

# 5

## Food of the Pharaohs

*Tiny teff, grown in Idaho, helps preserve Ethiopian heritage.*

*By Emily Fritchman*

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Coffee beans roast on the oven. Spices fill the air. Mother and daughter laugh as they make the traditional Ethiopian flatbread. The spongy bread is called injera. Its tangy sourdough taste comes from a pinch of salt and the fermentation of a tiny golden-brown grain. Teff, the mysterious grain, is a species of African lovegrass. Nutritious and easy to plant, teff, or tef, is transforming high-desert agriculture as the West discovers injera and hungers for gluten-free foods.

Desert sun and irrigation make the volcanic soils of the Boise Valley ideal for transplanting teff. Dry heat likewise appeals to desert descendants from ancient civilizations. Refugees from the Horn of Africa – from Ethiopia, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Somalia – number about 1,300 in Boise-Meridian-Nampa. One is Yordanos Refu, age 27, a refugee from Ethiopia, a teff connoisseur, and our host. Her family fled a war and famine that killed more than a million people. Escaping to a refugee camp in Djibouti and granted U.S. asylum in 2001, the Refu family was sent to Atlanta; but an airport misunderstanding diverted their passage to Boise. Yordanos, the oldest of three siblings, made the most of it with scholarships to Riverstone School and then the College of Idaho. Articulate and determined, she excelled in business and political science. She now works for a Caldwell pioneer who feeds the African diaspora and is one of North America's largest exporters of teff.

“Teff injera to an Ethiopian and Eritrean is what apple pie is to Americans,” says Yordanos. “It has been part of my life since birth. It is not far-fetched to say teff is part of my identity.”

Yordanos thinks the best place to sample injera is her family's own quiet kitchen near Veterans Memorial Park. Mother Belaynesh pours a gluey batter of teff over a spherical ceramic grill – a mitad. She ladles the batter from the outer edges, swirling inward. She covers the grill while explaining injera's importance. The bread is more than a staple. A cultural ambassador, a food utensil, it is eaten by hand and used like a scoop. How many crepe-like flats does the family cook each day? “As many as my family needs,” says Belaynesh, laughing. “I don't count.”

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WAYNE CARLSON



An Ethiopian woman makes injera, a crepe-like flatbread made with teff flour. It has a unique, slightly spongy texture with a mild sour and sweet flavor.

Previous page: Wayne Carlson cultivates teff near Boise.

### *Ancient Nutrition*

Ethiopian teff is fast becoming a health-food substitute for spaghetti noodles and other western staples. World consumption, since 2006, has increased more than 50 percent. Mighty but tiny, a single grain of teff measures less than a millimeter. Linguists trace the name to an Amharic word for “lost,” which is what happens when grain particles disappear in harvest because of their minuscule size. It takes about 150 seeds of teff to match the weight of a grain of wheat. Yet the world’s smallest commercial grain is rich with calcium, iron, protein, potassium, magnesium, and vitamins B6 and C. Its storage proteins are similar to a number of animal products and easy to digest. It is also gluten-free and high in fiber. Easy to plant and filling, it can be used in cereal, stews, soups, and energy bars. Health guru Dr. Mehmet Oz prescribes teff tortillas as a remedy for weight gain and PMS.

Scientists debate whether the African grain is a hybrid species of a seed found in the tombs of pharaohs. Teff, archaeologists say, may have been among the first grains to be



Hundreds of tiny grains of teff can fit on the tip of a finger.

cultivated, dating back more than 6,000 years. Pottery shards from the fifth century at Axum resemble the ceramic grills used for baking teff injera. From Ethiopia to India, Australia, and South America, the plant now rivals hay as livestock forage. But only recently has teff made inroads in Europe. Ethiopian authorities litigated in 2007 when a Dutch company patented a hybrid of teff. Patents and trade agreements, they alleged, hiked the price to native consumers. Global prices nearly tripled from 2005 to 2007. But with the grain's celebrity came modern industrial farming methods. Ethiopian teff production has grown by double digits over the last decade.

“[W]ash your hands and get set,” advises a Johannesburg publication. “Teff has become a super grain and a favourite. ... Ethiopian food is set for world domination.”

### *Teff Comes to Boise*

Wayne Carlson thinks the hot days and cool nights of Snake River agriculture can satiate global demand. A farmer and biologist, he is a 30-year veteran of teff production, and for all that time, he reflects, people have asked him the same incredulous question: Who would want to grow what Africans grow? Carlson calls the question “chauvinistic.” Teff, more than a health food, will grow when other crops fail. “Teff is a big part of my diet, just as it is for all Ethiopian athletes.” In Ethiopia, “everybody eats injera every day, and they don’t get bored.”

Carlson’s teff adventure began in the 1970s as a Red Cross volunteer during Ethiopia’s most murderous drought. He worked in Ethiopia’s central highlands where farmers still used oxen to plow. Westerners were determined to increase production with chemical fertilizers. The experience inspired him to experiment with teff back in the States.

In the 1980s Carlson and his wife, Elisabeth, relocated to the Boise Valley. They worked in the seed industry, studied the climate, and purchased a 5-acre farm. “The risks [were] phenomenal,” the farmer told a reporter, but then again, he reasoned, “a population of 30 million has been living on [teff] for thousands of years.”



FLOUR ACADEMY

A man sifts to separate the grains of teff from the chaff.

One of Carlson's most discriminating customers is a Boise chef who learned to cook in an Ethiopian refugee camp. Kibrom Milash, the son of a shopkeeper, now runs a place of his own in a State Street strip mall. Twinkle lights fall from the ceiling. African tapestries brighten the walls. Twenty-inch flats of injera, served family style without plates or eating utensils, absorb wats (stews) of beef, poultry, lentils, and lamb. Milash, in a polo shirt, greets and dashes about with a beaming smile.



LEFT: ALLEN R. ANSELL PHOTOGRAPHY, RIGHT: PETIT WORLD CITIZEN

Kibrom Milash feeds Boise's taste for injera in his restaurant west of downtown. Right: rolled flats of teff injera.

Milash, who reached Boise in 2013, worked as a janitor, taxi driver, and coffee-house barista before a business loan financed his dream. He opened a food stall on Franklin Road in the ill-fated Boise International Market. After fire gutted the market, he relocated to State and North 35th. Kibrom's Ethiopian & Eritrean Restaurant quickly became a five-star Yelp sensation with four employees, 40 dishes, and 650 to 700 customers weekly.

"Customers are king," says Milash, who thanks Boise for being so "awesome." Boiseans tip and are eager to help. "I do not feel ashamed to ask for anything," the restaurateur told the *Boise Weekly*. "In America, everything has a solution."

## Teff Love

Vegetables and stews scent the Refu family home in northwest Boise. Steam rises from flats of injera served according to the ancient tradition in a colorful basket called a messob. Wooden and ceramic bowls hold spiced greens, chickpeas, and lentils. We tear injera, Ethiopian style, with the right hand only. We finish with coffee roasted over the stove in a long-handled pan. Strong and black and served with a teaspoon of sugar, it brews in an African earthenware pot.

For Ethiopians, Yordanos explains, food is ceremony, a cultural bond. “If you know an Ethiopian, you have eaten teff injera. It is a staple in most every household. In America, I think of teff and injera as doors that lead to questions and discussion, bringing cultures together.” Food nurtures the wealth of multicultural understanding. Ethiopian seeds, transplanted to the Boise Valley, cultivate a dynamic that benefits both.



THE TEFF COMPANY

American-grown maska teff is ground fresh daily by The Teff Company and packaged for retail sale.



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