

Azeb Gide: Queen of Sheba

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Washington Examiner

Azeb Gide, chef/owner of the new Fairfax restaurant Sheba, wears her Ethiopian heritage with grace and pride. She translates those qualities into her sleek restaurant and its array of foods, many of which are dishes she learned from her family. “Every tribe has its own recipe,” she said. “My husband and I argue over how to spice and prepare butter [niter kibbeh].”

Growing up in Addis Ababa during the Ethiopian Revolution of the early 1970s, Gide remembers the communist persecution of Catholics and other Christians. Yet her childhood yields fond memories as well, especially of eating with family members. “I was one of those picky eaters and I hated eating on individual plates, enjoying rather the meal shared on the communal plate with my siblings,” she said. “More than the food, I enjoyed the stories and jokes my older siblings shared during these couple-of-hour-long dinners. I don’t remember ever eating alone growing up.”

What kitchen training she gained occurred before the annual celebration of the preparation of the Feast of the Holy Saviour in October. “I couldn’t wait to join the ladies in the food preparation,” she says. Cooking and home-brewing of the traditional beer, tella and honey wine always began weeks before the event.

On the day of the event, she says, several dozen ladies of the group would join her mother in the kitchen to help prepare the food for outdoor cooking, which lasted for about 18 hours. “I was always assigned to clean and prep the collard greens,” she explained. “I loved being around these women, who would tell stories and jokes, and I can still hear their laughter. They ... took cooking very seriously. They would argue about spice

If you go Sheba Ethiopian Restaurant

» **Where:** 3900A Pickett Road, Fairfax
» **Info:** 703-425-1130
» **Hours:** 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday to Friday, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Saturday, noon to 7 p.m. Sunday

preparations, when to add which ingredients while cooking, each holding their mother or grandmother as the ultimate authority.”

But, Gide remembers, they all agreed on the correct way to cook onions: “It was like the Eleventh Commandment,” she says. “They would criticize a meal they had tasted at events and they all seemed to pinpoint where it went wrong — the onion was either undercooked or overcooked. And my grandmother would chime in, attributing it to being lazy. They made it sound like it was the worst thing that could happen to a woman.”

That she now owns and cooks for a restaurant has left her mother puzzled. “Had a prophet from God told my parents when I was a child that I would some day open a restaurant, they would’ve had laughed so hard,” she said. “Sheba Restaurant would’ve been to my parents what Isaac is to Abraham.” And to this day, Gide says, when she heads to the kitchen, she always starts with cooking the onions correctly.



Gide

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What is your comfort food?

Eggs, boiled, scrambled or cooked in onion, tomatoes and jalapenos, as long as it’s not watery. There’s nothing more comforting than being fed by friends and family.

What is your favorite ingredient?

My mom’s spiced butter.

Which is your favorite restaurant? Cuisine?

There’s absolutely nothing like a good steak and mashed potatoes. I guess that makes it American cuisine. (This would absolutely scandalize my

French friends.)

What is your luckiest moment?

The birth of my first child. It was like my own rebirth.

What is your cooking philosophy?

My father used to say that the poor cook to feed and the rich cook to show off. It’s not easy to be poor when I constantly have to fight the ego. When you cook, think of feeding the person you love, and if you’re a Christian, think of it as an opportunity to feed Jesus — spices and salt will take care of everything else.

The Vine Guy & Gal » Scott & Cindy Greenberg Summer sippers — she said, he said

According to the sun’s position, the summer season officially began Wednesday, when the summer solstice sun reached the farthest distance north of the equator, providing the longest daylight hours of the year. This can only mean one thing — time to chill out with the right summer wine.

But with which wine to tame the high temperatures is a constant source of heat in our household. She likes white wines that are crisp and dry, he prefers wines that are off-dry and refreshing. Since both styles definitely have a place in the wine bucket and on the palate, we will each share our favorite picks so you can decide which wine style will help you keep your cool this summer.

Retail prices are approximate.

She said: crisp and dry

I can’t think of any better way to beat the heat than a glass of well-chilled dry white wine. Here are a few that I reach for when the heat is on.

Torrontes is one of my favorite summertime heat busters. Traditionally grown in Argentina, it is usually produced in stainless steel tanks to preserve the fresh fruit flavors. The

2011 **Andeluna Torrontes (\$10)** from the Mendoza region of Argentina is produced in collaboration with world-renowned winemaking consultant Michel Rolland. It has lovely aromas of acacia flowers, jasmine, peach and grapefruit. Abundant acidity keeps the bright flavors of tropical fruits, nectarine and citrus fresh and the finish crisp. **QPR 8**

I also like the 2010 **Neal Family Vineyards Sauvignon Blanc (\$18)** from Napa Valley, Calif. Produced exclusively from organically farmed grapes, this wine is a beautiful example of a warmer-climate style. The fragrant bouquet of papaya and kiwi paves the way for the lovely tropical fruit and pineapple flavors that glide across the tongue. Pitch-perfect acidity refreshes the palate with each sip. **QPR 9.5**

During the summer months, I prefer to drink my chardonnays naked — the wine, that is. It is a winemaking term that indicates the wine was produced without the use of oak in either the fermentation or aging process. The 2011 **Kim Crawford Unoaked Chardonnay (\$20)** from Marlborough, New Zealand, lets all the bright fruit flavors of green apple, white nectarine and grapefruit shine through on the midweight body. The wonderfully crisp acidity keeps the wine balanced and crisp. **QPR 8.5**

He said: off-dry

I want my off-dry wines to be refreshing but not cloyingly sweet. The secret is balance. When there is balance among the fruit, the

residual sugar and abundant acidity, few wines shine as brightly on the tongue as these wines do when it comes to beating the steamy temperature of summer or the heat of spicy fare.

Semisweet sparkling wines are one of the best kept secrets when it comes to taming summer’s heat. I’m sure the 2010 **Fratelli Moscato d’Asti Moscato d’Asti, Italy DOCG (\$17)** won’t be a secret for long. Fragrant aromas of acacia and white peaches explode on the nose and in the mouth, where notes of apricot nectar and nectarine join the fun. The pop of acidity and the bright bubbles keep the palate refreshed. **QPR 8**

I am usually not one for gimmicky wines, so I approached the 2011 **Kung Fu Girl Riesling (\$14)** from the Columbia Valley in Washington state with a healthy degree of skepticism. I was knocked out by the juicy apple core and bright citrus flavors. The balancing act between sweetness and acidity is perfect, giving the finish a delicious highlight of lemon zest and ripe nectarine. **QPR 8.5**

Pinot blanc is made for summer. The 2009 **Valley of the Moon Pinot Blanc (\$14)** from Sonoma County, Calif., is a study in balance. Ripe flavors of tropical fruit, pear and creamy lemon are round and full in the mouth. Candied pineapple and perfect acidity combine for a refreshingly not-too-sweet and lengthy finish. **QPR 9**

Note: QPR is a rating system that compares the quality a wine delivers relative to the price. A QPR of 10 is considered an excellent value.



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