

## 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.