

Senegal Cuisine Finds Home in Hyattsville with the Best of Traditional Dishes

What I remembered most about my visit to Chez Dior, a Senegalese restaurant owned by Mamadou Fall in Hyattsville, Md., were the beverages. In addition to bissau (a hibiscus flower infusion that is the “national drink of Senegal”), the restaurant offers juices made from sweet ginger with pineapple, tangy tamarind, “pain de singe,” a superfood fruit from the baobab tree, voluptuous mango, and the house special “cocktail,” a non-alcoholic mixture of several juices. Attaya, a traditional Senegalese green tea, is also available.

A favorite among the local African community as well as returned Peace Corps volunteers, Chez Dior’s menu includes traditional Senegalese dishes such



as Thiebou diene, made from fish, rice and tomato sauce (which, according to Mamadou Fall, is what “96 percent of Senegalese eat for lunch”), Yassa chicken marinated in lemon and onion, and Dibi, grilled lamb with onion-mustard sauce that in Senegal is

often featured in a Dibi-centric restaurant called a Dibiterie. Those craving other African cuisines will not be disappointed by the Cameroonian Ndole stew, cassava (yuca) which is a staple in Nigeria and Sierra Leone, and Attieke, a traditional dish from the Ivory Coast. Dessert selections include Thiakry, a sweet

millet couscous dish.

Chez Dior is named after the oldest daughter of Mamadou Fall, who immigrated to the US in 1998 with his wife and the young Dior after winning the visa lottery. In addition to Dior, Fall has three more children, all born in the US.

Before winning the lottery Fall ran a fish processing and export business with his siblings in Dakar, Senegal’s seaside capital. Employing about 20 workers, the company purchased fish such as barracuda,



dorade (sea bream) and rouget (red mullet) from local fishermen, then processed it and exported it primarily to Western European countries (France, Germany, Belgium).

When Fall arrived in the US nearly 20 years ago, he tried unsuccessfully to get into the seafood importing business here. Among other things he encountered a substantial language barrier, and he took various jobs while improving his English.

Fall says he and his family encountered a welcome reception in Minnesota where they spent nearly 5 years; even after the events of September 11, 2001, they never encountered anti-immigrant sentiment in the northern state, perhaps because of its rich immigrant tradition and the large number of Somali refugees who have settled there in recent years.

When the Minnesota winters got to be too much for Fall’s wife, the family moved to the DC area where Fall worked in several hotels (Park Hyatt, JW Marriott) before a long stint with Home Depot as a

supervisor, where he says the biggest lesson was “about customer service, and making sure the customer leaves happy.”

While he was working full-time at Home Depot, Fall operated a side business — a catering service that prepared and delivered meals to Senegalese community in the DMV area. Though this business closed in 2008 Fall continued receiving in inquiries and requests for authentic African cuisine, and eventually he decided to open a full-service restaurant.

In May 2014, Chez Dior opened its doors in Hyattsville’s Art’s District. The restaurant’s customers are about 50 percent African, estimates Fall. Chez Dior hosted a farewell party for James Zumwalt, the current US Ambassador to Senegal, and has catered several events at the Pentagon, as well as weddings, graduation parties, naming ceremonies for babies, and birthday parties.

Fall said the thing he misses most about Senegal are the family meals — but not a lot — as the large Senegalese community here in the DMV (the third largest in the US, after New York and Atlanta) has become his second family. Clearly the benefit is reciprocal, as his restaurant helps to bring the African immigrant community a sense of “home away from home,” and also offers a unique and tasty experience to the dining public.

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