

CAFÉ SENEGAL BRINGS WEST  
AFRICAN CUISINE TO CHICAGO

## Sweet on Senegal

By Michael Nagrant



I DON'T KNOW IF DIAW SOW, owner/chef of Café Senegal in Rogers Park, has seen "Field of Dreams," but she clearly doesn't agree with the movie's tagline that if you build it, they will come. Or, rather: if you cook it, they will come. Because the restaurant is so new and because of her concern for freshness, she's waiting for customer traffic to increase before she expands her selection. As a result, though her French-inflected West African-style printed menu features forty or so items, you'll likely only be able to order a handful on any given night.

This reflects a smart business move from a serial entrepreneur. Though Sow emigrated from Senegal in 1996, she's already run three local businesses, including a grocery store and a hair-braiding operation. But this new project is her true passion. While the restaurant opened recently, Sow took a sanitation certification course seven years ago, because she knew she'd always wanted to cook professionally. Because her food is so good, my only lament is that she waited so long.

My initial impression of the restaurant belied any kind of quality cooking. Though Café Senegal is a clean spot lit up by a gigantic wall mural of a neon-hued sunset, the dining room is also smaller than a high-rise studio apartment. Art sat on the floor waiting to be hung, and there was an empty hot box on the back counter, the kind you might see filled with desiccated "hot" pretzels or pathetic pizza puffs. And, when my wife, son and I first entered the restaurant, for one short awkward moment, Sow, her two daughters and another older woman looked us up and down like a couple of elderly tourists who'd just set foot in a Hells Angel's hangout.

The awkwardness turned out to be a touch of panic because they'd just served the last of their signature dish, ceebu jen. Ceebu jen, aka rice and fish stew, is to Senegal what deep-dish pizza or Italian beef is to Chicago. As a national dish, there are also as many recipes for ceebu jen as there are active Senegalese political parties (eighty-plus). Sow's version is made with eggplant, carrot, cassava and white cabbage and tomato. Unfortunately we'd have to come back to sample it.

But that didn't matter, after what I know now, if Sow only had one dish and she said it was made from old shoe leather, I'd trust her instincts. Fortunately, our options were quite a bit wider than braised animal hide, and we started with a generically named "beef patty." Featuring a flaky-puff-pastry-half-moon filled with ground beef and peppers, it's Senegal's version of an empanada. But by any standard the light crust and full fruity and fiery-peppered beef make this the best empanada, Latin American-based or otherwise, that I've had in Chicago.

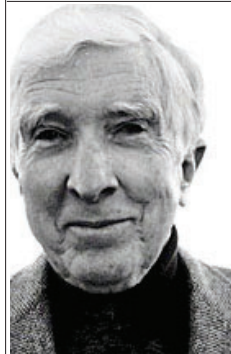
We followed that with a set of Nem. Though the dish sounds like a government agency or obscure stage of the sleep cycle, Nem is actually what would happen if you pan-fried a Vietnamese-style spring roll. Sow's version is a flavor torpedo of crispy, charred rice-paper conucopia oozing with scallions, glass noodles, egg and chicken.

While waiting for our main courses, the older woman in the restaurant entertained my unruly 21-month-old son by dancing with him to the house music and convinced him to call her grandma. She stopped only when a young man came in to purchase some African Black Soap (apparently Café Senegal doubles as a retail beauty operation). While "grandma" stepped out to get change for the man, he told my wife and I, "This is the good stuff, it's way better than Proactiv. It'll get rid of blemishes and everything."

As I dug in to a heaping plate of Debbe—peppery, grilled lamb topped with a sweet vinegar-tanged salad of olives, onion and tomato—I thought, man, that's good news. Maybe I won't have to endure those horrible infomercials of Lindsay Lohan, Jessica Simpson and Puff, err, Sean Diddy Combs rehashing their horrible acne drama anymore. The Debbe was followed by Yasa Ginar, a succulent sweet-spiced stewed-chicken perfumed with lemon and smothered in caramelized onion.

Though Sow learned to make these great dishes from her mother, she is no weekend warrior. She's a full-blown culinarian with a mastery of flavor and balance. The lack of a full menu here is actually a blessing that allows her to guide you, and you wouldn't want it any other way. The only thing mother-like at Café Senegal is that Sow cooks meals to order and entrees take forty minutes or so, but that just leaves you time to do a jig with "grandma." Whether Sow believes it or not, I'm pretty sure "they" will come. Just to be sure, you better head on over now.

Café Senegal, 2131 West Howard, (773)465-5643

BIDDING ADIEU TO ONE OF  
AMERICA'S GREAT NOVELISTS

## Goodbye, Updike

IN AN ERA OF SPECIALISTS, he stood alone as America's last great man of letters. In addition to his nearly two-dozen novels, story collections and a shelf-full of poetry, he wrote on American presidents, the cosmos, science and gadgets. In an era of identity politics, he refused the limitations of skin. Fifty years after he published his debut novel, John Updike—America's most gifted twentieth-century observer of the currents of this country—is gone.

It is hard to describe the vacuum his departure creates. He sprung into the world fully formed, publishing his first poem in *The New Yorker* when he was just a senior at Harvard University, following up with a torrent of "Talk of the Town" pieces, and then the glorious string of short stories remembering—and creating in readers' imaginations—the imaginary Pennsylvania town he called Olinger.

The knock on him—as it was with contemporaries Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow and Philip Roth, only one of whom remains today—was that he was a solipsist. But in the pages of his early collections, "The Same Door," "The Music School" and, especially, "Pigeon Feathers," Updike proved what miraculous things were possible from the close study of what one knew best.

From his perch in Massachusetts, where he moved in the late 1950s to escape the artistic mercantilism of New York, Updike breathed life into one of America's most enduring fictional characters: Rabbit Angstrom. Through the eyes of this unapologetically provincial car salesman, Updike tracked the upward and outward thrust of post-war American life. Taken as a whole, the five books Updike wrote about Rabbit won him every major literary prize available to an American writer. More importantly, they dignified the din and often unlovely consequences of this country's robust capitalism: The seepage of greed into a man's personal life; the corrosion of small-town life before big time dreams; the cushioning of empathy created by plentitude.

So often is Updike identified with Rabbit that during his lifetime he was confused to be a living embodiment of his character's values. The truth couldn't be further from the case. Although his fame as a literary writer was enormous, Updike remained a self-professed amateur. He happily reviewed books by writers from around the world, including those of Americans many decades younger than him, well into his middle seventies.

I had the good fortune to interview him six times. He was frighteningly articulate, unimpressed with himself, solicitous even in the face of the most prying questions. He possessed a twinkle in his eye, as if this miraculous zeppelin of work he launched weekly into the pages of magazines and yearly onto the shelves of bookstores was an act of mischief.

The truth was he knew how much was at stake in the act of writing—that what we dream in the pages of books conditions our appetite for the world. He gave it back to us, sentence by beautiful sentence. And unlike so many givers, he seemed to make it seem easy, as if the act of doing so was its own reward. That—more than the decades of sex which parades across his pages—explained the shine in his eye, so sadly dimmed forever now. (*John Freeman*)

### READINGS

THU/5

**Larry Smith, Rachel Fershleiser**

The authors read from "Six-Word Memoirs of Love and Heartbreak."  
*The Book Cellar*, 4736 N. Lincoln, (773)293-2665. 7pm. Free.

TUE/10

**Manil Suri**

The author discusses his work as part of the "Writers on the Record with Victoria Lautman" series.  
*Harold Washington Library Center*, 400 S. State, (312)747-4300. 6pm. Free.