

The number of wonderful people in Victoria continues to amaze me. If you take the time to stop and have a genuine conversation with a stranger, you may just make a new friend. Today, I had one of those conversations and made one of those friends. Victoria, I would like you to introduce you to Binetou.

Binetou is a warm-hearted lady; I can honestly say that I adore her. She is welcoming, generous – just being in her presence made me feel amazing. She is passionate about food and she loves to entertain, feed, and make people happy. “Cooking is my therapy; cooking brings people together.”

Binetou is from Senegal, which is known as the country of hospitality. It has a very open and sharing culture. Binetou met her husband in Senegal when he came back to visit his family – he was living in Canada at the time. They fell in love but it took approximately four years to gather the necessary paperwork that would enable Binetou to move to Canada. She has now been in Victoria for 12 years and she plans to stay here for a very long time – she loves it.

When Binetou arrived in Canada, she told her husband that she was going to open an African restaurant. Little did he know, she was actually being serious. She felt that something was missing in Victoria and wanted the people to know that Africa has really good food. Binetou was determined to make her dream a reality. In 2008, she decided to upgrade her English and enrolled in a cooking course at Camosun College. After finishing her program, she went on to gain experience in the food industry to learn more cooking techniques and about managing a business of her own. In 2010, she decided to take a chance and opened Le Petit Dakar. The name pays tribute to Binetou’s hometown and the capital of Senegal, Dakar. Opening a restaurant was risky, but Binetou knew that if she didn’t try, she would never know if she could succeed. The store has now been open for over 3.5 years.

Most of Le Petit Dakar’s recipes are straight from Binetou’s hometown. The only alterations she made were to the vegetarian and vegan dishes. Senegal does not typically have meatless options – the citizens eat *lots* of seafood and quite a bit of meat. She really focuses on the taste and quality of the food and refuses to serve anything that she would not feed to herself or to her family. Everything is made from scratch, including the soup broth. Her mission is to serve food that not only tastes great, but makes people feel happy as well. She values her customers and is committed to her business. Although she has hired people to help out, Binetou does all of the cooking herself. When I asked her if this was a stress for her, she replied, “I love to cook. The restaurant business can be hard but I am so lucky to be doing something that I love. I love to be with people.”

And loves the people she does. “People are very supportive in Victoria. I am proud to live here. Whenever I leave the city, I can feel the difference. It is a wonderful place to live and I am grateful to be here.” Binetou attributes the success of her business to the loyalty of local customers. Most of sales come from repeat customers, many of which refer their friends. She tried to think of her favorite place in the city, but this

was a tough question to answer. “My favorite place? Hard to say – it is called Beautiful British Columbia for a reason.”

During my visit, Binetou served me some soup and vegetarian samosas. They were impeccable. The samosas were both sweet and savory and I definitely left Le Petit Dakar feeling happy. Binetou, you achieved your goal.

I would highly recommend checking out this little gem of a restaurant. Some of their most popular dishes include the Mafe, Damoda, Yassa au Poulet and the Lamb Curry. I am sure anything you order will make your taste buds happy and put a smile on your face. Man, I love locals and I love food – great combination.