

Self-taught, spurred on by love: Senegal's star food blogger

DAKAR, Senegal - As a girl, Karelle Vignon-Vullierme loved eating the Beninese dishes her mother cooked but never bothered following her into the kitchen to learn how to make them herself.

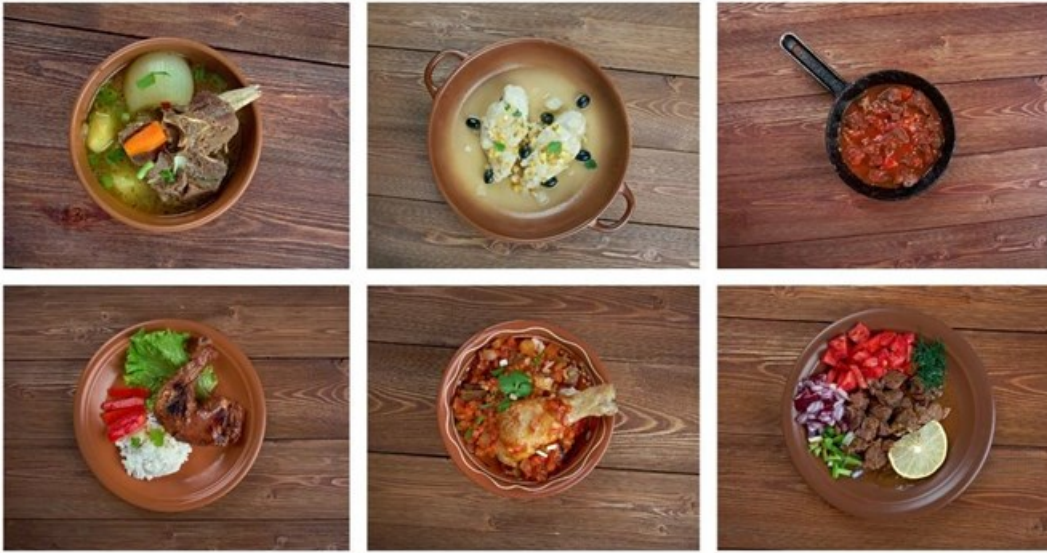


But that has not stopped the Senegal-based blogger, now in her 30s, from building up an adoring online audience of thousands by whipping up mouth-watering meals from all corners of the globe.

Hers is a story of love, the internet and plenty of chocolate cake.

Based in Dakar since 2012, Vignon-Vullierme has a strong following in France and francophone Africa for her skill in perfecting everything from Indian naan bread to spicy Moroccan soup, with frequent indulgences for her sweet tooth.

"I love to eat," says the French-Beninese former journalist, at her home in Dakar, prepping molten chocolate cakes in her kitchen at the nerve centre of "Les Gourmandises de Karelle" (Karelle's Treats), an ever-expanding social media and blog operation that has become her full-time job.



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Vibrant close-up photos of her culinary creations running the gamut of international tastes and occasions are accompanied by friendly, chatty comments about the recipes.

"I think I've already told you this but it's only recently that I've learned to love and to eat courgettes," she writes in a 2015 post for chicken and courgette cake on the website.

Sponsorships from supermarket chains and other regional brands also appear on her social media feeds, bookending sped-up videos of her recipes, and such partnerships have proved profitable, she says.

Perhaps surprisingly for a food blogger, who has almost 40,000 Facebook followers and 15,000 on Instagram, cooking rarely featured in her life until she met her future husband while studying in Canada.

Her mother "is a great cook," she told AFP. "When she would tell me 'Karelle, come to the kitchen and watch what I'm doing here!', I would just say 'tell me when it's ready!'"

But after falling in love with Olivier Vullierme, a Franco-Senegalese engineer, and following him to Dakar, she began studying French-language cooking websites such as Marmiton, Cuisine AZ and 750g, hoping to impress.

What started out as a gesture of affection began to change her life, as she experimented with savoury dishes for him, and plenty of cakes for herself. "I learnt to cook online," she says, spending time in particular on the Herve Cuisine YouTube channel.

Dishes cooked at home for her husband were carefully photographed and posted on Facebook, leading to enquiring emails from friends.

All were quick and simple but at times offered unusual combinations that are something of a trademark.

She set up the Gourmandises de Karelle blog in late 2013, she says, "firstly so that they would stop sending me messages saying 'how did you do that?'"

Her background had already exposed her to cuisine from three continents, and she happily produces Asian, African, European and North American dishes for her audiences.

With an average 120,000 visitors a month for the blog, she now has her own app so people can easily browse her creations, ranging from chocolate-banana spring rolls to a plantain gratin.

Like many social media stars, her personal and professional lives have collapsed into one, and blogging and posting is a daily commitment.

Vignon-Vullierme's audience falls into two camps "depending on the platform," Olivier Vullierme says, pointing to their slightly different expectations.

"In Africa, we have a lot of partnerships between social media and mobile networks, so you very often have Facebook or Instagram free depending on your payment plan," he said.

"Locally, people prefer to use social media rather than eating up their data on a blog with a lot of photos.

"She has a really interactive African audience on social media, and those more curious about cooking based in France on the blog," he added.

He describes himself as "very proud" of his wife but says few realise the enormous amount of time spent creating recipes, taking photos and videos, and responding individually to fans - a must in the social media age.

Vignon-Vullierme said her plan was never to "teach people how to cook", but simply how to eat properly with inexpensive ingredients widely available.

She can now make her mother proud by throwing together an amiwo, a dish from Benin made with cornflour and chicken.

But, she says, her target are young city-dwellers, who "no longer have the time to spend three or four hours in the kitchen".

And she has expanded into restaurant recommendations too, which offers a chance to hang up her apron and take a rest from the kitchen - but not for too long.

Source: AFP.

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