

Totos African Cuisine

You drive out into the sketchy, unwelcoming part of Los Angeles, already not expecting much from the restaurant you will be dining at tonight because of its area. You pull into a tiny plaza crammed with stores and restaurants, all sandwiched between a smoke shop and a liquor place. But then you see it; a brilliant column of light amid its dark surroundings. The sign excitedly displays to the world: *Toto's African Cuisine: A Taste of Nigeria*. Having second thoughts about the place but still not too certain, you step in through the doors and stop in your tracks as soon as your eyes meet the interior.

The space is small but tidy, painted an exciting orange with art and pictures covering the walls. The tables are neatly set and ready to go for their next recipients. Beer and wine are displayed against the wall, and a giant TV shows the latest on COVID-19. As soon as they see you, the staff jump up and escort you to your table politely and cheerfully. You have some ideas about what you might want, but looking at the menu, you become completely lost with all the choices. The waiter explains each dish with passion and joy, telling the history behind it and how it appears in culture. You finally settle on traditionally seasoned ram with a side of Jollof rice and the waiter nods approvingly, sending the order to the kitchen.

Nigeria has had a long and colorful history. In 1885, British conquest over Nigeria became official and was acknowledged by other European countries. This rule held for a long time, up until 1960, when Nigeria gained full independence from Britain. In 1967, East Nigeria declared itself independent from main Nigeria and war broke out, but they reunited three years later.

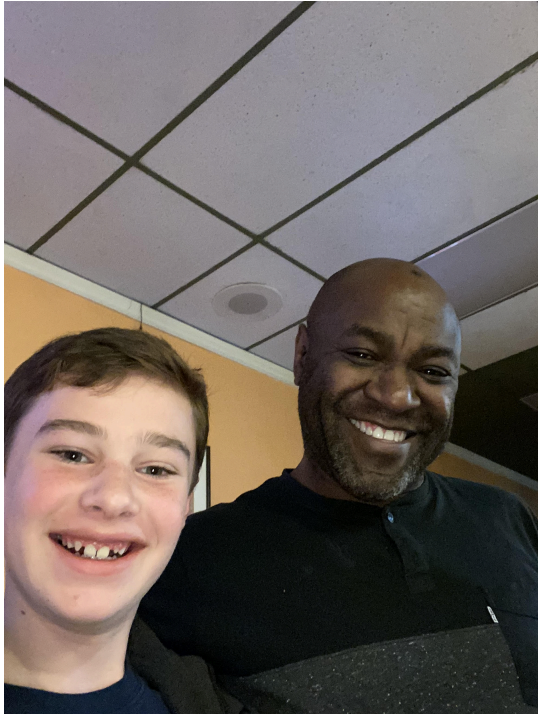
You don't have to wait long before he comes out with a steaming plate full of food. The Jollof rice smells like the pride of Nigeria, where it was created and is a favorite dish. The ram next to it is never forgotten on special holidays in its prestigious country, the equivalent of turkey in the US but eaten and savored much more often. The Jollof rice is given to you with plantains and chicken, and the ram is covered in a creamy red sauce. The waiter pulls out a water bottle and gives you a warning about how spicy it is. You brace yourself for the first bite of goat, and rightfully, too.

The first thing you notice is the spiciness. It overwhelms your senses, the hottest thing that you've ever tasted in your life. No amount of water can calm your flaming mouth. Something about it, however, makes you want to take another bite, and with each one, you get more and more used to it. The meat is almost like antelope, but a stronger flavor, like a fresher, bloodier version of beef. Despite the spiciness, you can't help but continue to shove it in your mouth. If you've ever had the red rice from a Mexican restaurant, that's what Jollof rice tastes like, but fierier and with more spices. It's a nice contrast to the ram and the chicken that accompanies it is tender and juicy. The plantains are sweet but also strangely savory, not what you'd expect a fried banana to taste like.

Will Jamison

When you finish, the kind waiter comes out and almost sadly hands you the check, and you can't help but give him a ten-dollar tip. Toto's African Cuisine is an unforgettably delicious experience that I highly recommend.

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A selfie that the restaurant owner and I took together.



The front of the restaurant.



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