South Africans fire up the braai for heritage holiday

Part cooking method, part national obsession, the braai is a shared social custom that cuts across race and social divisions 15 years after the fall of white minority rule.

At sunset, the densely aromatic smoke hangs over the rows of meat - steaks, chops, thick sausages, chicken legs - spitting into coals as Xoli Khubeka readies her tongs.

"You go to other countries, they'll tell you about a barbecue but it's nothing like a braai," the 22-year-old told AFP, giving a tangle of sausages a satisfactory turn in the busy Soweto park.

"It's definitely the only thing that unifies us and shows the Rainbow Nation. Every South African says 'I'm going to a braai'."

Part cooking method, part national obsession, the braai (barbecue in Afrikaans) is a shared social custom that cuts across race and social divisions 15 years after the fall of white minority rule.

So much so that one campaign wants the country on Thursday to unite around the braai on a national holiday meant to mark post-apartheid South Africa's rich cultural diversity.

"The unique thing about the South African braai is that it belongs to all South Africans," explained Tiaan van der Spuy about the concept which has snowballed into a market savvy brand in its third year.

"We have 11 official languages, and we all know the word braai.

"It has this power to bring people together," he told AFP.

"Braai for heritage" has Nobel Peace Prize laureate Desmond Tutu, said to be partial to a braaied T-bone steak, as its patron alongside ambassadors like national cricket skipper Graeme Smith.

"Eat more meat, enjoy each other's company, amidst laughter, peace and harmony. With the aroma of braai in the air... ah nothing could be more comforting," urged Tutu ahead of Thursday.

Braaing is serious business in South Africa. There are champion boerewors (farmers sausage) awards, braai paraphernalia in most supermarkets, and built-in fire stands at braai-friendly beaches and parks. And backyards nationwide.

Those too lazy to build a fire have the option of hugely popular "shisa nyama" (hot meat in isiZulu) eateries, where customers can buy raw cuts of their choice and grill them on coals provided alongside spices and tongs.

"They buy it and they braai themselves," said Tobogo Mogane, 22, whose pint-sized Soweto butchery sells roughly six to seven beef forequarters worth of meat every weekend.

Outlets like the landmark Mzoli's Place in Cape Town draw massive crowds with dedicated grillers in a slick experience dubbed by British chef Jamie Oliver as "the most brilliant meat version of pick'n'mix".

"The whole experience was totally sexy: the heat, the music, the food, the atmosphere and the people," wrote Oliver who dedicated a spread in his magazine earlier this year on shisa nyama.

South Africa's heritage council initially took umbrage with September 24 being renamed "national braai day" as it is an official public holiday meant to mark the nation's diverse heritage after the fall of apartheid in 1994.

"We agreed that they are not going to call it national braai day. They are going to rally the people of South Africa to say 'let's braai for heritage'," the council's spokesman Danny Goulkan told AFP.

Marketers have lapped up the concept for advertising campaigns.

It is active on Facebook and Twitter. And even the world-famous Soweto Gospel Choir is on YouTube adding their vocals to the catchy commissioned song "Our Heritage".

Surrounded by a sea of braaiers with expertly-stocked cooler boxes, pots of maize porridge and tubs of relish in the Soweto park, Khubeka said another day should have been chosen and not the heritage holiday.

"It's like taking Christmas Day and calling it national braai day. It's removing the meaning behind it," the recent economics graduate said.

But when asked what plans she has for Thursday, she laughed and admitted: "We're probably going to wear something African and braai."

Sapa-AFP