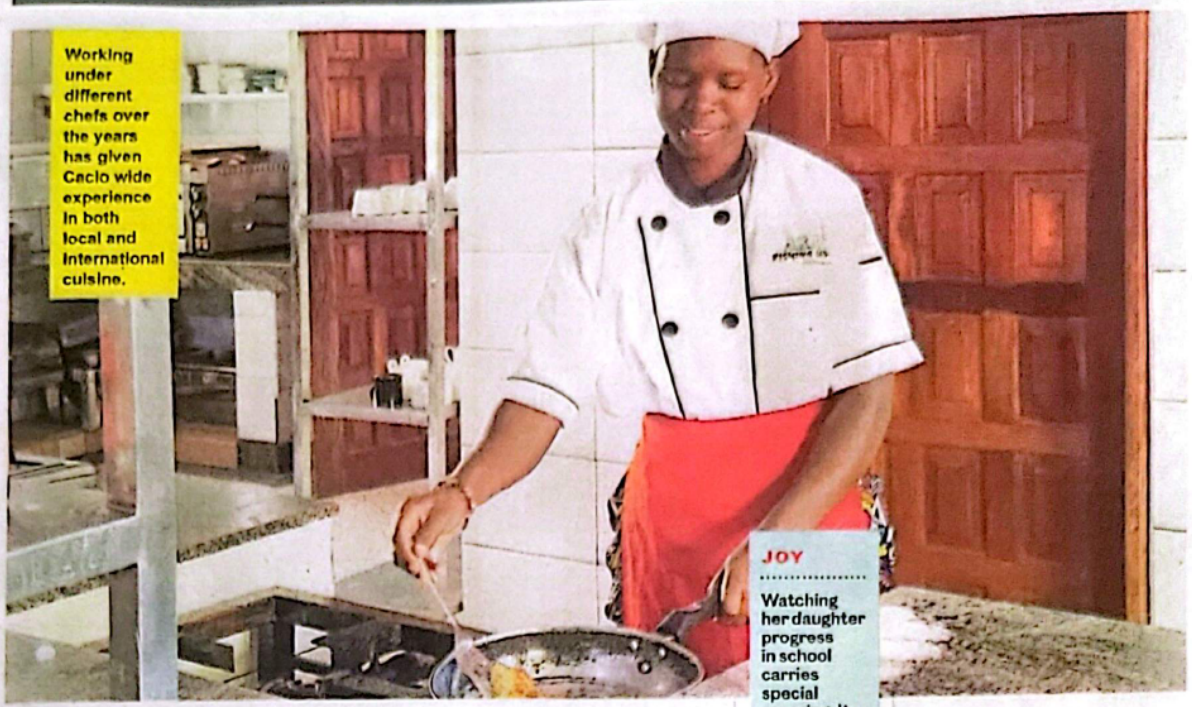


Working under different chefs over the years has given Cacio wide experience in both local and international cuisine.

JOY

Watching her daughter progress in school carries special meaning. It represents continuity and a second chance for the next generation. In Moyo, early marriage, teenage pregnancy and poverty continue to push many girls out of classrooms.

PHOTOS/ TREVOR LUTALO.

From Primary Six dropout to a career in hospitality

Her journey was not defined by sudden leaps, but by the slow, deliberate acquisition of skills, learning from every chef she worked under, improving her language bite by bite, and navigating the dual demands of career and motherhood without drama, only persistence.

BY TREVOR LUTALO

Before the roosters crow at 4am in Moyo District, while most homes are still asleep, 35-year-old Scovia Cacio is already awake. By sunrise, she has finished her household chores, prepared her three children for school, and readied herself for work. She drops off her youngest child, sees the older two off, and heads to Penthouse Inn in Moyo, not as a maid, as she once was, but as a certified cook and assistant chef. Her journey to the hotel kitchen began almost two decades ago.

A childhood cut short

Cacio grew up in Oparugo Village where she attended Moyo Town Council Primary School. But her education ended in Primary Six after her father died.

"When I lost my father, there was no one to support me at school," she recalls.

At 15, while her peers prepared for Primary Leaving Examinations, she entered domestic work to survive. She joined the home of Dr Jimmy Opigo in Moyo as a housemaid.

"I went there because life was hard," she says. "I did not know what would happen next."

As a child, she had promised her father she would become an accountant, but that dream faded when school ended abruptly.

Learning through work

Cacio proved disciplined and eager to learn. After working for some time in Moyo, she briefly served the family in Kampala before returning north. A few years later, she transitioned from domestic service to the family's hospitality business.

That move changed the direction of her life.

She began in junior kitchen roles, learning through observation and repetition. Over the years, she worked under seven different chefs.

"Every chef who came, I learnt something," she says. "When one left, another came. I worked with all of them."

She first mastered local dishes such as *malakwang*, simsim paste and smoked fish. Gradually, she expanded her skills to Indian cuisine, Chinese stir-fries and pizza. Serving travellers from different countries exposed her to new tastes and cultures. The kitchen became her classroom, working with international guests also strengthened her confidence in English.

"You start learning English from school. But when you are around people who speak it every day, you improve," she says.

Today, she comfortably takes orders, welcomes visitors and communicates with guests from different backgrounds, something she once doubted she could do.

The certificate that mattered

Despite years of experience, Cacio wanted formal recognition of her skills.

"My target was at least I should have a certificate," she says.

With support from her employers, she enrolled for a certificate course in Catering and Bakery, which she completed about three years ago.

For someone who left school in Primary Six, graduating carried deep personal meaning. It affirmed that her education had not ended at 12. The qualification formalised nearly two decades of hands-on training and strengthened her position in the kitchen.

"I never knew it would happen like this," she says.

Holding her ground

Penthouse Inn employs a small team, and Cacio is the only woman in the kitchen.

"Being a lady alone in the kitchen, everything looks at you," she says with a small laugh.

Professional kitchens demand stamina, precision and long hours. In a male-dominated space, she has relied on consistency and hard work.

"You must put in a lot of effort. If you are lazy, you cannot work long," she says. Her 18 years at the same hotel reflect both personal resilience and employer stability. She describes her employers not as bosses, but as family.

"I consider them as my parents. I came here as a lost child trying to earn a living and they have watched me grow into a mature woman capable of standing on her own two feet."

Through marriage and motherhood, she remained employed. The company supported her training and retained her through different stages of life, a continuity that has provided rare economic stability.

Motherhood as motivation

Cacio enjoys seeing her three children (two boys and a girl) grow and wants them to thrive. Her firstborn is in Senior One, the second in Primary Four, and the youngest in baby class.

Her routine remains steady; up at 4am, children prepared, youngest dropped at school, work at the hotel, then collecting him from her aunt's home near her workplace before returning home.

"This work is really helping me," she says. "I am able to pay school fees and take care of them."

Having lost her own education to hardship, she is determined that her children stay in school.

"Sometimes it depends on your family. Sometimes it is early pregnancy. Sometimes hardship," she says.

Redefining success

As a young girl in Uganda, Cacio believed success had a single definition: a university degree and an accountant's title.

Decades later, she has not achieved that childhood dream, and feels little regret.

Instead, she has built a different kind of prosperity; nearly two decades of continuous employment, a professional certificate, fluency in English and the ability to support her family through her own labor.

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