Mbale

Malewa

AfriFOODlinks

FOODChronicles

Recipe Series

AfriFOODChronicles

Welcome to a new edition of the AfriFOODChronicles Recipes!

In the recipe series, we use one cherished dish from each of the 5 AfriFOODLinks hub cities as a lens to understand the dynamics of the urban space.

In this second edition of the recipe series, we travel to **Mbale, Uganda** where **Woniala Peter** shares his favourite local dish with us: a smoky stew of fermented bamboo shoots called ***malewa*** which is often cooked with groundnut sauce and smoked meat or fish.

He generously welcomes us to learn about his favourite recipe. *Malewa* is one of the dishes most closely associated with Mbale and the surrounding slopes of Mount Elgon, where the bamboo shoots grow from the wild.

Read on to see what *malewa* can teach us about the city of Mbale...

We hope you enjoy your journey with us,
AfriFOODChronicles Editorial Team





Welcome to Mbale

Mbale is one of Uganda's fastest-growing secondary cities and an important regional hub.

Mbale is a city shaped by regional trade, fertile land and rapid urban expansion.

Today, Mbale's role as a trading city builds on the pre-colonial histories of food production, mobility and regional exchange.

The food system in Mbale is shaped by **agriculture, markets, trade and rapid urban growth**.

Food plays a vital role in Mbale's everyday life, connecting people, livelihoods and culture in a city that is undergoing significant urban changes.

In Mbale, **the challenge to the food system is not whether there is enough food in the city, but rather whether this food is equally available and accessible to all residents to sustain a nutritious diet over time**.

To learn more about the history, urban realities and food systems of the city, see our *FOODChronicle on Mbale*.

The dish of Malewa

Malewa is deeply tied to Bagisu (also known as Bamasaaba) identity. It was once a special food of the Bagisu people, but today it has **grown in popularity and crossed borders**, becoming a favourite across East Africa and beyond.



Bagisu people tell the story of *malewa* different ways. Many say the first Mugisu man, Masaba, emerged from a cave on the slopes of Mount Elgon, where bambo shoots grew in plenty. Cultural leader John Musira tells of ancestors who sheltered in the mountain's caves during the wars of the 16th and 17th centuries and learned there that young bamboo shoots could be boiled and eaten. Starting as a survival food, it became an important cultural dish over time. Whichever is the true story, ***malewa* (bamboo shoots) was a food of the mountain long before it was a food of the city**.

***Malewa* is a signature identifier of Mbale's food culture, linking the city to the surrounding Mount Elgon ecosystem**, where the bamboo grows naturally.

This dish supports local value chains: harvesters, processors who ferment and dry the shoots, and market vendors. The dish is **commonly sold in Mbale's markets**, making it both a **culinary and economic thread running through the city**.



For many families, it's **a dish passed down through generations, often prepared during important gatherings.** Malewa was traditionally served during the Bagisu circumcision rituals, *imbalu*, and weddings. *Imbalu* launch ceremonies are held every even year, during the month of August, at the designated ceremonial grounds *Mutoto*. **While still** enjoyed at special occasions, it is now a dish that is eaten regularly.

The distinct sour, earthy flavour is something people from Mbale describe as "**tasting like home**." These days, *malewa* still holds the meaning of home related to Mbale, but has spread across East Africa and can even be found on Woodstock Main Road in Cape Town.



“I remember my mother preparing malewa during a random Sunday afternoon; the smell of the bamboo shoots fermenting signalled that a big visitor who either knew or didn’t know ***malewa*** was coming”

Malewa (Bamboo Shoot Stew) Recipe

Ingredients

Serves: 4 - 6 people

- **500g dried, smoked bamboo shoots (***malewa***)** soaked and rinsed

"Mainly from Mbale's central market and small roadside (hawkers) vendors who sell pre-fermented and dried bamboo shoots"

- **2 cups groundnut (peanut) paste**

"Groundnuts are bought from local grain stalls"

- **300g smoked beef or dried fish** (optional)
- **1 onion**, chopped
- **2 tomatoes**, chopped
- **Salt** to taste
- **Water**

Preparation

1. Soak the *malewa* in water until softened, then rinse well and boil until its tender and drain
2. In a separate pot, sauté the onions and tomatoes
3. Add the smoked meat or fish and a little water; simmer until softened
4. Mix groundnut paste with water to form a smooth paste, then stir into the pot
5. Add the cooked bamboo shoots, season with salt, and simmer on low heat, stirring occasionally, until the sauce thickens and flavours meld (20–30 minutes)

Serving

Serve hot with *matooke* (a type of cooking banana), *posho* (maize flour), or rice







A shared staple

Malewa is often served with *posho*, a staple Ugandan dish. But ***posho* is not unique to Mbale as a city or even Uganda as a country, some variation of posho is widely eaten across West, East, and parts of Southern Africa.** It is **one of the oldest and most widely eaten staple foods on the continent.**

This staple is a type of porridge-like starch made from maize or corn which is cooked with water (or milk) until it is smooth and firm or stiff. It is eaten as a side dish, often with vegetables and a protien like meat. With variations in recipe and preparation, it is known as *sadza* in Zimbabwe and Zambia, *nsima* in Malawi, *ugali* in Tanzania.

Maize was brough to the continent in the 16th century from Latin America by Portugese colonists but spead quickly and is now the base of one of Africa's most eaten staple dishes.

While *posho* and many other variations of this staple across the continent are made from unfermented maize, in some places it is fermented - like in Nigeria where the dish is commonly known by the Yoruba people as *eko* and the Igbo people as *agidi*. *Kenkey* is similarly fermented and eaten in West Africa, mainly in Ghana. But *kenkey* is fermented, partially cooked and then steamed in dried maize leaves (or husks), similarly to how *tamales* are prepared in Mexico.

In other variations of this shared staple, it is made with another type of flour rather than maize or corn. For example, *fufu* in Nigeria and Sierra Leone is made from yam or plantain powder.

Even within the same region or country, the same variation of this staple can be known by many different names. In South Africa, you can find this maize staple by the name of *pap, bohobe, bogobe, um'ratha,* and more depending on where you are and who you are talking to.

Wherever it is eaten, this staple carries the dishes that go with it. In Mbale a plate of *posho* or *matooke* is often wherever *malewa* arrives, and the two travel together across borders.

ugali being prepared in Kisumu

Changes in the city means changes in what people eat

Despite the cultural significance of *malewa* and growing regional popularity, **over the years, preparing *malewa* has become more difficult for many families in Mbale**. What can this change teach us about the urban realities of Mbale?

"Bamboo harvesting has become more strictly regulated due to conservation efforts around Mount Elgon National Park. This has affected the availability and price of fresh shoots. More people now buy pre-processed, packaged malewa rather than fermenting it at home, and prices have risen due to the reduced access to harvesting areas."

These days you can also find *malewa* at restaurants all over the East African region. This may reflect the way that fast-paced urban life does not allow people the same time to prepare this special dish at home, or the way that family life in these cities is changing.



Despite these changes, *malewa* remains a cherished dish, still associated with celebration, tradition, and family.

This dish connects people to the land, to indigenous food knowledge and to a shared cultural heritage that deserves to be preserved and celebrated despite changes in city life.

While *malewa* helps us to understand more about Mbale as a city, it also provides us with a window into understanding how connected we are across national boundaries - in the ways that shared colonial histories have shaped the continent, and in how the shared enjoyment of dishes like *malewa* can build connections across political borders.

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