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Inkums opening Nashville's 'Gateway 2 Africa'

By Alexa Hinton, ahinton@nashvillecitypaper.com



Christopher Inkum and his wife Gina, both born in Ghana, offer Nashville a "taste of the motherland" and a little piece of their heritage. *Josh Anderson/The City Paper*

Tucked away in an alcove formed by shelving backsides and a thin shield of hanging strands of beads, Christopher Inkum shovels a soup-like meal into his mouth with his fingers. The dish, an African specialty called banku and made of corn and okra, resembles balled mashed potatoes, and the Ghanaian man is eating in the tradition of his native country.

Over Inkum's head, a flat screen television plays the DVD of *Princess Tyra*, a film with opening credits that promise it to be the best of Nollywood, Nigeria's film industry. And, visible before him through the sheets of beads, fish with exotic names like akwabi and kuta, are bagged unceremoniously in clear plastic and stacked inside a row of refrigerators.

The dining alcove is a pocket in the center of Gateway 2 Africa, a market of African goods Inkum opened with his wife, Gina, in July 2004. The store recently expanded nearly three times in size to include as many new imported products as well as a full service, four-table restaurant of sorts with a menu boasting a wide range of African cuisine. Gina and Cecilian Inkum, Christopher's sister, can be found in the kitchen cooking the made-to-order dishes which include jollof rice, grilled or fried goat, peanut butter soup, broiled yam and fufu just to name a few.

Nashville, despite all its Hispanic and Asian specialty stores and restaurants, has very few markets offering African goods. Gateway 2 Africa's expansion marks an increase in availability of products from African countries — like South Africa, Ghana, Liberia and Nigeria — to locals. The restaurant



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gives Southerners with no concept of African cuisine an authentic taste of the continent's traditional foods.

"Our goal was to make this place a home away from home for Africans who moved here and for those from here to give them a taste of the motherland," Gina Inkum said. "A lot of African-Americans are looking for their roots — some connection to Africa and a place where they can actually learn stuff. A lot of the stuff you see on TV, if it's not war and famine, it's other kinds of negative publicity. Here they can learn the possibilities."

And the possibilities are vast. The products the Inkums offer are at times unpronounceable and unrecognizable to locals, but the couple will explain their uses with delight. For example, the herb, bitter leaf which can be boiled into a tea, fights cholesterol and diabetes while nchawu leaves wipe out a fever. There are packages of spices — wede, knete knete, uziza, khebab and oxtail seasonings; rows of various products — cosmetics, butters, breads, meats, vegetables, canned goods, oils and coffees; and CDs and DVDs by African artists and filmmakers line the walls.

"A lot of parents complain that once their kids taste the bread, they will drag their parents here to come get bread for them," Gina Inkum said. The four kinds they offer — butter, tea, wheat and sweet — are baked by a Ghana woman who transplanted in Atlanta.

Gina and Christopher Inkum were born a few suburbs apart in the town of Accra, Ghana, but it took them traveling half way around the globe to Nashville to meet and fall in love.

Christopher Inkum, now 32, left Ghana when he was 14 years old after his father was killed in a car accident. The elder Inkum owned a road constructing company and had provided well for his son, but after his death, the teen joined his mother who had moved to Nashville where she worked for an insurance company.

"It was painful to leave my friends, but I had no family left. And, in Ghana, it wasn't easy. Even to fill a passport for me to come here, those things involve money. This was in 1990, and to get the papers filled out it involves money. And here for example, there are mission houses where people can run to and easily find food. In Ghana, when you are poor you are poor. Everyone in Africa in general thinks the U.S. is close to heaven. When you hear someone is in the U.S., you believe they see heaven," Christopher Inkum said.

He graduated first from Hillsboro High School in 1996, and then from Tennessee State University with a degree in computer engineering in 2000. While a college senior he excelled as an intern at NASA's Supercomputer Center in San Diego and was sent to work at the Stennis Space Center in Mississippi. The recent graduate, however, decided to move back to Nashville and be near his mother and two siblings, an older brother and sister. He found work with Carrier, a company that designed air conditioners, as a software designer — a position he held for five years.

Meanwhile, Gina Inkum, now 30, was a finance major at the University of Ghana and graduated with the prestigious degree in 1998. In the summer of 1999, she flew to Nashville where her father had relocated to begin paper work to study accounting in the U.S.

The fated lovers met at an all-night prayer event at her father and Christopher's church during Gina's initial visit.

"When I pray I usually keep my eyes closed and I just pray, pray, pray. But that night, when I opened my eyes, she was there, always there. I'd move around the sanctuary and it was like someone was telling me to open my eyes and every time it was the new girl visiting from Ghana," Christopher Inkum said. "So I asked her how long she was here and if I could pick her up for an ice cream date."

After a brief courtship that involved a Sonic milkshake, a road trip to Atlanta, a tour of the Parthenon and Cupid-esque efforts by their friends, Gina was to return to Ghana for the summer. Coincidentally, Christopher's mother was also vacationing in her native country that month, so the determined suitor convinced his brother to fly with him to Ghana for a month-long vacation. While there, Christopher charmed Gina's mother and grandmother, just as he had done the daughter.

"I said to him, 'You better be praying because if my mom and grandmother don't like you, there's nothing I can do.' Traditionally the blessing of your parents was pretty substantial — part of the

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decision making process, but my mom loved him. She said, 'I finally have a son now,' because I am an only child."

Six months later, Christopher hid a diamond ring in a pair of athletic shoes that were his Christmas gift to her and the couple became engaged under the sparkling holiday tree in front of both their families. They married days later at the courthouse.

In 2003, Gina learned she was pregnant. She had just passed her CPA exam and was an accountant for Nissan and Christopher was still designing software for Carrier. The news of her pregnancy, though, caused a swift shift in the ambitious woman's priorities. Gina said she looked around at her bosses and disdained the long hours they were forced to keep in their management positions, so where once she had dreamed of climbing the ladder of corporate America, the thought of a child grounded her.

"I didn't want to be begging my whole life — "please may I take my daughter to her game," "please may I take my child to the doctor" — so we said we had to have something that would give us the freedom to enjoy the kids God is blessing us with," Gina said.

An idea sparked from Gina's aunt who ran an African goods store in Richmond, Va. and suggested the young couple do the same in Nashville. With the combined talents of the aunt's more than two decades of experience in the industry, Christopher's business savvy learned from his father and Gina's financial background, the Inkums took a leap of faith.

"We started in a small corner and experienced growth after growth, I think because we go the extra mile to conquer the impossibilities," Christopher said.

"When we first tried to open the store, we tried a few places — several shopping centers — and a lot of people would look at us and shy away and say, 'I don't think so,' There was one guy who looked at our business plan and he said, 'That's a great dream. Keep it at that.' We were determined to stick it out so that people know they have to be educated and keep an open mind."

What: Gateway 2 Africa grand opening
When: Saturday, Sept. 29
Where: 5814 Nolensville Road
Cost: Free samples and open to the public
Info: gateway2africa.com, 832.1100

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