
Spice, Dust and Generators

A working chef's guide to kitchens in Africa

Ari Lepisto

Nordic chef · 30+ years from Tokyo embassies to Mogadishu and the Arctic

Ari Lepisto Hospitality Recruitment · Edition 1, October 2026

Before you pack

I ran the kitchen of a beach resort in Zanzibar. Later I spent close to seven years in Mogadishu, starting as Chef de Cuisine and ending up leading the catering department and camp: feeding a 200-person compound, delivering life-support contracts for NGOs, UN departments and foreign governments, and building an events business behind blast walls with a team from more than seven countries. Most recently I ran catering for more than a thousand troops on an exercise in Côte d'Ivoire.

Africa is fifty-four countries, not one. A safari lodge in Tanzania, a resort in Zanzibar and a UN camp in Somalia have almost nothing in common except the heat and the fact that the supply truck is late. This guide covers the kinds of kitchen jobs foreigners most often take on the continent, and what each one really asks of you.

In Africa the menu is a promise you make before you know what the truck will bring.

Three kinds of African kitchen

Resorts and safari lodges

Beach hotels on the Indian Ocean, lodges in the national parks, boutique places in the Cape winelands. Expect international guests, local teams you will train, and supply lines that make you creative. Executive and head chef roles are the most common openings for foreigners, because the job is half cooking and half teaching.

Remote sites and life support

Mining camps, oil and gas sites, UN and NGO compounds, military bases. Catering contractors feed hundreds or thousands of people three or four times a day, often on rotation – weeks on,

weeks off. The pay is usually good, the food standards are strict (HACCP and often the client's own codes), and security is part of every decision.

Hardship and conflict areas

Some sites are in places where the danger is real. I have worked under direct threat and I will not pretend it is an adventure. If you go, go with an established contractor, a proper security plan and insurance that actually covers where you are.

Why Africa, and why not

The good

- **Responsibility early.** You will run things you would wait ten years to run in Europe.
- **People.** Some of the best, most loyal cooks I ever trained came from teams in East Africa.
- **Money on rotation.** Remote-site work often pays well, with accommodation and food included.
- **Ingredients.** Spice markets, fish off the dhow, fruit that ruins supermarket fruit for you forever.

The honest part

- **Supply.** Imported items run out. You learn to cook with what arrived.
- **Power and water.** Generators fail. Plan your cold chain like your career depends on it, because it does.
- **Health.** Malaria, food-borne illness and heat are real risks. Take medical advice before you go.
- **Security.** In some places it shapes every day. Respect it, follow it, never get casual.

The paperwork, without the panic

Every country has its own rules, so check with the embassy of the country you are going to and with your employer. In general:

- **Work permits are employer-arranged.** A serious employer or contractor handles the permit. Do not start work on a visitor visa.
- **Vaccinations.** Some countries require proof of yellow fever vaccination at the border. Get advice on others well in advance.
- **Insurance.** Make sure your health and evacuation cover includes the region you will work in, including high-risk areas if relevant.
- **Contract.** Read it for rotation pattern, flights, accommodation, R&R, notice periods and what happens if the site closes.

Inside an African kitchen

- **You are a teacher.** On most sites the brigade is local or from several countries. Your success is their success.
- **Respect first.** Learn names, learn greetings in the local language, learn how people want to be addressed.
- **Hygiene is life and death.** In a camp, one bad batch can put half the site in bed. Logs, temperatures and hand washing are not paperwork.
- **Patience.** Things take longer. Shouting makes them take longer still.

How to get hired

- **Target the contractors** that run life support and remote-site catering, and established resort and lodge groups.
- **Show HACCP and volume experience.** Numbers matter: covers per day, team size, budgets.

- **Be ready for rotation** and say so clearly in your CV.
- **References from people who saw you work in hard places** count more than anything else.

Red flags

- Anyone who asks you to pay for a job, a visa or a place on a list.
- No clear security arrangements for a site in a high-risk area.
- Promises of a work permit "after you arrive".
- Salary only in cash, or no written contract.

Last word

Africa will take more out of you than any other place, and give more back. You will learn to cook without the things you thought you needed, to lead people whose language you are still learning, and to keep a kitchen running when everything around it is falling apart. Go with your eyes open, and go with people you trust.

If you want help finding the right kitchen, here or anywhere else, get in touch. I recruit cooks, service staff, supervisors and kitchen leaders for restaurants, hotels, resorts, embassies and remote sites across the Nordics, Japan and Asia, Africa and the Middle East. The employer pays my fee. Candidates never pay. Always.

Ari Lepisto · Ari Lepisto Hospitality Recruitment
hello@nordicbrigade.com · +358 44 975 4619 · Helsinki,
Finland

Written in October 2026. Rules differ by country and change often: always confirm visas, vaccinations and security arrangements with the embassy of your destination, your doctor and your employer before you travel. This guide is general information, not legal, tax or immigration advice.