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MEET THE CHEF *Adejoké 'Joké' Bakare*

Culinary history was made in February 2024 when Chishuru – a restaurant serving West African cuisine in London's West End – was awarded a Michelin star. Nigerian-born Adejoké 'Joké' Bakare became the first black female chef in the UK to be recognised by the Michelin Guide. Dream Escape managed to find a slot in Joké's extremely busy schedule to learn more

Words | Karyn Noble



Adejoké 'Joké' Bakare's journey from cooking with her grandmother in Nigeria to studying microbiology in the UK to becoming a Michelin-starred chef is an inspiration to many. Her restaurant Chishuru in West London's Fitzrovia originally began life as a supper club and then as a three-month pop-up in Brixton Village in September 2020 after she won a local competition. UK food critic Jay Rayner extolled its virtues in a national broadsheet and it then became a permanent Brixton fixture until October 2022.

Now, located just moments away from Oxford Circus, the two-storey Chishuru is a cosy restaurant producing a modern twist on West African food in a popular part of London. In this exclusive *Dream Escape's* interview with Joké, we learn more about how she is dealing with the Michelin-star acclaim, as well as what you can expect from her food.

Joké, you have had a completely brilliant 2024.

Congratulations on your Michelin star at Chishuru. How busy are you? How much has life changed as a result of the award?

Thank you! I have been insanely busy and recruiting like mad, and happily am now just a week or two away from having a fully staffed restaurant that's able to cope with all our fantastic new demand. I'm not sure I've got a perspective on how life has changed yet, but what I can tell you for sure is I'm being invited to a LOT more things!

Let's backtrack to the days before you were a history-making chef. When did you first become interested in cooking?

My love of food started when I cooked with my grandmother. I was the eldest of my siblings and as such was expected to cook for my dad, but I learned from her. I experimented on my dad too – I can still remember the dreadful pancakes I made him, the poor man.



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You initially moved from Nigeria to the UK to study microbiology. Have these studies influenced what you do with food?

Honestly, I struggle to see the connection but perhaps you could say my studies set me up for research. I own hundreds of cookbooks now from all sorts of different world cuisines. The food of my heritage isn't documented in the same way as, say, French or Italian cooking and so I have to draw inspiration from other cuisines as much as possible.

Tell us about Chishuru. It started in Brixton, but how did you come to choose the space in Great Titchfield St where you are now?

We knew we needed a bigger space, and a space that that I could put my stamp on, design-wise. And we had already happily attracted some international interest in the restaurant, particularly from the US, so we knew we needed to be in a central location that would be convenient for visitors. And we wanted to be somewhere near where businesses are based so we'd have a good lunchtime trade – I love eating out in Hackney but it's impossible to get five days of lunchtime trade there, which in turn dictates the kind of hours you are asking staff to work. Recruitment in hospitality is harder than it's ever been.

What is the most common misconception about West African food. What do you recommend that everyone try at Chishuru if they're not used to challenging their palates?

Generally, I don't find that customers have misconceptions – many of them don't have any conceptions at all! It's very lovely to introduce people to spices and flavours and combinations that they've never tried before. We're not here to challenge or educate, we're here to serve food that is enjoyable first and foremost.

“Years ago, Michelin recognised you could get great food in restaurants that don’t have linen tablecloths or someone to pour your water for you...”

Can you describe a typical day at work for you?

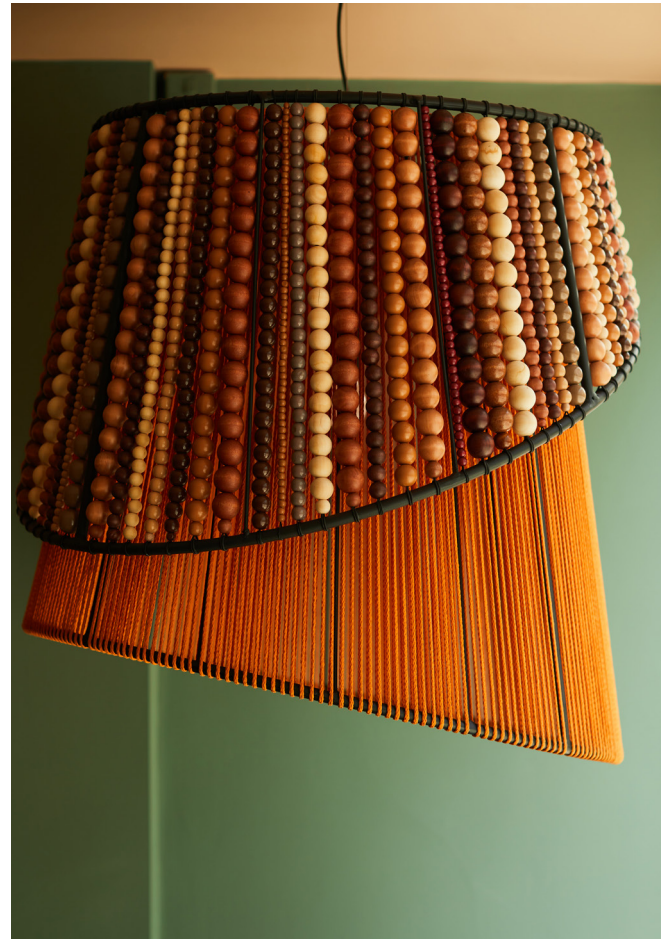
I’m in at 8 or 8.30am and will make a start on our sauce bases. Moruf our head kitchen porter and I will unpack the morning’s deliveries and then as the chefs come in we’ll look at our prep list and decided on priorities for lunchtime service. I will start thinking about staff breakfast – today it was croissants with bacon and spicy frittata – and then not long after that start thinking about staff dinner.

It’s important to me that we eat well – many kitchens just serve awful leftovers or pasta pesto five times a week. I will have to crack the whip a bit for everyone to get ready for service: as we’re so busy, there never seems to be enough time in the day and we have to encourage the chefs to get set up (or ‘en place’ as we say). Lunchtime service is a team effort but at dinner I might be running the pass: watching every dish come out, correcting if necessary, and sending off waiters with the right plates to the right tables. We have multiple customers per day with different allergies so there’s often specific changes on every tray. At the end of dinner service we clean down and I’m out the door, reflecting on tomorrow’s day.

The Michelin Guide describes Chishuru as not just having ‘high-quality cooking’ but ‘a real neighbourhood feel’. This is something quite unusual for London’s West End. How do you do it?

My intention for Chishuru was always that it should feel homely, to have that kind of informal welcome. We actually added a line to our website to say ‘Chishuru is not a fine dining restaurant’ because since the Michelin star we’ve had a certain number of customers coming in with some funny ideas about what a Michelin-starred restaurant should look and feel like. Years ago, Michelin recognised you could get great food in restaurants that don’t have linen tablecloths or someone to pour your water for you or a besuited man with a golden grapes badge who tries to upsell you on the wine.

Can you relax? Do you have any time off coming up? If so, what do you like to do (and eat)?



Yes, it’s hard to relax and no I don’t have time off coming up. I love to eat out of course; just this weekend I went to the lovely new pop-up Tou London (from the Tata Eatery team) with my business partner Matt – we ate Iberico pork katsu sandwiches and croquettes and chips – and then we went to drink a bottle of Italian orange wine at Elliott’s in Borough Market.

You can have any famous people from history (alive or dead) dining at a table at Chishuru. Who do you choose and why?

It would be a table of four, including me. Firstly, I’d invite Bridget my maternal grandmother. She fled from Lagos to the countryside during the civil war and ran her own trading business; she was the toughest of the tough, but was killed in a bomb attack. I’d love to talk to her about strength and resilience. Secondly, I’d invite Bell Hooks, the pioneering American author who wrote one of my favourite books, *All About Love*. Finally, for some much-needed humour, I’d go back to one of the classic BBC sitcoms we grew up with in Nigeria and invite John Inman from *Are You Being Served?*.

Finally, what are your hopes for Chishuru for the future? Another Michelin star? Expansion? Another restaurant? A better work-life balance?

Restaurant management is about trying to be 1% better than you were yesterday, every single day. Right now, that’s the focus. Matt and I have talked about another restaurant but right now our focus is 100% on Chishuru. 🍷

