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Etche Festival of Food, Art and Cultural Exhibition: *A Flavourful Celebration of Igbo Heritage*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Okonko masquerade display in the 2024 Etche Food, Arts and Cultural exhibition.

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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ETCHE FESTIVAL OF FOOD, ART AND CULTURAL EXHIBITION

Etche Festival of Food, Art and Cultural Exhibition: A Flavourful Celebration of Igbo Heritage

By Chuka Odike · Cultural Heritage · Ozikoro.com

Imagine the bustling town of Igbo-Etche or Ulakwo in Rivers State, Nigeria, coming alive with the tantalizing aroma of local dishes, the vibrant strokes of art, and the rhythmic pulse of cultural performances under the warm December sun. This is the Etche Festival of Food, Art and Cultural Exhibition, a dynamic event that transforms Etche into a vibrant hub of tradition, creativity, and community pride. Picture food stalls brimming with yam pepper soup, art galleries showcasing local talent, and cultural displays drawing crowds—held annually on the first Sunday of December, this festival is a flavourful celebration of Rivers State’s rich heritage. It’s a time when Etche shines, welcoming locals, diaspora, and tourists to experience a unique blend of culinary arts, visual creativity, and cultural unity.



Ndi Etche on their colourful display at the 10th Etche Festival of Food, Arts, and Cultural Exhibition 2024.

01

A Tradition Born from Community and Innovation

The Etche Festival of Food, Art and Cultural Exhibition emerged as a modern initiative to celebrate the cultural and economic vitality of Etche, an Igbo-speaking community in Etche Local Government Area. Launched with its inaugural event on December 1, 2024, it was spearheaded by community leaders and supported by figures like former President Goodluck Jonathan, who attended to honor the 10th anniversary of Eze Ken O. Nwala's coronation as the Onye Ishi Agwuru III of Ulakwo-Umuselem. While not rooted in ancient tradition like some Igbo festivals, it draws inspiration from Etche's agricultural legacy and its reputation as the "food basket" of Rivers State, a title Jonathan highlighted during the event.



The Eze of Ulakwo, HRH Eze Dr. Ken O. Nwala, Ugo 1 of Etcheland

The festival's focus on food, art, and culture reflects a contemporary effort to showcase Etche's diverse offerings—yam, cassava, and fish dishes—while promoting local artisans and preserving cultural identity. Held annually on the first Sunday of December, it coincides with the dry season, a time of harvest reflection, and aligns with the Christmas season to attract a broader audience. This innovative approach blends indigenous pride with modern tourism goals, though its short history invites scrutiny about its long-term cultural depth versus its economic motivations.

02

Preparing for a Cultural Feast

Preparation begins in late November. Families and local vendors gather ingredients—yams, cassava, fish, and spices—to create dishes like yam pepper soup and plantain porridge, while artists prepare paintings, sculptures, and crafts reflecting Etche's history. The community, guided by the traditional council and local government,

organizes the event at Nihi Community, ensuring a mix of food stalls, art exhibitions, and cultural performances. Workshops on farming techniques and food preservation, supported by initiatives like the Shell Petroleum Development Company's cassava mill training, add an educational layer.



The honourable councilor of the good people of Ulakwo ward13, a leader per excellence Hon. Kingsley Iheanyichukwu walked along his equals, superiors and subordinates to grace the occasion of the 10th anniversary / First Etche festival of food art and cultural exhibition as organized by Umuselem council of chiefs under the leadership of HRH, King Dr Ken O. Nwala JP (Onye Ishi Agwuru Umuselem Clan)

The days before build excitement with rehearsals and community clean-ups, welcoming indigenes returning from Port Harcourt, Lagos, or abroad. By early December, Etche is alive—streets decorated, venues set, and hearts ready for a day of celebration that blends tradition with innovation.

03

A Day of Food, Art, and Culture

The festival unfolds on the first Sunday of December, starting with an

opening ceremony where community leaders, including the Eze and Governor Siminalayi Fubara, offer prayers and speeches. The 2024 event saw Jonathan commend Fubara's leadership, urging peace amidst political challenges, while Fubara pledged road projects for Afara, Egwi, and Mba communities. The day features food tasting, with vendors showcasing Etche's culinary delights, followed by art exhibitions displaying local craftsmanship.



Notable figures like Gov. Sim Fubara and Fmr. President Goodluck Jonathan attending the Etche Food Festival, emphasizing the event's importance in promoting cultural heritage.

Cultural performances—traditional dances, masquerade displays, and music from ogene gongs—fill the afternoon, delighting children and adults who toss coins in appreciation. The event ends with a grand exhibition, blending food, art, and culture, fostering a festive atmosphere that extends into evening with storytelling and networking, attended by over 5,000 people in 2024.

A Festival with Purpose and Challenges

The Etche Festival is a cultural and economic lifeline. It celebrates Etche's agricultural heritage, promotes local art, and fosters unity, pulling indigenes home and attracting tourists. Leaders like Jonathan and Fubara use it to promote peace and development, with Fubara's infrastructure promises reflecting community support.



Ndi Etche on their colourful display at the 10th Etche Festival of Food, Arts, and Cultural Exhibition 2024.

Economically, it boosts tourism and trade, filling markets, though its newness raises questions about sustainability. Security concerns, linked to regional tensions, were evident in 2024 with police presence, addressing potential disruptions. Some critique its alignment with political agendas, suggesting it may serve governance narratives over

pure cultural intent, yet its community-driven spirit shines through.

05

Etche: A People of Culture and Potential

The Etche people—an Igbo subgroup indigenous to the Northeastern part of present-day Rivers State and Southern Igboland, is an agricultural hub known for yam, cassava, and fish, with a population of about 600,000. Bordering Imo and Abia States, it's famed for hospitality and traditions like the New Yam Festival. The Etche Festival amplifies this legacy, drawing visitors to its vibrant streets.



Ndi Etche on their colourful display at the 10th Etche Festival of Food, Arts, and Cultural Exhibition 2024.

Tourists love the festival's blend of food, art, and culture—pairing well with nearby Port Harcourt's attractions. For Etche, it's a chance to shine, a flavorful reminder of its roots.



A Festival That Endures

As the music fades and the exhibitions close, the Etche Festival leaves a lasting glow. It's a culinary tribute, a cultural reunion, and a community triumph all in one. In a changing world, this festival holds promise—a testament to Igbo resilience. Next December, the rites will resume, the displays will flow, and Etche will welcome all. If you're in Rivers State, follow the aroma—you'll find a celebration that's pure magic.

Blueprint.ng. (2024, December 2). Rivers crisis will shape Fubara into a political 'general' – Jonathan.

The Sun Nigeria. (2024, December 1). Jonathan to Fubara: You'll emerge as 'general' in politics.

Vanguard Nigeria. (2024, December 2). No one becomes general without fighting wars, Jonathan tells Fubara.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odiike

I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explore ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



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