

# EVAN DANNELLS

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FOOD & DRINK

## Les Delices de Awa owner celebrates hard-won joy in her cooking

By Victoria Davis, Special to the Cap Times  
Aug 26, 2024



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Awa Sibi instructs fellow cooks in the open kitchen at Les Délices de Awa. RUTHIE HAUGE

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Inside the restaurant Les Delices de Awa, named for owner Awa Sibi, there are many paintings and murals celebrating West African women.

There are women adorned in gold rings and beaded necklaces, fashioning colorful headdresses made of real cloth that's been glued to the painting.

Near the back, a painted woman in a blue dress and gold headscarf plays a wooden balafon, a gourd-resonated xylophone. The mallets are painted, but the instrument mounted underneath the woman on the wall is real.

But the most poignant piece of art in this new Atwood Avenue restaurant is located on the main wall between the dining area and open kitchen, where the warm, meaty scents of okra stew (\$16) fill the air. Next to "Les Delices de Awa" painted in large black lettering, a woman, with a basket balanced on her head and a red skirt draped around her torso, carries an infant in a back sling.

Sibi is a single mother herself. This mural, one of many painted by her friend and Abidjan artist Pehah Jacques Soro, speaks to Les Delices de Awa's long journey.

A survival story

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February 13, 6:00 pm

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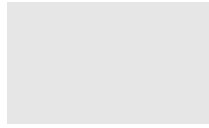
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At the age of 20, in her home of Abidjan on the Ivory Coast, Sibi gave birth to a son named Baba. She was in law school and wasn't married. Her parents, in Sibi's words, "lost it."

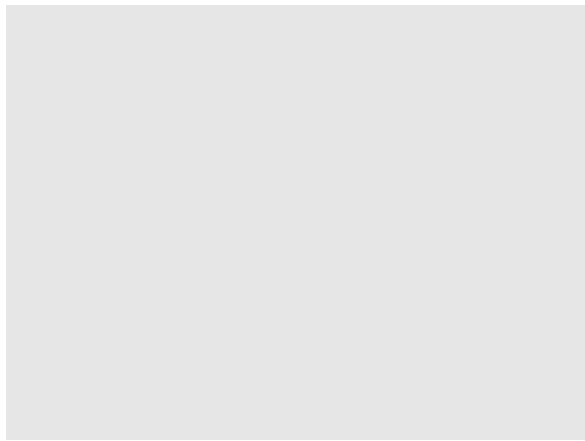


*Murals and paintings by African artist Peh'Art adorn the walls at Les Délices de Awa.*

RUTHIE HAUGE

"My father was a lawyer and I was working with him and this was all a big deal," Sibi said. "But I never swayed from my studies. I was a responsible mother. But it was challenging. My schedule was all over the place and, eventually, my father figured it would be best if they sent me to the States to finish my studies while Baba stayed with them."

Within a year of Sibi leaving, Baba began to have a series of seizures, some lasting as long as 45 minutes. There had been developmental complications since birth, but local doctors hadn't been able to diagnose Baba. Sibi immediately flew back home, took her son, and brought him back to the U.S. on a dependent visa while she hoped they could find answers.



*Ivorian Coast foods are prepared in the open kitchen at Les Délices de Awa.*

RUTHIE HAUGE

"I was dying being away from him," Sibi said. "He was only three years old and I had no game plan. I just knew I needed to be with him. But my father was displeased with the move and would hold it over my head. At a point, I had to cut myself off from them financially."

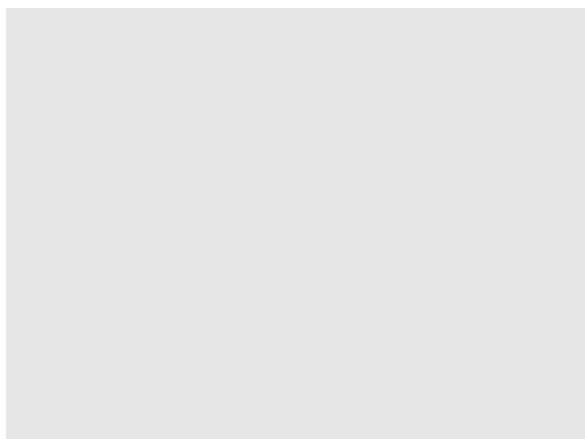
Baba was eventually diagnosed with cerebral palsy, epilepsy and ADHD. Sibi, an international student, supported her family of two as much as she could.

"Then, I met a man," Sibi said. "He told me, 'I got you. I got Baba.' And I believed him. We got married and then the abuse started. I'm not one to be trapped so I got myself and my son out of there. That's when my divorce lawyer told me about the Violence Against Women Act which allowed me to apply for a green card."

According to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, under the federal Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), non-U.S. citizens may be eligible to become a lawful permanent resident if they are the victim of battery or extreme cruelty committed by a U.S. citizen.

"I did the paperwork, applied, and then had a stroke," Sibi said. "I was in the hospital for three weeks. I temporarily lost my sight, couldn't walk. I

had to go to therapy. I was still waiting on my green card. It was terrible. What else could I do but keep fighting? By the time I recovered, I was ready to start something totally new with my life.”



*Beef skewers and riz gras (jollof rice) are served at Les Délices de Awa, located at 2045 Atwood Ave. in Madison.*

RUTHIE HAUGE

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## Spices and stews

In 2018, Sibi started a catering company, Les Delices de Awa. She worked full time with her aunt, also a single mother who recently moved from Africa.

“I thought, ‘What else am I good at aside from being a lawyer and a mother? I can cook,’” Sibi said. “I learned from my mother. Nothing made her happier than feeding people. She would wake up at 4 a.m. to start working on lunch. We used to make fun of her, and now here I am with my own food business.”

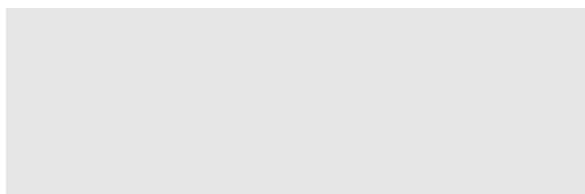
For six years she catered, serving marinated lamb dishes from Nigeria (lamb suya), Senegalese fried rice, peanut stew and meat pies. Sibi opened a brick-and-mortar location for Les Delices de Awa this year.

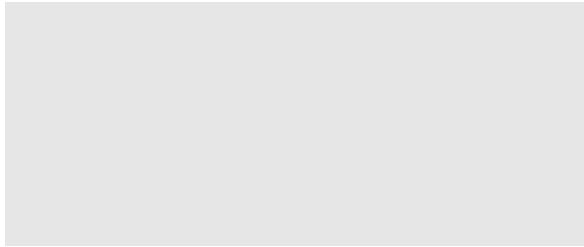
According to Sibi, most people from Africa living in Madison go to Indian or Mexican restaurants to get something close to what they’re used to at home. Sibi hopes to bring a bit of home to them, fried turkey tails (\$16) and all.

“It’s all about spices and stews for us,” said Sibi. “I would usually order a chicken masala at Indian restaurants or a whole fish at Mexican places. Their refried beans would be good too. But ours is better.”

Sibi said another defining trait of West African food is that nothing is boneless.

“Everything has to have a bone in it because it’s delicious,” Sibi said. “It adds a lot of flavor to the stews and soups. They are our comfort foods. But we also have a delicious vegan okra stew (\$12) with mushrooms and fufu, which is like mashed potatoes.”





Clockwise from upper left are fufu, white rice, fish pastels (fried fish pies), sauce pistache (melon seed stew) and lamb skewers with riz gras (jollof rice) at Les Délices de Awa.

RUTHIE HAUGE

Since her restaurant opened, Sibi has been trying to get guests to order the thick stews for lunch, despite the fact that Americans tend to have a light lunch and heavy dinners.

“It’s the opposite for us in Africa,” Sibi said. “There’s a huge emphasis on the togetherness at mealtime and lunches are usually pretty big and last a while. Americans are used to having salads and sandwiches, something quick. We do have sandwiches here, but I always try to get people to try our stews. I want them to sit down and relax and think of this place as home.”

Baba is certainly well at home at his mother’s restaurant. Though the doctors told Sibi that Baba would likely never walk or talk, at 13 the young teen is bussing tables and cleaning dishes. Les Delices de Awa has truly become a family business and a testament to what’s possible for determined mothers.

“I celebrate every milestone in the moment,” Sibi said. “When you’ve been through so much trauma, you’re always looking out for the next hurdle so sometimes those moments of joy are short-lived. But I just take it one win at a time.”

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## Les Delices de Awa

2045 Atwood Ave, Ste 109

(608) 286-1910

[lesdelicesdeawa.com](http://lesdelicesdeawa.com)

HOURS:

Wednesday - Thursday 11 a.m. -8 p.m.

Friday 11 a.m. -9 p.m.

Saturday 1-9 p.m.

Sunday 11 a.m -6 p.m.

Monday - Tuesday CLOSED

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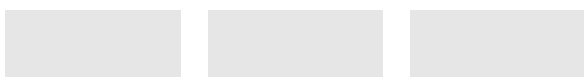
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