

# Condé Nast Traveler

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## spring awakening

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From left: Chef Dieuveil Malonga pictured inside his restaurant Meza Malonga; chef Malonga's Nile perch, avocado purée, and edible wildflowers



## WHAT'S COOKING IN KIGALI

No longer just the gateway for gorilla trekkers, Rwanda's capital is fast becoming a hub of pan-African and global flavors

farm in Musanze, with a spice museum, a food lab, and a school in addition to a restaurant. "There's a food revolution happening in Rwanda," he says.

This scene is fueled in part by the moneyed travelers who pass through on their way to the country's pricey lodges for gorilla trekking but also by local products and inventive chefs. Rwanda's fertile volcanic soils burst with a staggering diversity of plants: The country may account for less than one percent of Africa's landmass, but it is home to 15 percent of the continent's plant species. This bounty—along with Rwanda's relative safety and stability—is luring in a host of chefs and entrepreneurs from across the world.

At Kōzo, the irreverent Thai Dutch chef Sakorn Somboon whips up an eight-course chef's counter experience with flavors of Asia and Africa amid endless laughs and fashion statements. As he serves tilapia with cassava-corn banku and Tanzanian brochette in a Vietnamese summer roll, he models a Chinese hanfu he designed with Rwandan kitenge, Moroccan linen, and Masai art. "I'm bringing flavors of Southeast Asia mixed with flavors of Africa mixed with techniques from around the world," →

**THE MENU AT** Meza Malonga, a chic fine-dining spot in the Rwandan capital of Kigali, doubles as a geography syllabus. "The philosophy is about promoting African ingredients," says chef Dieuveil Malonga as he presents a jar of Ivorian button mushrooms alongside a hibiscus-and-beetroot-dusted beef tartare. A Burundian tree-tomato sorbet, obscured under cascades of dry ice, has a whiff of Egyptian black lemon. "Today we are receiving people from different places around the globe to learn and discover the African flavor," he says. By the end of nine courses, the palate has mapped the continent.

Born in Congo and raised in Germany and France, Malonga journeyed through 46 of Africa's 54 countries on research trips before opening Meza Malonga in Kigali in 2020. In May he'll open his second location, two hours away on a



Clockwise from left: Braised lamb and fufu mash at Kôzo; inside Kigali's Nyurah; chef Malonga at Musanze, the site of his next project

he says, referencing his stints in Thailand, Holland, London, and Ghana.

In the tony Kimihurura neighborhood, Kevin Mbundu is part of an effort to reimagine coffee, Rwanda's third-largest export: His hip café, Kivu Noir, is at the forefront of Kigali's burgeoning homegrown café scene, and last October he added a new restaurant and cocktail bar, Ruä, serving steak drizzled in a coffee-wine sauce and drinks made with local sage and green chiles. "When I started this, I didn't want to open a restaurant," he says. "I was more into curating something that someone would come to and say, 'I've experienced Rwanda.'"

Beyond its innovative chefs, Kigali is establishing the foundations for a thriving culinary scene. When Nicole Bamukunde moved back home after studying at the French hospitality management school Vatel, she saw a way to fill a gap in quality hospitality education by bringing an outpost of Vatel to Kigali. She followed it up in 2020 with Nyurah, a serene restaurant on the mezzanine of a nondescript office building in Kigali, a space to train students in every part of the restaurant business, from cooking to finance and marketing.

"Most of them are like, 'When I graduate, I will open an Italian restaurant,'" Bamukunde says. "Sure, you can be good with an Italian restaurant, but if you open a Rwandan restaurant inspired by Italian techniques, using what we have regionally, there you



could excel. So we push them to excel." At Nyurah, service is attentive and polished; the design is rooted in African aesthetics, with tables from Kenya and wall hangings from Rwanda. Diners might start with an amuse-bouche of sambaza, a petite tower of fried sardines from Rwanda's Lake Kivu, followed by a silken pepper-crusted Madagascar sirloin with pâte jaune and sukuma wiki fondue. Plantain ice cream doused in espresso is a worthy ending. It is the type of experience that would justify adding Kigali to the list of places travelers go specifically to eat, like Oaxaca, Copenhagen, San Sebastián, and more. Time will tell, but it seems to be well on its way. SARAH KHAN