



New York

Ethiopian Coffee And Venezuelan Fusion As Pandemic Adaptations



By Liz Susman
Karp

*Selamawit “Mimi” Wieland-Tesfaye came to the United States from Ethiopia in 1995 and opened **Lalibela** restaurant in Mount Kisco, in New York’s Westchester County, in 2010. In January 2019, she opened a neighborhood coffee shop, **Mimi’s Coffee House**, two doors down from Lalibela.*

My father originally got the visa for me to visit my

sister here in the US, and when I decided to stay, I went to school and did everything I could to support myself. I worked at **Crabtree's Kettle House** in Chappaqua, my first experience in a restaurant business—and in a coffee shop in Armonk, where I fell in love with the coffee business.

When I came, my sister and I made our food because we could not find it here. From there, I started to dream. I wanted to introduce Ethiopian food to Westchester. I'm in America, so I can do whatever I want to do. One of my dreams was to work for myself. My family says I'm a risk-taker. I do things people may think are impossible. I wasn't financially prepared to do a lot of the things I tried, but I believed in myself, and I was lucky to have a lot of people who believed in me and were willing to lend me money.

People said they loved Ethiopian food, but there were no Ethiopian restaurants in Westchester. I said, "I could start with a restaurant, and hopefully I'll end up where I want to be." When I opened Lalibela, it was the only Ethiopian restaurant in the area, and most people didn't know what the food was like.

The first few years, on a daily basis my expenses and my income didn't match. I had help the first six months, but after that I was doing a lot of the cooking, waitressing, dishes, cleaning, whatever I had to do to save and make sure I had enough.

The restaurant slowly built a following. People read *Cutting for Stone*, which talks about Ethiopian food and culture, so they came to try the food with their book clubs. They liked it and wanted me to succeed. They told and brought others, and wrote reviews on social media.

After about five years, the space where Mimi's Coffee House would be opened up and sat empty for three and half years. I kept asking until they lowered the rent, and I said, "This is my chance." It was a risk too, opening it around the corner from Starbucks. Everybody said, "Are you out of your mind?"



Photo: Courtesy
Mimi Wieland-
Tesfaye.

I have to outdo myself with really good coffee, food, service. I serve coffee from all over the world, including Ethiopia. Everything at the shop is made by me or people who work with me. People feel they know me. They see me working. They see my son. So spending their money with me, they connect, like helping family. We have conversations that build to knowing their families, and our family, and the people I work with.

Right away when we opened the coffee house, it sustained itself, which was a great relief to me. By the end of the year, I was very close to seeing a profit, but I was more concerned about quality and service. Then 2020 came. I was ready for spring and summer to be amazing. A few months in, the pandemic was like a punch in the face.

I didn't think the pandemic shutdown was going to last as long as it did. I decided to close the restaurant because it's not profitable to do takeout, and I wasn't sure how to keep everyone safe and please my customers since we serve our food on a shared plate, and customers use their hands. I felt that was going to be a challenge, so I kept only my coffee shop open. The coffee shop was so new, and I felt if I closed it for even two or three weeks or a month, people might forget we're here. I couldn't do that. Also, to close both of my businesses that I worked very hard on and sit at home—I think I would

drive my husband crazy.

It was very, very stressful for the first six or seven weeks because we were doing 20 percent of our business at the coffee shop. I was working by myself. One person came in the morning so I could get my baked goods ready, and I shortened the hours and menu so I didn't have a lot of waste.

It was like a movie. The parking lot was completely empty. You could barely see anybody walking or driving by. It felt like a whole different world. We extended our phone orders and did curbside pickup. Customers encouraged me, bought gift cards, offered me money. I am so grateful to so many people who helped me with word of mouth or coming in every day. Whether they needed the coffee or not, they came to spend their hard-earned money. I'll never forget that. Now we have outside seating—and 10 chairs inside—and more people are coming out. We're probably up to 75 percent of our business.

I thought about not opening the restaurant again because I wasn't sure if it was worth the struggle to pay my bills to get back to where we were. I felt like I was giving up on my first-born. Having the coffee shop too, I couldn't split myself into two places.

People called, emailed, and sent Facebook messages saying, "We'll do whatever we can to help you, just don't close." They came to the coffee house asking if or when I was going to open the restaurant, if I needed anything. After a while, I figured I'll give it a try. My landlord has been great. I'm doing a little renovation, changing the floor and painting so I can bring my customers back to a nice, fresh, clean space.

Ethiopian food is served on a shared plate—you share your plate with the people you're with, and you use your hands to eat the food. You use bread called injera to scoop up the food. My biggest concern is a lot of people will not be willing to do that. I have families who say they won't mind sharing, but I can't just limit it to families and people who're willing to share. I have to make sure I'm open to anybody interested in coming in, so I think that's going to be the challenge until people feel

being able to make things that people feel comfortable to do the things they did before— whether it's sharing a plate or having six or ten people sit together. I am being creative and figuring out how to make people feel comfortable—seeing what else I can add to how I serve the food.

I met Liuba Karenna, who is from Venezuela, at the end of last year at the coffee shop. She was coming to grab coffee almost every morning, and we got to know each other. She cooks, and I've eaten her food many times. She asked about opening a restaurant, and I told her the good and the bad, and what's challenging.

Liuba had never eaten Ethiopian food, so she came for lunch a few times, and she told me about Venezuelan food. I suggested we could work together because I knew there was a lot of room for Lalibela to grow. We're going to reopen Lalibela as Venezuelan-Ethiopian fusion. I brought Ethiopian food to Westchester, and now I'll introduce something different too. It's something we're going to build together.

Our flavors go really well together. Venezuelan food is influenced by a lot of African spices, and a lot of people settled there from all over the world too, so Liuba thinks we have a lot of similar spices and flavors. They have fish dishes that Ethiopian food doesn't, so we can offer that.

The main thing in Ethiopian food that separates it is the injera—the flatbread used to eat it—but a lot of the sauces can be eaten with anything. They have flatbread too in Venezuela—made out of corn, called arepa—so we can put a lot of our meat dishes into that, experiment, and see which flavors go well together, which dishes can be served together or separate.

I have to be careful because the customers are happy to try different cuisines, but the majority who come back will come for the Ethiopian food. That's the feedback I've gotten. I don't want to make them feel like Lalibela's going to be different than what it was right from the get-go. We have to slowly introduce this and expand from there. I'm going to leave it up to the customers if they want to share. We will accommodate everyone.

Some might think it's a little crazy to add those two cuisines together. But sometimes if you have an idea you feel would work, as I've had with both businesses, it's worth it to take the risk. I wouldn't be able to do this in the country I was born in. I feel like America is my home now because I've lived here more than I lived in Ethiopia. I truly am living the American dream, and I'm very grateful for that.

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