



Shola Olunloyo

*A chef of
many talents*

Shola Olunloyo a chef of many talents

Some guys have all the luck, right? Shola Olunloyo is one of those. Gifted with many talents he is a renowned chef, a distinguished photographer and a writer with an almost poetic touch when he talks about cooking as an art.

His mind and skills shaped by travelling the world, he has finally come home, having opened his own restaurant Speck in Philadelphia. We came across Shola on the internet. In a blogpost he described the mouth-watering experience of yellow early season tomatoes, dried in his Memmert oven, combined with crab meat and other tasty ingredients in a salad, topped with a tomato-verbena sorbet. Chefs are not really Memmert's primary target group, so of course we were curious to learn about the story behind the story and about this untypical chef, who is light years away from today's celebrity cooking circus in reality TV shows.



Chef Shola Olunloyo

10 Questions to Shola Olunloyo

AtmoSAFE: Shola, where did you find your Memmert oven and what was the idea behind buying it in the first place?

Shola: I found the oven at a place that sells surplus laboratory equipment on the internet. The idea behind buying it was to find an oven that was accurate temperature-wise not just for dehydration, but also for lower temperature applications of cookery.

AtmoSAFE: Chemistry in the kitchen and molecular cooking are still en vogue. Are your cooking experiments based on knowledge of chemistry and physics or are you the type of chef that learns by his senses? A scientist probably would ask you if you are cooking based on evidence or on experience.

Shola: My cooking is based on my senses and practice. I am not one who is super interested in the full applications of what is called “molecular gastronomy”. My experiments focus primarily on refinement, consistency, flavor and speed. Faster, more efficient ways to do things better every time.

AtmoSAFE: You don't seem to be keen on publicity and fame. But is there one famous person, you would like to cook for?

Shola: I would have loved to cook for Miles Davis and talk about composing flavors.

AtmoSAFE: You call yourself a self-trained chef. But you must have had some kind of apprenticeship. When did your professional career start?

Shola: I have been cooking for only about 15 years. I call myself self-trained because it is an ongoing education driven by passion and active interest. To the degree that I have been exposed to information from countless sources, it is that active interest, intellectual curiosity and practice that incubates competence.

AtmoSAFE: Many continental Europeans tend to look down on American (and English) food. What is your opinion on this issue as a professional chef?



Reliable for decades: Memmert drying oven from the last but one generation



Shola: Generally I find that negative outlook reflective of a lack of knowledge and due diligence in finding out the facts. Most continental Europeans consider American food to be “Fast Food” and hamburgers which is not at all accurate. If Europeans in fact consider learning about regional American cuisine, they will find a rich history of complex delicious food with European influences. The Portuguese and Italians in the Northeast, the African-Caribbean in the South, or in Pennsylvania Dutch-German based cooking.

American regional cuisine is no less elegant or complex than say Italian, French, German, Austrian, Eastern European food. American cuisine is not defined by Macdonalds and Kentucky Fried Chicken. A similar argument applies to regional British cooking.

AtmoSAFE: You offer modern American kitchen in Speck. Could you describe that approach and what are the basic American ingredients? Shola: The approach is to find great ingredients and NOT to be limited to strict historical or authentic reproductions or interpretations. The goal is to focus on the flavor attributes that each ingredient adds to the completed dish. For example we can make a pasta dish that is not Italian but is delicious. Our goal is not to change or re-interpret Italy, it is to be inspired by it. American ingredients are the same ingredients used everywhere else, while we certainly use some foreign products, the whole concept of “New American” cooking is not based on the source of the ingredients but rather the use and application of them. If an American paints French lilies in a river in the Loire valley in an impressionist style, it is not French art, it is art by an American in the French impressionist style.

AtmoSAFE: Before you opened Speck, you were busy with your project Studiokitchen, which you described as a weekly social dining experiment, a forum for the intellectual exchange and discussion of food and cookery. Did this experience extend your knowledge about how people perceive and sense food?

Shola: Studiokitchen absolutely did.

The point was not to alienate people or seem dictatorial, it was to open the experience and joy of dining to those who

Vacuum drying of milk powder

Students at the TU Weihenstephan get to know the process by experiments using the vacuum drying oven. The tests for vacuum drying are performed in the Memmert vacuumdrying oven.

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were open to the broadest possibilities. Studiokitchen was not a “consumerist experience”. In a consumerist experience the customer gets to dictate everything from when they arrive, what they eat and how they want to eat it.

Studiokitchen was about the customer saying simply “I want to eat, feed me”. People in America lie about diet restrictions and allergies all the time. While there are certainly people with fairly serious medical or religious restrictions, a majority of people just follow stupid fads like Atkins, low carb or south beach diets. Utter nonsense as far as gastronomy is concerned. Once you help people expand their minds, the perception of food changes greatly.

AtmoSAFE: You are a collector of valuable kitchen tools and obviously neatness and order appeal to your artist’s eye. What other sensations besides vision add to your cooking?

Shola: Flavor is obviously the primary goal of my cooking accentuated by texture and temperature. I think it does not need to be any more complicated than that. I wish I had something more clever to add but food suffers from over-intellectualization.

AtmoSAFE: You were born in Nigeria, raised in England and have lived in the States since 1998. It’s hard to ask an intelligent, not too cliché-esque question now, but we’ll try anyway. Are roots important for you or do you see yourself as a continuously growing blend of cultures?

Shola: Roots are important to me. History should be the framed context from which the future evolves. I don’t think it should absolutely intersect with inspiration always. In many ways I find a strict adherence to history as the sole inspiration to be very myopic. As cultures assimilate, we discover new things about ourselves, each other and what we eat. I never let my personal history dictate the perception of what I do, they are mutually exclusive. We as chefs are sometimes driven by public relations. Every time I read a chef interview that says “I quietly watched my mother cook when I was growing up”, I just quietly smile. It is good for romance and PR but really has nothing to do with the evolution of a chef in the modern age.

AtmoSAFE: Is there any food you don’t eat?

Shola: I am allergic to crab, shrimp, langoustine, lobster and all other crustaceans.

That however does not prevent me in any way from cooking them, I find ways to taste them by tasting the operative flavor carriers like sauces.

AtmoSAFE: Thank you Shola. Talk to you soon.

Autor: Memmert GmbH + Co.KG

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