

A haven for creatives, culture and chocolate in West Africa

How the Bushman Café is changing art, culture and the cocoa industry in Ivory Coast



Alain Kablan Porquet, founder of the Bushman Café, holds a fresh cocoa pod in his hand. (Sophie Garcia for The Washington Post)

If you're in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, you may miss a discreet entrance shrouded by local vegetation, which hides a giant red door. It's the entrance to [the Bushman Café](#), a multiuse space with a rooftop restaurant, cafe and an eight-room guesthouse. But people rarely come just to stay, eat and drink.

The location is a gathering place of diverse travelers from across the world who are looking for local art, history and storytelling. "It's like an Ali Baba's Cave of artworks" says DJ Praktika, a close friend of

the founder, Alain Kablan Porquet. Porquet has created a haven reminiscent of a living museum while also trying to revolutionize Ivory Coast's chocolate industry.



The entrance of the Bushman Café in Abidjan. (Sophie Garcia for The Washington Post)



The Bushman Café rooftop. (Sophie Garcia for The Washington Post)

Alain Kablan Porquet, 51, is the son of Ivorian poet Niangoran Porquet and Jeannette Koudou (sister of former Ivorian president Laurent Gbagbo). He began his career working in the banking sector, but found himself unchallenged and disconnected. Porquet later left banking to work in humanitarian aid and then joined the diplomatic corps. Once working in locations such as Geneva and New York, he longed for Ivory Coast. By the end of 2012, he returned to Abidjan to turn what was once cheap and undeveloped land into a place for creatives in the Riviera 4 district.

"At the beginning, it was a house for me — to receive my friends." Porquet explains. "It's the sum of the syncretism of my travels, my encounters, places that I love, with volumes, patina and experience lived." Now a two-story building, the location hosts tourists and passing visitors, providing refuge to those who live on-site.

Story continues below advertisement

In the Bushman Café, there's an inexhaustible inventory of antiques, sculptures, designer lamps and art. A calabash of piles of white stones and plants, each room has its own decor, which Porquet does himself. But most special is Room 5, transformed with the artistic directors of [the Art Comes First collective](#), Sam Lambert and Shaka Maidu.

"Room 5 is the punk part. She's dark. She's black. I love black color," says Porquet. Cloaked by black lace, the room features a four-poster bed, with a variation of the painting "[Origin of the World](#)" by Gustave Courbet hanging above it. Once the room was finished, Nigerian singer-songwriter and guitarist Keziah Jones made it his.



The corridor of the first floor where the guest rooms of the Bushman Café are located. Visitors are invited to stroll or sit down to read in the large armchairs arranged in the halls. (Sophie Garcia for The Washington Post)



Room 8 at the Bushman Café. (Sophie Garcia for The Washington Post)

The guesthouse is far from a classic hotel. The place hosts concerts and one-man shows and often has people gathering in common areas. The proprietors ask guests to be patient, explaining that there's a need for this vibrant cultural space in Ivory Coast.



The Bushman Café's rooftop is a place for congregating and sharing ideas. (Sophie Garcia for The Washington Post)

An 80-year-old New Yorker, Betty, who had been [traveling alone](#) to West Africa since February 2023, said Ghanaian friends recommended the Bushman Café to her. "For an artist or a person who appreciates arts, this is the place to go, and the food is outstanding" she says.

The cafe menu features large dishes served in banana leaves with alloco, attieke and sweet potatoes to accompany chicken "Gaou." They were created by Chef Yacou. Porquet says that the dishes feature local products and produce. At least once a week, a local blues band plays live, and DJ Yo Gio gets the party going with amapiano, hip-hop and afro-house music.



Chef Yacou, the grill manager of the outdoor kitchen of the Bushman Café rooftop restaurant, directs staff. (Sophie Garcia for The Washington Post)



DJ Yo Gio spins at the Bushman Café every Wednesday. (Sophie Garcia for The Washington Post)



Jérôme Fouqueray, a.k.a. DJ Praktika, is not only a friend to Porquet, but also his brother-in-law. Fouqueray has been at the Bushman Café since its inception and was the first DJ to mix there. (Sophie Garcia for The Washington Post)

Story continues below advertisement

If you visit Bushman, come with your sweet tooth because Porquet devotes most of his time to creating his own brand of fine chocolate, Bushman Cocoaïan. Much like the curation of his communal space, he treats cocoa like curating art. He selects carefully to bring out the best.

During his research on cocoa, Porquet wrote to Dutch cocoa researcher Albertus Eskes and discovered he has his own fermentation method. A friendship began, and Eskes stayed for two months at the Bushman Café working with Porquet.



Cocoa expert Albertus Eskes selects the cocoa beans with Porquet for chocolate production in Gagnoa, Ivory Coast. (Sophie Garcia for The Washington Post)

Eskes helped Alain to select the best fine cocoa varieties directly from cocoa fields in Central-West Ivory Coast, and showed him his "Anima" method, which transforms bulk, standard quality cocoa into fine cocoa, without resorting to "Dutching." The process, used by the Western chocolate industry, reduces the bitterness, but with it,

according to Eskes, antioxidants and flavors disappear.

[Africa supplies 70 percent of the world's cocoa beans](#). Porquet's approach aims to produce the best fine cocoa locally, but also to convince other Ivorians to imitate him. "We must fill this historical gap," Porquet said. Instead of Ivory Coast being a resource for wealthier nations, he wants it as a partner and a member of the international conversation in luxury goods, art and food.



François, a cocoa producer in Gagnoa, Ivory Coast, collaborates with Porquet to select the best cocoa trees for his fine chocolate brand, Bushman Cocoaïan. (Sophie Garcia for The Washington Post)



Porquet touches dry cocoa beans. Porquet is one of the first chocolatiers in Africa to use the "Anima method," created by Eskes, which avoids the Dutching process used in the Western chocolate industry. (Sophie Garcia for The Washington Post)



Porquet poses under the sign of his cocoa cooperative. (Sophie Garcia for The Washington Post)

Porquet plans to build a fermentation unit in fall 2024 in Ivory Coast to produce more than 100 tonnes of fine cocoa, which he plans to sell largely as a bulk supply for chocolatiers in Africa and elsewhere. Belgian chocolatiers recently came to the Bushman Café to establish a franchise to sell their fine chocolate in Brussels. "It's a paradigm shift," Porquet said.

Story continues below advertisement

To establish Bushman as a premier location for chocolate, he brought together many in the cocoa sector to create a competition for the best fine chocolate, specifically from Africa. The first World Chocolate Initiative Competition will be held in 2024, and it will aim to challenge the production standards of European chocolate.



A worker prepares cashew nuts coated with chocolate in the kitchen of the Bushman Café. (Sophie Garcia for The Washington Post)

Sitting outside the Bushman on his favorite bench, Porquet recalls one of his personal mottos after telling a visitor to leave with a young cocoa shoot. "Create, mark your time, mark your life and the lives of others."

Sophie Garcia is a photojournalist formerly based in Burkina Faso. She works between Abidjan, [Paris](#) and Dakar. You can follow her on Instagram at: [@sgarcia_photo](#).