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African grocery has taste, recipes of home

When University of Alabama-Birmingham student Victor Kareem returns to college after a weekend visit to his Stone Mountain home, the car is full of textbooks, clean laundry and a big bowl of his mother's Nigerian jollof rice.

"Oh yes, I must cook it for him to take it back to school," says mom Taiye "Juliana" Kareem, owner of Caribbean African Supermarket in Stone Mountain. "I love cooking, and I cook every day. We don't really eat out."

If she's not working out a recipe in her own kitchen — "a five-minute walk from the store," she says — she's reviewing West African recipes for her customers. A typical exchange ends with "you make your fufu and you're good to go."

African-born customers come from across the metro area, she says, to buy the ingredients for the staple starch fufu and other dishes. Essentials such as cassava, pounded yam and rice flour line shelves, along with the orange-colored palm oil, fresh Nigerian bread, plantain chips and Vita Malt soft drink. Popular items include the Nestle milk products such as Milo and Klim powdered drinks. Along the opposite wall are toiletries and herbal remedies common in Africa but hard to find here.

But Kareem is best known for her selection of herbs and her frozen fish and meats. She points out the bitter melon from the ukpaka tree, important to East Nigerian cooking; frozen vedu, the leaves of the jute plant; rusi, or melon seed in ground and

WORLD BAZAAR



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The frozen cases in back, filled with African fish and meats, are where Kareem shows the most enthusiasm for the cuisine of her homeland — and the foods from all of Africa. She holds up a dried catfish, easily 30 inches long. "This is from the Ivory Coast," she says. "The D'Ivorians want this."

She shakes a box of smaller whole fish. "Liberians and Ghanaians," she says. Jamaicans come in for the smoked herring. She carries smoked and dried shrimp, bony fish, Guinea fish and barracuda.

Among the meats, Kareem sells goat, oxtail, tripe, cow's foot and chicken — a whole hen with the head and feet or a cut-up laying hen, preferred by West Nigerians.

It isn't easy to cook authentic Nigerian dishes in the South — despite the strong West African influence on traditional Southern cooking (think okra and peanuts — or "groundnuts" as they're called in



JOEY IVANSCO / Staff

To African-born customers hungry for home cooking, Taiye "Juliana" Kareem (right) provides not only the ingredients but recipes too at her Caribbean African Supermarket in Stone Mountain. Ayo Aremo checks the selection.

resort to burgers, she says. But her goal is to provide the ingredients and the recipes, too, when needed.

Most of her customers are West African, she says, but there are a few Caribbean regulars. "Sometimes I have a few East Africans come in, but we eat so differently," she says. "It might be the same food, but a different way of preparing it."

Even within her native land, food traditions vary widely. "We have so many tribes and each tribe has so many ways of cooking," she says.

Kareem and her husband, Emmanuel, are of the Yoruba tribe, which

in the early 1990s, where Emmanuel worked as a licensed practical nurse and Juliana owned an African clothing store.

After visiting a family friend in Atlanta, they decided to relocate in 1998. They bought the store from a Nigerian couple who had run it since 1994. Juliana runs the store, while Emmanuel continues his nursing career.

Today, just inside the front door is a display of crates laden with fresh vegetables — plantains, okra, onions, several varieties of yams. It's almost a miniature farmers' market. And Juli-

— this one for a stew ("We just call it African stew," she says).

She edges past a display of gele — traditional African head wraps — that are embroidered with delicate patterns in metallic threads. It may be a nod to her past in the retail clothing business, but it's not an important part of her current venture, she says.

In the food business, "the good thing is the customers always come back," she says. "It's food. They are always needing more."

➤ Caribbean African Super-