The best way to eat an elephant in your path is to cut him up into little pieces

(African Proverb)

One afternoon, following a field trip to a village in the western part of the country, my colleagues suggested we stop at a local restaurant. I was enthusiastic about the opportunity to view life beyond urban Abidjan and sample the food in Western Cote d’Ivoire. Several hours had passed since breakfast and my stomach had begun to growl. I hoped that no one could hear its ever-demanding noises.

Chez Miriam (Miriam’s restaurant) was a squat yellow building a few kilometers to the left of the road on which we were traveling. With squealing tires, the van pulled into the driveway. The driver made a wide arc to avoid hitting a mangy mutt stretched out on the parking lot gravel. The dog raised his head as if to inquire about the commotion, then, returned to his siesta. The group piled out of the van as Miriam came forward to greet us. She wore an easy smile and a voluminous orange and blue boubou. The restaurant’s ambiance was at once friendly and homey. She guided us to a large table covered with a pink plastic tablecloth. Two young girls appeared on each side of the table with large plastic washbowls filled with water into which they poured several packets of Omo laundry detergent. The waitresses reappeared carrying pitchers filled with a murky yellow liquid and ice.

My colleague to the right of me leaned over and whispered, “Jus de gim-gim
The literal translation was ginger juice. I groaned inwardly. Josephine, my cook, had fixed this before and it was refreshing. However, I had to pass on it this time. No beverages with ice for me because of the risk of bacterial contamination. Playing it safe, I ordered bottled water with no ice.

A large bowl of what looked like cream of mushroom soup was placed at this end of the table. I recognized chicken parts within the sauce.

“Sauce pistache avec poulet.” Again, my colleague to the right spoke into my ear. Sauce pistache is made from a seed similar to pumpkin seed. The seeds are roasted and then ground into a powder and used as the base for the sauce. She confirmed that it was being served with chicken. That sauce, she advised, was best eaten with white rice, although some people ate it with foufou. The servers brought out two large steaming bowls of rice and placed one at each end of the table. My colleague motioned to the large bowl that contained a deep orange-red sauce with an oily sheen.

“Sauce graine avec agouti,” she said. “That one is my personal favorite.”

I was as hungry for the information about the food as for the food itself and I hung onto her words as she continued the mini-lecture. Sauce graine originates from the fruit of the palm nut. The meat in the sauce is agouti.

Everything sounded so delicious. But for my ravenous appetite, I might have been tempted to simply bask in the delectable aroma of the sauces. The servers brought out a large platter of what looked like stiff yellow cookie dough. It was foutou, the slightly sweet starch accompaniment for the spicy sauce graine. Boiled pounded cassava and ripe plantain are the principal ingredients in foutou. I had eaten this before with different sauces and enjoyed it. I decided to try the foutou sauce graine.
Everyone began eating with their hands. Having indicated my choice of sauce, the waitress ladled the sauce graine into a wide shallow dish set before me. She placed a mound of the yellow foutou on a small side plate. Using my right hand*, I dipped my fingers into the foutou, moved it into my palm (I copied my colleagues movements as surreptitiously as possible) and rolled it into a ball. Then, I moved the ball to the tip of my fingers, dipped it into the oily red sauce and swept it into my mouth. The sauce’s spicy flavors burst onto my tongue. Ta-Da! I repeated the same movements, this time, capturing a small amount of meat with the sauce. The robust flavor combination brought tears of delight to my eyes. I gave thanks for travel, thanks for working taste buds, and thanks for good cooks the world over. The meat was chewy and moist with a slightly smoky flavor.

“What is this meat, agouti?” In my haste to decide which dish to order, I neglected to ask the origins of the meat. Leaving my colleague on my right to savor her food (which she appeared to be enjoying), I asked this question of the gentleman seated to my left.

“Agouti is bush meat,” he said, “In Cote d’Ivoire, it is a small animal, like a large rat or small guinea pig that the young boys capture in the woods and sell in the market. It is very expensive and very delicious. I believe today they have used smoked agouti. You like it, no?”

I nodded my head; forcing a smile. I told myself that I had enjoyed it before I knew what it was . . . so . .

He beckoned to one of the servers and said a few words to her that I couldn’t hear. The young woman came over to my side, caldron and ladle in hand.
“What did you say to her?”

“Oh, I told her that you are a new guest in our country and should get the choicest piece of agouti meat—which is the head.” He was smiling.

Sure enough, a round dark object, about the size of a computer mouse (it would have fit within the palm of my hand if I were crazy enough to hold it, was fished into the large ladle). The young woman began to pour the sauce along with the agouti’s head into my bowl.

I touched the arm of the server and rendered up my most elegant French: “Thank you. Thank you so much. But, no—I am not the most honorable guest at this table. Please give this delicacy to Monsieur . . .” I paused to look around to see who was the eldest in the group. Gesturing to a white-haired colleague seated across the table, I continued speaking to the server. “This gentleman is certainly more venerable than me and more deserving. Please give him the head of the agouti. Thank you.” The server smiled in agreement and trotted over to the white-haired man.

Having dodged an African-etiquette bullet, I turned back to my headless bush meat parts and devoured my meal.

* The left hand is reserved for less sanitary functions.