



Peanuts:

A story of taste, tradition and culinary versatility

The peanut may be small, but its place in our culinary heritage is mighty, and its potential for innovation, endless write Dr Carmen Muller, Dr Beulah Pretorius & Prof Hettie Schönfeldt.

Few ingredients can claim to be as universally loved and culturally established in South Africa as the peanut. From the corner spaza shop to five-star kitchens, from the braai stand to school lunchboxes, peanuts are everywhere – roasted, boiled, salted, or spread thick on bread. They're a food that bridges generations, provinces, and palates, woven into our national food culture in quiet but powerful ways.

Walk through a busy taxi rank, past street vendors or spaza shops, and you'll catch the unmistakable scent of roasted peanuts drifting through the air. It's a smell that signals comfort, nostalgia, and community, a reminder of long taxi rides, Sunday sports games, and family gatherings. Yet, the same humble peanut that fills little plastic bags on street corners is also finding its way onto modern restaurant plates in sauces, dressings, crusts, and desserts.

That's the beauty of the peanut: a simple ingredient that adapts to any table.

A taste that transcends the table

Peanuts (*Arachis hypogaea*) are more than just a snack. They are a versatile, nutrient-rich ingredient that South Africans have been cooking with for generations. In many households, peanut butter remains a pantry essential – easy to spread, rich in flavour, and filling enough to power a day's work or study.

It is estimated that more than 80% of South African households keep peanut butter in their cupboards, a testament to how embedded it is in daily life.

But, peanut butter is only part of the story. Across the country, peanuts are enjoyed in countless forms: roasted and salted for snacking, boiled and sold warm from the pot, ground into sauces for spinach or morogo, mixed into stews for texture and flavour, crushed into toppings for traditional and

modern desserts, or eaten raw straight from the shell. Few ingredients cross as many culinary boundaries, savoury, sweet, street food, fine dining, with the same ease.

A common thread across cultures

In every South African community, peanuts tell a different story. For some, they're a reminder of childhood, a spoonful of peanut butter after school, or roasted peanuts shared during a long journey. For others, they're tied to rituals, traditional dishes, and family recipes passed down through generations. In the north, peanuts thicken and enrich local vegetable dishes; in coastal towns, they're combined with coconut and spices; in cities, they're blended into smoothies, sauces, and baked goods.

Our research found that most people first encountered peanuts at home – at a parent's or grandparent's table. They were a food of continuity, connecting generations through

flavour. Even if many South Africans no longer consciously recognise peanuts as part of their heritage, their presence across households, ages, and income groups tells a different story: peanuts are as South African as pap or rooibos tea.

An ingredient with endless possibilities

For chefs, peanuts offer both familiarity and creative potential. They can be roasted to bring out nutty depth, blended into creamy bases for sauces, or used as a protein-rich crust for meats and fish. Ground peanuts can thicken soups, replace dairy in creamy dishes, or add richness to vegetable purées. Peanut oil lends a mild, clean taste and high smoke point, making it ideal for frying, while peanut flour adds flavour and nutrition to baked goods and batters.

In desserts, peanuts add contrast and crunch, balancing the sweetness of caramel, honey, or chocolate. In savoury dishes, they act as both binder and flavour enhancer. From fine dining kitchens experimenting with global influences to chefs reimagining local cuisine, the peanut fits effortlessly into every cooking style. Its versatility rivals that of almonds or cashews, but at a fraction of the cost, a true gift for chefs seeking affordable creativity.

Accessible, affordable, and nutrient-dense

One reason peanuts endure in South African kitchens is their practicality. They're available year-round, in every town and city, at prices that make them accessible to all. Whether bought in a jar, a packet, or a plastic bag from a street vendor, peanuts are one of the few ingredients that cross economic divides.

Nutritionally, peanuts are a powerhouse that is rich in plant-based protein, healthy fats, fibre, and essential vitamins. For communities where animal protein is often unaffordable, peanuts quietly play a vital role in improving diet quality and food security. For chefs, that makes them an ingredient with both culinary and ethical value: one that nourishes, sustains, and inspires.

A place in every kitchen

In a landscape where chefs are increasingly challenged to create dishes that are both meaningful and sustainable, peanuts offer a uniquely South African solution. They speak to tradition yet lend themselves beautifully to innovation. Imagine a peanut satay accompanying grilled line fish, a peanut crumble over roasted vegetables, or a modern take on African peanut stew plated for fine dining.

But perhaps most importantly, peanuts connect chefs to the people they cook for. They are a shared flavour memory – something every diner recognises, even when reimagined. They evoke comfort, belonging, and warmth, qualities that make food not only delicious but deeply human.

Celebrating a national ingredient

The South African peanut industry is setting out to remind the nation and its chefs of just how versatile and valuable this small ingredient truly is. With consumers already embracing peanuts in every form, from breakfast to late-night snacks, the next step is creative inspiration: showing how peanuts can elevate everyday cooking while reflecting who we are as a food-loving nation.

As this new culinary series unfolds, SA Chef Magazine will explore the many ways to cook with peanuts and learn about the path they follow from farm to fork, from heritage dishes to modern interpretations. Because behind every handful of peanuts is a story of resilience, resourcefulness, and flavour that belongs to every South African household.

South Africa grows peanuts primarily in the Limpopo, Northern Cape, North West, and Free State provinces, where sandy soils and warm, sunny conditions favour their cultivation. Both smallholder and commercial farmers contribute to the industry, producing peanuts for local consumption and export. The crop is valued for its relatively low water requirements and versatility, making it an important contributor to rural livelihoods and the national agricultural economy.

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