

Ethiopian is hands-on fun

[AMY PATAKI](#)
DINING OUT

Ethiopian House

★★★

HOURS: Noon to 1 a.m., seven days

SEATS: 60

CHEF: Belaynesh Shibeshi

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS: No

LOCATION: 4 Irwin Ave., 416-923-5438

It's coming up to 20 years since Bob Geldof urged us to "Feed the world."

Famine was ravaging northern Ethiopia. One million people were starving to death. Geldof convinced fellow pop stars to record the charity single "Do They Know It's Christmas." It struck a chord. Band Aid topped the charts, raising millions for famine relief.

Times changed. Ethiopians switched from fighting hunger to fighting each other, and the wars drove refugees to Toronto. But the Band Aid image of starving Africans remains stronger than the reality.

"They have food in Ethiopia?" queried one acquaintance when told of this review.

Yes, they have food in Ethiopia. And it's good. Toronto has dozens of Ethiopian restaurants, one of the richest such concentrations in North America. Most of them are of the no-frills variety; a couple of tables, fluorescent lighting, limited menu. These cater almost exclusively to expats, who pop in for a quick meal and a long chat with fellow diners. Some aren't even restaurants, but grocery stores serving home-cooked meals.

The remaining Ethiopian restaurants are broader in their appeal, attracting value-conscious students, adventurous vegetarians and other culinary explorers. Even these establishments can be off-putting, like the good but dingy Addis Ababa in Parkdale, or the customer-service nightmare that is Queen of Sheba on Bloor St. W., which has one of



The coffee ceremony, complete with frankincense, is the centrepiece of Ethiopian hospitality.

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boasts going.

"If we cannot stuff you up enough, no one else in the city could," reads the Queen of Sheba menu.

Ethiopian cuisine is certainly filling. It centres on gently spiced stews made from meat, pulses or vegetables. Meals come with injera, a sourdough flatbread that some people swear swells in the stomach, necessitating a long nap to aid digestion or at least many cups of famed Ethiopian coffee. (See sidebar.)

The food is simple. Stews made with red chilies are called *wot*; those that are not are *alicha*. Meat is beef (as in the chili-spiked beef tartare called *kitfo*), chicken or mutton. There are lots of vegetarian dishes, due in part to the many meatless days mandated by the Coptic Church. While *The Oxford Companion To Food* says "Ethiopian food uses the largest variety of spices in sub-Saharan Africa," I've never tasted any evidence of that around here. The flavours are plain and unvaried, dominated by butter, onions and olive oil.

The best Ethiopian experience — food, atmosphere and service — can be found at Ethiopian House, a stone's throw from Yonge and Wellesley.

Ethiopian House has all the things you'd expect to find at an ethnic restaurant — folk art, authentic soundtrack, the odd goatskin — and quite a few that you don't, such as clean bathrooms and English-speaking waiters who are quick to fill in the blanks about the food.

Tables are set simply with napkins and moist towelettes. There's no cutlery, since you eat Ethiopian food with your hands. And you needn't bring a lot of cash, since meals rarely cost more than \$15 a person.

Eating at Ethiopian House involves a number of pleasant rituals. The first is the frankincense that perfumes the downstairs dining room (the upstairs smoking room caters more to the expat crowd). It's pure gift-of-the-Magi stuff, the scent of Eastern Orthodox services. You don't so much breathe it in as swallow it, the thick smoke coating your throat. It's hard to know whether the incense heightens or dulls the taste of the food.

After washing your hands (another key ritual that should be practised universally), order lunch. It's easy to choose: the vegetarian combo platter (\$6.50) or the meat combo platter (\$6.95). Both arrive on a large enamelled tin platter overhung with injera: from the side, it looks like a pie crust before trimming. From the top, it looks like an oversize artists' palette, the various stews daubed on like so many colours of paint.

This is when the fun begins. Tear off a piece of injera from the edge (extra bread is folded on a separate plate) and use it to scoop the food into your mouth. Experts use large strips to swiftly dab, pinch and fold around the stews. If you're not soon getting the hang of it, so what? No one's deducting points for technique.

You eat everything using injera, even the fresh green salad laced with a zippy vinaigrette. Injera is an Ethiopian staple, made from teff, an ancient grain high in iron. It's served at room temperature, a thick crepe with a pronounced sourdough tang (less so at Ethiopian House than at other local restaurants). One side is always riddled with holes, like a crumpet.

Eating is communal. I share one lunch with Brad Long, executive chef of the Air Canada Centre. I've invited him along as much for his entertaining company (I met him years before becoming a restaurant critic) as for his take on Ethiopian food, a new cuisine for him.

"This is the perfect food for a cold winter's day," he pronounces as he tastes his way around the plate.

Homemade white cheese, salty and bland, is crumbled in the centre. There are excellent collard greens, boiled until soft and lightly kissed with garlic. Strips of mild cabbage are braised with carrots and potatoes. There are even tender green beans cooked with tomatoes in the Italian style, a reminder that Italy occupied Ethiopia from 1936 to 1941. "That's a very Italian way of cooking beans," Long says of the dish. "They render them right down to mush."

Texture isn't an issue with the beef dishes, such as the *kitfo* (which we hardly touch) and the stir-fry called *tibs*. It's the blandness, which diners can rectify with a pinch or two of potent condiments.

"Whoo hoo," crows Long after sampling the berbere, a powdered blend of red chilies, cardamom, coriander and fenugreek, amongst other exotic spices.

The green purée of jalapenos lurking in another dish is similar to what Long cooks with at the ACC.

A dose of berbere also improves the five mild stews made from pulses. They range in texture from moderately smooth to smooth, and in colour from yellow to brown. I find it hard to tell the difference between them, colour aside. Long likes "the way they take on flavours."

He also likes the experience. "It's communal, it's fun to eat with your fingers. This is their food and they're proud of it."

Rightly so. It's time for Ethiopia to feed the world.