

IT'S A wrap

MOP UP STEWS, SOUPS AND MORE WITH AFRICAN BREADS

by Maisie Wilhelm

Tangy, spongy and supple, *injera* bread is not only a staple at Ethiopian meals, but one of the most ancient breads in Africa. At mealtime, a large (15-inch diameter) piece of *injera* is laid on a round tray and covered with accompaniments—stews, lentils, salad—that are mopped up using other pieces of *injera*; the bread simultaneously acting as plate, utensil and food. Common also in Eritrea, the fermented bread is eaten almost three times a day, like rice is to Asian cuisine, says Fetlework Tefferi, the Ethiopian chef/owner of Café Colucci in Oakland, Calif. She adds that its tang comes from teff—the grain most often used to make *injera*—and attributes the stereotypical strong teeth and bones of her countrymen to the grain.

“There is no butter, salt, sugar, eggs [in *injera*]” she says of the bread. “Its flavor comes from just the grain, water, temperature and the clay griddle it’s cooked on,” Tefferi notes. With such a simple batter (recipe, p. 82), the art is in the form. The ideal is “completely bubbled straight through, with a velvety back that

falls nicely when you hand it over,” she rhapsodizes. Teff, more so than other grains that are sometimes used (barley, sorghum, wheat), helps achieve the correct bubbling.

It’s unsurprising that a continent boasting the Atlas Mountains, Saharan deserts and equatorial rainforests is home to breads that vary greatly, too. In East Africa they eat *roti*—a flat, unleavened rolled bread similar to Indian *chapati*.

Chef Ahmed Obo, originally from the Kenyan island of Lamu, now makes *roti* at his Café Jambo in Santa Fe, N.M. Obo serves the Swahili staple “with all types of stews—lentils, goat, chicken,” and also eats it with his morning chai. He learned to make the labor-intensive *roti* at home, so that he might help his mother and sister with all the rolling (recipe, plateonline.com). Obo modifies his *roti* by adding scallion, and baking it crispier. “People think *roti*’s only Indian but in Kenya, we have the influence from the

Indian Ocean across the way.”

In Egypt “bread is very important,” says Moustafa Rohman, chef/owner of Mombar in Queens, N.Y. *Aish*, the Arabic word for bread, is also the word for life.

“It’s the thing you live on,” Rohman notes; “You eat bread at every meal.” At Mombar, he makes either *feter*, an Egyptian puff pastry whose unleavened layers are brushed with butter and then flattened, or *aish bel zabady*, a fluffier pita made with yogurt or buttermilk (\$1.50, recipe, plateonline.com).

Variations of pita are found all over

Egypt and are eaten with whatever’s on-hand—eggs, cheese, honey. At Mombar, Rohman serves it with olive oil and *za’atar* spice. “The pharaohs ate bread of emmer wheat and offered it to gods in temples,” he says. “Today the revolutionaries in Tahrir Square say, ‘Give us bread and freedom.’”

Maisie Wilhelm is a New York City-based food writer.

FERMENTED BREAD

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—Fetlework Tefferi