



THE TOE RAG

Spring
Issue

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A QUARTERLY MAGAZINE

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A Walking Recipe

My Mother's Plate

by
Oluwatobiloba Ajayi

Traversing Harrow Road – an ancient trackway of Iron Age Britain, and a mecca for nostalgic diasporic youth – has become a staple of my bimonthly routine. Its hold on me is inescapable, and its faultless consistency keeps me coming back.



I's a Nigerian living in northwest London with a habitual longing for the food of home, Harrow Road provides a path towards satisfaction. It is a path towards a dish that lingers in the mind of my stomach: my mother's oxtail stew.

At its best, stew is an exceptional explosion of spice, vibrant tomatoey goodness, packed with a decadent meaty punch. Paired with a side of plantain, it is indulgent and comforting – self-care on a plate. With a glass of Maltina, it is just sinfully good. Suitable as breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and perfect as a midnight snack. Every so often, I need my fix, and I find myself drawn in the direction of Harrow Road.

Harrow Road is not unlike many other roads in London: Rye Lane, Ridley Road, and Kilburn High Road. All these roads have a strong migrant presence, offering cheap produce and imports of African, Caribbean, and Asian origins. Communities don't depart for elsewhere without bringing a trace of their past geographies with them. These traces exist despite all attempts to obscure them. London's lattice of culturally-hybrid roads form part of the phantom fabric of Britain's imperial project, and are a testament to the formidable capacity that immigrant populations have for materialising a home away from home. The residual threads of loss, longing, and potential weave themselves into a tapestry of taste that allows me to crave Nigerian stew, saunter down the road in Kensal Rise, and return home well-equipped to make it.

This recipe consists of four steps along Harrow Road that correspond to four loose stages of cooking. My mother would argue that there are no discrete steps, just one uninterrupted orchestra of flavours. It takes years to build such dexterity, however, so this will do for now. A walking recipe is the antithesis to the static, easily digestible, on-the-page approach. My mother has always spoken, sung, and shouted her methods. In tune with her rhythm, I was then tasked with translating her intentions and improvising as part of the cooking process. Here, I embrace a similar spirit. The method reveals itself not through an exhaustive description, but through an active commitment to its potential product. You have to walk the walk to make the stew.

I Let's begin at the intersection of Harrow Road and Third Avenue in Kensal Town. As you walk down the road, take stock of its terrain: the sounds, the smells and the skewed paving that requires you to pay close attention to the steps you take. You will notice a number of shops with produce out front. Do not be fooled: not all of these shops offer the necessary vegetables required for stew. All will sell tomatoes, most plantains, but only



a select few will have the red poblano peppers and scotch bonnets needed to add the appropriate amount of heat to our meal.

Our first stop is **Atlas Halal Meat**, a supermarket with spoils of fresh fruit and vegetables that leach onto the pavement on 608 Harrow Road. You will need 8 plum tomatoes, 3 red poblano peppers, 3 scotch bonnets (3 scotch bonnets provide a healthy level of spice for a well-versed West African palette, please adjust accordingly!) and 1 white onion. Whatever you do, do not be so bold as to substitute plum tomatoes for another

tomato variation. Plums have a natural sweetness, so you don't have to cook the stew down for as long as other more acidic tomatoes might require.

Chop your tomatoes, onion, and peppers in chunks, and throw them in the oven for 40 minutes at 200 degrees celsius. This step gives your stew that delicious smoky flavour. Once the vegetables are out of the oven, blend them together to form the base of your stew.

This base will be fried in 3 cooking spoons of vegetable oil. Once the oil is heated, pour in your blended mixture, lower the heat and allow it to cook down. 'Cooking down' is my mother's way of describing the reduction of the blended mixture. As the acidity reduces and the water content of the vegetables evaporates, a natural sweetness and a deep savoury quality come to the forefront.

Stew is used to describe the tomato-based 'sauce' that is traditionally brought to life by a protein; there might be fish stew, chicken stew, or goat stew, all traditionally served with white rice. Since my mother permanently relocated to England, she has embraced oxtail as her meat of choice. Part of the fun lies in its inaccessibility; the journey required to source oxtail at the right price. England has afforded her independence. It is a place where

she can choose what to feed her family and procure the goods herself. This is a privilege that her life in Nigeria does not allow, so she relishes it.

II Round the bend from Atlas, you will find **Asia Food Bazar**, where you'll be buying the oxtail. Despite the titular continent, you will also find Maltina here – a quintessentially Nigerian beverage.

When you walk through the doors of Asia Food Bazar, head straight to the backroom where the butcher works. The pungent smells of blood and flesh, and the metallic clash of blade on bone, will tell you you're in the right place. Take the opportunity to talk to the butcher and arrive at a portion and price that feels comfortable. At this stage, I usually try to channel my mother's confidence and her relaxed way of talking. She is effortless, charming the socks (or oxtail) off anyone, while I often agree to a price that feels slightly too high, because I feel too shy to demand otherwise. In these moments, I feel grateful that I am in London. The societal code does not require me to talk more than is necessary. I relish the anonymity of my life in London, whilst I recognise Lagos in its street cries, its boisterous sensibility, and its capacity to feel more Nigerian than Nigeria.

Before you even think to start cooking the stew, the oxtail will need to be marinated, ideally for several hours, after cleaning. My mother takes pride in her simple marinade: salt and pepper will suffice. A tiny bit of olive oil will help you rub the seasoning into the meat. Massage it! Get into it!

Search in the fridge by the door for an orangey-bronze-yellow can of **Maltina**, a non-alcoholic sugary malt drink that is a necessary accompaniment to the meal. Perhaps buy two, because one is never enough, and make sure to refrigerate before serving!

While your stew cooks down, put the oxtail in the oven and let it cook at 200°C for 30 minutes. 15 minutes on one side, then flip. Once the oxtail is cooked, add it to the simmering stew and let it cook down for another 40-ish minutes. The key is to taste as you are going, always.

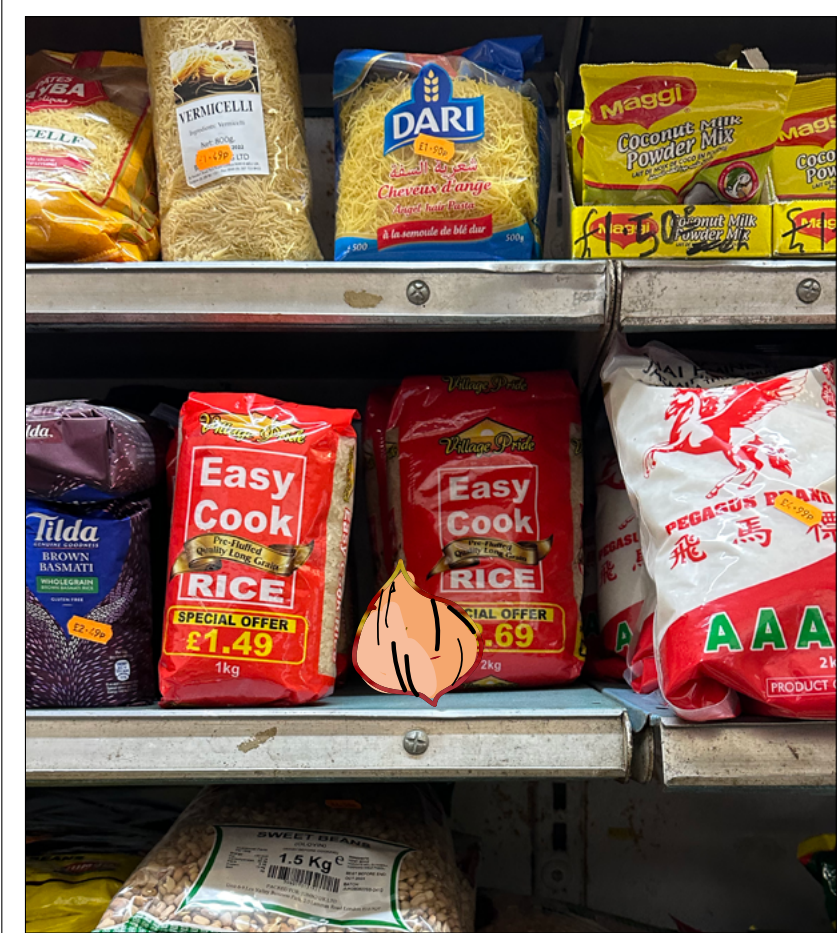
III No Nigerian dish is complete without a stock cube, but there is one question that continues to plague home chefs everywhere: *Knorr* or *Maggi*? My mother prefers *Knorr*, as she thinks *Maggi* cubes are too hard to open. But *Maggi*, what is actually a Swiss invention, feels more conventional. According to my mother, *Knorr* is tastier, but that ought to be debated in a higher court. Some people add bay leaves, but my mother shakes her head violently at the suggestion. Bay leaf and thyme are only introduced if she is making jollof rice: otherwise, she

IMAGE 38-41

Images and illustrations by Oluwatobiloba Ajayi, 2024.



My Mother's Plate: A Walking Recipe



stays clear. Regardless of where you stand on the Knorr/Maggi debate, both can be found at the penultimate stop, Jerusalem Gate, where Harrow Road meets Elgin Avenue.

2 Knorr/Maggi cubes will be added to the stew and oxtail. Let it simmer on the lowest possible heat for 10 minutes as you mix everything together.

IV

The final stop involves the rice and plantain, both found at **Miah's Oriental Foods**. The plantain is stacked just outside the door to the shop. I prefer my plantain brown/almost-black all over, over-ripe and therefore as sweet as it gets. This is a point of contention between my mother and I, who often makes a face of disgust before cooking it just how I like it, every single time. *Score the plantain down its side, peel it sideways (opposite of a banana), and cut diagonally into slices. Heat up enough oil in a pan to coat the plantain and deep fry until golden brown.*

A varied selection of rice is found inside Miah's by the till on the right. As the twin component of the plate,

rice is essential. *If you have reached this point in the walk and do not know how to boil rice then you are beyond saving! Once the rice is fluffy, your plantain golden, and your stew perfectly seasoned, the dish is complete.*

V

My longing for Lagos looms over my experience of London. The spaces are entangled; Lagos lies implicit in London and vice-versa, existing as twinned cities in my psyche. My ambivalence about my national identity is magnified when my desire for traditional food is met with my existence in this city. But walking these streets with my favoured meal in mind is a small way of reconciling the fictive landscape of my Black British diaspora.

Taste is as personal as it is formed in the shadows of a global history. The geographical references embedded in Harrow Road's shop names: *Atlas, Jerusalem, Asia, and Oriental*, signal the mosaic of foods on offer. These cartographic markers, so ubiquitous they become invisible, contribute to the incessant backdrop of coloniality.

For these reasons, my walk is not entirely unique. A similar walk might be recreated for my mother's dish on Blackstock Road, or for another plate, like Jerk Chicken and Rice and Peas, Thiéboudieune, or Metemgee on Electric Avenue. It is a walk all children of the diaspora must make for themselves in an attempt to reanimate a familiarity so perfectly captured in a plate of food. We are active participants in our local foodscapes, and in diligently patronising our neighbourhood shops, we play a part in defining what 'local' might mean for us.

Craving a meal and carefully sourcing its ingredients is a self-affirming spatial practice. This walking recipe is a portal into a world of comforts, allowing me to nourish my yearning for my ancestral home in the city that makes me feel *at home*. The process also makes me feel closer to my mother, who has sacrificed without restraint to make sure my sister and I are well-fed and well taken care of. The ultimate step of this journey is to honour her sacrifice by cooking this meal yourself. Your taste buds will thank you, as will I. 🍷

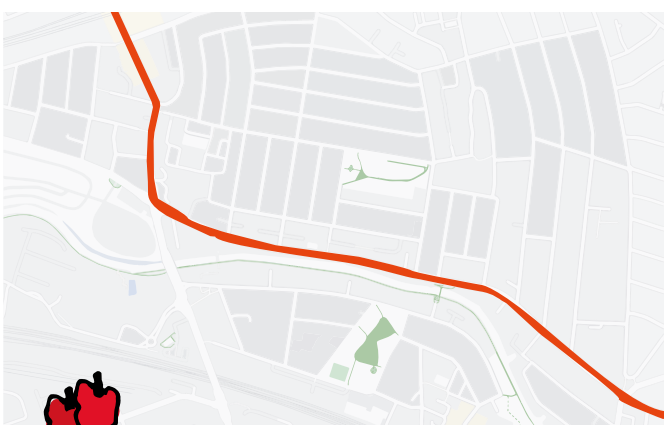


IMAGE 42
Map of Harrow Road.



SOUP