

Shopping in Malawi (Part 2)—A Detailed Presentation of the Delicious Food I Bought and Brought to Poland

Level B1-B2

The food I bought in Malawi will whet your appetite—Are you Ready?

Topic: What happens when a trip to Malawi turns into a food-shopping adventure? Come along as I explore markets and roadside stalls, hunt for local ingredients, haggle for my edible treasures and discover the delicious foods I couldn't resist bringing all the way back to Poland.

"What is patriotism but the love of the food one ate as a child?"

~Lin Yutang, Chinese Writer, Linguist and Inventor



SHOPPING FOR FOOD IN MALAWI AND POLAND: TWO VERY DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES

Shopping for food in Europe is rather straightforward. When my husband and I want to buy what we need to nourish our family, we don't need to go far or rack our brains too much. We generally know where to go, what we are looking for and, more or less, what we are going to find.

The first and obvious option is go to supermarkets like Carrefour, FRAC or Biedronka. The first offers a wide array of both local and international food products. The second has high quality food at prices that will that will make your mouth fall open most of the time, and not in a positive way. The third is unbeatable when it comes to discounts. The quality of the food remains intact, but the prices are like balm to your heart, especially if you have a large family.

We don't like hypermarkets, where one can get lost in the aisles and be tempted to buy things one doesn't really need. What we prefer is quality over quantity.

Our shopping experience usually looks like this. Once a week, we take our bikes and shopping trailer and head to one of the shops mentioned above, depending on our needs. Essentials are our priority. We buy what we need for the weekend, but we prefer to buy food on a day-to-day basis to avoid wastage.

Each weekday, we assess what we need and buy accordingly. This helps us eat healthily without overbuying or throwing away excess food.

When we buy food, we check the labels to see where it comes from and what it contains. We want to know exactly what we are eating.

We avoid buying vegetables that are packed in plastic, but sometimes we don't have a choice. Packaging is there to keep the vegetables fresh for longer. In European shops, everything is neat and orderly, and there isn't much room for disappointment or utter surprise.

Especially at FRAC. It's a picture-perfect shop, with well-arranged products that look so pretty that you don't want to eat them but keep them as decorations or souvenirs.

Of course, we take this for granted and assume that every shopping experience should look like that. You enter the supermarket, pull out a basket or a cart and start shopping. Everything is in its place, and you move around with clockwork precision.

Sometimes we weigh our vegetables ourselves, and sometimes we don't. We then pay for the goods, either at the cashier or at a self-checkout till. *Prosty*. No fuss.

Sometimes, we go to local markets when they are nearby. It is always a pleasure to go there. The fresh produce and colourful atmosphere have a magnetic pull on us. We could go to these markets every day if we could. Unfortunately, they are becoming increasingly rare. *Schade*.

Luckily enough, you can also stop by the roadside and buy fresh vegetables from local farmers. Here, you get what you see, and you don't necessarily know where the produce comes from. The mystery is both the charm and the curse.

During the strawberry or raspberry seasons, this is what we tend to do. The fruit is cheaper and tastier, and we generally enjoy the shopping experience.

As for France, more markets are available there, and they offer high-quality products ranging from fruit and vegetables to meat and seafood. The food is often expensive, but you can get some good deals just before the market closes.

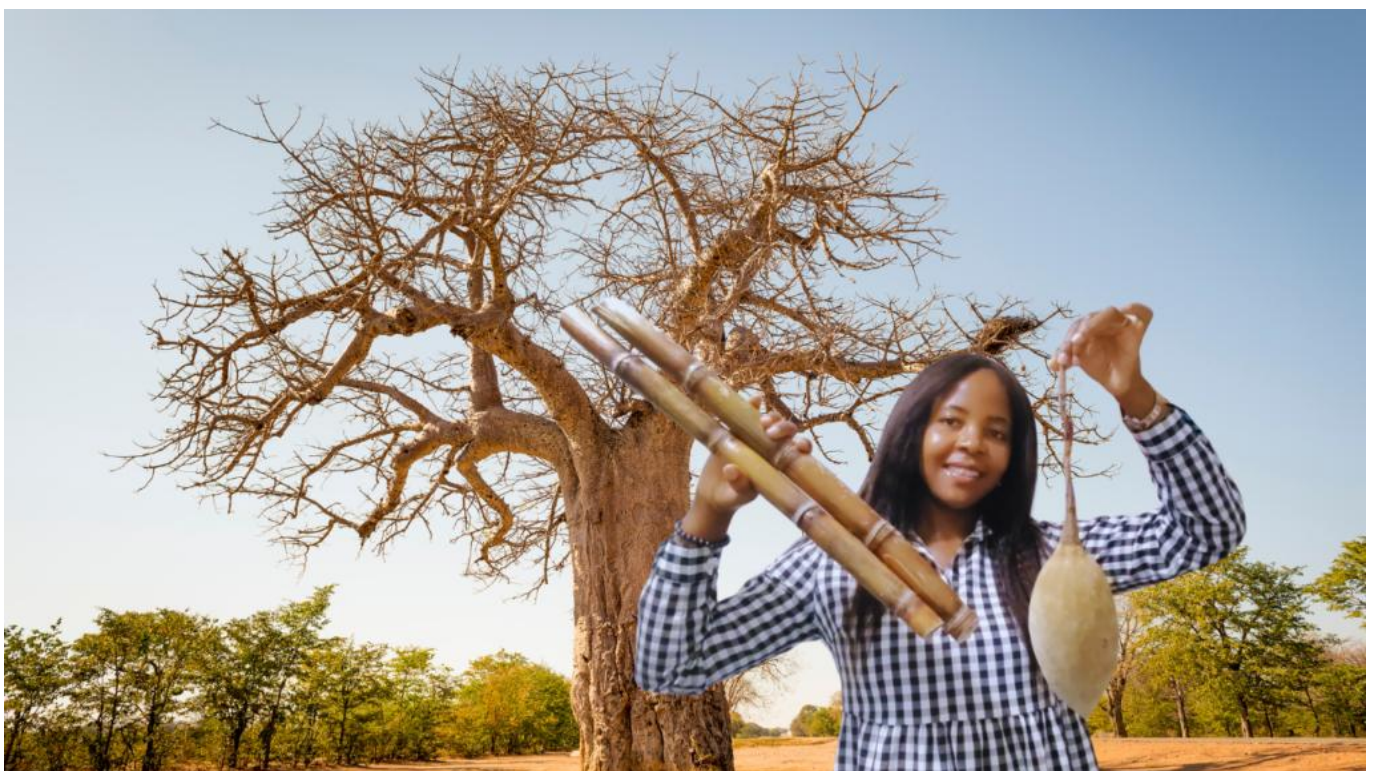
The last way of getting fresh produce in Europe is by growing it ourselves. We have grown cucumbers, tomatoes, rhubarb, raspberries, apples and grapes.

Unfortunately, the cold season lasts a long time in Poland, so we can't do this all year round unless we have a greenhouse, which we don't. Not yet.

All in all, it is fairly easy to shop for food in Poland. Shops are open from Monday to Saturday for long hours, and you can get there on foot, by bike, by car or by bus. Both local and international food items are available most of the time, and prices are generally affordable.

Shopping in Europe is essentially hassle-free but predictable. At times boring.

SHOPPING IN MALAWI: THE FOOD I BOUGHT AND MANAGED TO BRING BACK TO POLAND



Shopping in Malawi is a whole adventure: a colourful, often unpredictable but rewarding experience.

Picture the shopping landscape.

First, there are supermarkets, and even hypermarkets, that offer much the same experience as in Europe. A good example is Shopwise, formerly Shoprite. You enter these megashops, go through the same motions as in Europe, and come out with standardised goods that are both reassuring and worrying, especially for your purse and your health.

Here, consumerism goes even further, as the size of some products made me gasp on several occasions. Huge boxes of cornflakes in large quantities called to us from the entrance. I had never seen anything like this before. Not in France, not in England, not in Poland, and certainly nowhere else in Europe.

Now I get it. The giant cornflakes make sense because Malawian families tend to be large, with parents and children often living alongside cousins, young aunts or uncles, and grandparents.

In these supermarkets, we bought packaged goods that we felt confident buying. For example, we got Nali Garlic Sauce and Kambuzi Hot Sauce. We also bought NASFAM whole-grain maize flour (*mgaiwa*). Initially, I wanted to buy groundnut flour (*nsinjiro*) there too, but ended up buying it duty-free at the airport.

This was packaged, reliable food that we felt confident was safe to eat or drink. So we bought Sobo, *Malambe* Juice (baobab fruit drink) and Kilombero rice too.

The other difference is the display of products along the roadside. They are arranged in heaps, piles or pails. It makes for a completely different shopping experience.

You can't check what's in the middle of the pail, so you can get nasty surprises. What seems like a good deal at first can quickly turn into a scam. Imagine picking out perfect tomatoes from the top of the pail, only to realise at home that the ones underneath are rotten.

Sometimes, you can also buy food at a filling station or petrol station. The vendors, mostly women, will swarm your car and push their products in your face, whether you are inside the car or not. My advice? Stay in the car.

Going outside is not for the faint-hearted, by any means. It is a matter of survival for both you and the women. So, before you get out of the car, brace yourself and face the crowd with the heart of a lion, or a lioness, depending on your gender.

Remember, it is a treasure hunt of the utmost importance. Don't take it lightly.

But beware: most of the time, these women have really nice products, especially avocados, cucumbers, green peppers, Irish potatoes and tangerines. You can even taste some of the produce before deciding to buy. Get ready for high prices, but what the heck: just go all the way.

So, from these women, we bought *masau* (a local sweet and tangy fruit), *bwemba* (tamarind fruit), roasted groundnuts, cassava, roasted sweet potatoes, sugarcane and samoosas. We even bought street-cooked chapati at Dzaleka Refugee Camp.

The last, and perhaps most intimidating, stop was the market. People generally treated us with respect, and we never received any mean comments from sellers about the fact that we are a mixed couple. We often walked to the market, leaving the car behind, and people greeted us warmly and treated us fairly.

Blantyre market was, of course, very impressive. That is where we bought baobab fruit. It wasn't easy to find because it wasn't in season, but the woman selling it was polite and very helpful.

Overall, we engaged in different shopping experiences that, sometimes, took us out of our comfort zone but provided a thrilling and entertaining experience.

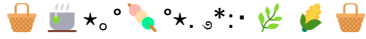
Now, whenever I see these products, I see the stories behind them: the sellers, the places, and how we came to acquire them.

The baobab fruit is laden with meaning, and so is the Sobo. Today, they sit in our kitchen like long-lost treasures, relics of a travel experience I don't want to forget.

Now and then, I take a piece of *malambe* or *bwemba* and pop it into my mouth. The taste not only takes me back to the hustle and bustle of Blantyre market, but also to the quiet shores of Lake Malawi in Senga Bay.

Every now and then, I head to the fridge and pour myself a little Sobo. Just a little. I dilute it with cold water and take small sips from the glass. And I remember the family reunions.

Days go by, and I watch my edible treasures getting smaller. Yet my heart gets fuller by the day. And so do the memories.





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