

Food for thought

Female Angolan engineer (33) spent large part of her youth in the UK

Guida (33) studied in London (UK) and moved back to Angola in 2004 to work for an international oil company. Knowledgeable, opinionated [“We young middle-class Angolans are generally speaking spoilt brats who focus on our own lives”] and eloquent, she loves eating out mostly international restaurants in Luanda.

Guida was born in Luanda, and intermittently spent half of her childhood and teenage years in the London (UK). Her last period in London lasted from 1993 until her final return in 2004, two years after the end of the Angolan civil war.

Malange Mushrooms

One of the things Guida enjoys about being back in Luanda, is food. Walking past women selling vegetables on the street, she says: “With the decrease in land mine exposure and an increase in farming, you see more and more traditional leaves reappear in the market. I’m trying out traditional dishes out that I never even knew existed. For instance that particular mushroom – turtulho - cooked with peanuts. It’s from Malange.”

Guida is pretty in a casual, natural way, and extremely eloquent. Her English is flawless, and she has a distinguished British accent and intonation. “Ever since I lived in the UK I’m addicted to chocolate. As kids, we only used to eat sweets like Mucua [made of Baobab fruit] ice crea, ‘baracuca’ [peanuts covered in sugar] and ‘doce de coco’ [dry, flat coconut pancake], all made and sold by made by grandmas. Yummy.”

“This is where I live with my parents.” Guida points to an inconspicuous house in Luanda’s wealthy middle-upper class neighbourhood, Alvalade. “Alvalade used to be inhabited by hand-picked families. If you want a who’s who immediately after Independence, look at who lived in Alvalade. Some of the best houses were kept for senior ranking officials, and to some extent that’s still true today.”

We go in for a drink. From the inside, the house is both comfortable and basic. An average family home, without any extra’s, and a broken water pump. “The kitchen doesn’t look every interesting,” she says. “My mum and I both usually eat out.”

Alvalade Family

The engineer is well-connected, but says she needed no one to get her jobs two foreign oil companies. “With a study like mine, recruiters will go: ‘Wow, you’ve studied abroad? Cool, you’ll get a job. You speak English? Great, when can you start?’”

Guida’s mother concluded her PHD in Europe. Guida describes her as “very much a career person”. “In some ways who we are is a direct result of that, and also of my father’s openmindedness.” Guida’s father served as a colonel in the MPLA army.

She has pictures of him coming back coming back from the jungle, “with a beard till here, covered in dust”.

“I remember vague images of truck loads of military men stopping in front of house, and my father jumping on, calling: ‘Hey, bye then!’ “Back then this was normal normal to us, but if I stop and think about it it was anything but normal.

Fall in social standing

Guida was in her early teens when her father decided to leave the military. “When you go through a process like that, your whole life changes. I remember my family struggling financially. The higher ranking you were, the more benefits you got. From the moment he left we were no longer a typical Alvalade family.”

Food was never plentiful. “During the war and especially under the Communist state, there were very few shops. There used to be a system of food coupons, with people standing in cues for hours. I remember even simple things like apples used to be a rarity.” Meals were very Portuguese during the week and very African during the weekends; funje during the day and grilled meat and fish at night. “I’d say that’s still standard across most middle class families across Angola today, including mine.”

International entertainment

Two to three years ago, Guida used to go out for dinner on average four nights a week. “You had all these new places springing up. Angolans mostly go to restaurants more for a special occasion, but our group of friends was made up of people from literally everywhere: Peru, Japan, Australia, the US.”

“Now we’ve reached the stage where we go to few places we really like, a mix of relatively cheap and less affordable restaurants: an Ethiopian place in the slums, and on the Ilha Chinese restaurant Che Wu, and the slightly more expensive Coconuts.”

Tonight it is the casual but popular Club Naval, with a stunning view of Luanda’s bay. It is May, the weather is already getting colder. Guida takes a sip of her caipirinha.

Her political views are outspoken, and she has detailed knowledge of Angolan history. She is extremely critical of the Angolan government, but still votes MPLA. “Every big movement needs a figure head, a poster child. We don’t have that voice that brings all the disaffected together. I still am very MPLA, because have you seen what the alternatives are?” The political ideals of the sixties and seventies have gone, she says. “We, the younger middle-class generation, are generally speaking spoilt brats who focus on our own lives.”

Her many years in the UK have also influenced her, Guida admits. But, she says, not as much as many people might assume. “It would be ridiculous to say my stay in the UK did not change the way I think, but I was much more influenced by my parents.”

London influence

Guida is currently engaged. Her fiancée is from the UK. “It’s such a terrible cliché, isn’t it? “I would hate it if as a result I’d lose part of my culture, of who I am,” she adds. “I often see people who marry foreigners lose their flavoring to blend in more.”

Her current lifestyle is miles away from what she remembers as a child. “There weren’t nowhere near as many restaurants as there are today, and eating out was something for expats and the Portuguese. Back then, everyone would go home for lunch and invite you to their own house.”

By Lula Ahrens for Collateral Creations