

Breaking bread

Uptown's Demera is the perfect intro to Ethiopian fare

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

Unless you're a foie gras duck farmer, shoving food in another's mouth isn't exactly a common thing in America. In Ethiopia, it's an act of love and friendship.

At an Ethiopian communal table, a friend will break off a piece of injera—a traditional, spongy sour flatbread—with their right hand, wrap it around meat or a stewed vegetable dish and feed the whole thing to a friend or family member. This is called a gursha, and it's said that the bigger the gursha presented, the tighter the friendship.

This is just one of the many rich Ethiopian culinary traditions that most Chicagoans likely don't know—and if you haven't tried Ethiopian fare, you're missing out. Ethiopia is known for incredible honey and some of the best coffee in the world. Outside of Indian food, there may be no better celebration of aromatic spices than the stews (wot) and sauteed meats (tibs) from Ethiopian cooks.

If you're looking to lose your Ethiopian food virginity—or an experienced foodie looking to reacquaint yourself—you can't do better than Demera in Uptown, located right across from and bathed in the flashbulb marquee light of The Green Mill.

Demera chef/owner Tigist Reda's experience crafting meals started decades before she opened the restaurant in 2007. Reda was born in Ethiopia and was the seventh of eleven children. "We had to start cooking early," she said. "Nothing was packaged. You buy raw materials. When we wanted flour, we cleaned the wheat and ground it ourselves. We sun-dried the spices. I was a good helper in the kitchen."

The lessons of her childhood carried over to Demera, where she procures whole spices and toasts and grinds them herself regularly. "I don't like it if I don't know where my spices come from. They lose flavor quickly, so it's better to grind them myself," she said.

When Reda came to the U.S., she learned English at Harold Washington College and worked a number of service jobs for almost a decade. She cooked for friends and entertained at Christmas, but other than a stint working the front of the house at an Evanston eatery, she didn't have a lot of restaurant experience. "There was a lot I didn't know.



Messob at Demera

It was a little crazy at first, but we learned," she said.

The first customers who came to Demera did a lot of learning as well.

"Usually there's one person who's been before, but the other three people in a party were new to Ethiopian food," she said. "A lot of people would say, 'Where are the forks?' So, we had the servers demonstrate how to break off a piece of injera and use it to pick up the food."

One of the first Ethiopian dishes newcomers usually scooped up was doro wot (\$14), or chicken stewed in a lemony sauce teeming with onion, garlic, ginger and berbere spice (a traditional Ethiopian mix of chilis, garlic, basil and fenugreek). Demera's doro wot is great, but I like the shrimp version, called ye-shrimp

wot (\$15), even better. The brininess of the plump shrimp add a nice contrast to the spicy, aromatic sauce.

Reda's lega tibs (\$14.95), or sauteed lamb, is also one of my favorites. She uses high-quality lamb from Halsted Packing House and flavors it with rosemary and garlic.

If you're into beef, check out the kitfo (\$13.95), Ethiopia's answer to steak tartare with herb butter and fiery chili.

"It's really good, but people sometimes have a problem with raw meat, so we'll serve it rare or cooked if they like," Reda said.

If meat's not your thing, Ethiopian cuisine is also a vegetarian's dream. Reda's gomen (\$10.95) is reminiscent of chopped and stewed southern collard greens, but instead of nut-



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4801 N. Broadway 773-334-8787

Looks like: An art gallery-restaurant hybrid trimmed in gold and crimson

Smells like: Sweet pungent garlic, onion and ginger

Sounds like: The chatter of families sharing messob plates

meg, you get a whiff of ginger and a jalapeno kick. Kik alicha (\$10.95), or yellow split peas seasoned with ginger, garlic and turmeric, is a close cousin of a comforting lentil soup. Demera offers a variety of sampler platters (called messob, \$14.95-\$37.95), so newbies can try a lot of dishes for a reasonable price. In addition to the food, Reda also makes her own tej (\$22 a bottle), a traditional sweet honey wine that counters the spicier dishes on the menu.

Seven years is a long time for a Chicago restaurant to stay open—especially one for which many Chicagoans have little point of reference—and Reda is just getting started. "I hope to be here a long time," she said. "I want to open a few more restaurants, and I'm hoping to make [pre-packaged] sauces so people can cook this at home."

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