

# Everyday food in Malawi

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## 1. Nutrition

In general, the Malawian diet is extremely good for carbohydrate, fat, and many vitamins and minerals because of the basic vegetarian diet which includes plenty of vegetables and some fruit. However, it can be low in protein. Meat is a luxury - depending on the wealth of the family, it may be eaten twice a week or only for special occasions.

The main sources of protein are small dried fish (brought up from the lake), eggs, beans and groundnuts. Fish may typically be eaten 3 times a week, though some families eat fish every day. Poorer families may not include beans or groundnuts in their diet often enough (because their necessity is not understood) and cannot always afford fish or eggs. Protein may typically be eaten only 3 times a week, and in Jan – Mar, when food and money are scarce, often families go without it for longer.

Jan – Mar are known as the 'hungry' months, and school attendance falls because children are often required to help work at home to raise money for food. The lack of protein in some families' diets is responsible for stunted growth, prevalent throughout the country. The problem can be particularly acute for young, weaned children from 2-4 years. As a family may share a plate of food, often the youngest children do not manage to compete successfully with the rest of the family for their share.

The basic diet changes according to the time of year – Malawians eat whichever fruits and vegetables are seasonally available. Of course most families don't have fridges or freezers, so food has to be eaten quickly once picked (especially when the weather is hot). Maize *is* stored, of course – in grain stores. If families can afford it, they will often spray the maize seeds to protect them from animals. However, poorer families often cannot afford to do this, so can lose large proportions of their crops to rodents and insects.

## **2. Annual availability of food crops**

Availability of food crops is highly dependent on the rains, which fall from November to April. May to October is the dry season, when very little rain falls.

Maize is stored and therefore available year-round, although maize from the previous year may start to run out for some families by Jan or Feb, depending on the success of last year's harvest.

Bananas, tomatoes and onions are also available year –round, because they are grown in 'dambos' – small rivers near the villages. Sugar cane, oranges, papaya, avocado pears, lemons and guavas may also be available at various times of year.

<b>Month</b>	<b>Food crops available</b>
January ('The hungry time')	Pumpkin leaves, okra, beans, bean leaves, Chinese cabbage, mango
February ('The hungry time')	As January, but no mango
March	As above, but towards the end of the month the new harvest becomes available, so there is also pumpkin, squashes, green maize, sweet potato, Irish potato, cassava, soya bean, sugar cane, groundnuts
April	As end March
May	As end March
June	As end March
July	As end March
August	As end March
September	Many crops harvested from March onwards are no longer available. Food crops match those available in January. Mango becomes available during this month – it is transported from the lake, where trees ripen earlier because it is lower and therefore warmer.
October	As September
November	As September
December	As September

### **3. Daily diet**

#### **Nsima**

Nsima – a staple food made from maize flour which is thickened to the consistency of mashed potato. Sometimes nsima is made from maize flour ground with the husks, in which case it is rougher. Often it is cooked using maize flour ground without the husks. This has a smoother consistency and is often preferred, but unfortunately is far less nutritious.

In fact, maize as a staple food (introduced by the Portuguese) is popular all over East and Southern Africa, but sadly is the least nutritious of any of the staples. Rice, potato, cassava and wheat are all better, but most Malawians feel they have not eaten properly unless they have had nsima that day, and it has proved difficult to encourage many families to diversify.

#### **Ndiwo**

Ndiwo is the sauce or relish served with the nsima. The exact composition will vary according to the time of year, but generally its make-up is as follows:

Pumpkin leaves (or sweet potato or cassava leaves or other green leaf)  
Tomato  
Onion  
Salt  
Oil or groundnuts

OR

Okra  
Salt  
Tomato  
'Chidulo' or African soda (water strained through the ash of groundnut leaves)

#### **Soya beans**

These are used to make milk, or to grind up and mix with maize flour for 'African cake'.

#### **4. Daily pattern of eating**

The basic pattern for daily food is as follows:

##### ***Breakfast (chakudya cha m'mawa = 'food of the morning')***

Maize porridge, known as phala

##### ***Lunch (chakudya cha masana = 'food of the afternoon')***

Nsima with ndiwo (= maize staple with vegetable sauce)

##### ***Supper (chakudya cha madzulo = 'food of the evening')***

Nsima with ndiwo (= maize staple with vegetable sauce)

##### ***Also:***

Around three to five times a week – more often for wealthier families, less often for poorer ones – eggs, small dried fish and sometimes meat will be served with the ndiwo

##### ***'Snacks'***

Children may snack on fruits such as bananas, oranges, guavas or groundnuts during the day

#### **5. Chichewa words**

Food	Chakudya
To eat	Kudya
Delicious food	Chakudya chakoma
Cooked maize flour (= staple)	Nsima (see above)
Sauce for nsema (also known as relish)	Ndiwo (see above)
Meat	Nyama
Fish (small, dried)	Usipa
Porridge	Phala
Salt	Chere
Cooking oil	Mafuta