



letter from portland, maine

A restaurant in Portland links African refugees with their past and Maine with its future

By Terry Farish

"Yes, food is so important." Florence Olebe begins many ideas with a low, melodious "yes." Her soft-spoken refrain offers the invitation, "Come with me, I will bring you into my culture," a responsibility she feels to the natives in Portland, Maine, where she runs the Ezo African Restaurant.

Today is one of those New England days that rises to 81 degrees to deceive you, and now flattens you with wind as the temperature drops. Florence dresses like she has known warmth. She wears a cotton, African print skirt and blouse with white embroidered detail and dark leather sandals the color of her feet. Florence and her seven sons found sanctuary in Portland after her husband

CULTURAL CHANGE

Although Maine is 97 percent white, it is also home to over 10,000 political refugees, including Ezo African Restaurant owner Florence Olebe.





FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Florence's traditional kiswa, moto-moto, and lentil stews keep the refugees connected to their African heritage while they adapt to a new life in America.

was killed in Sudan's long-standing civil war. Two and a half million of her countrymen have died.

Florence has three pots on the old, stainless Southbend gas stove in the tiny kitchen with only a glass-doored refrigerator, a single, freestanding dishwasher, and a half-sized sink filled with fresh collard greens soaking. Ezo, named for the home village of Florence's late husband, is the only African restaurant in Portland. Native Mainers, tourists, and immigrants find their way to Ezo on the small single block of Oak Street in what's become the city's arts district. With its tiger-skin tablecloths and batik art and photographs of women cooking kiswa, the traditional flat bread, on an open fire, Ezo is in a tiny storefront. It's tucked away and might not be noticed among the ordinary mix of city life. But Saturday night is Ezo's biggest night, when its tables are filled with people hungry for a taste of Africa.

To Florence and other Africans, Ezo is more than a business—it is their community.



"Go to Ezo," a Sudanese boy will tell you when he can find no English words to describe the cooking that went on in his kitchen in southern Sudan before his government's soldiers shelled his house. "Go to Ezo. Then you will see." The restaurant caters gallery openings of exhibits of African art and the University of Southern Maine's annual dinner to support the Portland English as a Sec-

ond Language Scholarship Fund. It's a place to have a party and, for a lot of youth, to work.

And here, sometimes the Africans can meet and talk.

*He married a new wife?
He is Nuer and he promised to take only one wife
but then he took a second wife.
How could he do that? He betrayed her.
[Shaking of the head.]*

*The car ran her brother down in Juba.
Is he dead?
We will know tomorrow. The soldiers do this all
the time to the southern Sudanese.*

*Her husband, he is taking all her money. She has
only \$7 in her account.
She should get her own account and he cannot
touch it...*

In English, Acholi, Bari, Zande, sometimes Swahili, or the colloquial Juba Arabic spoken in southern Sudan.

Welcome to Ezo African Restaurant, a new truth of Portland, Maine.

Even ten years ago, a Mainer's story would have been the story of a lobsterman Down East, a New Yorker come to hammer

Maine needs the refugees as much as the refugees need Maine

penny nails for a homestead in Washington County, a potato picker in Aroostook County, or around Portland, a start-up entrepreneur or an artist. But today, a Mainer's story might have begun in Somalia, Sudan, Morocco, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Congo, Eritrea, Togo, Colombia, Greece, Russia, Peru, Honduras, Cambodia, Bosnia, Iran, Iraq, or Kazakhstan.

It started in 1980, when Portland was designated a U.S. refugee resettlement site. Each year since, Portland has served as the first U.S. home for about 250 refugees, among them Florence and her children in 1998. In the late 1990s, the refugee population began to balloon as up to 1,500 refugees each year packed up from their cities of first resettlement and came to Portland, with its promise of housing and low crime. When Portland ran out of room, members of the Somali community moved on to nearby Lewiston—as many as five to ten families per week. Statistically the whitest state in the nation, Maine has now become home to over 10,000 political refugees and immigrants.

And they keep coming. Portland and Lewiston are bending under the weight of the additional services they must provide. But they cannot break, for Maine needs the refugees as much as the refugees need Maine. "We need more people," said James Tierney, former Attorney General of Maine, at a University of Maine lecture. "We must see immigrants as an opportunity. California, Texas, New York, Florida, Arizona, Washington, the states that are our country's engines of economic growth, are culturally diverse."

In the late afternoon, clouds whip over the sun that would have been enormous in Africa. The doors at Ezo open at 5 o'clock. Moto-moto, a marinated chicken, sizzles in the oven. The smell of cooking herbs fills the room. Florence has things on her mind. She is thinking about the African Resource Center she and her best friend Margaret Lado are organizing, a center to support their people, to refer others who want to know about

Africans in Maine. She lights the flames under the three pots, adds chicken to one, beef to another, chops tomatoes, onions, then adds lentils, shakes spices into the third. No need to measure. Then there's the group of old Sudanese women at the apartment complex. They are on her mind, too. The women are sewing clothes traditional to each of the tribes in Portland. They will sell the dresses and other handiwork, in a step to create an African women's clothing business. The women will need her support. At home, tribal differences are not so important among the educated like Florence. But here, it is important to keep tradition, to cook the traditional foods, to share the traditional clothes and dances with the people of Maine.

Florence brings a plate, and on the plate is kiswa, circles of crepe-like bread, hidden under a wrap to keep them moist. The phone rings and she speaks, now in Acholi. She says afterward, "My sons, they don't speak my own language. They understand, but they can't use enough to speak in my dialect. I speak to them in Juba Arabic." Many Sudanese parents are heartbroken that their children don't know their tribe's dialect, but with the imposition of Islamic law on the south, people have been forced to study and speak in Arabic. Here is a loss of tradition Florence cannot alter.

On Ezo's wall is a drawing from children who have visited. "Dear Florence Olebe, thank you for your wonderful food," they write above their splash of a colorful feast. "From the kids at the Oak Street Studios, a Young People's Art Institute." Also on the wall she has hung starched batik pictures. One depicts a row of traditional women with jugs of water on their heads. Florence straddles these worlds—representing Africa to Maine and honoring an authentic Africa for her people.

Now it's nearly 5 o'clock and Florence prepares to open the doors to Ezo African Restaurant. It's clear she takes satisfaction in this restaurant—this tiny place with five booths and three tables where Mainers come to learn how to eat stews scooped up into kiswa and where tall Sudanese boys come for a taste of home. *

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