

AN ETHIOPIAN SURPRISE IN BANGKOK

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Food as Ambassador

Perhaps the best ambassador a nation can offer to the people of other countries is that nation's food. No protocol, no bowing, no high-sounding words are needed, just good and honest taste. To know what a nation savors on its tables is to gain great insight regarding the heart and soul of that nation's people.

So, imagine my surprise when some Australian and Sudanese colleagues from the United Nations outpost joined me to a delightful little Ethiopian restaurant in the heart of Bangkok, Thailand. I'm sure they were trying to be kind since I am of Ethiopian heritage. Well, they were far more than kind. I wound up eating some of the best Ethiopian cuisine I have experienced outside of the motherland itself.

World Class Partners

As I said, the restaurant is small: Seven tables. And it is very, very clean – an Ethiopian requirement. A very cozy and quaint place, the pleasing art, the great fixture accents, and the strong colors make it warm and inviting. Making it even more inviting is the especially friendly and gracious service.



The restaurant is owned by two Ethiopians – Ambese who came to Bangkok via Virginia, U.S.A. and Taye Berhanu – who came to Bangkok direct from Ethiopia. Taye who served us is probably in his mid-twenties and very gracious and polite.

Ambese and Taye have brought their strong sense of Ethiopian etiquette and hospitality to this Asian capital where they serve the local members of the various African communities. Among them are folk from Ghana, Sudan, Nigeria, Ethiopia (of course), and Cameroon. Americans, Australians, and Canadians, previously exposed to Ethiopian cuisine, are welcome guests at Ethiopia Restaurant as well when they get a hankering for Bozena Shiro, Awaze Tibes, or some other Ethiopian delicacy.

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Menu from the Motherland

The menu at Ethiopia Restaurant could bring tears to the eyes (in more ways than one) to an Ethiopian starving for a taste from the motherland. That evening we began with the

special Kittfo Ethiopian Beef Tartar. It was exquisite beef, very lean and finally chopped. It was served with mitmita, a spiced chili powder. What makes it so special is another spice that is especially prepared for Kittfo and made up of organic spices imported from Ethiopia. Since the beef and spice are served as is, or raw, it's a perfect test for the skill of the kitchen. Ethiopia Restaurant passed with flying colors.

Bozeno Shiro was our next dish. A stew made primarily of ground chickpeas or broad beans, it is prepared with minced onions and garlic. Depending on regional variations, ginger, chopped tomatoes, and chili peppers can be thrown into the sauce. The chickpeas, along with cubes of lean beef, are simmered in a berbere sauce, which could best be characterized as an African barbecue sauce made up of cumin seeds, cloves, cardamom pods, and allspice, among other ingredients. The delightful dish was cooked and served on traditional Ethiopian clay dishes.

Awaze Tibes followed and I do believe it is the best I have ever had, with all apologies to cooks in the Ethiopian motherland. The dish consists of small cuts of lamb that have been marinated in herbs from the vast Ethiopian spice cabinet. It is then cooked with tomatoes, garlic, berbere sauce, and onion. The way it was served was fantastic.

An Exquisite Ethiopian Ending

Ambese and Taye prepared an exquisite ending to our Ethiopian feast – the coffee ceremony. My heart was touched at how Taye carefully followed all the traditions necessary to keep the practice alive. He obviously cares deeply about Ethiopian tradition and that included the burning of traditional frankincense and gum Arabic over a tiny charcoal stove as he prepared the brew. Of course, he prepared the coffee in the traditional Jabena pottery boiling pot, with its spherical base, long neck, and pouring spout, its long handle connecting to the base and the neck. The rich coffee was poured into cups of a kind you would find in any good Ethiopian coffee shop.

Needless to say, I left Ethiopia Restaurant feeling a little bit homesick. On the other hand, it was delightful to have discovered a place, however small, so deeply connected to Ethiopia and its foods and traditions. The sprawling Asian capital of Bangkok is known for its diversity; it's nice to know that the diversity includes Ethiopia. Through Ethiopia Restaurant, Ethiopia is offering its wonderful food as an ambassador to the peoples of the Orient.

Ethiopia Restaurant

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