



Essie Bartels walks at the Makola market in Accra. — AFP photos



Essie Bartels buys spices from her seller Aisha Ibrahim.

# 'OUR FOOD, OUR STORIES': BRINGING WEST AFRICAN CUISINE TO THE WORLD

*'We will tell our story better than anyone else can'*

It took a move to the United States from Ghana to convince food entrepreneur Essie Bartels that the world deserved to know more about west African cuisine. "You would always end up having to put on tons of stuff-hot sauce, lots of salt, pepper. Nothing was well-seasoned," Bartels said about her American food experience. "It was literally whiter than white, there was no dry fish, no palm oil, no chillies." Bartels saw a gap in the market and dedicated herself to creating sauces and spice blends inspired by her childhood in Ghana's



Vendor Aisha Ibrahim shows spices in her hand, at the Makola market.



Various spices are displayed at the Makola market.

capital, Accra, through her company Essie Spice. She remembers the flavors of her mother's kitchen, where she helped cook mouth-watering banku, a filling doughy dish made of

fermented corn, and kontomire stew, a savory offering featuring leafy greens sauteed in palm oil.

But Bartels is far from being a purist. The effervescent 31-year-old, who now lives in Englewood, New Jersey, works to take the flavors from her past and reinvent them with ingredients from around the world. The result is a new west African taste—a mango chili sauce is heightened by Jamaican scotch bonnet peppers, while a dry rub for meat has an addictive aroma of rich west African peanuts. It's clear that Bartels sees food as more than just a business—it's a way to promote and claim her heritage. "Our voices as Africans aren't heard as much, we have all this history and culture, but no one is talking about it," she told AFP. "Then someone from the West takes these ideas and profits off them, telling our stories. What I want to do is help Africans tell our story ourselves. "We under-

stand the story, we know where it's coming from, so we will tell our story better than anyone else can."

## Peppers and cloves

On a humid, sunny day in January, Bartels was back in Accra to talk with her spice supplier and hunt for new flavors. Wearing a tan geometric necklace by leading Ghanaian designer Christie Brown, Bartels picked up a handful of pungent dried black cloves in a bustling market in central Accra. Her long pink skirt brushed the burlap sacks filled with crimson red peppers, knobs of ginger and alligator pepper—a spice used in herbal remedies as well as local stews. Markets like these are the antidote to the bland food Bartels said she discovered when she moved to the other side of the Atlantic Ocean almost a decade ago.

Her condiments are now being sold in some high-end US supermarkets and she attributes the success of

the brand to a willingness to deviate from tradition and modern packaging, unlike her competitors. "When you're making something to international standards it has to appeal to everyone," said Bartels, whose main market is in the US but also sells her products in Canada and Ghana. "It's not diluting it but I'm presenting west African food in a way that attracts not just west Africans but everyone else."

Ghana's restaurant scene is dominated by informal food stands and simple restaurants. But BMI Research, a London-based market analysis firm, predicts there will be massive growth in the sector with an increase in businesses offering "innovative" dining experiences. "Sustained economic expansion and rising household incomes gave rise to the country's middle class with increasingly sophisticated tastes and diversified diets," BMI Research said in a 2016 report. "The industry is still at early stages of development, which leaves potential investors with a lot of room for growth and innovation."

## 'Magic happens'

The love of spice is a national trait, explained Ghanaian chef Selassie Atadika, who works at Midunu, a luxury catering service based in Accra that aims to celebrate Africa's culinary heritage. Like Bartels, Atadika says she too spends hours scouring the markets to find "big bold flavors" that are invaluable to both chefs and cooks at home. "They serve as a foundation to building flavors in the Ghanaian kitchen and when combined with our sometimes humble ingredients, magic happens," she added.

Ramping up production and broadening her repertoire of African spices is Bartel's next call of duty. Originally from Ghana's south, she says the north of the country is an unexplored frontier. "This is one of the things I'm trying to do, find all the hidden gems," she said. "This is an introduction to what could be." — AFP



Essie Bartels (left) walks with her mother Fausti at the Makola market in Accra.