

The Blue Nile offers an adventure in dining

**BY RENÉE SKOGLUND
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Good food and wine, music and love, 3,000 years of history and culture, My Ethiopia isn't everything. She is the only thing." — unknown Ethiopian patriot.

For Habte Wold Dadi, owner and chef of The Blue Nile in Ann Arbor, the above quote, prominently displayed above the restaurant's bar, is quite apt, and he proudly declares, "I'm the best restaurant in town."

Although such a proclamation is subjective, one fact isn't: The Blue Nile is a unique dining experience. It gives new meaning to the words "finger food." All the food eaten at this Ethiopian restaurant is done so with the fingers. Imagine that, no utensils.

"Eat with your fingers. It's the natural way. It's fun," says Dadi. He loves to talk about food and is very willing to educate his customers about the delights of Ethiopian fare, which includes lots of greens, pureed peas and lentils, and chicken, lamb and beef.

"If we don't talk about food, what are we going to talk about."

Is there anything else?" he says.

Honey wine. Ask how The Blue Nile's famous light and delicate honey wine is made, and Dadi will tell you there are no grapes, just a fermentation of honey, water and hops. He'll even add a bit of romance. "It came from honey-mooners, from feeding the bride and groom fresh honey. It represents a fresh beginning."

Romantic

Dining at The Blue Nile can be romantic, especially on weekends when there's a small jazz combo, but it's always intimate. Diners gather around small, basket-topped tables, and wonderfully hot, wet washcloths are passed around for cleansing the hands. The cloths are comforting, especially on cold winter days, and their warmth builds anticipation for the meal. (Hot cloths are once again distributed after the meal.)

Smaller tables are placed next to the diners for beverages and plates of soft, foamy flat bread made from self-rising flour and hot water. The feast, either Ethiopian (with meat) or vegetarian, arrives on a large, flat tray, with each selection individually mounded.

The Blue Nile Ethiopian Restaurant
Where: 221 E. Washington, Ann Arbor, (734) 998-4746.
Detroit location — 508 Monroe Street, Trappers Alley Mall, Greektown, (313) 964-6699.
Open: 5:30 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday; 4-10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 3-9 p.m. Sunday. Closed Monday.
Menu: Fixed price all-you-can-eat "feasts": Ethiopian \$16.90 and vegetarian \$13.90. Saled and beverages extra.
Atmosphere: Uncluttered, cool, a perfect setting for Ethiopian cuisine and American jazz. (The Ann Arbor location features a jazz combo on Friday and Saturday nights.)
Credit cards: All majors accepted.
Reservations: Accepted for parties of six or more.
Extras: Non-smoking, caters to large groups, nice bar area, superb coffee.

Next comes the ritual that makes dining at The Blue Nile so much fun: Break off a piece of bread, scoop up a luscious tidbit, then, transport the food to your mouth, ignoring what falls into your lap or on the floor. Accompany this with sips of spicy Ethiopian ice tea or light and delicate honey wine.

The result? "Tasty," said Dadi.

Healthy

The Blue Nile is the perfect dining spot for the health conscious. The meat is simmered, never fried, and the vegetables are flavored with onions, garlic and herbs. "The food is very healthy," said Dadi. "We skin the

chicken, trim off all the fat from the meat, use no preservatives and make everything from scratch. It's very balanced."

Some selections are cooked in "berbere" sauce, a blend of roasted jalapeno peppers and over 14 herbs. Berbere resembles paprika, but its taste is much spicier and more complicated. It's delicious, full of character.

Dadi and his wife, Almaz Lessanework, make sure no one leaves hungry. The set-price feasts are all-you-can-eat, and your tray and bread supply are constantly replenished. "They sample a little of everything. The more they eat, the more we bring out," said Lessanework.



Welcome: Habte Wold Dadi (right), owner of The Blue Nile, and his wife Almaz Lessanework, offer gracious hospitality and Ethiopian feasts to their guests.

Lessanework, whose brother, Seifu, owns The Blue Nile in Greektown, was born in Kaffa, Ethiopia, the land of the coffee bean.

Obviously brewing an excellent cup of coffee is in her genes. She roasts and grinds her coffee beans every day. The result is nothing short of coffee perfection.

Both Dadi and Lessanework agree the most rewarding aspect of owning The Blue Nile is serving the customers.

"I don't care what they look like when they come in. Our major concern is what they look like on the way out," says Dadi. "If they have a smiling face, we're happy."

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