

# BREAKING BREAD

When he learned how to make a seemingly simple childhood favourite, EUGENE YIGA also rediscovered his mother's love

PHOTOGRAPH **CHRISTOPH HEIERLI** PRODUCTION **ABIGAIL DONNELLY** TEXT **EUGENE YIGA**

As a Ugandan born and raised in South Africa, one thing that kept me in touch with my East African roots was Sunday lunch. It was then that we often ate chapatis, unleavened flatbreads (similar to rotis and naan) that Indian expatriates brought to the region. But although I loved eating them – with meat stew and roasted veg – I never paid much attention to how my mom or sisters made them. Indeed, I didn't realise how much effort and care went into the process until I visited Kenya as an adult and learned how to make them myself.

"We're going to make a local kind of chapati based on ingredients that people can afford," said Cecilia, the woman whose home I was visiting as part of a cultural tour. "Chapatis use a lot of oil and many people cannot afford vegetable oil.

So they use less expensive solid vegetable fat made from sunflowers."

I washed my hands and approached the low table like a surgeon about to operate for the first time. The ingredients and utensils were laid out as methodically as they are on a TV cooking show: measuring cups, spoons, a rolling pin, a rolling table, a basin in which to make the dough, a pot for melting the fat, a heavy frying pan for cooking the chapatis, and another pot to store the food.

"We don't use specific measurements," Cecilia said as she mixed the flour, water, sugar and salt with her hands. "There are those who like salt only and those who prefer only sugar, while others don't use either. Some add other favourite ingredients like carrot or pumpkin. Feel free to mix it up."

Once the dough was ready (we knew because it was no longer sticking to our hands and was nice and smooth – too hard and the chapati won't puff up; too soft and it's difficult to roll), we covered it for about 15 minutes. Cecilia explained that if we cooked it immediately, the chapatis would be too hard and would crack.

While we waited, she asked me what I liked to cook at home. I was embarrassed to confess that I stick to basic dishes such as grilled chicken breasts, roast vegetables, and pasta for days. "That's good!" she laughed. "There are those people who don't attempt anything. Even now you're doing well. I know you'll make it."

Fifteen minutes over, we sprinkled some flour onto the table, divided the dough into small balls and rolled them out to form flat circles. Cecilia told me her mother had always taught her that chapatis should be round, not rectangular or square.



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But it doesn't always work out that way.

One visitor came from Australia with his girlfriend," she recalled. "She made a round chapati but his ended up being heart-shaped. And they were so happy. They shared the chapati and said they were sharing their love."

And for me, after experiencing first-hand how time-consuming and tiring the process of making such a simple dish can be, I finally understood how much love went into it when my mom and sisters made chapatis for our family. I shared my thoughts with Cecilia and she agreed, especially given that people in Kenya often use charcoal stoves. Not only does the smoke add unique flavour, but you should also feel honoured when you're welcomed into a home and offered the "sweeter" chapatis made in this way.

"When you're using a local stove to make chapati for a visitor, he must be a special person indeed," she laughed. "Because I have a big family, I'll use the gas stove. But up-country, they don't have gas so they use firewood. It's faster because it burns heavily. And they're used to it; you cannot convince them otherwise. My mother doesn't feel tired. She does it fast and she does it well. I don't know how, but she does it!" Sounds a lot like mine. **W**

Eugene Yiga is a Cape-based freelance writer. Find him online at [eugeneyiga.com](http://eugeneyiga.com).

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Find a recipe for tamarind date chutney and easy home-made rotis (a.k.a. chapatis) at [taste.co.za](http://taste.co.za).

