

PEARL of AFRICA

SPECIAL TRAVEL SECTION

THE CRAYFISH OF LAKE



Twelve chefs, working with different tourism lodges across Kigezi region, were tasked with preparing crayfish from the waters of Lake Bunyonyi

By Steven Odeke

Culinary tourism is one of the top trends in tourism circles globally. Food festivals and food culture competitions showcase a growing diversity in cuisines and preparation methods. Fauna and flora may still lead in attracting tourists here and probably everywhere else, but food tourism is catching up.

Uganda is one food basket that needs burrowing in deeply if one is interested in understanding Ugandans. But then, while we attempt to attract foreign tourists to our foods, many a Ugandan would be surprised to learn that something called the Louisiana red swamp crayfish is part of our cuisine. Sounds very exotic, right? Yes, we have crayfish in Lake Bunyonyi, located in Kabale in southwestern Uganda. Well, crayfish is not a staple on our menus, and perhaps that is why not many Ugandans have savoured it, but these edible fish are in our waters.

I had not tasted it or even heard such fish existed in our waters before I received an invitation from Gorilla Highlands Tours to attend a cooking competition at BirdNest Resort off Lake Bunyonyi shores recently. On seeing crayfish as one of the foods to be prepared, I embarked on a seven-hour energy-sapping road trip, alongside Uganda Tourism Board (UTB) officials, from Kampala to Kabale.

Crayfish strike a resemblance to lobsters. We were told these crustaceans were introduced in Lake Bunyonyi in the 1970s and it took locals a long time to eat them.

They initially served them as snacks to their dogs and chicken, before trying them.

The cooking competition, in its third edition, tasked 12 chefs, who work with different tourism lodges across Kigezi region, with preparing two-course meals for five people with fish in them. The organisers were aware that most chefs might fail to prepare crayfish and so they offered an alternative of fish fillet.

Miha Logar, the Gorilla Highlands project leader and event founder, said: "Every year we choose something for a challenge. This year we decided to go for crayfish since we were to be by Lake Bunyonyi. We did not want to make it too tough for the chefs; it would have been unfair to them to have crayfish alone because some people have not seen them before. That is why we added fillet. But it was crayfish that was the whole point and that is the specialty of Bunyonyi."

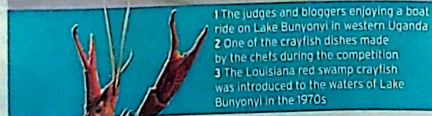
No chef really tinkered with preparing crayfish alone; perhaps they feared to lose to those who went with fillet fish. But the dishes with crayfish that were presented before the judges were yummy.

The chefs had to do one starter and one main dish, but one of the courses had to be vegetarian.

The vegetables provided included French beans, peas, onions, garlic (fresh and powdered), tomatoes, carrots, potatoes, sweet potatoes, green pepper, avocados, cauliflower, pumpkins, matooke, eggplants, spinach, lettuce and sweet corn.

The fruits included pineapples, apples, passion fruits, yellow bananas, mangoes and lemons. A host of spices included coconut powder, tarragon and lemon grass, and there

CULINARY DELIGHTS



- 1 The judges and bloggers enjoying a boat ride on Lake Bunyonyi in western Uganda
- 2 One of the crayfish dishes made by the chefs during the competition
- 3 The Louisiana red swamp crayfish was introduced to the waters of Lake Bunyonyi in the 1970s

was also white and red wine.

The tongue-wearing chefs, in different shifts and working solely, unleashed their culinary skills before the judges — Wolfgang Thome (leading travel blogger), Barrett Nash (Kigali-based foodie, founder of SafeMotos), Aline Kiberinka (Kigali-based food TV show host), Sylvia Kalembé (UTB) and last year's winner Levi Kato.

Buhoma Lodge's Allan Mukasa emerged winner of the silver hat for creatively experimenting with the recipes that pleased

BUNYONYI



<<CRAYFISH ARE CRUSTACEAN CREATURES WHICH WERE INTRODUCED INTO LAKE BUNYONYI IN THE 1970S>>



- 1 Buhoma Lodge's Allan Mukasa won the silver hat
- 2 Thome (centre) and other judges during the cooking competition

the judges' sensory palates. He created his own vegetarian dish for a starter of crème vegetables with sweet potato frosting. He made fish koftas with purple cabbage potato mash and coconut sauce. It was his first time to prepare purple cabbage potato mash and this got him thumbs up from the judges.

"I wanted to make something creative that would get someone wondering what I am trying to make. People are used to mashed potatoes of the same colour, but I tried to bind them with a touch of purple cabbage which gave it that purple colour and a nice taste. I am happy my dish won

the day," Mukasa said. UTB's Kalembé was impressed with the chefs' culinary expertise. "This is my third time as judge of the competition and I must say this year's was a little tougher, because there was no meat. But the chefs made it seem simpler and gave us great dishes. Such competitions help push our different forms of tourism, such as our cuisines," Kalembé said. Indeed, through foods, visitors can learn a lot about a country's climate, people's lifestyle and local cultures such as traditional cooking styles. This is why culinary tourism has taken the world by storm.