

Grace and flavour

West African, Japanese and
Scandi influences merge
in a chef's garden in Brixton

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Given that chef Carine Ottou moved from place to place so much as a teenager, then as a student and then also during her early working years, it's no surprise that the idea of home has taken on a particular sense of importance for her. She grew up first in Cameroon, but then moved to France at the age of 14, where she finished school and started university. That was followed by time living and working in Ireland. So by the time Ottou and her husband Jacob, whom she met in Dublin, decided to settle in London they were both ready to put down some roots.

"Home is really important to me, not just for my own family but also for my cooking and my work as a chef," says Ottou, who runs cooking classes and hosts a supper club at her home in Brixton. "Having moved around so much, 'home' became something that I really wanted to recreate with a place where we just feel at ease. It's definitely influenced by my background and combines many different parts of it. But it was also really important that when people come to the house, they would feel welcome."

As well as continuing a day job in IT and sharing the responsibility of looking after two young children – Mha and Moa – Ottou has managed to build a culinary business, working with a nutritionist to develop her range of West African-inspired sauces, Marie's

It's great outdoors: (clockwise from left) Carine Ottou at work at her kitchen island, which can be rolled back inside; open doors in the kitchen; organic fabrics in the bedroom; the dining room and brick wall; and Emery & Cie splashback tiles



Little Jar, made with natural ingredients, and she is also running classes and a supper club based around her memories of Cameroon. "I want to help people learn more about Cameroonian cooking," she says. "But it's also about reconnecting with the country, the culture and the ingredients."

Ottou lives close to the shops and markets of Brixton, which are particularly useful when searching for cooking ingredients. Ottou and Jacob bought the three-storey Victorian terraced house in 2011, but eventually realised that it would need remodelling if it was going to play host not only to family and friends, but also supper club guests and students at her cooking lessons. Deciding to take the plunge with an extension and reinvention, Ottou approached the Japanese-born, London-based architect and interior



designer Yoko Kloeden.

"It took us a while to make the decision to work on the house, but I knew how important the kitchen would be especially, and nurtured these ideas of how I wanted the house to be," says Ottou. "What really seduced me about Yoko was her level of care, which I could see from the start, but also her own cultural background. I saw some similarities, as well as differences, between my background as a Cameroonian and hers in Japan, which is partly to do with respect for natural materials and ingredients. I could see, intuitively, that the fusion would work."

The design of a rear extension holding the new kitchen was, naturally, a priority and features custom units by Kloeden and characterful splashback tiles from Emery & Cie, along with practical and hard-wearing concrete

worktops. A key part of the design was a kitchen island on casters that can easily be rolled out to the terrace via a fold-back wall of glass. The terrace itself has been transformed into a welcoming outdoor room, ideal not just for the family but for guests. Here, with the island in place, the space becomes a second, fresh-air kitchen.

Another important space is the dining room, where every available square inch was maximised to create an inviting and atmospheric setting. A custom-made banquette runs along the raw brick wall to the side, adding to seating around the table, while a large vintage mirror reflects light through the room. As with the sitting room, it's a space where touches of Japan, West Africa and also Scandinavia – where Jacob grew up – combine, particularly in the use of organic and earthy materials, seen in the wooden floors and joinery.

Yet the hub and heart of the house is, inevitably, the combined kitchen and the terrace set against the backdrop of the garden, which constantly draws the eye outside. "The terrace is really an extension of the kitchen itself and, again, comes from my background growing up in West Africa, where we lived mostly outside," says Ottou. "We cook outside here and use the space whenever we have the weather for it."

"When lockdown happened the house was really put to the test and the great thing was that the family was able to be here without walking on each other's toes and that was a proper accomplishment. The kitchen and terrace are actually key, because we can all come together for lunch and dinner, feeling happy to see one another, and then find our own space in the house." ■ carineottou.blogspot.com; yokokloeden.com