

To access digital component of entry, enter contest@lee.net as the username and the password Newspaper1.

=

Restaurant review: Ethiopian cafe Buna Kurs is one of this year's best new eateries

https://richmond.com/life-entertainment/local/food-drink/restaurant-review-ethiopian-cafe-buna-kurs-is-one-of-this-year-s-best-new-eateries/article_23b547dc-19b8-11ee-9aa5-5f3bf85ba370.html

Lily Fasil's sister, Aida, dressed in flowy white garb, presides over the ceremonial preparation of the coffee on Sunday mornings. She sits behind her pulpit in the light-filled studio at [Buna Kurs](#), Fasil's Ethiopian breakfast cafe in Jackson Ward, as those in attendance form an attentive circle around her.

Viridescent beans are methodically roasted on a cast-iron pan, crushed into a powder, and steeped in a slender clay vessel called a "jebena." The enchanting aromas meld with incense burning in the backdrop. Conversations between complete strangers are exchanged. And a communal bowl of popcorn is passed around the room.

The sacred buna ceremony has a meditative, soul-affirming quality to it, but not in the religious sense. "It's just an Ethiopian thing," says Fasil, a first-generation immigrant from Addis. For her and other children of the motherland, coffee is a birthright they are proud to uphold. "The togetherness is what coffee is for us."

The ceremony, traditionally an hourlong affair convened by Ethiopian families at the end of every communal gathering, progresses in three rounds. The first is known in Amharic as "abol." Two more follow, during which the brew gradually wanes in strength and boldness.

It's customary, though, to save the fullest-bodied batch for honored guests, for whom this entire show of hospitality has been orchestrated. At Fasil's cafe, that coveted first sip goes to any person lucky enough to snag a front-row seat to the caffeine-fueled action.

[Buna Kurs](#) takes its name from the assortment of light noshes served during the ceremony. Independently, however, the words "buna" and "kurs" also mean "coffee" and "breakfast," two hallmarks of Ethiopian cuisine that the cafe specializes in.

As much of a hub for Ethiopian culinary traditions as the place has become, this wasn't Fasil's initial plan. Like her dad, a renowned painter in Washington, D.C., she's always loved art, especially photography. The Virginia Commonwealth University grad had

spent years, after moving back to Richmond in 2016, working a boring desk job, waiting tables, doing retail and driving for Uber. And she was desperate for a creative outlet.

The plan, which Fasil, a first-time business owner, finally hatched during the pandemic, was to open a multipurpose studio space for independent artists like herself. To help the business stand out, Aida persuaded her to incorporate elements of their culture, through the addition of a small cafe.

Equipped with a back studio, the former Saadia's Juicebox location felt like the perfect fit. Yet, since Buna Kurs opened in October 2022, the gravitational pull has all but shifted toward the front of the house, thanks to the popularity of the cafe. What began as a side project has become the main attraction.

The Buna Kurs menu is, as Fasil likes to call it, "unapologetically Ethiopian," featuring breakfast fare that one would ordinarily have to trek all the way to the D.C. area to find. In addition to coffee beans flown in from Yirgacheffe, the cafe sources many key ingredients – spices, flours, breads – from Ethiopia.

Fasil, having never worked in a kitchen or owned a restaurant before, tries to downplay her food as little more than common dishes that any Ethiopian household would know how to cook. However true that might be, the dishes are uncommonly good – and, at least for the rest of us, a revelation.

What is markedly different about the Ethiopian breakfast canon is the spectrum of flavors, set at a frequency with which the basic Western palate has never been attuned. A rush of sensations, unlike any you've probably experienced before, accompanies Fasil's cooking.

Most of it is brought to life by the mother of all spice blends, berbere. It's a mix of dried red peppers, ginger and vivid spices that mimics the reddish look of paprika but has a far smokier, spicier profile.

Swirled with olive oil, a sultry infusion of berbere is brushed onto the cratered surface of a spongy, two-layered crepe cake made from sourdough teff batter (\$6.50). This creates a yin-yang effect with a dark orange tint on top and a pristine base of griddled, ivory-colored crepe on bottom.

Uneven pieces of injera are stained in berbere-rich ragu, which elevates the tanginess of the fermented grain bread with boldness and a bit of heat – and which, given its use of tomatoes, onions, garlic, and spices, is not wildly dissimilar to Indian bhuna masala. Fasil serves the saucy bread alongside garlicky, heavily-seasoned eggs and a fluffy mound of bulgur wheat, cajoled with sauteed onions and cardamom-scented butter – a quintessential combination at her family's breakfast table (\$15.50).

"Those three (dishes) come together," the Buna Kurs owner says. "When an Ethiopian walks in here, they know."

Even the chechebsa (\$9.50), the closest thing here to flapjacks, gets a dose of berbere. Just enough of it to wake you out of whatever nostalgic trance one might slip into while partaking in this plate of broken pancake pieces, lavished in a sweet, sticky mess of honey and clarified butter.

Mitmita, a fruity mix of chiles that packs even more of a punch than berbere, is employed for a light, vinegary dressing that steadily ignites a cool tomato salad (\$5.50). The heat level crescendos, slicing through the freshness of the diced tomatoes and red onions without searing anyone's tongue off. Fresh, fiery and flavorful, the dish would fit right into a lineup of Korean-style banchan.

Another essential heating agent? Fresh jalapeños. Like the ones that Fasil minces up with garlic and tomatoes, scatters among squiggly injera strips and tosses around in olive oil and, of course, a twinge of berbere, yielding a bright, breadly salad in proximity to a panzanella or fattoush (\$6).

As the star of the Buna Kurs menu, breakfast is served all day. But those who plan to linger, particularly now that Fasil has extended the closing time from 3 to 6 p.m., can also sample the cafe's less-publicized lunch offerings.

Swaddled in a big injera blanket is a top-notch shiro (\$16.50), a thick, creamy, luscious chickpea flour stew, the color and consistency of smooth peanut butter. Its flavors waver between charmingly nutty and, at times, slyly spicy.

Also blanketed by injera, the Ethiopian half-sibling of beef goulash, known as "awaze tibs" (\$19.50), is made by cooking down the whole gamut of aromatics – onions, tomatoes, garlic, jalapeño and berbere – into a profoundly rich simmer sauce. Though the salt could be scaled back, it's an otherwise refined plate of food.

The success of the cafe, one of the best spots to open in this town in the past year, has taken Fasil by surprise. The Buna Kurs owner never expected that food, not fine art, would be the focus of her new business venture.

Even so, in bringing the influences of her native country to her newfound home in Richmond and introducing folks to traditions like the coffee ceremony, she still finds herself fulfilling her inner artistic desire to share different forms of culture with the world.

"Our father always wanted us to complete at least high school in Ethiopia so we knew our culture," says Fasil, who came to the United States after turning 21. "That culture was instilled in us."

And now, at 34, she gets to instill it in others. “In a way, that’s art, too,” she says, reflectively.

=

Restaurant review: At Conejo, an inspired take on traditional Mexican centers on housemade tortillas

https://richmond.com/life-entertainment/local/food-drink/conejo-richmond-patterson/article_1a42ea1e-cf9f-11ed-b47f-ef636e968aa8.html

Think of the first tortilla you ever met. Chances are, it sat lining the grocery store shelf, next to plastic-sealed slices of Wonder Bread. A starchy top sheet of dough with no discernable taste, color or definition, unceremoniously forgotten under a burial mound of beans and cheese and rice.

Now let me introduce you to what Conejo’s Danny Mena calls a tortilla. Its only relation to the store-bought stuff is in name alone.

At the modern Mexican restaurant on Patterson Avenue, which opened in March 2022, the tortilla holds a sacred place. A mural of corn, the building block of masa, is symbolically displayed among all the basket weavings, potted ferns and painted dahlias sown around the perky, Mexican flower-child-inspired dining room.

The name, “Conejo,” means rabbit in Spanish. But it’s also an heirloom maize varietal that the chef soaks in limewater, through a process known as nixtamalization, and weaves into rugged, ivory-colored rounds of masa that look as if they’ve been cut from fabric drawn right out of the ground itself.

His tortillas are also made in deep, bold shades of midnight blue, and in moonlit ovals of milled wheat, sturdy yet supple, with the wholesome sweet glow of toasted grain that reflects their Sonoran heritage. Some get fried or baked; others, tanned directly atop the hot, griddled face of a comal.

Mena, author of “Made in Mexico: The Cookbook: Classic and Contemporary Recipes from Mexico City,” knows the subject matter well. The Mexico City native, having been born and raised in the heart of taco country, dedicates most of his book to tortilla-centric bites.

“Mexicans have been eating food on or in tortillas since they invented the process of nixtamalization,” he writes. Crop the iconic tortilla from the picture, and “you’d be losing part of the soul of Mexican cuisine.” So the popular saying goes: “Sin maíz no hay país. Without corn, there’s no country.”

Recruited to Richmond by the Tazza Kitchen folks, the chef’s culinary background is a tale of two cities: Mexico City, where he grew up, and New York City, where he grew

professionally. And that is the story Mena conveys in the food at Conejo – the energetic flavors of his childhood home combined with a Manhattan-groomed chef’s urbane sensibility. The result? A take on traditional Mexican cuisine that feels altogether fresh, inspired and rejuvenated.

At the start of the meal, you’re offered a sacrament of house salsas, each one differently calibrated: a chile crisp-esque salsa macha that springs with oregano; a blend of arbol chiles and roasted tomatoes whose lilted creaminess and savage heat will bedevil your tongue; and a sprightlier variety animated by charred tomatillos and habaneros.

The salsas are here to carry you through the meal – that is, if you can resist polishing them off over a bowl of house-made tortilla chips. Unlike the pre-bagged kind dispensed at bars, the chips don’t come free. Still, for an extra \$1.50, it’s a small investment that pays off, in dividends of pleasure you’ll receive while dipping the warm, salt-flecked toes of fried tortilla into every salsa.

The chips prove handy as well for ladling up cheesy-baked layers of mottled queso and brawny chorizo crumbles that arrive bubbling away in a campfire skillet (\$11.50). Or for dunking like bread into some pozole (\$8.50), a brothy infusion of stewed pork, guajillo chiles and tender beads of hominy, just as soulful and lustrously red as Korean jjigae.

Nearly all the dishes at Conejo speak for themselves. But there are a few exceptions, for which you’d do well to ration that salsa. Rolled into tight, crunchy blunts around a shaggy hash of beef, the blue corn taquitos (\$8) are relatively muted. As are the sopas de nopal, sweet, pan-fried cakes of masa covered with giant bushels of shredded and tangy cactus blades (\$7.50). An amp of salsa, however, does the trick.

No assists are needed for the tostadas (\$11), though. And it’s here that Mena’s training at Michelin-starred New York restaurants really begins to peek through the curtain. Atop tectonic plates of crispy white corn, he bridges land and sea, garnishing shiny, little trinkets of raw tuna mined from the water with fried leek trimmings, which, like some undiscovered species of soil-harvested kombu, lend their earthy umami to the dish.

His ceviche (\$15) is a stunning plate of food, too. Formed into a circular mosaic, acid-washed tiles of sea bass and arcs of cucumber glimmer ever so brightly and exuberantly on the palate. The sole crack in the foundation is the pruned mouthfeel of the fish, which, I gather, has been left to languish a bit too long in its milky citrus bath.

“Dishes come out as they’re ready,” the servers advise. Translation: Be prepared for a pileup. Plates frequently get launched from the kitchen like a runaway train and collide as they arrive all at once on your table. But stay the course. The best is yet to come, however chaotic that might be.

Where the food unfolds most beautifully is in the final two chapters of the Conejo menu. The first, titled “costras,” explores the genre of cheesy, griddled flour tortillas – which one might think of as an open-faced quesadilla.

The only thing is, I’ve never met a quesadilla where the cheese comes face-to-face with heat in the way it does with a costra de queso, not simply melting but searing, crisping and even burning the cheesy glue that holds everything together – from baubles of shrimp done up in rich, sofrito-like fashion (\$6.75) to a hodgepodge of mushroom and leek that tastes like the finest savory tart you’ve ever had (\$6.50).

With the pastor con queso (\$7), Mena slips another tortilla on top. And incredibly enough, he makes a convincing case for cooked pineapple, by planting ripe bits of tropical sunshine between the hearty, rotisserie pork-lined crevices.

The “tacos” chapter is one you might be more familiar with – and some of it, such as the Baja-fried fish and carnitas tacos, feels like predictable content. But even this part contains a couple of surprising plot twists.

Three lines down on the menu is a charred, mole-roasted broccoli taco, served on a corn tortilla, that glides on the strong gust of a spicy, minty chimichurri (\$7). Two more lines down is a taco that achieves rare and intriguing lushness with seared tuna, an enameled, red-orange brick of it stained in fruity, floral pibil sauce and laid on a creamy mortar of aioli (\$9).

With all this talk of tortillas, I might have buried the real lede and yet another reason to rush over to Conejo: For less than \$50, you can order enough food for two – still – at a time when, due to inflation and rising food costs, a single entree from most fine dining restaurants can now run you closer to \$30 to 40. Putting it into perspective, Conejo’s pricepoint seems pretty newsworthy.

And the added brilliance of Mena’s cooking? Well, that’s just the cheese on top of the tortilla, I’d say.

=

Restaurant review: Birdie’s oyster bar brings light to downtown Broad Street

https://richmond.com/life-entertainment/local/food-drink/restaurant-review-birdie-s-oyster-bar-brings-light-to-downtown-broad-street/article_9aff4b4c-e9ea-11ed-9ed9-574312a83c4d.html

When [Birdie’s](#) finally opened on Broad Street a year into the pandemic, it was more than just a new restaurant. It was a beacon of hope.

Arts District businesses, by that point, had taken a huge hit. The local work crowd had departed in droves. Storefronts had been boarded up. And much of the landscape had gone dark.

But a restaurant opening felt like a reassuring sign. Maybe, at last, the lights were coming back on in downtown Richmond.

Debuted in November 2021, this “coffee bar by day, oyster bar by night” is run by [Common House](#), the members-only social club that resides above the restaurant. Fortunately, for members of the public, annual dues aren’t needed to dine here.

“Light” is a word that repeatedly comes to mind when one thinks of Birdie’s.

Light, in the way that afternoon sun streams in through its majestic picture windows, framed by pinstriped bistro awnings. And in the bright, contemporary look of the space, outfitted with marbled tables, brass fixtures and polished gallery floors.

But also in the sense of how the restaurant operates. Light as a feather.

All the cooking and shucking at dinner are overseen by one person. This lone chef singlehandedly tends to portable burners and a glass-encased raw bar out of the 40-seat venue’s open kitchen – and, as far as I can tell, does it all without even breaking a sweat.

Then there’s the Birdie’s menu, which is, conceptually speaking, light as well.

An average restaurant menu dabbles in a range of 20 dishes. Twenty chances to nail it with diners or totally flub things up.

Birdie’s, however, plays a more focused food game. Beyond the roster of raw bar delicacies, only a dozen or so prepared dishes are featured on a menu devised by chef de cuisine Hunter Garvin, supplying enough for a full meal but little room for error.

It takes precision to pull off such a limited menu. Garvin, thankfully, has learned a thing or two in working for the masters of precision fine-dining at Longoven.

Nothing is overlooked at Birdie’s. Not even a simple basket of potato chips, which typically, one might regard as a throwaway menu item. Here, the spuds are tanned more zealously than George Hamilton’s beautician and caressed in salt and vinegar.

As captured by the name, a fictitious, turn-of-the-century alter ego meant to go with its oyster bar persona, Birdie’s embraces the spirit of those shell-shucking saloons of yore, such as the iconic Union Oyster House in Boston and Manhattan’s Grand Central Oyster Bar. And yet, it also ascends to a more enlightened state of consciousness.

Forget the gloppy chowders served at traditional oyster bars. Garvin delivers a concentrated crock of cioppino (\$8), a bold tomato-based stew teeming with luring herbs and spices and more seafood per square inch than an Italian fisherman’s trawl.

Lobster rolls made with gut-wrenching quantities of mayo are swapped out, too. Replaced by pristine chunks of poached lobster, gracing the center of a toasted brioche bun and doused in a thin primer that incorporates only enough of the emulsified stuff to give it a light, milky complexion (\$30).

Also spring for upgraded versions of shrimp cocktail, sloshed in a cool, creamy, punchy chile-pepper vinaigrette abounding with dill (\$3 each). And cheddary crab dip (\$12), another cocktail party classic, which is done rather simply but packs a crabcake-sized megabyte of flavor into its system.

Don't hesitate to swim back ashore, either, as Garvin's land-faring dishes are similarly stellar.

His slick, well-dressed Caesar (\$8) is the best I've met in recent memory. A zephyr of anchovy, a heavy gust of Dijon mustard and a torrential downpouring of shaved Grana Padano, all converge in a spirited tempest-on-a-salad-plate.

Garvin adds fresh, refined finishes to other food offerings as well.

A fleet of deviled eggs (\$8) turns delightfully seaworthy, after being blinged out in salty fish roe and bagna-càuda-style anchovy ranch. A hot dog (\$12) gets amplified through the intensity of whole-grain mustard and zippy chow-chow relish. A pesto-rich gemelli pasta (\$17) is infused with the raw, incisive energy of garlic. And a carpaccio of beef (\$10) has its lush and delicate sensibilities aroused with bitter blades of arugula and seduced by full-bodied shavings of Parmesan.

None of Garvin's dishes misses the mark. But if the chef were bent on improving his aim, I'd suggest he focus on the tartine (\$10), a stately, spring-y bite of sliced radishes and English peas pasted onto panels of sourdough with some ricotta that has been churned to the consistency of fondue. Pleasant as it is, a little extra pizzazz – a soft herb element or pickled garnish, perhaps – wouldn't hurt the situation, either.

At night, Birdie's emits a warm, sensuous glow that catches my eye whenever I pass by it. Whether this Broad Street oyster bar is the "clean, well-lighted" object of Papa Hemingway's imagination, it's certainly a place that has brought life back to the area since the pandemic darkened our doorstep. An inviting spot where folks can take refuge, gather around the bar and order up sumptuous plates of food and the coldest gin martinis in town.

And to find your way there, all you need to do is follow the light.