

Review: Demera Ethiopian Restaurant
Demera Matters

by Faith Hart

George Perry Floyd Jr. was murdered on May 25th, 2020. That means that as of today, it has been 24 days since the latest spark of protests for racial justice was ignited and a long-overdue national dialogue about police brutality and white supremacy in America was forced onto the table. Floyd's murder lit a necessary firestorm that cast a brilliant, unflattering light on the very foundations of democracy, calling the ongoing history of violence and discrimination against Black people into fervent question. Due to the tireless, invaluable organizing and leadership of Black activists nationwide, the protests have transcended beyond a memorial flame to honor the legacy of one man and have burst into a luminous, reinvigorated movement for all Black lives that calls for radical change, reconciliation, and reparations.

It is in this luminescence that we, the diverse and multiplicitous American people, may find one another and choose to see the truth of our nation for what it is, bare and exposed. It is only with these long-neglected systemic issues forced onto the table that we may ever get the chance to truly gather together and break bread. Racial reconciliation is possible and imperative, but it will not come easily or without a tenacious commitment from people across many lines of differences to dismantle white supremacy from the ground up.

If there's anything I have learned from the last 24 days, it's that the kind of righteous fury and burning passion that Floyd's death gave rise to— especially for privileged white people like me who have the option of not comforting racial repression every day of the year— can lead to burnout. At my lowest moments of petty “exhaustion”, Black friends and influences have fed me a sacred perspective: we've got to be in this fight for the long haul. Centuries of white supremacist domination and racial unrest will not be solved in a week, a month, or even over the span of several years.

The legacy of white supremacy in this country is my inheritance and fighting to demolish it is my most basic responsibility in this life. What the great chasm of injustice in America demands of me is a lifelong commitment to confronting and repurposing my privilege, becoming more educated every day, and uplifting Black people around me with every chance I get. In order to extend my good intentions into a meaningful anti-racist practice, I have to inspect every aspect of my daily life, big and small.

Living amongst the vastly white-owned businesses and restaurants of Chicago's North Side, one conscious way I can work to uplift Black people is by frequenting their businesses and reallocating my spending towards their efforts. Ordering take-out once a week has become a hallowed ritual for me throughout the past few months of quarantine. From now on, I will be committed to ordering food from Black-owned restaurants in my neighborhood. This is only one minute stroke along many other strokes of activism we Chicagoans can do to support Black people in our communities, but it makes a

direct impact and requires little to no effort on our part. In fact, we gain something from it: delicious, instantly-gratifying dinner. Take-out is the gift that keeps on giving.

Some weeks' quarantine to-go orders have been more climactic than others, but each has felt holy to me— savoring sustenance crafted for me by another human being's hands feels like the closest thing to intimacy that I can find. I order take-out because I wish I could go to a restaurant and I wish I could go to a restaurant because I want to be around people. I want to feel connected to a community. I want to come to understand the stories of people in real-time, through their cooking and through their service. I want to smell the food of the diners around me and breathe in the comfort of knowing we are all together, experiencing form, texture, color, and taste. I want to buy-in to the dream of a chef and savor its unique richness, which is altogether impossible for me to create in my kitchen alone.

What I know for certain about white supremacy is that it thrives in isolation. To be enveloped in a world of whiteness away from outside cultural influences is to be glutinously fed self-affirming biases in constant repetition. Ignorance feeds the ego and exempts us from our innate responsibility to others. It was not until I moved away from my suburban Texas town to the city of Chicago that I experienced the culinary explosion that sheer diversity offers. As I have visited restaurant after restaurant, each more unfamiliar to me than the one before, I have learned invaluable lessons about global interconnectedness and the humanity of people around me.

When I dream about racial reconciliation, I can't shake the biblical metaphor that asserts that a restored community is forged by the practice of breaking bread together. Beyond the logistical importance of financially bolstering Black and BIPOC-owned restaurants, I can't help but wonder if exposing ourselves to cuisines beyond our immediate cultural lexicons is a step towards deeper love, understanding, and curiosity. I know it is a life-affirming, educational experience for me.

Tonight I am wishing I could be with the good people of Demera, one of Chicago's quintessential Ethiopian restaurants, in person. Even still, I am grateful to be gifted with their talent and find myself giddily delighted when my take-out order arrives at my doorstep. I lay out the glorious spread on my dining table and my mouth waters with anticipation.

Vegetarian sampler platter: gomen, kayseer tibs, dinich wot, ye-misir wot, kik alicha, tikle gomen. Though I've dabbled with Chicago's spectacular smattering of Ethiopian cuisine my fair share, I've never felt ready to order any of the delicious-sounding meat entrees spots like Demera have to offer. It's not that I'm a vegetarian— I'm not— it's just that I'm not quite done being overwhelmed by the bounteous complexity of Ethiopian vegetable dishes and I think I might pass out if I unleashed the

floodgate right now. A heaping, glorious pile of injera. House salad. Let's keep it simple. An appetizer order of chicken sambussas. I can handle this.

Before I dive in, I review the menu descriptions and draw out a map labeling each dish the sampler has to offer on an old napkin. I'll admit my ignorance when it comes to Ethiopian fare but I won't be contented to keep it. Gomen is collard greens slow-cooked in a bath of onions, ginger, and garlic. Kayseer tibs is a dish that consists of fresh garden beets sautéed with carrots and a dash of cinnamon. Dinich wot is a delectably spicy stew of chopped potatoes and rich berbere sauce. Ye-misir wot is a classic dish of stewed red lentils in an Ethiopian spice blend. Kik alicha is split yellow peas prepared with onions, fresh garlic, and seeded jalapeños. Tikle gomen is a brilliant blend of tender cabbage and carrots slow-cooked with bright turmeric, onions, garlic, ginger, and seeded jalapeños. Injera is sour, fermented flatbread. These are things I can learn— and what a gift it is to learn them.

Biting into my first chicken sambussa is like arriving on a new planet, bursting with life unknown to me before. Dipped in a sweet and wild honey awaze sauce and wrapped in a perfectly flaky casing, ground chicken accompanied by delicate herbs invites me to stay awhile. I hold my abundant portion of foamy, soft injera in my hands for a moment before I begin to tear it into pieces that serve as scoops for the vegetarian platter's many offerings. Eating with my hands eliminates one degree of separation between me and this meal, and I wouldn't have it any other way. I want to permanently nuzzle up to the warm solace kik alicha offers me. The golden stew is a showing of integrity and simplicity, its humble mushiness holding so many flavorful surprises.

Discovery defines every moment of this meal. The dinich wot tests the boundary of spiciness, dancing on my tongue with all-encompassing warmth but never crossing the line. My mouth finds form around the dish's succulent potato and accepts it as god. The gomen's seasoning offers brightness against all odds, despite the way the stewed collard greens transport me to my childhood in the South. Holding a portion of ye-misir wot wrapped in tangy injera, I'm reminded that there is so much I do not know and so much I want to know— about food and about this world. There are flavors I do not have language for. The red lentils exude an elegant, subtle spice that defies my vocabulary and inspires me to keep learning. Kayseer tibs— sweet, tender beets flowered with cinnamon— remind me of the earth that I'm standing on, the rich soil that provides the root vegetable with its wholesomeness.

The land that I live on is not my own. This ground is Indigenous ground, colonized by my ancestors, and made rich by the efforts of enslaved Africans. Our country is plagued with a history of violence, suffering, and injustice but now, we are all here together trying to find a way to go forward. The answer as to how to do it right is so often unclear.

Demera was founded in 2007 by Tigist Reda, an Ethiopian immigrant and an unbelievably talented chef. My life in this city is richer because she is here and I know that Demera's many, many devoted patrons would say the same. Our country is more vibrant, more industrious, more inventive, and more beautiful because of Black Americans. Acknowledging our shared, grievous history is the cornerstone of the work towards future racial reconciliation. In this moment though, we cannot forget to be awake to the gifts of the present. Our city is rich with Black artists, chefs, artisans, academics, and world-makers like Tigist Reda. If we want to imagine a world where Black lives matter, we can start by affirming the vital work of the Black lives in our communities.