



FLAVOUR OF THE NOW



As Georgiana Viou becomes the latest black chef to earn a Michelin star, we speak to the self-taught mother-of-three about Europe's appetite for African fine dining

Words **Madévi Dailly** Photography **Maki Manoukian**

EARLIER THIS SPRING, somewhere in Strasbourg, France's best and brightest culinary talents gathered for the annual Michelin Guide awards ceremony. Chef Georgiana Viou, hair wrapped in resplendent red cloth – red like Rouge, the name of her restaurant in Nîmes – was last to climb to the stage. She wiped tears from her eyes, took a few dance steps and raised her hands to the sky in praise. Behind her, her cohort of mostly white, mostly male peers stood shoulder to shoulder in their crisp new Michelin jackets – the latest members of a notoriously selective club.

The Michelin star, says Georgiana, came as a “total surprise”. She didn't see it coming: a self-taught, Benin-born, 45-year-old mother-of-three, recognised for her culinary game by the industry's most straight-laced institution. But African fine dining is now firmly on the map. Europe – that self-proclaimed arbiter of good taste – has been cottoning on to the depth and variety of African flavours for a while. From Brussels to Cologne, a new generation of chefs has found its feet, drawing inspiration from their diasporic experience.



And suddenly, pan-African and Afro-fusion are the buzzwords du jour.

In London, Nigerian-born Joké Bakare grew critic-lauded Chishuru from supper clubs to a bijou Brixton locale, and is now crowdfunding for a central Soho restaurant. At two-star Ikoyi, chef Jeremy Chan's kitchen puts a playful spin on British produce with sub-Saharan spices. Home to diverse African communities, Paris has unsurprisingly become another hotspot for experimentation. Take the hipster café-deli BMK, where the Malian Djikine brothers, Abdoulaye and Fousseyni, are drawing in crowds with their tasty Bamako brunches (think citrusy beignets, moringa bread and bissap-poached eggs). Or Thierry Marx-trained TV chef and all-round wunderkind Mory Sacko, who earned his first Michelin star in 2020 just two months after opening MoSuke – a culinary lab of sorts for his Malian, Japanese and French influences – and is now at the helm of Louis Vuitton's much hyped first restaurant in St Tropez.

“What I like about that boy,” says Viou, “is his modesty. He's still doing things he enjoys and he tries

Above:
Pioneering chef
Georgiana Viou
Right: Red mullet
stuffed with
blood sausage
at Rouge



**AFRICAN CULTURE GOT
PEOPLE TALKING, NOW IT'S
HAPPENING WITH FOOD**

PHOTOS KENNY GERME



Top left: Mecurial chef Mory Sacko
Above: One of Sacko's stunning creations

to do them as well as he can, while pleasing himself and his public, too. But it's not easy every day."

Unlike Sacko, Viou found success at a later stage of life. She flippantly describes her trajectory as a succession of failures: having moved to France at 21 to pursue translation studies at the Sorbonne, she found herself sidetracked by a pregnancy at a young age. She turned to cooking as a necessity, with the small dream of opening an "edgy" salad bar in her new home of Marseille one day. Twelve years, two more children, a failed marriage, failed business partnerships, MasterChef final and Covid-curtailed plans later, she's finally found a home for her indomitable talent at Rouge.

"People eat what they know how to eat. So for a long time my food was just Mediterranean," she

says. "I told myself: if you're still going 10 years from now, maybe you can allow yourself to use ingredients from elsewhere."

These days, dinner at Rouge starts with focaccia made with palm oil from sustainable producers the chef is keen to support. "I use it like hazelnut or pistachio oil: to cook with, as seasoning, or even in meringue," Viou explains. "Sometimes I use it for its colour, sometimes for its taste."

The bread is served with dja, a typically Beninese tomato condiment flavoured with dried shrimp, ginger and onions. The recipe – Viou's mother's – remains untouched, though the chef isn't precious about her use of African ingredients. "People are disappointed when they don't get to taste something different. So now I always include at least one dish

AFRICAN FUSION AT AFFORDABLE PRICES

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In London: **Chuku's**

The sister and brother duo behind Chuku's have created the world's first Nigerian tapas restaurant.
chukuslondon.co.uk



In Paris: **Table Metis**

This neighbourhood bistro offers colourful plates of authentic yet innovative pan-African cuisine.
tablemetis.com



In Brussels: **Café Béguin**

At this friendly, casual café expect wholesome and flavourful fusion food and prepare for a spicy punch.
cafebeguine.be

FOOD PIONEERS

with something from over there.” Like red mullet stuffed with blood sausage, mint and afitin, a condiment made from fermented néré seeds, or a lobster tartare dressed with gombo (okra). The chef uses traditional techniques too, salting, preserving and charring to evoke a distant taste of home.

Is African fine dining finally trending? “I think these things come in cycles,” says Viou. “There was a whole craze for Asia. Then it was South America. And today, it’s Africa. It started with the arts, with music, with fashion. African culture got people talking, and now it’s happening with food, either with chefs who focus on the cuisine of a particular country, or with people like me or Mory Sacko.”

Another such chef is Congo-born Dieuveil Malonga, who honed his craft in Germany’s Michelin-star kitchens. From his base in Rwanda, the young entrepreneur (he made the *Forbes* 30 under 30 list in 2018) has travelled extensively to gather inspiration – and ingredients – for his restaurant



Above: Dieuveil Malonga on his farm in Musanze
Left: A dish served up Meza Malonga

Meza Malonga, a stalwart of Kigali’s buzzy dining scene. “I started it as a project to train young people who are passionate about cooking, but don’t have the means to go to culinary school,” he says. “We’re only open four days a week, and we depend entirely on our farm.”

That’s seven hectares of fertile soil in the volcanic foothills of Musanze, two hours away, producing much of what ends up on his Michelin-worthy tasting menus: fish from the nearby lake, quails and guinea fowls, vanilla, coffee and what he reverently calls a “magnificent” honey. It’s also where he’s opening his next venture, a farm-to-table restaurant catering to the well-heeled clientele of the local luxury resorts, and, following in the footsteps of his inspiration Alain Ducasse, a cookery school to train the next generation of African chefs. He dreams of a five further schools in Cameroon, the Ivory Coast, and perhaps his hometown of Brazzaville.

As for Georgiana Viou, she’d rather not make plans. She has vague thoughts of a book project to collect grandmothers’ recipes, back home. Like everything else in her life, it will happen serendipitously, when it does. She confides, laughing, that her mother tells her she is now a legend, “that when I die I will be recognised as the first Beninese woman to win a Michelin star”. In the meantime, you’ll find her cooking up a storm behind the stoves at Rouge, humming the chorus from her favourite Nigerian hit, *Bandana*: ‘Dem never see me comin’ / Hmm hmmm see me comin’.



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**WE’RE OPEN FOUR DAYS
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ENTIRELY ON OUR FARM**