

EATING OUT

OUR RATING SYSTEM ★★★★★ Excellent ★★★★★ Very good ★★ Good ★ Fair

Ethiopian restaurant is full of surprises

Mesob

515 Bloomfield Ave., Montclair,
(973) 655-9000.

Hours: lunch, 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.
Tuesday through Sunday; dinner, 3 to
10 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday.

By Teresa Politano

FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Those in a midsummer dessert-and-coffee mood would not likely think first of dropping in to an Ethiopian restaurant. Yet Mesob in Montclair has a sweet and dense almond cake so punctuated with nuts that you won't be able to complete a sentence, plus a lovely cappuccino ice cream. And coffee? The coffee here is a story unto itself, part ancient ritual, part performance art, all dark and intense, served to pamper.

If Mesob is on your radar screen

at all, it's likely there as a destination restaurant, one of those places to go when you are feeling adventurous. Indeed, the decor reinforces that conception. Much is here to engage the curiosity-seeker; the artwork is stunning, offering practically a museum's tour of tapestries, leatherwork, artifacts. It's soothing here, in an ancient way, a hushed-toned way, a museum way . . .

But there on the menu are cabbage and potatoes, for goodness' sake. And there at a table by the door is a happily munching 5-year-old, whose mother, all crisp and Lily Pulitzer summery, is taking pictures, as if it's his birthday celebration.

The wait staff at this sophisticated BYO is clearly trained to help you connect the dots between New Jersey and Ethiopia. "Is it your first time here? May I

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make a suggestion?"

If it is (and if you are a meat-eater), you'll be guided to the restaurant's meat sampler (\$21.95) - a perfect choice, too, for critics. Bluntly put, you get five meats and three vegetables.

The meats, prepared family-style, are stewed versions of favorites that transcend cultures. We ate simmered lamb, a spicy beef stew, a cubed beef stew and a mild beef stew. We ate chicken breast sauteed with red onions and garlic. We ate cabbage and potatoes, green beans and carrots and marinated portobello mushrooms (which are well worth their extra cost). '

Everything we tried was quite

pleasant, but we were impressed more when we ventured off the sampler. The shrimp (\$22.95), sauteed with red onions and fresh tomato, was so light as to almost seem airborne.

Once you've made sense of the menu, then, the real culture shock is not so much the food, but the way it is served. The entire meal comes on a giant round piece of spongy Ethiopian bread (think savory crepe). And no silverware. The idea is to gather the food with tire bread, family-style. Which, of course, is nice, and friendly and communal and all, but, as Americans, we worry about such things as double dipping

and too many carbs.

But if you ask nicely (and they'll probably hate me for telling you this), you will be given one of the forks they have reserved in the back. (And even though this was admittedly an ugly American thing to do, they were cordial about it.)

Order the urn of Ethiopian coffee (\$14), and the beans brought to the table for your approval, as if they were a revered vintage.

The coffee that returns (in an urn that appears lovingly ancient, and is quite heavy) is dark, rich and vibrant, but also crisp, without a trace of oils or even the faint hint of aftertaste. It is poured, appropriately, in tiny and oh-so-delicate china cups. And those desserts - the sweet almond cake (\$7.95) comes with an intense raspberry sauce, and the cappuccino crunch (\$5.95) is rich and creamy.