

R.I.P., Meskerem: The Ethiopian restaurant that shaped Adams Morgan

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At its peak, Meskerem was considered one of Washington's best restaurants — Ethiopian or otherwise. (Sarah L. Voisin/The Washington Post)

[Food](#)

By [Tim Carman](#) May 4

Meskerem, which opened in 1985, helped define Adams Morgan. (Sarah L. Voisin/The Washington Post)

Restaurant openings are essential nutrients to food writers. We can't survive without a few juicy coming-soon scoops, filled with all manner of detail about chef, cuisine, decor, investors and anything else we can squeeze out of an available source.

But what about closings? How often do we offer more than a dashed-off tweet to acknowledge the passing of a beloved restaurant? I mean, for every [CityZen closure](#), there must be a dozen others that never merit a word

from the Food Media Complex, many for good reason. But Meskerem was different, not just because of its ripe old age, but also because of its role in shaping the personality of Adams Morgan in the 1980s and 1990s.

Before it closed on April 15, Meskerem was apparently the oldest Ethiopian restaurant operating at the same address in the United States. It opened on March 15, 1985, says Harry Kloman, a journalism instructor at the University of Pittsburgh, who has been researching Ethiopian eateries for more than a decade.

Meskerem was a bit younger than the original Blue Nile, which opened on July 1, 1983, in a small storefront in midtown Detroit, says owner Seifu Lessanework. But over the years, that Ethiopian restaurant moved twice before settling in Ferndale, Mich., just outside of Detroit. “We never closed,” Lessanework says. “Not for a single day.”

Meskerem wasn't even the first Ethiopian restaurant in Washington. That [honor went to Mamma Desta](#), which opened in 1978 at 4840 Georgia Ave. NW, according to Kloman. Many Ethiopians, in fact, claim Mamma Desta was the first Ethiopian restaurant in America, but Kloman has unearthed an earlier one: the prosaically named [Ethiopian Restaurant](#), which debuted in 1966 in Long Beach, Calif. Its life span was only a few months, Kloman says.

But even if Meskerem wasn't the first Ethiopian restaurant in America, or even the oldest operating one, the establishment had a colorful past that helped define Adams Morgan for a generation. It deserves an eulogy, especially given the way it closed: without a peep. Even semi-regulars didn't know it was gone until days after.

Once Mohaba Mohammed and his sister, Nafisa Said, finalized the sale of their three-level building for \$1.7 million, they didn't announce the restaurant's imminent closure so longtime Meskerem customers could enjoy one last meal. The owners just shut it down, no questions asked.

“From my vantage point, they ran a restaurant and business” for 30 years, says Mychael Cohn, a partner with Lorton Corner Road LLC, which bought the property. “They were ready to retire.”

And apparently ready to retire from the limelight, too. Neither Mohammed nor Said could be reached for comment.

With its colorful combination plates and tangy injera, Meskerem offered many locals their first taste of Ethiopian food. (Sarah L. Voisin/The Washington Post)

Politics and platters

When Meskerem opened in 1985, its owners were among the first waves of Ethiopian immigrants who fled the country after a Marxist military junta overthrew the emperor in 1974. Mohaba Mohammed told Kloman that he immigrated to the United States in 1980 and drove a cab before opening Meskerem. He was one among many East African newcomers who quickly established a foothold in Adams Morgan, which was the unofficial Little Ethiopia long before [savvy Ninth Street restaurateurs lobbied for the name](#) in 2005.

The Washington Post’s archives are littered with references to Adams Morgan as a haven for Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees, although perhaps not always a safe one. Tensions between Ethiopians and Eritreans, who waged a three-decade war, could spill over to the restaurants and cafes in Adams Morgan.

Back in June 1991, former Post staff writer Carole Sugarman, now food editor and restaurant critic for [Bethesda magazine](#), wrote this about the displaced African politics of Adams Morgan:

“Eritrean Desble Mesghenna, owner of Alla Scala restaurant on Florida Avenue, says that Ethiopians will eat in the upstairs section of his restaurant,

but not downstairs, which is called the Eritrean Cafe and serves the same Italian menu.

“Desble says that many local Eritreans have spent time at the restaurant celebrating the recent military successes. They open champagne. They dance,’ he said. ‘The Ethiopians don’t dare come and laugh with the Eritreans. Some people raise politics. They don’t like that,’ Desble says.”

Like so many people who flee war-torn countries, formerly prominent Ethiopians were sometimes reduced to kitchen labor in Washington, just another immigrant working the stoves to keep Americans fed. “The former chef at Meskerem restaurant was the wife of an Ethiopian general,” Sugarman wrote. “And the retired chef at Fasika’s restaurant was the wife of Brig. Gen. Teferi Benti, who was the head of state following the overthrow of Haile Selassie.”

The politics and people of these Adams Morgan restaurants likely hovered below the radar of the average American diner who frequented the joints back in the 1970s and ’80s. For many, these establishments offered locals their first taste of Ethiopian cooking, in which colorful shiros and wats were served on injera flatbread that doubled as an eating utensil. Meskerem, in fact, remained an entry-level experience for diners almost to the day it closed, judging by its [last Yelp reviews](#).

During its peak, Meskerem was considered not just one of the best Ethiopian restaurants in Washington, but one of the best restaurants period. In her 1991 list of 50 favorite restaurants, former Post food critic Phyllis C. Richman wrote: “Just order a combination platter so you can sample the chicken, beef, lamb and half a dozen vegetables. Not only do you get to taste all the best, it is arranged like a palette, with a range of vivid colors any artist would be glad to settle for. The range of tastes is every bit as vivid.”

Ten years later in 2001, when I first walked into Meskerem as a freshly transplanted Texan, the place was still a vibrant outpost for Ethiopian cooking. My memories of the meal have entered that no man’s land

between truth and romanticized fiction. Mostly I remember ordering honey wine and hating the person I was forced to talk to, a classic wonk who thought I was some hick from Houston. In retrospect, it seems a fitting introduction to Washington and one of its iconic cuisines.

As Adams Morgan transformed into a party zone in the 1990s and 2000s, the nerve center for the Ethiopian community shifted to the U Street corridor, mostly along Ninth Street, and then fanned out toward the suburbs. Perhaps because it was catering to a new kind of diner, and not just Ethiopian expats, Meskerem lost favor among critics as the years went by. “Doro wat — chicken and a hard-cooked egg in a cloak of typically searing berbere sauce — is a celebratory dish on its home turf, but you might not get that from sampling Meskerem’s version, which is shy on the heat,” Post food critic Tom Sietsema wrote in his [spring 2011 dining guide](#). “I’ve also found gored gored, strips of raw or rare beef traditionally rubbed with red chili paste, to be vanilla (and chewy) going, as if the kitchen were cooking for tourists.”

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A connection gone

Perhaps my sentimentality is showing, but I wish Meskerem could have gone out on a higher note. I wish we could have properly thanked the owners for their many contributions to the District. But that moment has come and gone. The new owners are already searching for a tenant to take over the massive space, which covers 3,700 square feet on three levels, not including a 1,500-square-foot space in back that could be used as a patio.

The space lends itself to another restaurant, Cohn says, but the Lorton

Corner Road partners “wouldn’t be opposed to an alternative use.” They’re talking with prospective operators both locally and outside the District. Whoever takes over the building will need to invest in a renovation, Cohn says. The previous owners took good care of the property, Cohn says, but Meskerem’s outdated decor would not serve the next business.

Lorton Corner Road would like to find a tenant soon, but the owners say they won’t settle. They want someone who fits into a changing Adams Morgan, which is shedding its image as a party zone. The D.C. Alcoholic Beverage Control Board’s [decision last year](#) to grant new restaurant liquor licenses has made Adams Morgan more attractive to business operators who were historically scared off by the chaos and occasional violence of the nightclub-heavy neighborhood.

“We’d kind of love to continue that trend toward making Adams Morgan a better place to visit,” Cohn says.

Meskerem’s closing hasn’t robbed Adams Morgan of its last Ethiopian eatery, says Kristen Barden, executive director of the Adams Morgan Partnership. There are still a few operating in the neighborhood, including Awash at 2218 18th St. NW and the Adams Morgan Coffee Shop at 2204 18th St. NW, which recently [added Ethiopian dishes to its menu](#).

So, yes, Adams Morgan has not separated completely from its rich Ethiopian history, full of sound and fury and fitfit. But with Meskerem’s closing, the neighborhood’s connection to that first wave of war-weary immigrants appears to be severed forever.

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