

## Tasting Ethiopia

Ronald A. Reminick

### Abstract

After a discussion of the origins and food resources of the highlands of Ethiopia a discussion of the symbolic significance of particular foods and beverages points out their role in the identity and social solidarity of the Ethiopian community. Fasting and the taboo on pigs define one aspect of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, a living museum of early Christianity. Details of the specifically important foods includes *injera*, the sourdough bread and the mainstay sauce, *berebere*, made up of 14 different spices and herbs, including a generous dose of black and cayenne peppers. Coffee and the ritual of the coffee party is an important part of everyday life in the highlands and involves the recognition of the ever-present *zar* spirit. Other culturally important beverages include soups, tea, milk, beer, honey wine, and their distilled beverage, *qatiqala*. The consumption of raw beef has a special role in highland culture. An analysis of the ritual feast wraps up the discussion with a little salacious humor.

**Keywords:** food resources, beverages, raw beef, fasting, Ethiopia

### Introduction to the Land and the Food Resources

Forty million years ago the earth in the Horn of Eastern Africa cleaved and allowed lava, steam, and bedrock to burst to the surface. The gradual process of lava and volcanic rock oozing to the surface built up the highlands ranging from 6,000 to over 15,000 feet. When this process ceased it left a rich wide-ranging plateau suitable for highly productive farming. Ethiopia today is about the size of Texas and New Mexico combined. In Ethiopia for millennia the ancestors of humanity have hunted game and gathered fruits, nuts, roots, and edible vegetation. This was the original way of life for our ancestors. Recent finds by paleoanthropologist have found evidence of our ancestors reaching back 5 million years, which strongly suggests that the Awash River Valley of the Ethiopian Great Rift is the homeland of us all.

About 5,000 years ago Semitic peoples from the Arabian Peninsula crossed the Straits of Bab el Mandeb and settled in the highlands, which we often call Abyssinia. They brought many of the cultigens that have become the diet of the Abyssinian peoples. Among these peoples were the Agau. They made the major contribution to highland food products. The genius of ancestral Agau culture is primarily responsible for central highland Ethiopia ranking as one of the world's important minor centers of the origin of cultivated plants, along with China and India. Although the Agau adopted elements of Sudanic agriculture from the preNilotes to the west, they continually experimented with wild plants and developed new cultigens which now make up the bulk of the Ethiopian agricultural complex. The following, then, make up the food base of the Agau and other highland peoples: The cereal grains include eleusine, or finger millet (*Eleusine coracana*), which spread widely through East and South Africa and to India. T'eff (*Eragrostis abyssinica*)<sup>1</sup> spread to a limited extent into the eastern Sudan. Barley and wheat are also popular, but they, by and large, were developed in South Arabia. The root crop ensete (*Ensete edulis*), or false banana, is the staple in southwest Ethiopia, especially among the Gurage people. Garden cress (*Lepidum sativum*) is consumed not only as a leafy vegetable but is also used for its oil expressed from the seeds. Agau-developed condiments include coffee (*Coffea arabica*), fenugreek (*Trigonella foenumgraecum*), *ch'at* or *qat*, also called Arab tea (*Catha edulis*) which is a mild alkaloid stimulant, and vegetable mustard (*Brassica carinata*). We must also credit the Agau for developing oil and dye plants such as castor (*Ricinus communis*), nug (*Guizotia abyssinica*), which is widely used in Ethiopia, and safflower (*Carthamus tinctorius*), which is used both for its oil and as a dye. Cattle, sheep and goats, and the ubiquitous chicken, were likely obtained from the Nubians and preNilotes around the third millennium B.C. along with the donkey and the horse which they later bred together to produce the sure-footed mule. These cultigens and domestic animals provide the basis for the Ethiopian cuisine, which of course in modern times, was supplemented by foods imported from all over the world.

### **A Comment on The Significance Culturally Symbolic Food and Drink**

Humans eat not only to stay alive. Commensality is an expression of relationship and solidarity. Eating together warms the channels of communication and reinforces existing relationships. People eat together to express nurturance. The symbolic value of food and its consumption is intensified on important holidays. They eat particular

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<sup>1</sup> The apostrophe signifies an exploded consonant where the glottis has closed the trachea and the sound is exploded out of the mouth.

foods to reinforce their cultural identity. Culturally symbolic foods offer a modality of identification with the family and with a people's ethnicity. The ingestion of symbolically significant foods offers one a sense of an identity with an entity larger than the self. Symbolic foods offer the one who eats them a sense of power, however subtle it may be. Ingestion of the wafer and the wine in the Catholic ritual is the ingestion of the body and blood of Christ. In several New Guinea tribal cultures the ingestion of human flesh offers the eater a sense of the power of the person who recently died, or often, an enemy that has just been killed. Lifting a glass of fine wine in consonance with a rich cheese on a fine cracker is more than a tasty appetizer; it is an identity with a particular aspect of culture and class. Vegans and vegetarians are not only eating the cultigens to stay healthy, they are also expressing a particular ideology about health, animal sanctity, vibrant living, and spiritual sophistication.

Feasting in highland Ethiopia is certainly an integral institution of the culture. But fasting may be the most important aspect of Amhara Christianity. If a person decides not to fast, one's family is not obligated to provide memorial feasts in their name. Fasting also protects one from the devil as well as providing better chances of getting into heaven (Levine, 233). The Amhara peasant fasts about 165 days/year and the clergy, about 250 days. Normally, on a fast day, one has nothing to eat or drink until mid-day. After mid-day milk, eggs, animal fat, beef, sheep, or chicken are forbidden. The peasant, rather, survives on pulses and cereal grains. After age 15, the 8-week Lenten fast must be observed.

A strictly forbidden food is from pigs. Pork is the food of unclean people. It is unchristian to eat pork and one who does is despised. In the late 1960's while doing fieldwork in the remote highlands I was accused of harboring pork. I had two beautiful Shepherd/Collie dogs that I had gotten from the last Peace Corps Director who went back home to America. I had a fairly large store of canned dog food bought in Addis Ababa. The peasantry was suspicious of what was in those cans and one old woman who was a coffee party guest in my house suspected pork in the dog food. She would not believe otherwise because she couldn't see what the meat was like. She told the whole community about the suspicious cache of dog food and so I was persuaded to publically dump the dog food into the garbage pit and feed my dogs the scraps of people-food as is the custom.

### **Journey into the Highlands**

My first fieldwork in Ethiopia commenced in 1967. Leaving my wife, 2 years old son, and 5 years old daughter in Addis Ababa, my research assistant, a guide, and I set off to our proposed field site. We climbed into my Land Rover in Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia, standing at about 8,000 feet elevation, and followed the tarmac road north which reaches into the Amhara heartland, home of the peoples and

culture that was the focus of my research. This road winds and curves along a sunny rolling plateau decorated with a patchwork of cultivated land growing a variety of crops such as wheat, barley, beans, and hops. After a few hours we reach the town of Debra Berhan, “City of Light”, 136 km. distant from Addis Ababa, situated at about 10,000 feet. Beyond Debra Berhan the road continues to climb into higher elevations, becoming much steeper and with many winding grades. We climb into a cold, wet, wind-swept, fog-shrouded, mountainous country, to an elevation of 11,500 feet. The road now is hard-packed rock and gravel with steep drop-offs on one side or the other. Some of these gorges are 1,000 meters deep. Sharp-sided gullies run along the other side, forged by both road-work and the run-offs of rain. Before we reach Mussolini Pass, a deep tunnel bored through the near top of a mountain by the Italians, where the road begins its steep, precipitous, and winding descent toward the town of Debra Sina, about 60 km. from Debra Berhan, we reach a turn-off in the road to the right, hardly noticeable unless one is looking for it and already knows its location. Appearing out of rain and fog is a rough-hewn sign, pointed at one end so as to simulate an arrow, with faded painted English letters spelling out “Molalie 76 km.” At this point the road assumes a much steeper grade and I shift down into 4-wheel drive and low gear in order to gain greater stability with increased torque. Even toward the end of the rainy season the climb continues into charcoal grey, bone-chilling, wind-driven rain and fog; then down into high valleys, traversing narrow ridges along escarpments with frighteningly steep cliffs and precipices situated on either or both sides of the road, which opens up into vast gorges. The trip appears interminable, but, finally, the gorges retreat from the road, and after one last torturous winding climb, we emerge out of the dark and cold into a brightly sun-warmed rolling highland plateau dotted with round mud and stone homesteads, surrounded by a colorful patchwork of cultivated land. This is the region of Manz, remote homeland of the Amhara of Ethiopia. Several peasant farmers greet us, wrapped in large white hand-spun, hand-woven cloaks, topped with heavy woolen blanket wraps. The peasants encircle the vehicle with quiet suspicion and apprehensive curiosity.

### **Injera: The mainstay thin pancake-like sourdough bread**

*Injera*, like berebere, is made with elaborate care for this is not only the bread part of the essential mainstay of Ethiopian (Abyssinian) cuisine but has symbolic significance as part of Ethiopia’s national dish and cultural identity. The primary ingredient is *t’eff*, the seed of a grass (*Eragrostis teff*) with a light and delicate taste. I once parked my Land Cruiser on what looked like creeping bent grass. The owner came out of his house yelling at me accusing me of destroying his crop of *t’eff*. I told him I thought it was grass. Apologies and offerings of money to pay for the damage

quelled his ire. Where unavailable as in the higher reaches of the Ethiopian highlands, barley is used.

In 2005 my wife, Wendy, learned from the wife of the family we stayed with how to prepare *injera* “from the ground up”. To begin preparation the *t’eff* seed must be cleaned by sifting thoroughly to separate the chaff and the dirt or foreign matter. It is then ground to a very fine flour. The flour is then sifted again. This is mixed with cold water added gradually. One must rub out the lumps with the fingers and create a thick mixture. This is poured into a pot containing a left-over batter leavening mixture. This batter is then left overnight; or, if left-over batter leavening is not available, the batter should be left in a covered container for 2 or 3 days until fermented. The water that rises to the top is then poured off. Then a cup of the dough is put into another pot. One adds water to make it thinner. It is heated on the stove and stirred continuously until it has become thick. This is then cooled and the mixture is then poured back into the original batter and thinned with more water. The pot is covered and let stand until the batter rises. Then one builds a fire under the greased *injera* baking pan. Fill a small tin with the batter and pour it on the hot pan in a thin stream starting at the outside, and spiraling in, from left to right, to the center. Cool slightly and cover pan with its lid. The cooked *injera* should have bubbles on the top like a pancake or crepe cooked on one side and it will rise from the edge of the pan and be easily removed from the pan and onto the *mesob* or basket table.

In her fascinating book, Dervla Murphy, *In Ethiopia With A Mule* (1968), described one meal she had with *injera* in the remote highlands in 1967: “At lunch time today I had my first meal of *injara* and *wat*. *Injara* has a bitter taste and a gritty texture; it looks and feels exactly like damp, grey foam-rubber, but is a fermented bread made from *teff* – the cereal grain peculiar to the Ethiopian highlands...” (p. 15). I believe it was unfortunate for Dervla to have been served by a bad cook! It may have been older *injera* that becomes sour and darker with age. When fresh it is light with a delicate flavor and just a hint of the sour dough, although barley *injera* is normally darker in color.

### **Berebere: The Mainstay Sauce in Ethiopian Cuisine**

The major ingredient in berebere is red or cayenne pepper (*Capsicum annuum longum*) which is normally dried in the sun and pounded/ground and mixed with all or a number of the following spices and plants some of which I believe have no English names:

- red shallots
- garlic
- ginger
- fenugreek Bishop’s weed

- black cumin
- cardamom
- cinnamon
- turmeric
- nutmeg
- cloves
- black pepper
- salt
- *kebebe sine*
- *hidar filfile*

The preparation is elaborate and must be carried out with care and with attention to detail. After all, it is a very culturally significant, symbolically salient ingredient. First, the wife or maidservant takes sun-dried peppers with their stalks removed. They are pounded into powder. Then she pounds red shallots and garlic and this is added to the pepper. She sprinkles water on the mixture and keeps it covered for 2 or 3 days. It is then put in sun to dry. Now she peels and chops fresh ginger and lets it dry in the sun. As it dries, she roasts the fenugreek on her *injera* baking pan as with the rest of the spices. As Ma'aza said, "We heat the pepper and mix with the other spices. Now, I add salt. It is time to take it to the flour mill and have the mill man grind it to a very fine mixture, or, if he is closed we will ask Lemlem, our maidservant, to use our home grinding stone. We will then mix the immediately usable portion with warm water into a thick paste to mix later with the food! It will be good!

### **The Coffee Party and its Conversations**

It is said that Ethiopian coffee is some of the finest in the world. The origin of coffee is in Ethiopia, specifically Kaffa Province in the southwest. I saw recently on a television program an international coffee tasting festival. The Yirgach'efe and Harar coffees of Ethiopia came out on top in a blind tasting. There is a little mythical story about the discovery of coffee you might find on the back of a package of Ethiopian coffee in a Caribou café; when, once upon a time, a goatherd saw his goats eating the coffee cherries and the males became very excited and hypersexual and began mating with the females. It didn't take long for the peasant farmers to take heed and began experimenting with this fruit!

The coffee is taken in little cups that look like the Chinese tea cups. In fact, I believe many of these cups come from China. The coffee can be drunk black, with sugar, or in some areas, with a little pinch of salt. Once in a café in Addis Ababa I

watched a man put in countless teaspoons of sugar into his little cup of coffee. I leaned over to him and said, “Why don’t you put a little coffee in your sugar!” He looked at me a bit quizzical with a faint smile and proceeded to drink his “coffee”. If there is a coffee party in one’s home you might find the hostess offering to put a leaf of “*t’ena adam*”, what we call rue, into your cup which adds a bit of exotic flavor to the coffee.

No home life is complete without carrying on the institution of the daily coffee party, in many places, called *t’irt’ib*. On special occasions, as maybe an honored guest will be coming or a holiday, a special long and soft grass, called *gwassa*, is scattered on the floor. The coffee party is something greatly enjoyed, especially by the hostess. As one woman put it, “It gives me great pleasure to serve my *t’irt’ibenya* (coffee party members). It gives me an opportunity to talk and to be sociable. And, (giggle) it brings my *ch’elley* (female *zar* spirit) near to me!” Abyssinians, especially the Amhara, are habitual coffee drinkers. I read somewhere that Ethiopians were the biggest coffee drinkers in the world. The term *sus* refers to “that time” of day when one must go to a friend’s house or bar to drink and to socialize. The coffee party may be had from one to three times per day depending on the available time a person has at his or her disposal. It may last from one to three hours. If one doesn’t drink their coffee at the accustomed time he or she will feel all sorts of bodily ills and a mild sense of malaise because “the *wuqabi*<sup>2</sup> hasn’t gotten his regular tribute”. I heard many times that the headache from not drinking coffee one day, what we may consider caffeine withdrawal, is the punishment of the annoyed *zar* spirit who wants his daily recognition. This condition will last until the next coffee party when that remiss member will have redeemed himself. Throwing the dregs of one’s cup out the door is a further offering to the *zar* spirit. Once, in 1995, I was at a coffee party of a friend. The attendees were all fairly educated businessmen and academics. At the end of the first cup I threw my dregs out the door and muttered “my *wuqabi* wants this!” which brought on uproarious laughter and joking. The *zar* spirit is something very much, although secretly, held in the hearts of these Ethiopians!

Snacks are always present with coffee, in the countryside as well as in the city and towns. However, in Addis Ababa, the capital city, there are a plethora of Italian-style pastry shops that add to the traditional fare. Traditionally, there are five types of snacks commonly offered to the coffee party guests: *dabo k’olo* (toasted or fried little bread balls) are very tasty, with or without a little salt as is the *gubs* (toasted barley). Other toasted grains are simply called *qolo* and, if not barley, would be wheat. Chickpeas, called *shimbere* in Amharic, can be served raw or boiled. And, a hot crispy bread, called *chechebsa*, is also a favored snack item during coffee time. It would not be uncommon to also find the raw, minced, and spiced beef, called *kitfo* counted among the fare or the dried beef or lamb cut into long strips, called *qwanta*.

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<sup>2</sup> Another name for the *zar* spirit.

No coffee party can break up without having first boiled the coffee three times; each member having drunk three cups. First the green beans are washed, then roasted, then ground or pounded ready for the boiling. The little black clay spouted pitcher, called *jabana*, is the container for the preparation. Water is poured into the flared top of the *jabana* and then the coffee is poured in and it is brought to a boil over a fire from dung, wood, charcoal, or kerosene, depending on what one is cooking on. The first coffee is strong and rich. Subsequent boilings do not use added coffee. So, the boiling is milder and the third coffee is thin and weak. It is said in the Amhara highlands that it is so with friendships, which can include amorous and marital relationships as well and more casual relationships. At first one has a strong and rich relationship. Then follows progressive degrees of indifference. And finally, just as the thin and bitter coffee is thrown out, so the relationship must be dispensed with. I once had to leave a coffee party after the first boiling because it was getting dark and I wanted to get home before the hyenas began prowling. I stood up to leave and Kebebush exclaimed, “What?! You are leaving after one cup of coffee? That just isn’t done! Is it good to make enemies of your friends?” I stayed. It is an insult to the host to act “strange” in their house after being invited in.

### **Coffee Party Conversations**

Stories and conversations abound in “news”, song, and jocularly. At Yeshimibiet’s house (her name means “wife of a thousand”), in 1968, she was making a very nice coffee party with the distilled beverage, *qatiqala*, the local beer, *talla*, and toasted grains. Just then her husband came into the house. He was plowing the fields and there was dung between his toes, mud and bits of hay stuck to his legs, and he was covered in sweat. He sat down and, as is the ancient custom, she washed his feet. While carefully washing away the evidence of his labor she exclaimed, “Now that’s what makes my vagina water! to see my husband working hard to keep this family!”

It was many months in the highlands during my first fieldwork in the late 1960’s that I took numerous notes about land, plowing, seeding, the water, and that which springs from the ground. I thought I had a lot of material on agriculture. But then one afternoon, at a lively coffee party, Almaz, who was a beautiful 30-something at the time, was exclaiming about how her friend came over last night. “The moon was high and he was handsome and I let him into my house and he plowed my land so good and he let the seed spill and the water came...” I was puzzled and queried, “Wait a minute! Who plows land at night?” That brought forth howls of laughter and finger-pointing at me. It was then that I realized that not all those notes on agriculture were about agriculture!

Salacious joking and metaphor are common once a coffee party gets going. At a wedding party once, with the young couple present, there were comments about



whether the young man, about age 18, would be “warrior” enough to conquer his young bride and would the *ch’agula*, the white cloth placed under the buttocks of the young bride, catch the blood of the battle; for a true warrior sheds the blood of the enemy. It was at this party I learned the complex semantics of the term “enemy” which includes one who poses the challenge. (See Reminick, on ceremonial defloration, 1976)

During my neighbor’s coffee party in the mid-90’s the husband came into the house drunk. He looked at his 3 years old daughter and muttered, “That girl is mixed!” What he intimated was that his wife had sex with other men and that their semen had mixed with his making this child. This brought forth yells of vituperation from the older men and women, mainly women, in the room admonishing him to be quiet and stop making a fool of himself. Anyone could see that that beautiful little girl looked just like him. He sat down quietly and drank his coffee.

### **Other Highland Beverages**

**Tea.** A variety of teas come from the lower elevations of the country. A good deal of tea also comes from India, just across the Arabian Sea from where trade had been on-going for a thousand years. Teas can be flavored with sugar, cinnamon, or cloves. I learned of no special symbolic value of tea.

But it does bring to mind the fourteen hours excursion my students and I made to the pilgrimage site of the Muslim healer’s tomb of Shek Hussein. Muslims and people of other faiths traveled here from all over the country for healing and for revitalization. I was anticipating seeing a large river that cascades over an escarpment into a valley below. It normally feeds a lake that the inhabitants take their water from. Much to our chagrin the river was dry and the lake was a shrinking pond. From this pond people took their drinking water, watered their animals, and did their laundry. One morning we had a breakfast of camel and a good deal of tea. I knew the teas here were boiling since dawn and the water was good. Then we descended into the valley to see some caverns where monks lived and prayed. On the way back up, which took the better part of an hour, I got progressively ill. By early evening I was very ill; feverish, nauseous, and guts in an uproar and it wasn’t long after that I rushed to the bushes where I began shooting out of both ends uncontrollably. My clothes were soaked in vomit and diarrhea. I shed them in the bushes and a student brought me a bucket of water to wash down with. I said we’d bury the clothes but my students said no, they were *Levi’s* and couldn’t be discarded. They wrapped them in three garbage bags and packed them into the Land Cruiser. Thanks to our rehydration salts I was able to survive the trip back home, although one of my students had to drive. Back at home I told my maidservant to bury the jeans, garbage bags and all, but she said, “But these are *Levi’s*! I will wash them for you.” I told her she was crazy and to just throw

them out. She washed them and ironed them and folded them neatly into my clothes drawer. The American Embassy lab determined I had both amoeba and giardia. Could it have been the camel? Then I realized it was the tea cups; they were washed in that pond water and the boiling tea did not kill those germs on the cups.

**Milk.** Milk from the cow is not a very popular beverage but it is often what children get while growing up. During my first fieldwork in Ethiopia in the late 1960's our neighbors, Almaz, and her husband, Shebbie, had a very healthy cow who had recently calved. We got a liter of milk every day for many months from Almaz' cow both for my, at first, 2 years old, Michael, and my 5 years old, Lisa (we were in these highlands for 2 years); and my wife used it for cooking. We would scald the milk before using it. One cold morning (sometimes frost would be on the ground mornings of the wet season) I went out to visit neighbors who lived about a kilometer from us. The chill took the heat right out of one's bones! I arrived at the house of Fallaka with the images of a hot cup of tea with a cinnamon stick in it. His wife exclaimed, "Oh look at you so cold! You need some warm milk to make you comfortable!" I responded that it wouldn't be necessary; a cup of tea would be fine. She ignored my comment and ordered her grandson to bring the cow into the house. Fallaqa's wife handed me a "glass" which was a cow's horn. I peered into it and saw fleas jumping around in it. I deftly turned the horn upside down and then back again and much to my consternation the fleas were still in there! The cow was brought to where I was sitting on a low eucalyptus wood chair covered with a sheepskin. She had only one horn. The grandson steadied the horn cup under the udder while I held it and then he proceeded to squeeze the steaming milk into my horn cup. A guest is supposed to relish the offerings of the host and so I held the glass high, and with a flourish, drank down the milk. Some minutes went by with casual conversation when my stomach began to churn and then my guts went into spasms. In no time at all that milk had traveled some 25 or 30 feet of gut and was demanding to get out! I excused myself and hurried to a small grove of bamboo where the blast could, I hope, not be heard.

**Beer.** *T'alla* is the Amharic name for their fermented beverage. It is a very popular beverage and no self-respecting homemaker would be without it. If one did run out one only has to go into the neighborhood and look for a tin can sitting upside down on a stick outside a house. There you will find your *t'alla*. It is brewed in a very large black clay jug with a narrow neck, called a *gan*. It could weigh 30 or 40 pounds empty. Into the *gan* one pours maybe 20 liters of water. Then the woman of the house will grind hops and leaves and put them into 5 liters of water the container of which is put aside. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> day she would add dried, ground, germinated wheat and bread broken into small pieces. On the 5<sup>th</sup> day woody hops are pounded into a meal and combined with ground roasted barley or, if need be, wheat. The whole mix is poured into the *gan* and sealed. After 6 or 7 days, when the brew is fermented well the

container is opened and the *t'alla* can be poured through a strainer and kept in a separate container, or glass bottles, until guests are ready to drink. *T'alla* is mildly alcoholic and has a sourish taste and is welcomed on a very warm afternoon and goes very well with *injera* the flat pancake bread, together with the national dish – the highly spiced chicken stew, called *doro wat* which is the Ethiopian national dish.

**Qatiqala.** *Qatiqala*, also called *areke*, is the native distilled beverage. It is clear and has a distinctive smell, looking something like vodka but smelling different. It varies greatly in alcoholic content but normally runs 60-100+ proof, at least according to my judgment. It is common for any social gathering to begin with a drink of this beverage. It is the custom in the highlands for the guests never to drink from a full bottle before the host demonstrates that it is good. Poisonings are legend throughout the centuries of highland culture. When one wants to kill an enemy he may poison the *qatiqala* because it disguises the poison. The whole party can be wiped out but one's enemy will be among them! So, the custom is for the host to open the full bottle and pour himself or herself a drink and wait a moment and then declare it good. Then everyone in the party exclaims, "Yes, it is good!" Often there will be a toast: "*lenya t'ena!*" which means, "to our health!" and then all drink to their wants. It is a beverage that lubricates the conversation and enhances the food offerings.

**T'ej or honey mead or hydromel.** This honey wine is served in small wide-mouth bottles. It is made by mixing honey with water, adding cooked hops and allowing it to ferment for about 5 days. The hops are then taken out and the brew is allowed to stand a day or so. Then it is poured into a clean container and sealed. After a week or so the mixture becomes stronger and subsequent drinks should be strained of the sediment that has collected. As with the other beverages *t'ej* can be drunk at any type of social gathering, public or private. It has no special symbolic significance that I know of.

**Soups.** Both thin and thick soups can be made from a variety of grains and meats. My favorite is the spicy and thick chickpea soup, called *shiro wat'*, which can be eaten with a spoon or grabbed with a piece of *injera*. The soup that I remember most vividly was served to me in the late 1960's in the remote highlands. It was a cold afternoon and I was visiting a middle-aged woman who felt she had just the thing to warm my bones. She brought me a steaming bowl of sheep broth. It smelled of great spices and well-boiled mutton. My only problem with it was the head of the sheep sitting in the middle of the bowl. His eyes were looking up at me and there was still grass stuck in his teeth. Bits of brain trailed out of the back of his head. I had the soup around the head and then suggested to my host that the meat was still good enough to make another boiling of soup. She agreed and we proceeded with the rest of our afternoon repast.

**Raw Beef.** Raw beef is common fare at feasts and is a common dish at traditional restaurants. It normally is in the form of minced and spiced beef, called *kitfo*. The problem with eating raw meat is tapeworm. This parasite is endemic to the highlanders and city folk alike. My colleague at Bahir Dar University calls this parasite “his guest”. Those determined to rid themselves of tapeworm can make a traditional tea, boiling the leaves of the *qoso* tree. It is a very strong purgative which often tears loose the segments of the tapeworm but commonly leaves the head attached to the intestinal lining to grow more of itself.

[There is a very casual attitude about parasites and germs, if germs are believed at all. Once, in a café in Addis Ababa, a 4 years old was eating an ice cream cone with his father. They were sitting on high stools at a little table. As the little boy licked, the ice cream dip dropped out his cone and flopped onto the filthy floor. The boy wiggled off his chair. The father was very careful not to let the boy fall. The boy got onto the floor and grabbed the ice cream dip with all kinds of disgusting dirt stuck to it. He casually got back onto his stool and proceeded to enjoy his ice cream cone while his father nonchalantly sipped his coffee.]

At elaborate feasts the host often serves cubes of raw beef to the guests. The raw beef may be dipped in a *berebere* paste which adds a good deal of zest to the meat. When a large number of people are at a feast the carcass of an ox may be hung and at a particular time of the feast the guests will come up to the carcass with their sharp knives and cut strips for themselves. In the mid-1990’s I was a guest of a wealthy family celebrating the wedding of their son. The feast was held at the Addis Ababa Hilton Hotel in the Grand Ballroom. Hanging against the red velvet drapery were two halves of ox carcass. At the appointed time the guests, in a muted rush, approached the meat with their sharp knives, competing with each other for the favored portions of fat adhering to the meat.

Once, in 1968, while trekking in the remote Semien Mountains, I came across an ox with a very curious sewn up incision in its flank. On closer inspection I saw a very distinctive indentation under this incision. It didn’t take but a moment after my initial shock to understand that someone, hungry, I guess, opened the flank of this ox and took some of its flesh and then closed the wound by, I believe, piercing the skin with acacia needles and lacing it up as we would do a turkey.

I always regretted not having the presence of mind to photograph this phenomenon.

On another occasion during this same fieldwork period there was an ox-slaughter in the sort-of town where I resided. The feet were tied, the animal was knocked down, and the throat was cut. The animal was hardly dead before the peasant men began opening the flanks, cutting out the still quivering flesh from its body.

A few of these men cut strips of flesh, putting one end into their mouths and, holding the other end of the meat, took their curved knives and cut off morsels barely missing the end of their noses!

The morning of a very elaborate wedding feast in Addis Ababa my wife and I traveled with the Groom's Men in their Mercedes Benz. My Ethiopian friends were veterinarians and physicians and know all about viruses, bacteria, and parasites. They decided to stop at a favorite little restaurant to have a morning repast. My wife and I were getting hungry since we hadn't had an adequate breakfast and what they ordered was very colorful; the different portions of minced food nicely arranged on a large platter. We were ready to dig in when my wife asked what it was. Dr. Wondwossen explained: It was a raw dish, sometimes eaten as an appetizer, consisting of minced liver, kidneys, and stomach, onions and herbs, and a great deal of garlic. We demurred in preference for coffee and a croissant when offered this morning appetizer.

**Yismaw's Feast.** It is Christmas time 2005 in Ethiopia. It is called *Gaenna* and it occurs in January according to the Julian Ethiopian calendar. My friend, Yismaw, is in his 60's and a retired military officer of high rank. He has a very large compound about 2/3 the size of a soccer field. Inside the compound is a circle of juniper trees, about 4 meters in diameter, bound together at the top so that it makes an enclosure. It is his little private space. The compound is lavish with flowering bushes, coffee trees, an herb garden, and tall dense shrubbery that surrounds the celebration area with an opening that served as an arched gateway into the inner sanctum of the celebration area. It is the perfect place for a Christmas party.

The celebrants arrive gradually from around noon. As guests continue to arrive they are greeted with kisses on each cheek, first a kiss on one cheek, then the other. Peremptory greeting kisses are three; highly valued and loved members get multiple kisses. A "big man" enters the compound. Some of his relatives fall to their knees and kiss his feet and hug his knees, whereby he chucks them under the chin and raises them up.

Yismaw offers *t'alla*, and *qatiqala* to his guests. For very special guests he offers Johnny Walker Black Label Scotch and an assortment of European beer. As more guests arrive over the hour or so the maidservant, Worqnesh, (Amh. "You Are Gold!) begins the coffee ceremony. As the coffee is brewed Yismaw's wife brings out popcorn to have with the coffee. Yismaw's wife brings out several bottles of *t'alla* and exclaims that it is Christmas *t'alla*, strained and clear and very special. She hands the brew to guests with both hands and the guests receive it, half rising from their seats and subtly inclining the head, taking the glass of brew with both hands; a gesture of respect and gratitude. Several minutes later Yismaw brings out a large bottle of *qatiqala*, the locally distilled liquor. It is a new bottle and the guests anxiously await the pronouncement of its goodness. Yismaw opens the bottle and

pours some into a largish shot glass and toasts the guests, “*L’ enya t’ ena! Tiru nnew!*” “To our health! It is good!” The guests see that Yismaw looks good after his drink and then those who ask get their little glasses filled.

Maybe an hour or two passes. I’m not keeping track of the time since the Johnny Walker was good and the *t’ alla* was fine and the *qatiqala* was powerful!

A child of 10 makes the rounds with a basin and a pitcher of warm water and a bar of soap held in a rag. She pours water on the hands of each guest who washes with the soap, the basin catching the dirty water. Each guest either uses the dry cloth or shakes the excess water off their hands. (In the better restaurants a hot moist towel is offered.) There are basket tables (*mesob*) arranged around the compound with 4 or 5 guests seated at each. On a large round pan on the basket table the maidservants place a freshly-made steaming hot *injera*. Then *injera* cut into strips and rolled are placed at the edge of the pan. These are for tearing off and using to pick up mouthfuls of food. As in other societies, like India, where they eat with their hands, only the right hand is used to pick up food. The left hand is used to take care of business at the other end of the alimentary canal. Older children and the maidservants then place little piles of meat, cheese, legumes, and vegetables that had been prepared the day before and throughout the morning.

The pepper sauce, *wat’*, and sheep meat and beef, are dumped in the middle of the big *injera*; the sauce, normally very spicy hot with cayenne pepper base is an essential ingredient. A salty old woman, Etaferau, quips, “You know it’s good when it burns twice!” The chicken stew (*doro wat’*), the national dish, is the *piece de resistance* of the feast and has a hard-boiled egg gracing each serving. There are also piles of puree: peas, chick peas, and beans. Some foods are unspiced for those whose stomachs have trouble with *berebere*. One also finds a pile of a dry, tart cottage cheese, called *ayb*, which complements the spiced foods very nicely. And a variety of salad greens add taste and color to the table. On a separate table I see a large tray piled with spit-roasted sheeps’ kidneys, hearts and livers, and large lumps of mutton and beef fat. This is optional fare.

Relatives and friends express their intimacy by placing a mouthful of *injera*-wrapped food in the mouth of the receiver. A short time later the receiver will give the *gursha* in reciprocation. This continues in a lazy non-ceremonious way throughout the hours of feasting. I certainly didn’t mind my wife, at this party, or my former Ethiopian girlfriend or the pretty neighbor next door, or even my adoptive mother giving me *gursha*, but I like-near gag when a man puts his fingers into my mouth! In 1995, traveling with my Master’s students in the countryside I had 9 men giving me *gursha* which just about spoiled my appetite!

I used to eat everything on my plate at feasts, small or large, but I soon learned that if the host sees your plate is empty more food is piled on. This is fine when one still has room for more, but when you are “stuffed to the gills” and more food gets dumped on your new *injera*, how is one supposed to politely refuse. It is not good to

refuse food. When I was new to the culture I would beg them not to put more food on my plate to no avail. Then I realized that I would have to leave food before it would not be added. As time went by I also learned that I could beg, in the name of God, not to give me more food. And then, in 2005, an English engineer friend I knew in Bahir Dar taught me the foolproof thing to say when I positively could not eat another bite: “Please! I cannot eat another bite! *“imbertey yiggalebetal!”* My bellybutton has turned inside out!”

There is no dessert in Ethiopian tradition, although the Western influence has altered the food customs in the city so items like Italian pastries or popcorn are sometimes seen. Now, in the Amharic language, the verb “to taste” (Amh.: *maqmas* or *qammaasa*, “he tasted”) has a metaphorical meaning suggesting sex. It reminded me of the time several years ago, after a large feast in the southern town of Awasa, I whispered to my Sidamo girlfriend at the time, “Zeritu, I will taste you for dessert!” She looked at me with large wide eyes and a big toothy grin with that diastema I always found so charming, and exclaimed, “Is it true?” (which comes out differently when translated into English). As I was lying with her in a little hotel room on the shores of Lake Awasa in southern Ethiopia, melting into her, I said, “Zeritu, look! we’re like chocolate and vanilla ice cream!” and she replied, “What’s ice cream?” So, after the feast my wife, Wendy, and I attended in 2005 I leaned over to her and said, “Wendy, I’ll have you for dessert!”

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