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You can learn much about a country's culture and history through its cuisine. South Africa is no exception. The Dutch brought their garden produce (like potatoes, pumpkins, and watermelons). Slaves from Malaysia, Indonesia, and Madagascar brought exciting spices. The French brought their winemaking techniques. Germans brought their sausage and pastries. British brought their meat pies. Indians brought their curries. South African food is a melting pot of different origins and culinary customs! Find out which South African foods are best trying and where to go to get a taste of this diverse cuisine.
* Some of the links in this post contain affiliate links. If you make a purchase through these links, we may receive a small commission at no extra cost to you. All recommendations are from first-hand experience that I feel will deliver value to you! Thank you for your continued support. FOLLOW & SHARE WITH A FRIEND! Ah, one of the most popular South African snacks! What is it? The Dutch word "bil" means rump/meat, and "tong" means strip. This South African delicacy is a "strip of meat" that is seasoned with vinegar, salt, pepper, coriander, and spices and allowed to air dry for a week or two. Vinegar gives it a distinct flavor. It is usually made from beef, but game meat can also be used. I don't care for beef jerky (never could acquire the taste for those Slim Jims), but I actually kinda liked the flavor of biltong. Some describe biltong as what you would get if jerky and prosciutto had a baby. Here are the differences between beef jerky and biltong. BILTONG: Cut into thick strips with various fat percentages (the good stuff is made with prime cuts & made of beef silverside!) Vinegar is added Never smoked No heat used, only air-dried BEEF JERKY: Normally cut thin No vinegar Often smoked, hence the "smoky" taste Cooked into a dehydrator This high-protein/low carb South African food can be enjoyed alone or in sandwiches or stews. Enjoying a sundowner with biltong as a snack (as seen in the metal tin on the far left) while on safari at Lion Sands River Lodge WHERE TO TRY SOUTH AFRICAN BILTONG: You can find biltong in grocery stores (brands like Stoffelberg Biltong). We had it shaved over butter to pair with fresh bread at Creation Restaurant during our Hemel-en-Aarde wine tour (an interesting combination) and also as a snack during our evening safari drive at Lions Sands River Lodge in Sabi Sands Game Reserve. I have had New Zealand lamb (I dream of Pedro's House of Lamb!) and Icelandic lamb but did not realize South Africa is known for its high-quality lamb. Sparkling wine can only be labeled Champagne if it comes from the Champagne wine region in France. Beef can only be called Kobe beef if it is a specific breed of cattle called Tajima-gyu born and raised in Japan's Hyogo Prefecture (whose capital city is Kobe). In the same tradition, you can only call lamb a Karoo lamb if it comes from the Karoo region in South Africa. Geography matters for these iconic foods! In addition, the lamb has to be raised among 2 of 6 specific indigenous shrubs, which gives it a unique herbaceous flavor. Look for the Karoo Meat of Origin certification label, which guarantees the origin how the lamb was raised and pastured. Must-try South African food: Karoo lamb with pumpkin, salsa verde, and smoked olive at La Petite Colombe Restaurant in Franschhoek Fish & Chips at Fish on the Rocks Surrounded by both the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean, you know South Africa has to have great seafood! From kingklip to snoek to tuna to abalone to mussels to oysters to langoustines, there is no shortage of choices. One can enjoy this seafood as one of the main courses such as the quail, langoustine, mussel, & ham dish at La Petite Colombe, or as fast food at a local fish & chips shop. Fish & chips continue to be local's favorite South African foods. It is usually made from fresh hake or snoek that is fried to order until it is golden and crispy. Snoek (species of snake mackerel) is considered an iconic traditional South African food. This feisty fish is typically consumed as a pate or grilled fresh with a little apricot jam and butter. We enjoyed it with "butter" at The Test Kitchen in Cape Town and as pate with curried labneh at La Petite Colombe in Franschhoek. Enjoying fish & chips at Fish on the Rocks in Hout Bay, South Africa WHERE TO TRY SOUTH AFRICAN FISH & CHIPS: There are several well-known fish & chips shops, and everyone has their favorite. Ours was Fish on the Rocks in Hout Bay. With Chapman's Peak as our dramatic backdrop, we enjoyed fresh made-to-order fish & chips while sitting outdoors on a bench at the edge of the working harbor with the seagulls flying above. We went around lunchtime, and the place was packed. You know you have found a good place when 1) you see a line out the door and 2) you are surrounded by locals. It does not get much better than that. Oh, and the food was delicious too! *** Later I found out Somebody Feed Phil actually filmed a scene chowing down on fish & chips at the Fish on the Rocks during his visit to Cape Town. I lost count of how many gin & tonics we had during our trip to South Africa! Everywhere you turned, it seemed like someone was making gin & craft gin in South Africa. In its simplest definition, gin is a base spirit + JUNIPER + optional other botanicals. The base spirit can be made from barley, rye, corn, grapes, wheat, etc. One way to make gin distillers in South Africa make their gin stand out is incorporate the local fynbos, which is a specific type of vegetation in South Africa. We had the opportunity to try a crisp and zesty Gin Classic from Inverroch, which is known for incorporating fynbos into its trilogy of gins (Classic Verdant and Amara). Other brands we tried that we enjoyed were the Musgrave Pink Gin and the Six Dogs Blue Gin. Winemakers have taken notice of this trend too. During our self-guided wine tour of Moreson Wine Farm, we had a chance to taste their small-batch Wildcraft Equinox 79 Gin. This gin is made from triple-distilled Chardonnay and nine botanicals. Gin makers such as Indolva are using unusual ingredients like elephant dung to make their gin stand out. Hmmm ... I don't know about that. KVV Cruiland was the FIRST SOUTH AFRICAN GIN to win the prestigious World's Best Lmond Dry Gin at the 2020 World Gin Awards beating out over 150 international brands from 39 countries! Their secret is the rare and exotic Kalahari truffel. Surprisingly, you do not find these truffles in the forests of France or Italy. They are located in the one place you would never guess ... buried beneath the sands of the Kalahari desert. Love this gin! Stanley & Livingstone Boutique Hotel Sundowner with Six Dogs Blue Gin and Tonic. Infusion of the Blue Pea flower gives gin that striking blue color. Stanley & Livingstone Boutique Hotel Sundowner with a Musgrave Pink Gin and Tonic WHERE TO TRY SOUTH AFRICAN CRAFT GIN: A fun place to experience the craft gin experience is the appropriately named speakeasy, The Gin Bar in Cape Town. With over 70 indigenous gins, you are bound to find something you enjoy. Finding it is the fun part. You actually walk through the Honest Chocolate Cafe and into a secret, charming, light-filled Mediterranean courtyard. Order a "cure" (signature gin & tonic) off the menu. Miso corn malva pudding with popcorn ice cream at Chefs Warehouse at Maison in Franschhoek Malva pudding is considered one of South Africa's iconic desserts. Mandela loved it, and Oprah's chef Art Smith served it at her Leadership Academy's first Christmas Dinner. Surprisingly, it was created not that long ago. So what is South African Malva Pudding? People have created different versions of it, but the original recipe is made with apricot preserves and vinegar. A sweet indulgent sauce is poured over this fluffy cake right after it is done baking, which is also the technique used to make tres leches. As the story goes, back in the '70s, a woman named Maggy Pepler was asked to help run the kitchen at Boschendal Wine Estate by wine expert Michael Olivier. Her malva pudding quickly became famous, and now it has become an iconic South African food. For you South Africans, it brings up nostalgic childhood memories. Rich, warm, fluffy, indulgent and spongy describe this feel-good dessert. It is best served with homemade vanilla custard or ice cream. A variant of the malva pudding is the Tippy Tart, which is a brandy pudding. We enjoyed this delicious dessert during our stay at the Stanley & Livingstone Boutique Hotel in Zimbabwe. WHERE TO TRY SOUTH AFRICAN PUDDING: Mama Africa in Cape Town. We experienced a modern interpretation of this decadent dessert at the Chefs Warehouse at Maison, which was delicious. Pronounced boob-but-tah. South Africa's national dish. Think of it like a meatloaf casserole or shepherd's pie or Greek moussaka. We can thank the Dutch and the Cape Malay community for this comforting South African food. The Dutch created the first recipe in 1609, but the Cape Malays put their own touch on it and are responsible for what it is today. The Cape Malays playing an integral part in developing what defines South African food. They are descendants of Indonesian, Malaysian, Indian, and other Asian slaves that were brought over to Cape Town by the Dutch East India Company. They are one of the most unique societies and only exist in South Africa. When the Cape Malays were slaves, they would consume roast meat on Sundays and then use the leftovers on Monday to make the meat casserole that is now known as bobotie. Bobotie is made of curried sautéed minced meat (beef or lamb) mixed with bay leaves and sometimes fruits like raisins and then topped with a milk and egg mixture that when baked forms a custard crust. It is usually served with yellow rice and chutney or sambal, which is a delicious chunky sauce made of raw red chilis, vinegar, and salt. The first time I tried sambal was at the Pot Luck Club when it was paired with Cape Malay fish. This is one of my favorite condiments that I have tried while in South Africa. South African bobotie at the Neighbouroods Market at the Old Biscuit Mill WHERE TO TRY SOUTH AFRICAN BOBOTIE: Mama Africa, Bo Kater Kombuis, and The Neighbouroods Market at the Old Biscuit Mill in Franschhoek. You have to check out the Neighbouroods Market to experience traditional Cape Malay cuisine. That is where I first experienced bobotie. The best way to describe it is a flavorful meat pie. It was good but not something I would crave. It is worth trying once. The market only runs on Saturdays from 9 am - 3 pm, so plan accordingly. In addition to the multiple food stalls, there are plenty of vendors selling wine, beer, gin, coffee, etc. Perfectly brewed coffee at Truth Coffee with a chocolate éclair While instant coffee still has its place due to cost and ease of use, interest in freshly brewed specialty coffee in South Africa continues to grow. Farmers are producing high-quality beans, and the finest baristas are being recruited to bring out the best flavor of those beans. South Africa is now one of the coffee hotspots as coffee production and consumption continue to rise. Cape Town, the epicenter of this coffee revolution, is justly the place to find that perfect cup. Instead of requesting your cup "to-go" like we often do in the U.S., it is more expected you will be enjoying your coffee "for here" in a proper cup. WHERE TO TRY SOUTH AFRICAN SPECIALTY COFFEE: We had a lovely brewed cup at Origin Coffee Roasting (where the owner of Truth Coffee used to work) at the Saturday market at the Old Biscuit Mill. This company is known to have the widest selection of single-origin coffees in South Africa. Other great options are Rosetta Roastery, Espresso Lab Microroasters, and Tribe Coffee Roasting & Cafe. There is one coffee shop that hands down rises above all the others, which is Truth Coffee. According to the UK's Daily Telegraph, TRUTH COFFEE IS THE BEST COFFEE SHOP NOT JUST IN SOUTH AFRICA BUT THE ENTIRE WORLD. The purpose of this coffee shop is to "bring the joy of the extraordinary to people." I can attest the coffee is near perfect. No bitterness. No sugar is required. OSTRICH, It's what's for dinner?? Welcome to Africa. Meat lovers rejoice! There is no shortage here. There are many options including duck, springbok, ostrich, wildebeest, crocodile, zebra, and even warthog. Everyone has their favorites, but if you are our safari guide, you have to try warthog. They describe the taste as somewhere between pork and beef. I never got the chance to try it, darn. I have not had all the game meats, but my favorite so far is ostrich. Delicious if it is cooked properly. This red (yes, red!) meat tastes just like a beefsteak but much leaner. You can also consume it as a burger or even carpaccio. Not gamey at all. People compare it to filet mignon, and it is much healthier due to the lower fat content. A lot of game meats are grilled on an open fire with family & friends. This is known as braaing and is a must-do if you have the chance while in South Africa. Another great South African food to try: Ostrich fillet with bean cassoulet, butterbean puree, beetroot, fine beans, savoy cabbage, and port jus at Lion Sands River Lodge Springbok shank with waterblommetjies at Creation Restaurant The world produces some fine wine, and there are certain wine varietals that instantly come to mind when we think of a certain country. Malbec, we think of Argentina. Sauvignon Blanc, we think of New Zealand. Pinotage, although not as well known, is the quintessential South African wine. It was developed in 1925 and is a cross between Pinot Noir and Cinsault. It became famous in 1991 when it won the Robert Mondavi Trophy for the Best Red Wine at the International Wine and Spirits Competition in London (see picture above). Pinotage is very bold and intense in flavor with a wide array of tasting notes such as blackberry, raspberry, smoke, tobacco, and licorice. You will love it or hate it. What to pair with it? Meat! Steak, sausage, burgers, and game meat bring out the wine's smokiness. Pinotage is not the only wine varietal South Africa does well. South Africa is also becoming recognized for its high-quality Chenin Blanc, Pinot Noir, sparkling wines (Methode Cap Classique), Bordeaux-style blends, Syrah, Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, and more! WHERE TO TRY SOUTH AFRICAN WINE: You will find many wine choices at South African supermarkets, boutique wine shops, and restaurants. The best way to experience the wine is by visiting the winery itself. I have listed all of the top wineries and what varietals to try in my ultimate guide to South Africa wine country. If you are specifically looking for the top-rated Pinotage that represents what South African wine is all about, try the Cape Malay Pinotage. This is one of my favorite condiments that I have tried while in South Africa. Literally a sister since the dough is braided like a doll. I think the latter interpretation makes more sense. Breaking the words down then, these decadent treats are "cake sisters." This delightful sweet South African food is made of donut dough that is deep-fried and dipped into sugar syrup. It is considered a Sunday tradition in many South African households. Koeksisters are considered a South African delicacy and were even proudly served with tea to Prince Harry and his wife Meghan when they visited a resident's home in the Ko-Kaap district on Heritage Day in September 2019. This pastry comes in 2 versions: – AFRIKAANS KOEKSISTER (with 2 k's) The dough is braided and deep-fried and immediately dipped in cold syrup (very important step!). This technique results in a crispy outside and a sweet syrupy inside. See the picture above. → CAPE MALAY KOESISTER (1 k) This oval-shaped dough is flavored with spices (like cinnamon anised, ginger, and cardamom), deep-fried, allowed to cool, and then dipped in hot syrup and sprinkled with coconut. This technique results in a soft, fluffy, and more donut-like texture. See the pictures below. There is also the bola, which is a baby koeksister aka the "glazed donut hole." A must-try South African food! Local favorite South African food: Koesters and bollas at the Saturday market at the Old Biscuit Mill WHERE TO TRY SOUTH AFRICAN KOEKSISTERS: While my husband and I were at the Saturday market at the Old Biscuit Mill, we passed by a local Cape Malay food stall that served all of the South African food classics including koesters and bollas. Both were delicious, but my favorite was the bollas. I love cake-y desserts. Our bollas were made with dried and ground naartjie (tangerine) peels (gave it a little orange zest), which gave it that special extra touch. We love experiencing a country through its food. South Africa is truly a melting pot of cuisines. From the Saturday markets in Cape Town to South Africa wine country to the safari lodge, there should be plenty of opportunities to try all the amazing examples of South African food. You'll love the diversity and all the amazing flavor profiles of this incredibly unique cuisine. Enjoy! REACH OUT, FOLLOW, OR SHARE THIS POST WITH A FRIEND! What other South African foods have you tried? Let me know in the comments below! South African cuisine is as diverse as its culture. It is no wonder that people call it the rainbow nation, as it is home to many ethnicities from almost every country. Interestingly, foreign dishes that migrated to the country saw an evolution in their original recipes but remained respectful of their origin. Most of the world views ethnicity in terms of black or white, while South Africans are a blend of almost everyone. Caucasians from Europe blend Dutch, German, French, and English primarily. People of color have various tribal origins, each with traditional cultural dishes that play a vital role in creating South Africa's palate. In addition, waves of immigrants, for example from Malaysia and the Indian subcontinent, have all made their unique contributions to the South African culture and cuisine. Here are the top South African foods that have evolved into the most popular local favorites. Each comes with various recipes, but we'll explain the core ingredients that make these dishes unique. Then, it will be interesting to see the effect of South Africa's melting pot on how they continue to evolve. Bobotie is a must-try dish when visiting South Africa. Bobotie is a delicious minced meat spiced with medium-hot curry, turmeric, garlic, lemon zest, onions, herbs, salt, and pepper. Many people like to add raisins. Once baked until fully cooked, the dish is topped with an egg and milk mixture and placed back into the oven to set. When the top custard-type layer has set, the dish is cut into squares and served on top of yellow rice (long-grain white rice cooked with turmeric and raisins), perhaps with a melted apricot fruit chutney on the side. Many argue about the origins of Bobotie. Back to the Roman times, a similar dish with layers of meat and spices was described by Roman writer Apicius. The Dutch, however, recorded a bobotie recipe in 1609 and brought it to South Africa. Then the Cape Malay community spiced it up to what bobotie is today. Biltong and Droëwors are cured meat consumed as tasty snacks. This local delicacy is culturally associated with watching rugby, cricket, and football (soccer), the most popular sports in the country, or while traveling on long road trips. Biltong is meat cuts soaked in brine and hung to cure – an ancient maritime method of preserving meat. Although not considered healthy, locals prefer biltong with generous layers of fat. Droëwors (dried sausage) goes through a similar process, but instead of meat cuts, ground beef mince and mutton fat are mixed with spices to make a thin, cured sausage. Potjiekos: Photo credit: Chrstphr.jones Potjiekos translates literally as "food made in a pot". Of course, any stew recipe works well, but the traditional method is to layer fresh vegetables on top of meat with a little sauce—the cast-iron pot cooks on low heat, usually outside on a small fire. Control of fire heat is an art that most indigenous South Africans learned from an early age. Experienced cooks avoid lifting the lid to check the dish as much as possible so that the pot's contents retain heat and moisture. The cooking time is determined by the number of layers and chunky meat, usually at the bottom. When the food is ready, it isn't stirred but rather dished up with one scoop from the bottom. Sinyew chunks of meat turn to jelly, making the meat tender and tasty. It's a must-try for all visitors to South Africa. South Africa is home to a large Indian population. The majority live in and around the city of Durban, making it one of the largest ethnically Indian-populated cities outside of India. No surprise then to find many traditional Indian dishes among the most popular foods in South Africa. Biryani is made from Indian spices, rice, and meat. The meat is usually beef mince or chicken, but goat, prawns, pork, lamb, or fish can be used as well. The word "birian" in Persian means "fried before cooking" and the dish is made precisely in this way: the rice and meat are cooked separately and only mixed thereafter. The mixed spices usually have a strong but balanced flavor, so they are not too fiery. Some South Africans also like adding lentils and vegetables. South Africans classify the quality of a butcher by the quality of their boerwors. Although these look like plain sausage to visitors, butchers in South Africa are familiar with the strict rules governing the making of this authentic delicacy. However, there is some leeway for butchers to put their creative spin on the dish, as long as they follow the guidelines, which are: The sausage should contain at least 90% meat or fat from beef, pork, lamb or goat. The meat blend must always be a majority of roughly ground beef. Pork and lamb may be added for flavor and consistency. The meat must not contain more than 30% fat. Locals traditionally braai (barbecue) boerwors over a fire, and while cooking, it is essential not to prick the casing—all the juices will run out, resulting in a dry sausage. Boerwors are also a staple food in Namibia, Botswana and Zimbabwe. This coarse maize meal is a staple in a majority of households. It is cheap, doesn't need to be refrigerated, and stays fresh for a long time. Generally, stywe pap (thick polenta) is cooked with a 1:1 balance with water and is a perfect partner for stews and meat. Don't get your paps mixed up, though! Crumbly porridge, almost like couscous, is the alternative to stywe pap, whereas slap pap (runny porridge) is usually eaten for breakfast with milk, sugar, and butter. Vetkoek, also known as amagwinya in Xhosa and Zulu, can be described as unhealthy, but delicious burger buns! Resembling the Dutch oliebol, or Jamaican Johnny cakes, these fried dough balls are crispy and golden on the outside while fluffy on the inside. South Africans like to stuff them with curried mince or chicken mayo mixtures. They are popular fast-food snacks, sold everywhere by street vendors and small, local restaurants. Sosaties: Photo credit: MacDara Conroy Another dish of Malay origin is sosaties, more commonly known in the rest of the world as kebabs. They are skewered meat and vegetables marinated in a spicy sauce. Sosatie meat is either lamb, chicken, beef, or pork. Locals enjoy cooking them outside on a braai (barbecue) to add a smoky flavor. A koeksister is a sweet treat of twisted and plaited dough drizzled in syrup (or honey) and lemon juice - after being fried until golden and crunchy. It's much like the Chinese bowtie but smaller, thicker, and sweeter. The koeksister is slightly crunchy on the outside and soft and sweet on the inside. They are so revered that the town of Orania erected a koeksister statue to celebrate women who sell their baked goods to raise money for churches and schools. In addition, as they were served to Nelson Mandela by Mrs Betsie Verwoerd the widow of the former Prime Minister and architect of apartheid, they have come to be regarded as symbols of peace and reconciliation. Melktert, Photo credit: DimiTalen The most famous South African dessert is a melktert (milk tart). It is made with a sweet pastry crust and a filling like a very light cheesecake. The filling is made with milk, flour, sugar, and eggs – the ratio ensures that it sets, yet retains the predominantly milky flavor. This luscious tart is always topped with powdered cinnamon. Over the years, locals have created recipes that don't involve baking, and substituting regular milk with lactose-free versions allows those with intolerance or allergies to enjoy it too. A word of caution! This dessert shouldn't be confused with an alcoholic beverage of the same name created by locals that tastes surprisingly similar! Next to the milk tart, this is one of the most iconic South African desserts. Malva pudding is served just about everywhere. A soft and springy cake with flavors of apricot jam and caramel is topped with a sweet creamy sauce and served with a thin custard and ice cream. Simply delicious! This cheesy and creamy potato bake is always a favorite at South African braais, and is simple to make with basic ingredients. The trick is to slice the potatoes very thinly so they bake evenly, and to slow-cook them to allow them to absorb the flavored liquid. Jazz it up with whatever extras you like, such as mushrooms, bacon, or biltong (South African dried meat, similar to jerky). Credits: @thecinamomjariblog Geelrys, translated to yellow rice, is a delicious sweet and savory rice seasoned with turmeric, lemon rind, raisins, and cinnamon. The rice and meat are cooked separately and only mixed thereafter. The mixed spices usually have a strong but balanced flavor, so they are not too fiery. Some South Africans also like adding lentils and vegetables. South Africans classify the quality of a butcher by the quality of their boerwors. Although these look like plain sausage to visitors, butchers in South Africa are familiar with the strict rules governing the making of this authentic delicacy. However, there is some leeway for butchers to put their creative spin on the dish, as long as they follow the guidelines, which are: The sausage should contain at least 90% meat or fat from beef, pork, lamb or goat. 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