

Mother knows best

Learning how to recreate a recipe from his childhood shows Eugene Yiga the power of breaking bread

Being a first-generation Ugandan, born and raised in South Africa, I might have lost touch with my East African roots if it weren't for our Sunday family lunches.

We would eat chapati, an unleavened flatbread (similar to naan bread) made popular in Uganda by Indian expatriates. I never paid much attention to how my mom made it. Nor to how much effort the process requires, until I visited Kenya and learned how to make it myself.

KNUCKLING DOWN

While the recipe is simple enough (hint: Google), the process is a bit tricky. You have to be vigilant because the ratio of wet to dry ingredients greatly impacts the chapati.

'Think twice before you add any water,' advised Cecilia, whose home I visited on one of Kenya's famous 'cultural

tours'. We added water sparingly – as well as some oil so that it would cook from the inside. Then came the hardest part.

'You might have fancy dough mixers, but we locals like this ...' she said as we pressed down hard with our knuckles to knead the mixture. 'It's a bit dirty, you see, and tiresome. And that's just for one chapati. Imagine what it's like making 10!'

FRUITS OF SUCCESS

As we pan-cooked the chapati (getting the thickness just right so that it cooks evenly and doesn't burn) we rotated the chapati on the pan so that it 'ballooned' evenly and flipped it over to ensure it browned on both sides. We also kept adding oil to prevent them cracking, while controlling the temperature of the charcoal stove by opening and closing the air vent.

Eventually, the work was done! And then it was time to taste the fruits of our success. Cecilia and her children would judge the chapati I made. Her eldest son and daughter approved, but I was more nervous than a contestant on a melodramatic reality TV cooking show when Washington, her five-year-old who dreams of becoming a pilot, took his first bite.

THE WASHINGTON NOD

'He's fussy about his food and he hates vegetables,' Cecilia whispered as I held my breath. But the boy nodded, smiled and gave a thumbs-up. He didn't speak, but his expression said it all. I breathed a sigh of relief and hoped that Washington wouldn't wait as long as I had before trying his hand at making his first chapati. 

