

The New York Times

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April 12, 2009

DINING | SOUTH ORANGE

An Ethiopian Attraction, and a Cafe Is Born

By [DAVID CORCORAN](#)



AH, fate. One moment you're at an insurance office, paying your bill like an ordinary citizen, and the next moment — well, let Terence Richards tell it.

"I practiced engineering for 17 years," said Mr. Richards, 46, the chef and co-owner of the sweet, unassuming Harrar Cafe in South Orange. "But I had a passion for cooking, and at some point I decided I'm going to give this cooking thing a chance. I had a catering business in Piscataway. Went to pay my insurance bill one day and happened across this Ethiopian [coffee](#) and teahouse"

He paused. "I have to admit she was sitting outside, and she did catch my eye."

She was Lulit Mamo, a recent immigrant from Ethiopia, where her family ran a roadhouse restaurant. She had plenty of recipes in her head, and Mr. Richards was smitten — not just by Ms. Mamo but by the cuisine of her homeland.

Needless to say, they are married now and together own Harrar Cafe (the name refers to an Ethiopian coffee-growing region), which is two and a half years old. If you have yet to experience this cuisine, you ought to stop by.

Walled off through history by water and mountains, Ethiopia has developed a singular style of cooking and eating. Long-simmered stews float to the table on fragrant gusts of herbs and spices — fenugreek, rosemary, cinnamon, cardamom, cayenne.

The defining feature, though, is injera, the spongy, fermented flatbread that takes the place of cutlery. Portions of stew, in earth-toned yellows and browns and deep greens, are ladled onto wide rounds of bread, which you tear and use as a scoop. Extra rounds, rolled up like fancy napkins, sit alongside. It's all very communal.

Prices, like every aspect of the experience here, are gentle. Beyayenetu, a combination of four vegetable stews — lentils, yellow split peas, collard greens and a cabbage-carrot-potato mixture called atkilt wot — is all of \$12. The legumes come out looking like baby food, but they have mouth feel and spicy heat; the greens and the cabbage mixture have more crunch, along with a potent overlay of onions and garlic.



You can go all the way up to \$20 for goden tibs, two brontosaurus-size beef ribs grilled and topped with browned onions, but I wouldn't if I were you: the meat is tough and hard to separate from the bone.

Other meat and seafood entrees are more stewlike, and Mr. Richards's liberal use of the spice chest gives them deep currents of flavor. We loved shrimp tibs, in which the juicy shrimp were brightly flavored from [tomatoes](#) and lemon juice. (The word tibs refers to grilling or sautéing, the word wot to stewing, but there is considerable overlap.)

Ingudai tibs is meatless but meaty: thick slices of portobello mushroom, sautéed with onions, garlic, tomatoes and what Mr. Richards said is a rotating cast of spices — mild or hot, to the customer's liking.

Among appetizers, the two most intriguing are based on injera. In yetimatim fitfit, the bread is chopped and tossed with tomatoes, onions and a vinaigrette; it comes out looking like a bowl of Wheatena, but the taste and texture suggest sourdough pasta. Kategna injera, in which rollmops of bread are toasted and mixed with intensely spicy berbere, makes for compulsive eating.

Mr. Richards takes a few detours into his culinary past, with soul-food offerings like crab cakes and grilled salmon. We tried the salmon; let's just say Ethiopian was a good move for him. But his banana pudding is worth a try — creamy but surprisingly light, like a banana tiramisù.

Harrar has the shoestring feel of a first restaurant, with exposed brick, miscellaneous pan-African décor and, on both of our visits, a lone waitress who sometimes struggled to keep pace. But its flaws are easy to forgive; what it lacks in elegance it more than makes up in pluck and charm. Call me smitten.