

New Jersey

Homey Ethiopian, From Sister Chefs

By [DAVID CORCORAN](#)

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YOU go to a restaurant for a good time and a good meal — not to be reminded of bitter things like war and repression. Still, it's instructive and moving to learn the story behind Mesob, a restaurant so sweet, calm and unassuming you'd never guess its painful, storm-tossed origins.



Alan Zale for The New York Times
TABLE FOR TWO At Mesob, which Ethiopian table pictured, food is served on a flatbread and eaten by hand

Berekti Mengistu, its co-owner and guiding spirit, fled to [New Jersey](#) from Ethiopia in 1982, at 16. To this day, she does not know what became of her father, a businessman who was caught up in the genocidal Red Terror of the dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam (no relation). “So many people disappeared,” she said in a resigned voice the other day.

Ms. Mengistu went to live with an older brother in Somerset County. She fell in with New Jersey's tiny Ethiopian community (centered in East Brunswick and the Oranges) and began cooking at weekend gatherings. After her older sister Akberet, another talented cook, joined her in 1999, she recalled, “People began saying, ‘Why don't you two open a restaurant?’ ” And in October 2003, that is what they did.

The restaurant's name, pronounced meh-SOHB, refers to a toadstool-shaped wicker dining table popular in Ethiopia. (The restaurant has several, though most diners sit at standard tables.) Remove the mesob's peaked cap, and there's a round surface for the platter that holds the injera, the flat, spongy sourdough bread that is the delivery vehicle for practically all Ethiopian food.

No forks or knives, please. You order stewed meats, seafood or vegetables with fetching names like doro key wat (chicken legs) and lega tibs (boned, marinated and spiced leg of lamb); they are arranged in individual servings atop one or two large injeras for the entire table, like fragrant hills on a round, flat plain.

Break off a piece of bread. Think of it as an edible scoop for wat or tibs. Or gomen, collard greens simmered in an herbed sauce. Or butcha, puréed chickpeas with a texture like highly

spiced polenta. Taste. Repeat. Berekti Mengistu or one of her staff will stop by from time to time to answer questions, to keep you well supplied with injera, or just to make sure you're enjoying yourself.

It is that kind of place. When you enter, you're enveloped by the homey yet exotic aromas of roasting coffee and spices. The long, narrow space, with seating for 85, is done in restful shades of cinnamon and cream. On the walls are elaborate decorative garments that turn out to be vests fitted for carrying babies.

Two of the appetizers are based on injera: kategna injera, in which the bread is liberally dosed with a hot-pepper powder akin to paprika, then rolled and sliced into half-inch-thick rounds, like rollmops; and timatim fitfit (say it five times fast), in which injera is combined with a spicy-cool mix of tomatoes, onions, garlic, jalapeño pepper, lemon and olive oil. Or there are pleasant salads based on lentils and portobello mushrooms.

Without the injera, the entrees would be nothing special — just well-spiced, long-simmered versions of the stews your grandmother made. Indeed, the chicken breast and the leg of lamb came out a bit overdone and dry, as perhaps your grandmother's did. But much is redeemed by that bread, with its wonderful absorbency and its soulful buttermilky undertone. No wonder the restaurant goes through several hundred pans of it a night.

Dessert is not an Ethiopian thing, but there are some imports — a dense, perfumed mini-loaf of sesame-and-pistachio halewa (halvah) and a fully acceptable chocolate torte made by a local baker. By this point, though, you may be too full for anything but Ethiopian coffee or tea, and they are the real deal: the tea richly scented with the cardamom and cloves you smelled when you arrived; the coffee black and grainy and almost chewy. There is one thing you will certainly not want, and that is to leave.

Mesob
515 Bloomfield Avenue
Montclair
(973) 655-9000
www.mesobrestaurant.com

VERY GOOD

THE SPACE A narrow but comfortable downtown storefront decorated with intriguing, carefully chosen examples of Ethiopian folk art. Wheelchair-accessible.

THE CROWD Couples and families, casually dressed.

THE STAFF Exceptionally warm and attentive.

THE BAR Bring your own wine or beer.

THE BILL Lunch entrees, \$9 to \$12. Dinner entrees, \$13 to \$26. All major credit cards are accepted.

WHAT WE LIKE Kategna injera (peppered, rolled flatbread), timatim fitfit (flatbread with spicy diced tomatoes), azifa (lentil salad), butcha (puréed chickpeas), ingudai tibs (marinated mushrooms); doro key wat or doro aletcha wat (stewed chicken legs, mild or spicy), gomen (collard greens), atkilt wat (stewed green beans), shiro (puréed split peas), tikile gomen (cabbage and potatoes); Ethiopian coffee and tea.

IF YOU GO Closed Monday. All other days: lunch, 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.; dinner, 3 to 11 p.m. Reservations are recommended Fridays and Saturdays. On-street parking is limited; Montclair has several municipal garages and lots, including one behind the restaurant.

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