The Ghana Cookbook
Fran Osseo-Asare and Barbara Baëta
viii + 240 pp. Photographs. $19.95 (paper)

The publication of a cookbook is hardly noteworthy since hundreds of cookbooks are published each year. What does make The Ghana Cookbook noteworthy is that it is the rare cookbook published about a single African cuisine.

As Fran Osseo-Asare¹ observes in her preface, there are plenty of cookbooks about the Caribbean, Brazil, and the American South that reference “African influences” on these cuisines. There are also encyclopedic African cookbooks on the market, such as The Africa Cookbook: Tastes of a Continent by food historian Jessica B. Harris and The Soul of a New Cuisine: A Discovery of the Foods and Flavors of Africa by famed Swedish-American chef Marcus Samuelsson, but these cookbooks have often blurred the vast differences among African cuisines. “Too often,” Osseo-Asare writes, “books treat the continent and islands of Africa, numbering well over fifty countries, as a single entity, when even within one country like Ghana there are ten regions with cuisines reflecting distinctive geographies, ingredients, cultures, and histories” (p.2).

The fact that African cuisines are often treated as indistinguishable from one another certainly helps explain why there are so few cookbooks about a single African cuisine on the market and may explain why Osseo-Asare, a food historian, and her cowriter, Barbara Baëta, a chef and culinary school owner in Accra, the capital of Ghana, had a difficult time finding a publisher for their cookbook. In a February 21, 2012 Washington Post article, “The Oily Charms of West African Cuisine,” Osseo-Asare stated that publishers did not think there was a market for a Ghanaian cookbook. Thankfully, Osseo-Asare and Baëta’s manuscript found a publisher, because they have crafted a well-written cookbook with an exhaustive collection of recipes.

Osseo-Asare and Baëta’s cookbook is not the first Ghanaian cookbook on the market, but the smattering of Ghanaian cookbooks on the market are mostly self-published and bear the distinct mark of poor research, a surface knowledge of Ghanaian cuisine, or the simple inability to create recipes that work. The few Ghanaian cookbooks that are not self-published exhibit the same problems as the self-published cookbooks. Osseo-Asare and Baëta’s recipes reflect the ease of people who possess a deep knowledge of Ghanaian cuisine.

The cookbook has two parts. Part I, “Essential Flavors and Techniques,” covers staples in Ghanaian cooking, cooking methods and techniques, and basic stocks and soups. Considering that Ghanaian cooking is not well known outside the region, this section is helpful to those who are new to Ghanaian cooking. (Those new to Ghanaian cooking are the obvious target audience for this cookbook, but there were several new recipes I encountered, despite my knowledge of Ghanaian cuisine.) “The Ghanaian Pantry in North America,” a subsection of Part I, provides a helpful guide for what ingredients you can substitute for foods and spices that may not be readily available outside a few major cities in the United States or Canada.

Part II is broken down into eleven subsections, such as “Snacks, Street Foods & Appetizers,” “Meat & Poultry,” “Grains, Roots & Other Starches,” and “Candy, Desserts & Baked Goods.” Unlike other cookbooks that feature Ghanaian recipes, the recipes in The Ghana Cookbook consist of more than the usual fare of nkate nkwan (peanut soup) or red-red (black-eyed peas made with palm oil and tomatoes). The authors also do an admirable job of showcasing the myriad cuisines found within Ghana by presenting recipes from around the country, especially from the northern part of the country, which is often overshadowed by the cuisines of the south.

In recent years, cookbooks have become more than a mere collection of recipes. We now read cookbooks for the history of a cuisine as much as we do for recipes, so it is a little disappointing that the authors, who have a deep knowledge of Ghanaian
cuisine, do not delve more into the history and evolution of
Ghanian cooking. The reader is provided an overview of
Ghana and the different crops and animals consumed in the
country that numbers only three pages.

The authors do try to make up for the brevity of their intro-
duction by including helpful tips or interesting facts for each
recipe, such as how the peanut, a native to South America,
was introduced to West Africa by the Portuguese (p.104).
While The Ghana Cookbook would have benefited from a
more comprehensive introduction at the outset, this is a small
quibble in an otherwise excellent book that fills a lacuna in a
more comprehensive introduction at the outset, this is a small

NOTE
1. I interviewed Dr. Osseo-Asare for my Gastronomica essay,
“How Not to Write About Africa: African Cuisines in Food Writing”
(Vol. 15, No. 1, pp. 44–55).

The Oxford Companion to Food
Alan Davidson
Edited by Tom Jaine (revised and updated edition)
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014
922 pp. $65 (hardcover)

Sometimes you can’t help but be annoyed when a classic is
revised and updated. Do I really need another copy to take
up precious shelf space? Can I really bear to abandon this
weathered friend whose pages I have meticulously and voraciously scoured over the years and scribbled in its margins?
Well, the answer in short is yes. The field of food studies has
grown so immensely that an update was absolutely required,
and Tom Jaine, with the help of many great food writers, has
done a superb job with it. Perhaps most impressively, the wit
and wisdom of Alan Davidson that shone on every page has
not been lost; one can still hear his voice clearly, and it is ac-

There is a very good reason this work became a classic and
better reason that it will continue to be. It is truly delightful to
read, even cover to cover if you have the time to be so en-
riched. Of the many reference works that appeared nearly two
decades ago, Scribner’s Encyclopedia of Food and Culture,
The Cambridge World History of Food, the revised Larousse
Gastronomique, and several others in their wake, including my

Chop Suey, USA: The Story of Chinese Food in America
Yong Chen
New York: Columbia University Press, 2014
xvii + 292 pp. Illustrations. $30.00 (cloth)

When historian Yong Chen journeyed from China to study
at Cornell University, he was struck unexpectedly with a long-
ing for home and by the stark awareness of his Chineseness.