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Yirgalem: A little bit of Ethiopia on Monroe Street

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One of the best things about Madison is that although it is surrounded by farmland, its restaurants represent cultures and cuisines from all over the globe.

Although it can be intimidating going to a restaurant where you can't even pronounce most of the items on the menu, don't always resort to something familiar like Noodles & Co.

Yirgalem, 2623 Monroe St., is one of these unfamiliar places that will surely impress anyone willing to give it a chance. Owner Daniel Teferra, a UW alumnus, opened the restaurant a year and a half ago with the intent of giving Madison a flavor of Ethiopian cuisine and culture. It is named after his hometown in Ethiopia, which he left in 1974.

Ethiopian food, Teferra said, can be broken down into four main categories: wat (sauce), tibs (sautéed meat), kitfo (finely chopped beef or tuna) and veggies (like lentils and string beans).

All meals in Ethiopia are served with injera, a sponge-like bread, which acts as your knife, spoon and fork.

I started off with the Timatim Fitfit (\$6) appetizer, which consisted of injera pieces mixed with tomatoes, jalapeno skins, onion and a lemon-based house seasoning all tucked inside a folded piece of injera.

I was also given a free basket of baked injera pieces served with a creamy dip that tasted somewhat similar to hummus, but a little bit thicker in texture.

In the spirit of Ethiopian tradition, all meals on the menu are intended to be shared. Entrees come on one large serving plate and are split among the dinner party.

Although Ethiopians also believe in hand-feeding one another, or "giving gursha," as a way of showing love, you can, but are not expected to, do so at Yirgalem.

For the main course, we ordered two different entrees to share. The Kitfo Special consisted of chopped organic beef blended with Ethiopian herbs, jalapeno peppers, onion, olive oil and awaze sauce, which gives the meal a spicier flavor. You can adjust the spiciness of any dish by simply asking for more or less awaze sauce.