



The Judicial Palate

By Michael L. Sensor, Esquire



The Horn of Plenty: Dahlak Eritrean Bar & Cuisine

Delaware has plenty of good and interesting restaurants. But, for northern Delaware diners, things don't get much more complicated than Indian or Vietnamese cuisine. Noshers around here pretty much agree that to find truly exotic or interesting food, one must journey north to Philadelphia. And so shall I, taking a gustatory trip to the Horn of Africa by way of University City.

My first exposure to Ethiopian food came during college, when I was a member of the University of Pennsylvania Balalaika Orchestra. We had a Friday night party in the basement of a place in West Philly called Dahlak. I had been told it was an Ethiopian restaurant, but beyond that, I didn't really know what to expect.

At first blush, an Ethiopian restaurant may not seem the ideal place for an itinerant bunch of college students who play Russian music to hang out. But, that impression would be wrong. For one thing, Dahlak has an excellent, if small and cramped, bar. But, most importantly, its food is abundant, cheap, and extremely filling.

It's about at this stage of telling the story that my listener usually scoffs because Ethiopia isn't traditionally associated with bounty. That nation's history of famine is due to poor government and despotism rather than a lack of resources because Ethiopia and its neighbor, Eritrea, border the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, and have a wide-ranging climate which permits just about any kind of food imaginable to be grown.

Since I graduated from college, Eritrea became independent from Ethiopia, so Dahlak now bills itself as an Eritrean restaurant. Ethiopian food is complex and fascinating. To understand the cuisine, one must first understand how it's eaten. Like sushi in the traditional Japanese style, uten-

sils are not used. Rather, a crepe-like sour bread called injera, made with a certain type of flour known as tef, is used to eat your meal. There's even a tradition in Ethiopian food of scooping up food with your injera and feeding your neighbor by hand; I don't recommend trying this with anyone except your significant other, though.

About that injera: It's slightly thick and absorbs sauces extremely well. At Dahlak, like all Ethiopian places I've been to, you place your order à la carte, picking and choosing the various stews and sautees you'd like to try. You're then served your orders on a large platter lined with injera, on which is dotted your meal. Additional pieces of injera are served on the side, giving you everything you need to eat your food. One of the many guilty pleasures of Ethiopian food is scooping up a big piece of sauce-soaked injera with another piece of injera. It may sound like overkill, but once the sauce hits the bread, it turns into something else entirely.

Just what are those sauces then? Ethiopians cook two standard types of food: wat, which is a stew; and tibbs, which is a sautee. Because Ethiopia is predominantly Orthodox Christian, the dietary laws of which requires abstention from meat and fish for over 200 days a year, many dishes are vegetable-based; Dahlak's stewed lentils and spinach are particularly tasty, as are the eggplant and potatoes. However, wat and tibbs made with meat aren't uncommon; Dahlak has a wonderful lamb tibbs that can't be beat anywhere. Both wat and tibbs are both intensely spiced, featuring plenty of ginger, garlic, and berbere, a spice mixture similar to Indian garam masala, but with some spices native to the region. Another interesting meat entree found at Dahlak is kitfo, which is basically raw (or, raw-ish) beef stewed in a very spicy chili sauce. Regardless of what you choose, in

a bow to bland American palates, Dahlak doesn't serve its food particularly spicy, but they will notch up the flavor at your request.

My review of Dahlak and of Ethiopian food wouldn't be complete without a description of one of my favorite dishes: timatim fitfit. It's really a very simple dish: pieces of shredded injera mixed with tomatoes and a simple dressing that is reminiscent of Italian dressing. As with its main dishes, Dahlak serves timatim fitfit with still more injera, so you get to experience the guilty pleasure of eating bread with bread. Even more interestingly, in my research for this article, I discovered that fitfit is actually eaten as a breakfast dish in Ethiopia and Eritrea, something I would never have guessed, since I usually have it as a salad before my main course.

The intangibles of eating at Dahlak can't be overlooked. Stay there for an hour and you'll be immersed in Ethiopian jazz, which is played over the speaker system at a nice level for conversation. Ethiopian music is pentatonic and, as such, immediately recognizable anywhere in the world even if you've only heard it once. For more information, and to listen to sample clips of this amazing music, head over to <http://www.ethiopiquest.info>.

There's much more I could write about Ethiopia, Eritrea, Dahlak, and the food it serves. I just don't have enough words here to do that. Try it for yourself; head up to Philadelphia some weekend to see just how different your dinner can be. I think you'll be surprised at what you find.

Dahlak, 4708 Baltimore Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19143; (215) 726-6464. New location recently open at 5547 Germantown Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19144; (215) 849-0788. Casual dress. Hours: 4pm to 10:30 pm, 7 days a week. ☞