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Africa with a twist: Paris chef Sacko wins Michelin star

It took Mory Sacko just weeks to break into the illustrious circle of Michelin laureates with his audacious menu of African cuisine, refined with a smattering of French and Japanese twists. The tall 28-year old was already a star on French culinary TV show Top Chef when the Guide Michelin awarded his restaurant "Mosuke" a star this week, the first in France for a cuisine centered on west and central African culinary traditions.

While many other chefs' businesses languished during the many months of COVID-19 restrictions in 2020, Sacko says his year turned out to be "a bit crazy, but very beautiful". During the short period of freedom between last year's first and second French Covid lockdowns, Sacko left his post as sous-chef for Thierry Marx at the Mandarin Oriental, which holds two Michelin stars,



French chef Mory Sacko poses during a session photo in Paris on Jan 20, 2021. — AFP

to venture out on his own.

His restaurant, situated in the Montparnasse neighborhood in the south of the capital, quickly became the talk of the town after it opened in September, and just two months of operations were enough for Michelin's inspectors to give him the nod.

'Fried chicken'

Days before winning the Michelin star, he was handed the Young Chef Award by La Liste. "I can already say

that my year 2021 is even greater than 2020 which was already exceptional," Sacko wrote on social media. When reconfinement forced the closure of restaurants - except for takeaway meals - Sacko quickly looked for ways to turn challenges into opportunities by "revisiting the totems of street food". His restaurant quickly sold an average of 150 takeaway meals per day.

"The central theme for me is fried chicken, which I serve up every two weeks," Sacko told AFP at his bright

and minimalist-styled restaurant with a capacity of 30. The chicken is cooked "with a Japanese frying method with little grease", and served with cajun or aioli mayonnaise. "That's a reflection of the cosmopolitan identity of the restaurant," said the chef.

"When the lockdown was announced I said to myself: We're going to make street food, in a homage to black food, to the soul food of New Orleans," he said. Sacko was born and raised in France, but knew French food only from the school canteen as a boy. Instead, his mother's cooking accustomed him to the range of west African tastes. "She's Malian, but was born in Ivory Coast and grew up in Senegal," Sacko said.

West African food at home

"I ate the cosmopolitan food of west Africa at home, and often went to eat central African food in friends' homes. I also know the Congolese cuisine really well," he said. During his formal chef training, he discovered traditional French fare such as veal blanquette and boeuf bourguignon, perfecting his skills under Thierry Marx whom he calls "the most Japanese of French chefs".

But now that he has injected Africa "into the DNA" of his own restaurant, Sacko feels he is "a spokesman for this African new cuisine". French restaurant goers are much more familiar with north

African dishes such as couscous and tajine, but sub-Saharan offerings are slowly making inroads. The Food Temple festival in Paris in September made Africa its main theme.

Not just rice

"My ambition is for clients to come away with the realization that African cooking is not just a big plate of rice with sauces that are neither pretty nor delicate," he said. Among fusion dishes at Mosuke, Sacko prepares a Breton sole with attieke, a cassava semolina, fermented with natural acidity "that people eat on the pavement or in bars in Ivory Coast".

Sacko's approach is perhaps best summed up in his take on Senegal's traditional Chicken Yassa, "a quintessential African dish", that in his version gets a Japanese and a French twist. He uses young fattened chickens from northwestern France, Cevennes onions - "which are mild and sweet and add a lot of roundness" - and onions from Roscoff in Brittany "with their slightly maritime, crispy side". He then adds Japanese yuzu and sudachi citrus fruit for extra potency, and creamed Camargue rice. — AFP

Brazilian singer's YouTube hit joins virus fight

Singer MC Fiati, the first Brazilian to garner 1.5 billion views on YouTube, has re-cast the tune from that video - to try to go viral against COVID. Brazil has lost approximately 213,000 lives to the coronavirus, a toll second only to the United States, and the music-maker is hoping the song - will help push his nation's people to get vaccinated. MC Fiati has updated "Bum Bum Tam Tam," which exploded on YouTube in 2017, for the grim new reality of a world battling to control a virus that has sickened some 8.6 million people in Brazil. The artist has changed the song lyrics, which mention the Portuguese word for backside, to include "Butantan" - the name of the research institute charged with producing the Chinese CoronaVac shot in Brazil.

"The vaccine is going to save a lot of people. Come to Bu-bu-tan-tan," the artist, whose real name is Leandro Aparecido Ferreira, sings in the re-make. "My song 'Bum Bum Tam Tam' was launched four years ago but it became viral again with the arrival of the vaccine, because Internet users linked it to the Butantan institute. It happened on its own," he told AFP.

After seeing what was happening on social media, MC Fiati decided to shoot a new clip inside the research institute. "Butantan supported me 100 percent. I was very well received," said the 26-year-old artist. The extras in his new clip are none other than institute employees, who swing their hips at the prestigious establishment to the rhythm of the tune.

'People will continue to die'

The song in Brazilian-style "funk" is imbued with themes like everyday life in



Brazilian musician Leandro Aparecido Ferreira, known as MC Fiati, poses at a recording studio in Sao Paulo on Jan 20, 2021. — AFP

the nation's favela shantytowns or sexuality, but this is the genre's first foray into science. "I find it totally normal that science and medicine are evoked in funk music, because funk adapts easily to any theme, unlike other musical styles which would not dare to do so," the singer added.

Without directly mentioning the nation's far-right President Jair Bolsonaro and his supporters, MC Fiati regrets that "some people" have pushed Brazilians to doubt the usefulness of the vaccine. Bolsonaro has minimized the risks of what he initially called "a little flu," - subsequently catching and recovering from the virus.

"I feel very happy to encourage people to believe in (the vaccine). Through funk, I can speak a lot to the favelas," said MC Fiati, who grew up in one of the poor neighborhoods in an area south of Sao Paulo. He now lives next to his recording studio with his wife and one-year-old daughter, and says he plans to get the shot, which Brazil began rolling out this week. "Of course I will get vaccinated," he said. "My fear is that the pandemic will continue and that people will continue to die. If we have a vaccine that can save lives, we must save them." — AFP



This undated handout camera trap photo released yesterday shows a freshwater Siamese crocodile at Kaeng Krachan National Park in central Thailand. — AFP

Endangered Siamese crocodile in rare sighting at Thai national park

The critically endangered Siamese crocodile has been spotted for only the second time in a decade at Thailand's largest national park, according to photos released yesterday. The freshwater reptile - snapped by camera traps sunning itself at Kaeng Krachan National Park near the Thai border with Myanmar - was once ubiquitous across Southeast Asia, but its numbers have plummeted in the region. It is currently listed as critically endangered on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's red list.

National park officials estimate only about 20 remain in the wild because of hunting and habitat loss, but yesterday the nature reserve shared a rare spot of good news. The crocodile - never seen before by officials - was captured by cameras slithering out of the water, before it parked itself on the river bank open-jawed under the sun.

The footage was captured in December and is "proof that Kaeng Krachan National Park is an important area for wildlife conservation," said Manoon Prewsoongnern, a park manager who works with the NGO World Conservation Society. The crocodile is estimated to be about 3m long, he said, adding that this is only the second sighting of the species in the past decade.

"The Siamese crocodile is a predator, but it is one of the first victims of environmental corrosion, so the sighting... is also evidence that the national park's environment is still pristine," Manoon said. The endangered crocodile is highly sought after by poachers, who supply eggs and adult reptiles to farms around the region, where their skins are turned into luxury belts, shoes and handbags. — AFP

'JAMES BOND' STUNTMAN REMY JULIENNE DIES FROM CORONAVIRUS

One of the world's leading stuntmen, Remy Julienne, who worked on six James Bond films as well as the 1969 classic "The Italian Job", has died from COVID-19 aged 90, friends and family said on Friday. A veteran of more than 1,400 films and TV commercials as an actor or stunt coordinator, Julienne had been in intensive care in a hospital in his home town of Montargis in central France since early January.

"What was bound to happen has happened. He left us early in the evening (Thursday). It was predictable, he was on a respirator," a relative told AFP. Julienne was born in Cepoy near Montargis in 1930. A French motocross champion, he began his film career in 1964 when he doubled for French actor Jean Marais in the film "Fantomas", in which he was required to ride a motorbike. "They needed someone who was very controlled," he said of this experience. "It ended up being me. It was the start of a huge adventure."

His career saw him fly over Venice dangling from a rope-ladder suspended from a helicopter, being hit in the face with a pumpkin while riding a motorbike and countless car crashes. He doubled



In this file photo taken on Sept 28, 2017, former French stuntman Remy Julienne gestures next to rolls of films at the Centre for Conservation and Research of Toulouse's film library in Balma near Toulouse in southern France. — AFP

for some of the world's most famous actors, including Sean Connery and Roger Moore, as well top French names including Yves Montand, Alain Delon and Jean-Paul Belmondo.

He worked on six James Bond movies in total, including "GoldenEye" and "For Your Eyes Only", in which he drove a heavily modified yellow Citroen 2CV during a memorable car chase. Both as an actor and a director of stunt sequences, which became the focus of his later career, Julienne won praise from some of the biggest names in cinema for his precision and creativity. "He has an absolutely incredible scientific understanding. He's a real scientist, the Einstein of stuntmen," French director Claude Lelouch told a documentary for

America captivated by young black poet after inaugural reading

Amanda Gorman, the young black poet who performed at President Joe Biden's inaugural, has become an overnight star with her works shooting to the top of Amazon bestseller lists ahead of their publication. Gorman, 22, recited "The Hill We Climb" at the inaugural, a poem inspired by the US Capitol attack touching on how democracy "can never be permanently defeated". She is the youngest poet ever to recite at a presidential inauguration, a role first given to Robert Frost by John F Kennedy in 1961.

The Harvard University graduate was invited to participate after First Lady Jill Biden saw one of her readings. A collection of Gorman's poems to be published in September was number one on the Amazon bestseller list on Friday followed by a children's book, "Change Sings: A Children's Anthem," also to be released in September. A hardcover copy of her inaugural poem to be released next month is number three on the list.

Gorman's works knocked former president Barack Obama's autobiography, "A Promised Land", down to the number five position. America's first black president was one of the many Americans left impressed by Gorman. "On a day for the history books, @TheAmandaGorman

delivered a poem that more than met the moment," Obama tweeted, before quoting the closing line of Gorman's inaugural poem. "Young people like her are proof that 'there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it; if only we're brave enough to be it,'" Obama said.

Talk show host Oprah Winfrey, former Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai were among those praising the young poet. She gained two million followers on Instagram in a day and a million on Twitter. Her poem was set to music by Rostam Batmanglij. Originally from Los Angeles, raised by a single mother, Gorman had a speech impediment as a child - like the 46th president - and turned to writing.

She won her first poetry prize at 16 years old and went on to study sociology at Harvard. She has previously written about the struggle for racial equality and the #MeToo movement against sexual assault. Gorman was forced to extensively revise her poem at the last minute after supporters of president Donald Trump stormed the US Capitol on Jan 6 in a bid to undo Biden's election victory. — AFP



American poet Amanda Gorman reads a poem during the 59th inaugural ceremony on the West Front of the US Capitol on Jan 20, 2021 in Washington. — AFP

France Televisions marking Julienne's 50 years in the business.

Fatal accident

A believer in real action rather than special effects, Julienne worked constantly to minimize the risks he took during his shoots, but he badly injured himself early in his career while filming on a Colombian production in Germany. Missing his timing to exit from a car before it crashed into a ravine, he ended up with a crushed ankle that left him in bed for six weeks.

Once recovered, he would go on to earn fame from his work for the car chase scenes in the "The Italian Job" with Michael Caine. "Fear is necessary before and after, but never during," he once said of his time on film sets. His career low point came during filming for the French film "Taxi 2" in 1999, which he was overseeing, when a cameraman was killed by a car that missed its landing spot after a jump.

He was found guilty of involuntary manslaughter in 2007 and handed an 18-month suspended jail sentence, which was later reduced on appeal to six months and an order to pay damages of 60,000 euros (\$73,000) to the victim's family. Julienne also helped police with crime reconstructions. In 2000, he mounted a reconstruction of the death of a British student, Isabel Peake, to try to establish how the young woman was pushed from a Paris-bound train. Julienne said the work "was very much like cinema work, only here we are fortunate enough to be using dummies, which takes a certain amount of pressure off us". — AFP

Le Monde's celebrated cartoonist Plantu to bow out after 50 years

The celebrated cartoonist of France's Le Monde daily Plantu said Friday that he would soon leave the paper after half a century of work that has seen him mock the elite in his country and elsewhere with biting acerbic drawings. The departure on March 31 of Plantu - who has championed cartoons as a bastion of free expression - comes as a freedom of speech debate is raging both at the venerable paper and in France.



But Plantu, whose real name is Jean Plantureux, said his departure was not linked to the move this week by fellow Le Monde cartoonist Xavier Gorce to sever ties with the paper in a censorship row. Plantu told AFP he would be taking his retirement when he turns 70 in March and his exit had nothing to do with Gorce's departure.

He said his cartoons would be replaced by drawings by Cartooning for Peace, an organization he founded with former UN secretary general Kofi Annan 15 years ago to promote cartoons from around the world. Plantu has created some 14,000 cartoons in his career, mainly for Le Monde, and has already handed most of his collection to the National Library of France (BNF). — AFP