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Opening Extract from...

Mma Ramotswe's Cookbook

Written by Stuart Brown

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Mma Ramotswe's Cookbook

nourishment for the traditionally built



Stuart Brown

Foreword by **Alexander McCall Smith**

Photography by **Mats Ögren Wanger and Ulf Nermark**

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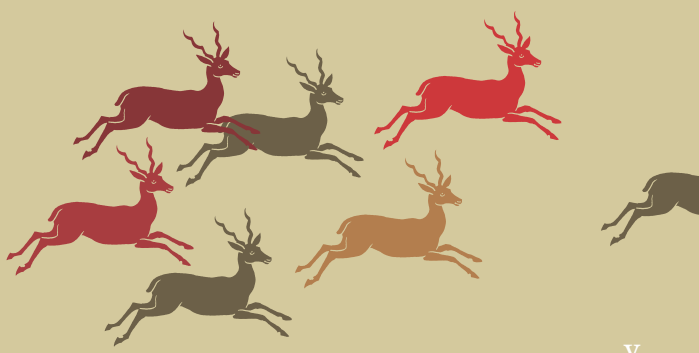
In memory of
Molly McArthur

Late people
are still loved



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Foreword

When you invent a fictional character you give a hostage to fortune: the character does not belong just to you – he or she belongs to readers and to the world at large. So others may propose to give your character a larger life, whether on the screen or in some other context. Most authors are wary of this – and understandably so; many literary characters have been made to do and say things they would never dream of doing in the hands of their original begetter.

It was a happy day for me when Stuart Brown came to ask me if he could write a Mma Ramotswe cookbook. I already knew Stuart and I was confident that he would produce something with which I – and Mma Ramotswe – would be perfectly happy. I knew that he had made a very detailed study of the books and indeed it seemed to me that he knew more about them than I did myself. Authors often forget the details.

When Stuart showed me a draft of the book I was astonished at the extent to which food is mentioned in the original books. I do not remember endowing these books with quite so many culinary references, but there is no doubt that I did. That is not because Mma Ramotswe is a glutton – it is just that she often thinks about things when cooking or eating, and so it was understandable, then, that there should be a fair number of references to food.

The cuisine of sub-Saharan Africa is not widely known in the wider world. This book is to be welcomed in redressing that situation and in bringing to the attention of readers some of the tasty dishes with which the cooks of Africa – many of them women very much like Mma Ramotswe – feed their families. Do not look for great culinary elaboration here – look instead for good, nutritious fare, exactly the sort of food that we can imagine gracing the table as Mma Ramotswe sits down to dinner with Mr J.L.B. Matekoni and the children after a hard day's work in the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency and Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors. Can I smell pumpkin? I think I can. Do I hear the sound of cattle lowing in the distance? I think I do. Is all well in the kitchens of Botswana? I think it is.

Alexander McCall Smith



Letlhafula: harvest thanksgiving

Introduction

This book began with a meal. In 2001, I found myself sitting next to Alexander McCall Smith at a conference dinner in Stockholm. There was a great deal of laughter around the table and cooking was discussed, the concept of 'unreconstructed males' touched upon and the name Elizabeth David mentioned in exalted tones.

Upon joining the millions who appreciate Alexander McCall Smith's affectionate and humorous tales, I was struck by the prominence of cooking and eating in the stories. Sharing Mma Ramotswe's relish for food, I suggested a cookbook to McCall Smith who has been hugely encouraging throughout the process.

The result has no pretensions to being a definitive guide to the cookery of Botswana, but is written in a spirit of celebration for the people and the place. It seeks to offer a flavour of the foods dear to Mma Ramotswe as well as an approving appraisal of the traditional build, the larger-sized figure that signifies prosperity and the enlightened state of being at ease in one's own skin. The book also reproduces recipes from people in Botswana, keen to share their cuisine with others everywhere, because they are kind-hearted and love their country.

Whilst many of the ingredients required are to be found online and internationally in African grocers and butchers, some remain elusive outside Botswana. Where possible, alternatives are suggested and a glossary of terms is provided at the back as well as an index.

I hope that you will enjoy this book, whether as a companion to McCall Smith's stories; for the beautiful photography and design; as a stove-side recipe guide; or a gentle encouragement to explore Botswana.

Stuart Brown
August 2009





Chapter 1

Bush Tea Beginnings

Mma Ramotswe was always the first to rise in the morning, and she enjoyed the brief private time before the others would get up and start making demands of her. There would be breakfast to prepare, children's clothes to find, husband's clothes to find too; there would be a hundred things to do. But that lay half an hour or so ahead; for the time being she could be alone in her garden, as the sun came up over the border to the east, beyond Tlokweng, hovering over the horizon like a floating ball of fire. There was no finer time of day than this, she thought, when the air was cool and when, amidst the lower branches of the trees, there was still a hint, just the merest hint, of translucent white mist. (The Miracle at Speedy Motors)

Mma Ramotswe has a pot of redbush tea in Africa, at the foot of Kgale Hill. Each day dawns with a deep red brew and the familiar chorus of cattle bells on Radio Botswana, unchanged since Precious was a little girl waiting by the fire in Mochudi with her dear daddy, the late Obed Ramotswe, expert judge of cattle.

The first cup of tea is enjoyed sitting in peace on the veranda in Zebra Drive watching the birds, or whilst taking a stroll around the yard. Mma Ramotswe doesn't officially count the two cups that she enjoys during this, her favourite time of day, when no demands are being made of her as a wife, a mother and the proprietor of the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency.

Observing the old Botswana ways, tea must be offered to others before replenishing one's own cup and is regarded by Mma Ramotswe as a temporary solution in many cases, helping clients to talk, putting them at their ease and taking their minds off their fears for a moment. Mma Makutsi, *Associate* Detective, who had gained a peerless ninety-seven per cent at the Botswana Secretarial College, was clear in her own mind that she drank a good deal less tea than her employer's six cups a day, a figure that did not include top-ups.

Rooibos

Redbush tea is also known in Botswana as *Rooibos*, literally, 'red bush' in Afrikaans, and *Radikgonnyana* in Setswana, meaning 'small sticks'. The tea comes from the *rooibos* shrub (*Aspalathus linearis*) in the Western Cape of South Africa, the needle-like leaves of which turn red when fermented and dried in the sun. *Rooibos* is naturally caffeine free and doesn't induce the slight fluttering of the heart for Mma Ramotswe that coffee and China tea set off. In the past, in many villages in Botswana, it was common to add milk to the pot as soon as the boiling water was poured in and for the pot to be placed on the hot coals for the tea leaves and liquids to work their magic. The Redbush Tea Company[1] gives a percentage of its profits to the Kalahari Peoples Fund (KPF)[2].

Whereas in some countries during World War II, sugar rations went into cakes, in Botswana sugar continued to go into tea. Many people in Botswana do have a sweet tooth when it comes to their drinks and today it is acceptable to add condensed milk to tea (as Mma Makutsi has been known to do), or honey, cow's milk, a sprig of fresh Botswana mint or of 'Resurrection Bush' which make a delicious addition to a brew. This resourceful herb is so-called because once picked, it can be stored in a favourite tin for many months and when plunged into water, bright green leaves will miraculously burst open. A sprig of this added to the bath is also said to have the power to enhance male potency.

1 www.redbushtea.com
2 www.kalaharipeoples.org



There is a good deal more to be said on the important subject of tea, but tea is surely much better with a biscuit.

Biscuits

Her Saturdays were something of a ritual. She always went to the President Hotel for tea in the morning, and then, after a quick shopping trip, she would return and make lunch. In the afternoon she would have a nap, as Mr J.L.B. Matekoni also sometimes did, before getting up to make biscuits for tea. (Tea Time for the Traditionally Built)

The scale of Mma Ramotswe's biscuit output is very much more modest than that of Prince Charles, of whom Mma Ramotswe has read. She had determined that one or two of the plain Marie biscuits would definitely make space in the tin labelled 'pencils' if ever a royal biscuit should happen along. After all, these were biscuits not only of a royal, but of a man who respects cattle.

Lemon and Condensed Milk Biscuits

Makes around 24 2-inch diameter biscuits

These egg-free biscuits are light, yet rich. Friends or family should appreciate the traditionally built lady rousing herself from a well deserved rest and, as she fills the home with the warm smell of baking, such a provider may wish to check that condensed milk, spooned straight from the tin, tastes quite as delicious as she remembers it. Members of the community look to 'ladies with a reputation for baking' to answer such questions and it is important not to disappoint.

Ingredients:

12 oz plain flour
2 tsp baking powder
½ tsp grated lemon rind
7 fl. oz condensed milk
Pinch of salt
8 oz unsalted butter
½ tsp lemon juice
4 oz caster sugar
Small quantity icing sugar

Method:

Cream butter and sugar well.

Add condensed milk and beat until well mixed.

Sift flour, baking powder, salt and add to the butter mixture, with lemon juice and grated rind.

Beat until thoroughly mixed through.

Grease two large baking trays, or line with greaseproof paper.

Take teaspoons of the mix and roll gently into 1 inch balls and place on baking tray.

Flatten gently with a fork until they are about ¼ inch thick and ensure they have room for manoeuvre to avoid sticking together.

Bake at 170°C for 12 – 15 minutes (160°C fan-assisted oven).

Cool on the tray.

Dust very lightly with icing sugar.



Mealie Meal Biscuits

Makes about 40

Ingredients:

1½ cups of flour
½ cup dried coconut
¾ cup white sugar
1 egg
2 tsp milk
½ cup fine mealie meal
6 tbs shortening (butter, margarine)
1 tsp baking powder
Small pinch salt
A few currants or sultanas

Method:

Sieve the flour, mealie meal, salt and baking powder and mix together. Rub in the shortening very finely, until the mixture is like fine breadcrumbs. Add the sugar and coconut and mix well all together. Beat the egg and mix with the milk. Stir this into the dry mixture, adding a very little milk if required to make a firm dough. Roll out the dough on a floured table, or board, and cut into little biscuits with a cutter or a small glass. Put the biscuits on a lightly greased baking tray and press a currant or sultana on top of each biscuit. Bake the biscuits in a moderate hot oven, 200°C for about 10 minutes until lightly browned and cooked.

Bambara Groundnut *(Setswana, manoko a be sitsweng)*

Grown in Botswana, these larger than average peanuts or 'monkeynuts' are very tasty and enjoyed as a snack. The nutritious nuts can be boiled or roasted in their shells, seasoned with chilli, or pepper and salt and eaten shelled. They can be eaten fresh, or sun-dried. They are also a staple ingredient in some traditional dishes.

Groundnut Biscuits

Makes about 48

Ingredients:

½ cup margarine
½ cup groundnuts
½ tsp salt
2 eggs, well beaten
2 tsp baking powder
½ cup peanut butter
2 cups sifted flour
1 cup sugar
¼ cup milk

Method:

Heat oven to 190°C. Grease a large baking sheet. Chop the groundnuts, but do not make the pieces too small. Cream the margarine until it is light. Slowly add the sugar and peanut butter, and cream together until fluffy. Mix in beaten egg and milk. Sift together flour, baking powder and salt. Stir into the first mixture, making a very stiff dough. Then add chopped nuts. Use a teaspoon to put small pieces of dough on to the baking sheet. Leave space for them to spread. Bake for 15 minutes or until nicely brown.



Pragmatism and Loose Purists

A pragmatist, Mma Ramotswe has succumbed to the use of teabags. As a romantic, a patriot and staunch defender of the old Botswana ways, she also continues to use loose tea, on occasions, enjoying the frisson of getting the odd tea leaf in her mouth. At home in Extension Two, Grace Makutsi uses her old round tea caddy showing Botswana's former administrative capital, Mafeking, also once a regular shopping haunt of Mma Ramotswe's prior to the growth of Gaborone which today sells anything one might want. Mma Makutsi follows the time-honoured recipe of 'one spoon for each mouth and one for the pot' and knows that her employer likes her tea fresh from the pot, piping hot.

She loved standing in the kitchen, stirring the pot, thinking over the events of the day, sipping at a large mug of bush tea which she balanced on the edge of the stove. (The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency)

Tea is the essential 'cook's tipple' and Mma Ramotswe invariably has her favourite brown patterned teapot from the Gabane Pottery, within easy reach of the stove. She saves her special commemorative Queen Elizabeth II tea cup for use at meal-times and enjoys the edgy *je ne sais quoi* that the greasy finger marks on the mugs at Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors bring to the already distinctive taste. Tea drinkers should insist that their pots are treated with respect. Fresh in Mma Ramotswe's mind is the calamitous incident where the older Apprentice, Charlie, had used Mma Makutsi's new china teapot as a receptacle for engine oil. This had unleashed a catalogue of events including Charlie calling Mma Makutsi a warthog and storming off.



Happiest when travelling into the Bush, Mma Ramotswe has the foresight to plan possible bush tea stops along the way, but always makes the provision of travelling with a supply of teabags. While the motto of the Botswana Secretarial College is 'Be Acurate', Mma Ramotswe favours 'Be Prepared' and carrying bush tea is a totem of preparedness. In a bid to avoid running out of teabags, Rra Polopetsi had been put in charge of stock control, his having volunteered the need for a system, drawing upon his knowledge from the pharmacy. Whilst defused by Mma Ramotswe's smile and a knowing look between the two ladies, this unbidden suggestion of introducing new practices has been accurately chronicled as: 'a moment of electric tension, thrilling in retrospect . . . dangerous to a degree'. On the matter of tea for the detective on the move, it must be understood that coffee is an entirely different drink and that the serving of tea from a coffee flask leaves an unpleasant taste in the mouth for some time, but not quite as long as such transgressions linger in the minds of those victim to tainted *Rooibos*.