



by Amanda Miller

more than just food

Buna (the coffee ceremony), with Felekech.

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It's not just the fire-and-earth red of the *doro wat* chicken stew simmering in the kettle. It's not just the spongy elasticity of the crepe-style *injera* almost sticking to your fingers. It's not even just the dark aroma of coffee beans roasting over in the coals in preparation for brewing *buna*. Something about the entire sensory experience of making Ethiopian food is so much more than just getting food on the plate (or on one round tray, in this case). My soul ends up being fed just as much as, if not more than, my stomach.

That isn't to suggest that Ethiopian food simply doesn't prove satisfying, regardless of the preemptive opinion of several staunch meat-and-potatoes Midwestern farmers in my cooking classes. I've been teaching at a local kitchen store here in Kansas, and attempted to persuade one of my groups to allow me to introduce them to some East African cuisine, fully aware of the stark contrast to central Kansas dining. They joked about "learning how to eat bread and water," expressing what can be an unfortunately common sentiment about other countries' food and accompanying culture—lack of both awareness and curiosity. I, however, have more than enough enthusiasm to go around, and was happy to share. Accordingly, I overrode their trepidation and took the disdain as a challenge.

Here's where that enthusiasm comes from

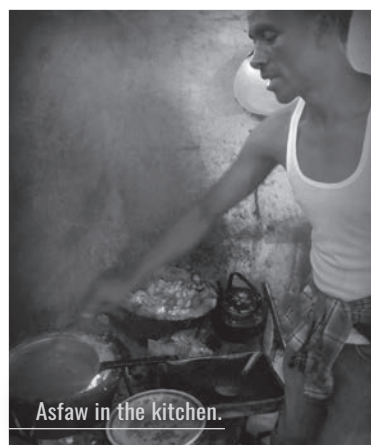
Even just in planning the menu for my class, I often had to stop and take a moment. Every recipe is so much more than ingredients and quantities, especially since those are all just nebulous ideas anyway. Each recipe is of names and faces and stories. I was living outside a refugee camp in Northern Kenya when I met Ethiopian food and the people who make it, and they are inseparable in my memory.

I know how to watch for yeasty bubbles to pop in the thin *injera* batter, showing it's time to peel it off the hot skillet, because early one morning a young woman my age walked me through the steps. She didn't speak English and I didn't speak Amharic, but she was an excellent and patient teacher. My kitchen these days doesn't include a clay oven and a giant flat cast-iron, but I can't make *injera* without remembering the smell of the charcoal fire and the tin teapot she used to drizzle out the batter.

I know that transliterating *doro wat* into "chicken stew" is almost a tragedy, because that just doesn't prepare you for a stew like no other. When I was in the camp, the deep red of the long-simmered onions in hot pepper *berbere* caught my attention and created an instant flavor inferno in my mouth and stomach. Literal kilograms of hot pepper in the pot will do that. In between gasps for breath, I tasted the undeniably delicious fall-off-the-bone chicken and signature hardboiled eggs; I



Making injera.



Asfaw in the kitchen.

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couldn't help but keep eating. This was the traditional feast reserved for only holidays and honored guests, and it was rare to be able to prepare it in the camp. But there we were, being served *doro*.

I know brewing *buna* takes patience, because every time I asked my friend if the coffee was ready, she would emphatically observe, "Not yet!" The coffee ceremony is an integral ritual of Ethiopian culture, so much more than a shot of caffeine. No one takes coffee alone (which is probably good, because someone could have a heart attack with how strong it is). Starting with green coffee beans and going all the way through a triple-boil process, the process of enjoying *buna* is just that—a ritual to enjoy, something to share with others. Each round of successive almost-thick espresso brings people closer together, and the random popcorn is just another bonus.

I want to go on and describe how the earthy sweetness of cabbage is brought out in turmeric-y *alicha wat*, or how buttery and meaty *tibs* makes a day in the desert worth it, or how the pudding texture of spicy lentil *shiro* is so oddly delicious. The culinary aspects of those observations don't necessarily mean anything to me; what I care about is the sweet shy smile of the lady who showed me where she prepared her distinct *alicha*, how men at long low tables shoveled in their trays of *tibs* in silent acceptance of the awkward white people also eating there, how my hardworking cook friend served me *shiro* in a mini cast-iron pot on my birthday.

It is impossible for me to forget the flavors of the food, and it is impossible for me to forget the faces behind the food. The instantaneous beam of recognition from

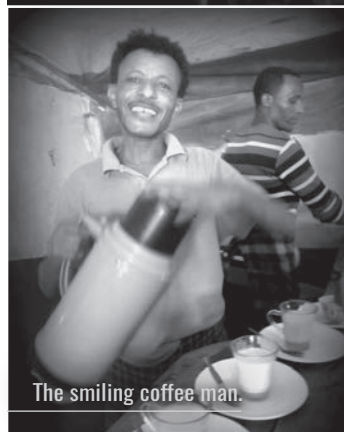
“I hear reggae and catch a waft of incense and see dust floors when I cook injera and wat.”

the work-worn coffee man every time we came into his shop. We would share a nod as he automatically began to pour out the milk for my untraditional

mkiato no sukari (the typical dose of black espresso and sugar is close to lethal for me). Or the silent pain in the eyes of a woman who is one of the last refugees from her region, still waiting after 22 years of watching others being resettled. She prepared our most memorable meal in the camp as a farewell, but then we left to go back to our homes, and yet again, she stayed. Or the innocent, undeveloped grins of a girl too small and young for her age, who will never receive the special help she needs, since there just aren't extra resources when everyone is simply trying to survive. The camp is all she's ever known; maybe it will always be.



Khadija presides over the coffee ceremony.



The smiling coffee man.



Amanda's mkiato.

“For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...and if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it.” 1 Corinthians 12:13a, 26a.

Amanda is still in contact with friends at the refugee camp. If you'd like to know how you can pray for and support them, please contact her at hyperpeanutbutter@gmail.com



Amanda with Lydia.

Food isn't just food

Just from the little I've known of the camp, I feel like I could keep writing for days, trying to compile a photo album of all the faces that are stories, stories that are lives. The snapshots of memories in my mind travel all the way into my heart each time, pain plus joy. I hear reggae and catch a waft of incense and see dust floors when I cook *injera* and *wat*, in an almost startlingly holistic emotional reaction to Ethiopian food.

Food isn't just food; it's relationships and community and culture. And when you catch even just a glimpse of those through a tangible medium, such as preparing and eating a meal together, you form this bit of a connection that makes

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the literal other side of the world not so far away after all. Geography and anthropology aren't just school subjects anymore. Facts and figures and news clips become real.

The culture of food has something deep and real served up with it, something that lasts even longer than the five rounds of espresso. There isn't always enough *injera* to go around, so everyone reaches in with their hands as they gather around the same tray, focusing as much on sharing and fellowship as on eating. When guests visit, they are treated with intense generosity, so hosts might just go without food for the next couple days.

My Ethiopian refugee friends live faith, because they have truly lost everything and maybe everyone they hold dear, and yet somehow they trust. They keep on cooking up stacks of spongy *injera*, stewing up pots of lentils, brewing up kettles of pitch-black *buna*. So do I, sharing with anyone who is willing to try a little bit of Ethiopia here in Kansas.

And, to my delight, more people than I anticipated are interested in trying a bit of East Africa. I think those staunch meat-and-potatoes men were as surprised as I was by not only how delicious Ethiopian cuisine is, but by how you immediately feel a certain attachment to the culture that it depicts. Several times in the midst of searing beef, shredding cabbage, and peeling *injera* off the skillet, I had to remind the guys that if they wanted to eat, they had to stop asking me questions about the refugee camp and cultural aspects. I warned that once I got started talking about my friends and the life there, I might not stop, but they didn't even seem like they would mind.

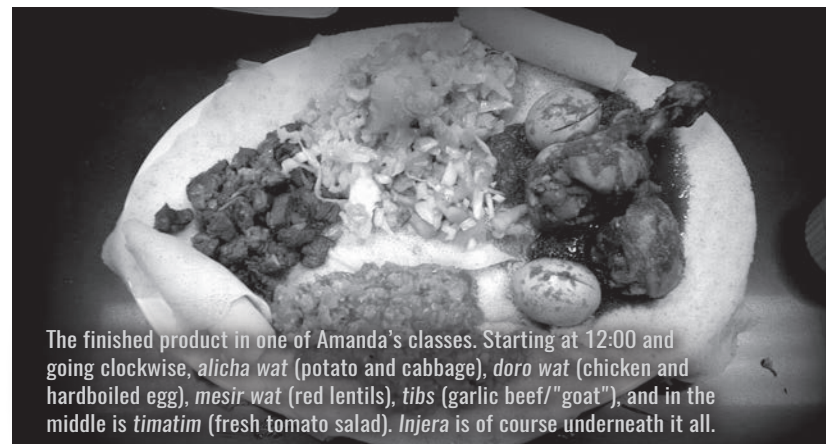
Here's what they had to say

Russell shared, "The cuisine was excellent. I was not sure what I was in for, but was very delighted after consuming the meal. Very tasty and the hands-on experience made it

authentic." In his quietly gruff manner, another mentioned that he "would eat it again." Andrew caught my enthusiasm to share the experience, and he already has me booked to get together and teach his whole family. And Jaryl liked the stories I told about my friends in the camp and what they had to face. He said: "That they were able to sustain themselves in such a harsh environment is a testament to the strength of the people and the help of the missionaries. Of course, now we know that the food they prepared was delicious and sustaining."

I decided to put another run of the class out on the store schedule; it's already almost full. I can't wait to find myself surrounded again by that delightful mix of popcorn and mangoes, espresso and reggae, Kansas and Ethiopia.

RBC alum Amanda Miller misses her buna friends, but loves the people she meets because of normal coffee and her job at a local coffee shop. She recently discovered she appreciates the early stages of fall, especially if she doesn't think about the impending cold and inability to wear sandals every day. Right now she's also busy riding her bike, making cheese, reading C.S. Lewis, and baking pies.



The finished product in one of Amanda's classes. Starting at 12:00 and going clockwise, *ailed wat* (potato and cabbage), *doros wat* (chicken and hardboiled egg), *mesir wat* (red lentils), *tibs* (garlic beef/"goat"), and in the middle is *timatim* (fresh tomato salad). *Injera* is of course underneath it all.



Amanda's students enjoy the Ethiopian meal they've prepared in class. Left to right: Jaryl, Russ and Mark