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Shagga Coffee & Restaurant in Hyattsville

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Washington is fortunate to have a thriving Ethiopian culture, but not everyone can make it to the hub that has formed at Ninth and U streets to get their fix. Thankfully, Kelem Lemu, 49, opened Shagga three years ago and has been offering her vibrant native dishes ever since.

The former NIH lab technician had no formal cooking or restaurant experience before taking the plunge into ownership. She credits her upbringing for the dishes that keep people coming back.

“My mother was a very excellent cook,” the Addis Ababa native says. “And I just love to cook.” Lemu says Shagga means “good” and “beautiful.”

Among those dishes is the rich and finely textured Special Kitfo (\$11.95), containing chopped lean beef spiked with onion, jalapeno, garlic and cardamom. Kitfo is traditionally served raw, but can be ordered medium. At Shagga, it comes with sides of stewed collard greens and homemade cheese.

Kik alicha (\$8.95), a knockout mash of yellow split peas, onion, garlic and herbs, somehow tastes downright buttery even though Lemu swears that only canola oil is used.

Sambusas (\$1.50 each; six for \$7.50; \$12 per dozen) are another must-order. The dough is not made in-house, but the mildly spiced fillings of lentil, beef or chicken are made daily and the stuffed triangles are fried to order.

Alas, the chicken wot lunch special (\$7.95) was nothing special compared with other dishes. Opt instead for the doro wot (\$11.95), Ethiopia’s famous dish of chicken simmered in a red pepper sauce.

Our takeout orders came wrapped in injera, the spongy bread Ethiopians use to scoop up their food. Lemu says the injera can be packed separately for reheating purposes. For lunchtime orders, she also recommends calling ahead, but says the 30-minute wait we encountered is much longer than normal.

Lemu, who emigrated from Ethiopia 31 years ago, says they roasted and ground their own coffee beans daily in her country. “We do a coffee ceremony on Sunday afternoon and by request,” she says, referring to her restaurant. “We roast and grind it, and boil it with water.”

For its regular drip, Shagga uses Harrar beans roasted specially for her by Ceremony Coffee, which counts Restaurant Eve among its clients. This coffee (\$1.75 for 12 ounces; \$1.85 for 16 ounces) is so smooth and

redolent with natural chocolate overtones, it doesn't need cream or sugar. Sit at the bar and enjoy a cup while you wait, or order one to go.

Shagga Coffee & Restaurant 6040 Baltimore Ave., Hyattsville; 240-296-3030;
www.shaggarestaurant.com. Hours: Mondays through Thursdays, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.; Fridays and Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m.; Sundays, 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.

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