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Egusi/Egwusi: *The West African Soup That Igbo People's Version Became Nigeria's National Cuisine*

By Idenze Ezeme

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EGUSI/EGWUSI

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Across West and Central Africa, egusi forms the heart of many cherished traditional dishes. Egusi, also known as egwusi in many Igbo dialects (some call it egwushi), is a beloved soup made from ground melon seeds rich in protein and oil. It is known to older Igbo people as “ofe énnì” or “ofe éllì,” depending on the dialect. Across the region, various ethnic groups have their unique interpretations of this hearty dish. Yet, it is the Igbo people's version that has come to symbolise Nigerian egusi on the global stage, thanks to its richness, sweetness, and aesthetically pleasing look. When non-Nigerians today speak of “Nigerian egusi soup,” they are almost always referring to the Igbo version, a legacy of taste, history, and cultural significance.

01

The Igbo Egwusi: Rich, Green, and Hearty

In Nigeria, nearly every major ethnic group prepares egusi soup, but the differences are clear. The Igbo style is rich, thick, and deeply flavoured, loaded with leafy vegetables like “ugu” (Nigerian fluted pumpkin leaves), waterleaf, or onugbu (bitter leaf). Crayfish and native spices like ogiri (fermented locust bean) are often added to deepen the flavour. When “Nigerian egusi” is mentioned

internationally or shown in cookbooks, it is almost always the Igbo version of the soup that is represented, a testament to its popularity and wide acceptance.

The defining features of Igbo egwusi soup are its thick, hearty consistency and its vibrant green appearance, thanks to the addition of vegetables towards the final stage of cooking. It is a dish that symbolises hospitality and is often served at weddings, festivals, and important ceremonies. Because of its visual appeal and rich taste, the Igbo version of egwusi gradually became what Nigerians abroad and international food writers recognise as “Nigerian egusi soup”.

02

Other Nigerian Variations

While egusi soup is widespread among Nigeria’s many ethnic groups, the styles vary significantly. Among the Yoruba, one major variation is Ijebu egusi, which is significantly different from the others. Ijebu egusi is usually prepared without leafy vegetables, resulting in a lighter, more broth-like soup. It often relies on a tangy base created by blending tomatoes, peppers, and onions, resulting in a sharp, almost stew-like taste.



Ijebu Egusi. Credit: Sisi Jemimah

Another is Edo Egusi soup. Among the Edo people of southern Nigeria, Egusi soup is also a cherished dish, but it is prepared with distinctive techniques and ingredients.



Credit: Edo Egusi. by Kitchenbutterfly.com

There's also an Itsekiri version of egusi called Obe Eyin Ikpogiri (Banga Egusi). This delicious hybrid is a unique fusion of two traditional soups: Banga (palm nut soup) and Egusi.

Despite the diversity of styles, the vegetable-rich, thick Igbo version dominates restaurant menus, cookbooks, and online food blogs under the banner of "Nigerian egusi." This dominance reflects not only the dish's popularity but also the significant influence of Igbo cuisine in shaping global perceptions of Nigerian food.

03

Egusi Beyond Nigeria: Cameroon, Benin, and Congo

Egusi is not confined to Nigeria; it is beloved across much of West and

Central Africa. In Cameroon, egusi appears in several forms, the most famous being egusi pudding, also known as mboh egusi. Rather than a soup, Cameroonians mix ground egusi seeds with spices and steam them into a firm pudding, often served with a light sauce. This preparation highlights egusi's versatility, though it differs entirely from the soup-based styles in Nigeria.



Cameroon mboh by kengskitchen.com



Cameroon mboh by kengskitchen.com

In the Benin Republic, the Fon and Yoruba communities also prepare egusi soups, which are often much thinner and spicier than the Nigerian Igbo version. They are typically enjoyed with *pâte* (a dense maize dish) or pounded yam.

Moving into Congo (both the Republic of Congo and the Democratic Republic of Congo), egusi (known there as pistache) forms the base for *supa de pistache*. In Congolese kitchens, the ground seeds are cooked into a smooth sauce and eaten with cassava fufu or plantains. The Congolese method tends to be less spicy, with a more oily and buttery finish.



Credit: Congolese Pistachio Sauce by CUISINE AFRICAINE AVEC PULCHERIE YouTube

04

Why the Igbo Version Became the Global Face

Several reasons explain why the Igbo egwusi soup became the iconic Nigerian style.

- **Migration patterns:** A large number of early Nigerian migrants to the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe were from the Igbo region, especially after the Biafran War. They brought their food traditions with them.
- **Visual appeal:** The thick, colourful presentation of Igbo egwusi, rich with meats and green vegetables, photographs well and visually symbolises “African abundance”, making it popular among bloggers, cookbook writers, and restaurateurs.
- **Versatility and flavour depth:** The Igbo method, which involves the complex layering of proteins, vegetables, and spices, offers a fuller, more luxurious eating experience that appeals to a wide audience.

Today, whether in a Lagos restaurant, a London pop-up kitchen, or a New York cookbook, when egusi soup is presented to the world as a Nigerian dish, it is overwhelmingly the Igbo version, which is a triumph of culinary culture.

05

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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