



Whatz Cooking

Inspiring Tasty, Healthy and Sustainable cooking

‘Why is it that in rural areas, where trees abound with avocados, bananas, and guavas, we don’t see more recipes or traditions involving blending these fruits with other ingredients, or using methods like frying, baking, or fermenting?’

Chef Cola, pioneering plant based female Zimbabwean chef

This initiative stems from a cooking tour in Masvingo province in July 2024, featuring Chef Cola and other chefs, where we interacted with communities, leaders, academia and NGOs. The below is based on that trip and the Whatz Cooking team’s experience and knowledge.

The aim of the initiative: To enrich everyday cooking in particularly vulnerable communities by inspiring and exploring cooking using locally available, affordable, and drought-resistant ingredients to create healthy, sustainable, and delicious meals.

Relevance: cooking and food knowledge is important for multiple reasons. With skills and knowledge you increase your potential to cook better and healthier, better use and take care of available foods, prepare yourself and adapt to lean seasons. A skill set that can help parents to prevent undernourishment among children, help prevent other nutrition related deceases and prolong lives. In other terms, health, nutrition, food security and safety, climate adaptation can be improved with investments in cooking and food knowledge.

More cooking and food knowledge can respond to some of the food related challenges in Zimbabwe today and in the future. For example, everyday cooking in Zimbabwe is in many cases limited in diversity and nutrition. It is prevalent to eat Sadza (a maize based polenta or porridge) everyday and sometimes several times a day, in large quantities. Sadza is filling, but not rich in nutrients and is very glucoses rich that do impact health. Also, maize is a crop that is less drought resistant than alternatives. Although most households have a predominantly plant-based diet and limited consumption of animal proteins, greens tend to be overcooked, with excessive use of oil, and food is prepared over open fires in enclosed spaces contribution to respiratory challenges. As incomes rise, dietary choices in particularly in urban areas tend to shift towards highly processed foods and higher degree of meat consumption.

In Zimbabwe, high levels of stunting among children under five (23%, UNICEF) coexist with rising diet-related obesity. While malnutrition presents itself in various forms, a common challenge is providing a sufficient and balanced diet prepared in a healthy manner.

Food insecurity is a recurring problem and risks to worsen with accelerating climate crises. For example, white maize, commonly used for Sadza, often suffers during dry spells. As a result, the government and other stakeholders are promoting the cultivation of more drought-resistant and traditional grains, such as sorghum and rapoko. However, these grains are generally less popular due to taste and affordability concerns.

Approach: Whatz Cooking seeks to address these challenges through food and cooking education, with a focus on community interaction. It complements supply-side initiatives, such as food production and crop promotion, by influencing, stimulating curiosity, and educating the demand side—everyday cooks and professional chefs. Whatz Cooking adopts a community-based approach, identifying what is available, affordable, and how it is being used, then collaboratively creating new or adapting traditional dishes.

For example, lemons are abundant in Bikita district but often go unused and left to rot. We made simple lemonade, marmalade, and incorporated lemon juice into traditional dishes. Other examples include using less oil, cooking outdoors, baking bread on the stove, and mixing sorghum flour with regular flour when baking.

A key aspiration of Whatz Cooking is to inspire everyday cooking by offering basic tips and tricks, encouraging them to explore, seek knowledge and ideas, share recipes with neighbours, and find joy in cooking—both men and women alike.

To our knowledge, this is an innovative initiative in Zimbabwe, addressing nutrition, food security, and climate change adaptation. It is an initiative complementing other traditional food safety and security initiatives.

How: Recognising that cooking and food knowledge, even among professional chefs, have room for infusion, Whatz Cooking approach is to make connections with overseas chefs to exchange ideas and experiences. We are working on exploring systematic collaborations that can benefit the gastronomic arena in Zimbabwe. This is complemented with nutritional, agricultural, and health experts to ground the culinary discoveries in science. With capacity enhancement, also in the area of communications and pedagogics, the intention is to have a group of influencers and trainers that will benefit the evolution of everyday cooking in communities.

At the community level we are facilitating establishments of community cooking clubs, generally based on existing groups connected to for example gardening. Here are a range of activities that we have not yet all tried including cooking competitions, food fairs, recipe sharing groups, social cooking and food hacks. It is about creating a fun motivating setting that encouraging curiosity in knowledge, testing and learning.

In parallel, we continue with online cooking demonstrations, disseminate knowledge, and exploring technological solutions for recipe sharing in rural settings. A social media campaign is being launched beginning of 2025 to garner interest and attention to Whatz Cooking internationally. Further down the lane, we like to respond to the ask for learning food

preservation techniques, nutrition courses for individuals with special needs, and the construction of efficient and healthy stoves.

We anticipate partnerships and collaborations with the Zimbabwe Chef's Association, academic institutions, relevant NGOs, food companies, and media outlets to reach a broad audience.

Where: Our current presence and strong community network are based in Masvingo province, but there are no geographical limitations, including the possibility of expanding to neighbouring countries.

Who we target: While our ultimate focus is on vulnerable communities in rural and urban areas, we realise change is achieved through different groups in society who influence norms and perspectives. Particularly working with professional chefs are key for the changes we aspire to attain.

Who we are: This initiative is part of Hope Tariro, founded in 2003 in Masvingo province, which has a strong community connection and supports vulnerable households, including the promotion of organic farming and gardening. The project management is led by Fezile Ncube, Manager and founder of Hope Tariro since 20023, with a Swede with 20 years of experience in UN and NGO startups, supported by a senior nutrition lecturer at Masvingo University.

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