time the Fufu was thicker and drier than usual and it even had burn marks from being on the stove too long. What happened? Has he broken all the rules? I asked myself. But, I understand, my father is getting old, is too busy with his sales work, and has little time to perfect the art of making Fufu. However, some things still remain the same: hot pepper, the tall pitcher of cold water in the fridge, my father’s sucking sounds after eating the hot pepper, his great big sigh after finishing his meal.

I’m embarrassed to admit I never learned how to cook Fufu.