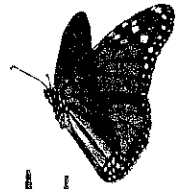


Living & The Arts



# Pasta

## from colonial legacy to major national food

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By Henok Reto

It is thirty minutes after noon on any single day. That is the usual lunch hour and individuals from a wide range of professions including mid-level bureaucrats with those indeterminate titles like policy analyst, budget officer, team leader and work process owner flock out of their offices. The next hour or an hour and a half - depending on the lunch break - is the time for gobblers to eat their fill, maybe have caffeine and be perked up for the rest of the work day.

Usually, most of these individuals frequent one of the many modest bistros in the capital. A typical menu in these places is ordinarily similar across the board. Each patron has a simple choice to make. On a non-fasting day - Wednesdays and Fridays excluded - tibs, tibs firfir, kikil and spaghetti with meat sauce are the ones listed on the menu. Yet, the way the spaghetti can be served varies - it can be served either with bread or injera.

For Italians like Elisa Rossetto, 27, public relations officer at the Italian embassy in Addis Ababa, eating pasta with injera, is kind of strange. "I was surprised the first time I saw people eat spaghetti with injera," she told The Reporter, adding that some Italians have told her that the sauce made with berbere (red pepper) makes the spaghetti with injera have a unique taste.

For others it is a grotesque mixture and an individual even compared it with eating injera using a fork and knife. Still many appreciate spaghetti with injera, which is an assimilation of an Italian culinary art with its Ethiopian counterpart.

The relationship between the two countries goes back more than a hundred years. One highlight of the relationship is the historic battle that was fought on the hills of Adwa in 1896. The victory over the colonial superpower was mainly caused by patriotism for safeguarding the territory of the nation. It has also contributed a lot in protecting the culture of the indigenous people. Nonetheless, after fast-forwarding 100 years, the cultural assimilation is highly noticeable with cultural and strategic ties looking strong.

Some say, "Ethiopia is the birthplace of coffee but Italians know how to make it." One does not need to go far to understand that statement. Cappuccino, macchiato, espresso are some of the innovative ways of preparing coffee. And that is what many urbanites in Ethiopia are accustomed to nowadays. It is not just food and drinks that are found in the Amharic lexicon. Names of areas in Addis Ababa like Piazza, Mercato and Casa Incis and words like machina and testa are all part of the Amharic vocabulary.

All these and many more are results of the Italian occupation that took place from 1935 to 1941. However, pasta's unique presence in the lifestyle of almost all Ethiopian households is something singular. "We are here because of it today," Fabio Melloni, head of the Italian Development Cooperation, Ethiopia, said during his opening remark at the first Ethiopian pasta event held at Hilton Addis Ababa on November 6 and 7.

In Ethiopia wheat - a grain from which pasta is made - is one of the major cereals and hosting an event on wheat, flour, and pasta should have come earlier, according to some of the participants. The event brought together farmers, associations, chefs and various



Ethiopian and Italian chefs preparing pasta for the contest that was held at the Hilton Addis Ababa last weekend as part of the pasta event



stakeholders. Panel discussions, pasta cooking and tasting and contests were part of the two-day event.

Ever since Ethiopia saw a small-scale industrial revolution in the early 1960s, food processing factories have been taking the leading role. Those firms in the beginning were dominantly established by foreigners who understood the country's potential for food and agriculture. For instance, the oldest, Fafa Foods, was opened in cooperation with Swedes whereas Anbessa Flour and Foods was originally owned by Greeks.

According to the Ethio-Italian Cooperation, a new partnership between the Ethiopian and Italian governments and farmers cooperatives has had a successful result in the implementation of the Durum Wheat Value Chain

Project in Oromia Regional State. As a result, durum wheat production jumped from about 500 tons in 2012 to 15,000 tons. "Smallholders' cooperatives appear to be able to satisfy the demand of huge stocks of high-quality durum wheat coming from the national pasta industries," Taha Hassen, president of Ethiopian Millers' Associations, said.

Indeed, durum wheat has been cultivated in Ethiopia for thousands of years, although it has gradually been displaced by bread wheat. However, demand for pasta, spaghetti and macaroni has shown a steady growth to lead the industries for wheat importation. The high demand with the pasta factories, estimated to be between 300,000 to 500,000 quintals, will be fulfilled by the

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local production, particularly with Bale Zone, which dominantly leads the way forward to substitute the imported wheat, according to Taha.

As the country's pasta factories are limited to not more than ten in number, the promising durum wheat cultivation is expected to satisfy the demand of the factories. However, the growing popularity of the wheat-made foods in cities will inevitably force the country to build more firms so as to revamp the demand for fine wheat. And this is indeed a huge task for the association of millers in expanding the lesson learnt in Bale Zone of the Oromia Regional State to other wheat cultivating regions in the country.

"The emerging food habits and demands would make pasta more favorable in Ethiopian cuisines," Vito Bellomo, an Italian chef, said. According to him, pasta holds many favorable features that would increase its share in the weekly food consumption until five kg per capita per year for tens of millions of families.

The globally known pasta is stated by the American National Pasta Association as a perfect foundation for a healthy, delicious and satisfying meal. The National Pasta Association (NPA) in its recent journal stated that the average American consumes 20 lbs of pasta annually to make it the 6th highest food per capita in the country. However, there are researches that indicate that durum wheat has gluten in it and should be avoided by those who follow a gluten-free diet. As the US produces 4.4 billion pounds of pasta every year it takes the numbers two spot - Italy is the number one producer - of largest pasta producers in the world, according to the NPA.

The art of pasta making and the devotion to the food as a whole has evolved since pasta was first conceptualized. And according to Justin Demetri, in his book, the History of Pasta, it is estimated that Italians eat over sixty pounds of pasta per person, per year, easily beating Americans, who eat about twenty pounds per person. Though there are no official figures for the Ethiopian case, the dish is has become one of the most

popular and highly consumed repasts.

Ruth Mekonnen, an Ethiopian housewife, said that since pasta is affordable it is one of the main dishes in her household. According to her, she usually prefers pasta to the local most popular dish injera bewot. "We usually have spaghetti for dinner at our house," she said. Indeed, literatures indicate that pasta is known as being one of the most inexpensive food items to be prepared for an individual or a group of people. The NPA further states that a plate of pasta can be considered as a fairly satisfying nourishment particularly for dinner as light meal is often recommended before bed. On the other hand, pasta could simply be an ideal meal to keep one healthy and fit because of its nutritional values. With so many options for building lower calorie, nutrient rich-pasta meals, one never gets bored, nutritionists advice.

Pasta is generally served with some type of sauce; the sauce and the type of pasta are usually matched based on consistency and ease of eating. Northern Italian cooking uses less tomato sauce, garlic and herbs. While in Ethiopia red pepper is added to the food to revamp the taste. However, tomato sauce is the most common way of serving pasta.

The invention of the first tomato sauces dates back from the late 18th century; the first written record of pasta with tomato sauce can be found in the 1790 cookbook L'Apicio Moderno by Roman chef Francesco Leonardi. Before tomato sauce was introduced, pasta was eaten dry with the fingers; the liquid sauce demanded the use of a fork.

This time, in some developing countries the changing lifestyle is the outcome of having better income. Thus, the habit of living on pasta and other foods items with less calorie are extremely important, according to physicians and food science experts. Moreover, complex carbohydrates like pasta provides the optimum type of "fuel" to power muscles and the brain. As it is digested more slowly it provides a slower release of energy to keep one going throughout the day. "That is the ultimate message

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