



Romancing the Foam No. 126

Ethiopia has always held a special attraction. My grade school used to show us newsreels during the early 50s and I remember seeing films of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 where the Ethiopian army equipped mostly with spears and swords and a dabbling of pre-WW I equipment defended their country from the Italian army. I bumped into an Ethiopian during my early college days. He was running around mid-Michigan in mid-January wearing a sport coat. My friends pooled our money and bought him a cheap, but serviceable coat. The country also



gained a certain allure with Bob Marley and the whole Rastafarian thing. In Toronto during the mid-70s I stumbled onto an Ethiopian restaurant and fell in love with the people and with injera (a spongy bread that takes up the whole plate made with the ancient grain teff and is used to scoop up food and sop up juices) and doro wat (a hot spicy deep red chicken stew). Ethiopians discovered coffee and their Yirgacheffe is among the best in the world. For a while we had an Ethiopian Neighbor, Tamrat. Tamrat replaced a band of born-again punk mud racers who drove vehicles spray painted with inspirational religious quotes and covered in mud with giant tires and bodies 4 feet off the ground. When Tamrat (from Ethiopia and wearing a sport coat) came by to introduce himself (and hunt for his cat) he said, “I



hope you are not too surprised to find a black man living in your neighborhood and in your yard hunting for his cat.” I asked if he owned a mud car and he said, no he took the bus. I said Tamrat, you will fit in here just fine. A while later I stumbled onto the Jazz of Ethiopian artist Mulatu Astatke and now go through phases where I will play his music for a week or two solid.

About a year ago I suffered through a restrictive diet – gluten and dairy free for a while and then various restrictions. Beer was off the menu so I turned to sake, cider and mead – all gluten and dairy free. In the process I discovered T’ej - an Ethiopian (and Eritrean) mead. As much as 80% of Ethiopian honey - the largest honey producer in Africa - is used to make T’ej, Ethiopia's most popular drink. Most Ethiopian farmers use primitive basket hives hung in trees or clay

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pots to produce honey - much less efficient than modern boxes.



The earliest references to T'ej date back 1800 years. T'ej is made from honey, water and gesho - the dried stems and leaves of *Rhamnus prinoides*, the shiny-leaf buckthorn and a relative to *Rhamnus cathartica* - the common buckthorn, a native of Eurasia introduced to North America in the 1880s. Originally an ornamental shrub, common buckthorn is now considered an invasive species and several years ago I spent a long

weekend pulling a buckthorn hedge out of my yard.

While the Ethiopians use gesho to provide bitterness and flavor to beer and mead and like hops, gesho is bitter and has antibiotic qualities - it is no relation to the hop plant.

Ethiopian T'ej in its native land is consumed in small neighborhood T'ej bars that make their own T'ej. Ethiopian T'ej it is a more rustic, potentially much funkier, and more varied drink than the T'ej available here which is produced by wineries and filtered. It is also sweeter.

At

<https://www.romancingthefoam.com/Mead/Mead%20Styles/Tej.html> I review 7 T'ej that I was able to dig up and provide information on how to find them. Here I review my three favorites.

Brotherhood Winery Sheba T'ej Honey Wine (13.9% alcohol by volume) is made with a traditional Ethiopian recipe. It has a spicy, earthy nose wrapped in honey with a hint of fresh cut wood and a trace of tart and hint of funk from the yeast. It pours brilliant gold with good reflectance and light legs. The flavors start sweet with a pleasant honey presence, herbal and woody with a trace of tartness and a moderately bitter, drying finish with a light astringent touch. The bitterness is herbal. Overall the T'ej's sweetness is medium high but the tartness from the yeast, the herbal bitterness and the herbal



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flavors provide an interesting balance. The alcohol is smooth, moderately warming but not hot or harsh. The T'ej gets more complex and elegant as it warms. T'ej pairs nicely with Ethiopian food and should also work well with other spicy food.



Heritage Winery is one of the oldest T'ej producers in the US. Their Axum T'ej (13.5% alcohol by volume) is an Ethiopian mead spiced with gesho named after the 4th century Kingdom of Axum. It has a light honey, earthy, spicy, woody smell that gets spicier and woodier as the glass warms. It pours brilliant gold with a clear meniscus and thick, well developed legs. The taste is honey sweet with some candy up front and a touch of citrus leading to a very pleasant, spicy finish. It is a drying finish with some light tannic astringent notes and a subtle bitterness. It is sweet but well balanced. As the T'ej warms the bitterness becomes more pronounced and nuanced with some slightly woody and herbal notes. I rate it 90 and will look for it again.

Menkir Tamrat is a Bay Area California scientist and business who makes mead and produces Ethiopian food in his spare time. Yamatt Tej (11.5% alcohol by volume) is a still, standard mead on the sweet side of semi-sweet. It is made with

Washington state wild-flower honey, California Gesho and water. The "Yamatt" in the title means "mother-in-law's" recipe. This is one of the spicier and more herbal interpretations of T'ej I have tasted. The gesho is spicy, herbal, woody, earthy and complex. The honey aromas are also assertive. While Yamatt claims the t'ej is filtered, it pours a rustic looking copper gold with light haze. The Gesho is big offering an interesting array of woody, spicy flavors as well as the usual bitterness to balance the sweetness. The honey flavors add to the Gesho spiciness. The tannins in the Gesho add to the medium full body and add a little astringent note behind the sweetness that is there if you look for it. I especially like this T'ej because it does not pull back on any of the flavors. This pairs very well with spicy Ethiopian food and other hot, spicy food. I especially like to pour a glass of Yamatt Tej and listen to my Mulatu Astatke CDs. I rate this T'ej 90.



These T'ej are cleaned up versions of what you might find

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in a small café in Addis Ababa. They are filtered and made under controlled conditions in a winery and their recipes cater to the North American palate – they are more elegant and not as sweet or funky as their Ethiopian cousins. They also use North American honey and may use North American gesho. I have read reviews by wine reviewers that skewer T’ej for having too much honey flavor (it’s a mead, people) and for having a muddy, dusty taste (it’s the gesho). I think T’ej looks different when viewing it as a mead instead of a wine. I like T’ej because it is different and the gesho is an interesting spice and has interesting bitter qualities. I like T’ej better than many of the hopped meads because the gesho has more character and dimension. The gesho can taste muddy and dusty and woody, spicy and herbal but it can also present qualities that reach back several centuries. If you see some T’ej, buy it.

