

## RESTAURANT REVIEW

## Mesob

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Communal meals are the heartbeat of Ethiopian culture, and injera—grilled sourdough pancakes made from a tiny grain called teff—is its lifeblood. Injera serves as plate and, torn into pieces, as fork and spoon for the slow-cooked stews central to Ethiopian cuisine.

Mesob (meh-SOBE) is named for the woven, mushroom-shaped tables Ethiopian families gather around. Diners at Mesob can sit at actual mesobs in the storefront windows. The restaurant, owned by sisters Berekti and Akberet Mengistu, is staffed almost entirely by family. Sister Hiwot regularly delivers the highly prized pepper-spice mixes, critical to Ethiopian cuisine, straight from Addis Ababa.

The scent of freshly ground cloves and cinnamon fill the nose as you enter. Then the eye falls on the Ethiopian tapestries and handmade leather papooses. Lamps with shades of parchment-like leather inscribed with the Ge' ez alphabet illuminate the bar with amber haloes.

Mesob's menu could overwhelm first-timers if not for its instructive glossary and heat ratings. Entrée portions are large, and side dishes are an essential part of the fun, so don't over-order. That said, it's hard to pass up preludes like kategna injera, toasted strips of injera basted with berbere spice mix and clarified butter. Ayib bemitmita, a cool, creamy farmer's cheese dusted with mitmita (a hotter variation of berbere), is refreshing despite the higher heat. The standout preamble is ingudai tibs, marinated Portobello sautéed with caramelized red onion, garlic, and tomato.

Akberet, the chef, produces beef entrées with big bangs of flavor. Tibs wat (cubed beef simmered with awaze spice paste) was consistently moist and smoky. Minchet abish aletcha wat (chopped beef sautéed in spiced butter) was akin to a sloppy joe, but sweeter and more vibrant.

In Ethiopia, seafood is generally limited to freshwater varieties, but Mesob's adaptation of chunky swordfish tibs was well-prepared and reminiscent of a comforting cacciatore. Succulent shrimp tibs might be Mesob's finest dish.

Chicken and lamb were flavorful but inconsistent. Doro tibs (chicken) was moist the first time, dry on a repeat visit. Lega tibs (boneless lamb) was tasty but sinewy. Yebeg aletcha wat (tender lamb chunks) was the better of the two lamb dishes, but the unexpected bones made scooping with injera awkward.

Vegetables are a strong point. Nearly half the menu is vegan (no meat, dairy, or eggs) and closely follows the Lenten recipes of Ethiopia's Coptic Christian Church. The shiro (puréed split peas) had the

warm, pumpkiny essence of autumn. Atkilt wat (green beans simmered with carrots) and tikile gomen (a chunky cabbage and potato stew) were deliciously comforting. Lentils, an Ethiopian staple, bask in a sharp red-pepper sauce (miser wat) and are also served as a chilled salad (azifa) delicately dressed with olive oil, parsley, and a hint of jalapeño.

Excellent Western-style desserts from Tart & Soul in Montclair include moist almond cake with strawberry sauce, rich espresso chocolate torte, and pistachio halvah with fig sauce.

The ancient proverb, Buna dabo naw, or “Coffee is our bread,” demonstrates Ethiopia’s affection for its prized Arabica beans. They produce a robust brew that is nuttier and less biting than espresso. Poured from a gourd-like pot and served in festive porcelain cups, Mesob’s coffee is a must.

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