

Exotic Fare and Affordable Healthy Selections

New to Surfside Beach: Redi-et Ethiopian Cuisine

by Russ Lane

Herbivores rejoice! The Grand Strand dining scene now boasts Ethiopian fare at the recently-opened Redi-et Ethiopian Cuisine, and the vegetarian dishes are the restaurant's highlight. In addition, you get to eat with your hands and it's inexpensive, so there really is much to love about this delightful new eatery.

Located at the Intersection of S.C. 544 and U.S. Business 17, and open from noon to 9 p.m., Redi-et offers a solid introduction to Ethiopian cuisine. Rather than conventional silverware and plates, a giant platter arrives at the table lined with traditional Ethiopian oval flatbread, called Injera. Diners then tear off bits of the stretchy bread and use it to pick up mouthfuls of food. One inevitably eats much more slowly and thoughtfully this way (vs. using a fork), leaving ample time to socialize, and the hands-on nature of the dining experience lends a wonderfully intimate social atmosphere.

Ethiopian food relies on simple ingredients and unique seasoning blends, which revolve around paprika, garlic, and red chili powder. An airy, sour bread arrives first, to be dipped in clarified butter and a tiny spoonful of berbere (a paprika-based seasoning). Next comes the big platters, and as the meal progresses the Injera is immersed in these seasonings, soaking up the mingling flavors. The etiquette is simple: keep your hands clean (they provide wipes), eat with your right hand, try very hard not to lick your fingers (rude even at American tables; even more so in Ethiopia) and if you really love someone, feed them as a sign of respect.

Redi-et upholds its Ethiopian heritage faithfully. The menu offers traditional meat dishes, including Way Doro Wat (traditionally stewed chicken with whole eggs and spices) and Zilzil

Tibs (marinated lean beef strips). Solidly prepared, the chicken carried paprika's smoky bite and was delicious topped with egg and accompanying condiments. The beef carried even more complex flavors, with a delightful interplay of intensely rich butter, fragrant rosemary and garlic. The meat dishes may best be shared among diners, so rich is their character.



The vegetarian platter, an offering of several menu items, is a whirlwind of textures, flavors and colors. Obviously proud of these dishes, the waitress thoughtfully brings a sample platter which includes a bit of everything, then if you're somehow still hungry after the samples, she will bring more. These vegetable dishes are the restaurant's strength. Spinach stewed with tomatoes, garlic and onion left no room for complaint. Collard greens get a break from southern fatback and instead are loaded with garlic and gingerroot. Two different lentil dishes were excellent contrasts to each other; one paprika-laced and mixed with whole lentils, the other a milder, slightly mashed variation blended with turmeric. These dishes tasted bright and vibrant, pinched as they were between a scrap of spongy Injera and accompanied with a must-have side of Ayeb, a fresh cot-

tage-cheese. Requesting the cheese is almost mandatory, as its creamy texture is as much a complement to dishes as the rich, salty lift it provides your palette, and it offsets the rich and smoky spiciness of many of these dishes.

That you can enjoy this meal for less than \$10 is a treat; courteous, generous service from the staff only sweetens the experience. Even with the introductory course of bread and butter, you can enjoy your Ethiopian meal and be confident in its nutritional integrity. Injera is made with teff, a whole grain found in Ethiopia that's high in protein, lower in fat and carbohydrates and almost gluten-free. The protein content also makes a meal using Injera extremely filling (gluten-free eaters should take care before tearing into Injera, as in America it's often mixed with other flours that raise its gluten content). The

menu explains its dishes' ingredients so thoroughly that it makes adherence to a special diet painless.

Redi-et has health-consciousness, generosity and some wonderful vegetables in its favor. Perhaps because of their newness, or in deference to the area, Redi-et is light on the spiciness. This is the only element separating Redi-et from a truly great home-style Ethiopian cooking experience, but it is a minor quibble for a restaurant that brings an otherwise thoughtful experience to South Carolina shores.

Russ Lane is a freelance journalist covering food, music and culture in the southeast. He lost 200 pounds while working as a food writer in Myrtle Beach. Every Sunday he recounts how he did it and what he learned from it at, "Second Helping," a column at MyrtleBeachRestaurantNews.com.