

# The Star-Ledger

## Harrar Ethiopian Cafe

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Tasty bread makes the difference at Ethiopian eatery

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Ethiopian food is a cuisine that takes some getting used to. To be honest, this has not been my favorite food in the past, so Harrar Café has languished on my Taste list for a couple of years now. But I wanted to meet my friend Sandy for lunch, and she loves Ethiopian food, so I suggested we meet at this very pretty eat-in/take-out/retail storefront in South Orange Village on a Saturday afternoon in September.

Not expecting anything great food-wise, but looking forward to good company, we settled in and met Lulit Mamo, a lovely young woman from Harrar, Ethiopia, who owns the café with her husband, Terence Richards. Sandy ordered, and we got to chatting.

We had ordered beyayenetu (\$9 lunch, \$11 dinner), a combination of four vegetables, including missir wot (spicy, slow-cooked red lentils), kik alitcha (peas in garlic and ginger), gomen wot (stewed collard greens with shallots, onions and garlic) and atkilt wot (cabbage, carrots and potatoes simmered with ginger). Sandy had also asked for Harrar doro tibs (\$12, pieces of chicken breast marinated in lemon juice, sautéed in spices, onions, tomatoes) and kebe (clarified butter with cardamom and other spices), but she asked for a boiled egg that would have come with a spicier chicken dish she really wanted, but I had declined because well, I had been too chicken.

Mamo brought us a large platter that had only a layer of ingera on it. Ingera is a thin, flat, spongy bread — the mainstay of Ethiopian food, and you use it to scoop up your food. Then she brought out our dishes, put a scoop of each one on the ingera and gave us each two large slices of the bread.

We peeled off small hunks of the ingera, scooped up chicken, and I knew immediately why I hadn't enjoyed Ethiopian food up till that moment. It was the bread. Every bite of food you eat is wrapped in ingera, and all the ingera I had ever eaten before had tasted sour. But Harrar's wasn't.

For the first time, I could taste the seasoning in the food: the berbere blend of cardamom, coriander, red pepper, garlic, fenugreek and other Ethiopian spices, a hint of cloves, a kick of green chilies. This was delicious. Everything possible at Harrar is imported from Ethiopia, and the starter for ingera — much like a sourdough bread starter — comes from Mamo's family in Harrar, her home state.

On the menu, there are several appetizers to choose from, and we tried fitfit (\$6), a traditional cold dish of tossed chopped tomatoes, onions, green peppers and pieces of ingera. There's also azifa (\$5, a salad of lentils, onions, green chilies and lime juice) and sambousas (\$5, fried pastry shells filled with lentils, peas and potatoes or spinach and cheese).

By the way, if you get a chance, ask to try ayib, an Ethiopian cheese. If you want something heartier than vegetables, chicken and cheese, Harrar has two seafood dishes, two lamb dishes and 10 beef dishes.

One of the beef dishes is the traditional kitfo (\$15), Ethiopian steak tartare, seasoned with mitmita and kebe and served with ayib. Mitmita is another spice blend like berbere, and Mamo says you can order kitfo cooked, if you prefer.

Scooping your food with ingera is fun, and it's all part of the customs of the culture. There are two traditional eating tables at Harrar — called mesobs — and you can request to sit there if you like. You sit on low, padded stools and your food platters are placed right into carved-out portions of the tables.

If you sit at a mesob — or even if you don't — you may want to indulge in an Ethiopian coffee ceremony (\$20 for four). Raw coffee beans from Harrar are roasted in the kitchen, and then brought to you for your approval. Then the beans are ground, put in a gemina (clay coffee pot) and boiled with water. It's then placed in small earthen coffee cups and each of you drinks three cups. The coffee is very strong and, because of the lengthy process, it must be ordered before your meal.

Harrar also has Ethiopian spiced tea and a non-alcoholic drink called honey wine. As for retail, you can purchase eight large pieces of ingera for \$6 or one pound of raw Harrar coffee beans for \$5.

Richards says customers should not worry about food being too strongly seasoned; every item on the menu except for one chicken dish can be prepared mild, medium or spicy.

Mamo is expecting their first child in two weeks, but Richards will be holding down the fort. He was a professional chef long before his wife taught him the art of Ethiopian cooking. After graduating Johns Hopkins University and spending 18 years as a material sciences engineer, his passion for food took him on a different path. He also owns Vonda's Catering, and has been known to cater events for up to 800 people.

As for Mamo, some of her family still lives in Harrar, where they run the restaurant complex her parents started and she managed before coming to the U.S. five years ago. She opened Harrar in West Orange three years ago, then met and married Richards when he came into the café as a customer. They moved the shop to South Orange in August.

If you haven't tried Ethiopian food yet, it's difficult to describe the taste or compare it to anything that might be familiar. It's very different, but I really recommend giving it a try at Harrar. The flavors are alive, the traditions are unique and learning about a new cuisine is always fun.

For all you lovers of Ethiopian food, Harrar is a find. You may want to buy some ingera to take home and scoop up some food of your own. I'm not sure anyone can duplicate the coffee ceremony, but I wonder if ingera could be the new wrap?