

Harrar Café, a little known gem In West Orange

West Orange – On a side street in what would be considered an inconspicuous spot, situated between a furniture store and a soon to be dentist office, is a little known gem in West Orange, the Harrar Café. This Ethiopian restaurant is small, seating about 24-30, and modestly decorated with Ethiopian coffee pots and cups, and an assortment of ornaments and simple pictures depicting the culture. Its name and décor certainly typifies a café, but don't let the façade fool you, as the variety and quality of the Ethiopian dishes on the menu say "restaurant".

As one of the few Ethiopian restaurants in the area, and the only one in West Orange, co-owner, Terence Richards says "Those in the know, know that this is the place to go for authentic food."

Richards explained the Harrar Café takes its name from the city in Ethiopia, where drinking coffee originated. And in fact, the restaurant started life about three and half years ago, as a traditional Ethiopian coffee and teahouse. And to add credence to the authenticity claim, it continues the practice of holding the traditional coffee ceremony, on Sunday afternoons, between 12-2 pm. Open to all, the ceremony consists of roasting and grinding the coffee beans, through to the serving of the coffee from a Jemina, a traditional clay coffee pot. All of this takes place while seated in a circle on the floor.

Harrar Café serves a small neighborhood of Ethiopian and Sudanese, but Richards says it also draws people from other areas of northern New Jersey and is increasingly attracting a more culturally diverse clientele.

Although, mainly Ethiopian food is served, for the less adventurous there are also some traditional American favorites such as meat loaf, fried chicken, and Maryland crab cakes. This combination of foods is well suited to the restaurant's owners, Terence Richards a Newark native and Lulita Mamo, an immigrant from Ethiopia. These two are true partners in business and life.

Mamo came to the US four and half years ago to continue her studies, and found employment at the Harrar Café. When the business became available for sale, Mamo, along with other family members, purchased the establishment.



Richards simply had a passion for cooking. While working as an engineer for 18 years, he started Vonda's catering on the side. He then took his passion further and committed to his catering business full-time.

Mamo and Richards met socially, and at an opportune time combined their businesses. The initial focus was on the catering business and the teahouse, but it has now evolved into the restaurant.

Mamo is the main chef, although Richards admits that, unlike in traditional Ethiopian culture where men do not get involved in the cooking, he also has to help out in the kitchen.

Harrar Café serves many of the staples of the Ethiopian diet, which includes beef, chicken, lamb, salmon and shrimp, and a wide selection of vegetarian dishes. "We have to be aware of both Christian and Muslim religious and cultural holidays," explained Richards, "as many of our customers adhere to the common practice of only eating a vegetarian diet at certain times."

While Ethiopian food tends to be a little spicy, for the faint of heart like myself, the heat levels can be adjusted. I had a sampling of some of the most common dishes, which included Yebere Tibs (\$12.00), a beef stew, seasoned with onions, tomatoes and spices, which was tender and flavorful.

Of the vegetarian selection, my favorites were the Kik Alecha (\$6.00), pureed yellow split peas, simmered with

onions and garlic which had a nice smooth texture with nice bites of peas. Also the Missir Wot (\$6.00), lentils in house sauce which was thick and provided an unusual exotic flavor.

Atkilt Wot (\$6.00) is a mixture of cabbage, carrots, and potatoes with Abesha herbs, which provides a nice mixture of textures if somewhat heavy.

All of this is served on and with Injera, a fermented flat bread, made from Teff, a type of wheat. This principal part of the Ethiopian diet is light and airy, if a little doughy and slightly sticky, and as Richards explained, is used to scoop up the various other foods served. Like many countries in West Africa, Ethiopians use their hands, or to be more specific, their right hand to eat. "Carb" lovers like myself will enjoy this tasty and filling staple. The restaurant also does a brisk retail trade in this bread, which is made on the premises, and sold in packs of eight for \$5.00

Dessert lovers will be a little disappointed, as Mamo explained, desserts are not commonly eaten in this culture, and so the choices are limited, but there is a small selection of cakes, and an assortment of vegan cookies.

Coffee, tea, and soft drinks are available, including a mango smoothie, but alcoholic beverages on a BYOB (bring your own bottle) basis.

There is also a breakfast menu serving a blend of both Ethiopian and American cultures, such as the Harrar Eggs (\$3.50), scrambled eggs with tomatoes, onions, and green chili peppers, served with bread or injera. But if the basic buttermilk pancake is your fancy, that is also available.

Although the restaurant has existed for a number of years, it is only now that Mamo and Richards are really focusing on publicizing this side of the business. "Our customer base is expanding and we hope to expand the business a little too."

He acknowledges that the existing space is small and concedes that they may have to move to new premises if the business continues to grow.

Harrar Café, 335 Valley Road, West Orange, NJ 07052, 973.325.8300. Opening hours: Wednesday to Saturday 10 am-9 pm, and Sunday 10 am-6 pm.