A Tale of Two *T'allas*

By Harry Kloman

Let's get one thing clear from the start: Never will I, a mere *ferenj,* ever make *t'alla* that compares to the *t'alla* made by Menkir Tamrat, my Ethiopian food sensei. I will always be his young padawan, struggling to live up to my culinary master.

But here we are, Menkir and I, separated by thousands of miles – he in Northern California and sometimes Ethiopia, I in Pittsburgh – each making *t'alla,* the traditional Ethiopian beer. We've both had some levels of success, and while mine is neither the best of *t'alla* nor the worst of *t'alla*, Menkir certainly makes a far, far better thing than I have ever made.

My opening sentence is a bit of a pun because there's nothing clear about *t'alla*, not even how to spell it in English (see Epilogue). It can be very dark brown or various shades of yellow, but it's almost always opaque, unlike some *t'ej,* the Ethiopian honey wine, which I've made successfully for years.

What follows here is our tale of two *t'allas,* Menkir's and mine. He's taught me a lot about it, but making *t'alla* is far more difficult than making *t'ej*, and despite Menkir's influence and teaching, I finally only tried because of happenstance. What follows here is our tale of two *t'allas,* Menkir's and mine. He's taught me a lot about it, but making *t'alla* is far more difficult than making *t'ej*, and despite Menkir's influence and teaching, I finally only tried because of happenstance. We'll get to all of that as this story unfolds. I hope you find it to be both engaging and edifying, perhaps even enough so to try making *t'alla* yourself.

Just one more thing to note: I published this tale on Dec. 9, 2023, but my *t'alla* tinkering continues. In Chapter VI, far below, I'll offer updates on my brewing and drinking experiments, along with other news about my *t'alla* and Menkir's. Come back now and then to see what happens next.

Here's a drawing and a photograph of *very* traditional *t'alla* making in Ethiopia.

I. The History & Lore of *T'alla*

Many Ethiopian cultures make *t'alla*, or their own versions of traditional beer, and most have other names for it in their own languages. *T'alla* is the name in Amharic, the government language of Ethiopia. In Tigrinya, the language of northern Ethiopia, it's *suwa*, and in Afaan Oromo, the most widely spoken first language in the country, it's *farsoo*. With some 80-plus languages spoken across the country, it goes by many more names.

And each culture isn't always kind to the other's style of *t'alla*.

"To the Amhara, none save themselves can make *t'alla* worthy of the name," the Ethiopian scholar Tegegne YeteshaWork wrote in an invaluable 1957 article. "The boastful comment of the Amhara upon Oromo *t'alla* is: 'The Oromo does not know *t'alla.* He drinks spoiled water.' But the Oromo proudly answer in a moralizing tone: 'Oromo *t'alla* is delicious. Amhara *t'alla* is an intoxicant that turns the stomach and rounds the head.' On his part, the Tigrayan tells you: 'Taste for once *suwa* from Aksum and thereafter your mouth waters at every mention of the name.' A just conclusion to these tribal rivalries is that each tribe is master of its kind."

But no matter what you call it – or how you call it out – it's all a homemade beer-like drink created with various types and textures of fermented grains, usually not very high in alcohol content, and produced by mixing water with three or four powdery or chunky ingredients, then drinking it after a week or so of fermentation.

Ethiopians have made *t'alla* for at least 700 years, according to Samantha Kelly in her 2021 book, *A Companion to Medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea*. "By the 14th Century at the latest," she writes, "among Christians, a beer made mostly of barley and embittered with *gesho* was and is the common alcoholic beverage of the rural household. To be served at aristocratic or royal banquets, it had to be filtrated." She doesn't name it, but that can only be *t'alla*.

Pedro Paez's very important 1622 account of his time spent in Ethiopia tells us that at a church festival, "a great crowd of tents is put up by taverners, who sell wine made from honey, and another kind made from barley and maize and other seeds that they call *t'alla*, a beer made from fermented grains…This is commonly drunk by those who cannot afford honey wine." In a later reference, he says that they make this beer with "millet and other grains."

The Portuguese missionary Manoel de Almeida visited Ethiopia in the 17th Century, and his 1620 book offers another important early account of the culture. He observes that Ethiopian women grind, by hand, a lot of grain every day to make 40 or 50 *apas*, using the name of a flatbread-like food familiar to his culture: He means *injera*. He then notes that they must grind a lot more for the "*sava* or beer they drink, which uses up a great deal of meal." By *sava*, he means *suwa*, the Tigrinya word for *t'alla*. Early accounts of Ethiopia sometimes noted both the Amharic and Tigrinya words for things – and usually

transliterated them badly. Almeida also described a village that welcomes caravans of traders, noting that "the producers of *sava,* which is what is principally sold here, make a large profit."

You'll know you've found a *t'alla bet* (house) in Ethiopia when you see a pole like this.

In 2014, an Ethiopian biochemical engineering student, Behre Tekle Adhanom, published a 15-page essay that he called "The Science of *T'alla* Production." In it, he said that "*t'alla* is believed to be over 10,000 years old," engaging more in lore than history. "Although no one knows its exact origins," he wrote, "some agricultural historians believe that the first *t'alla* may have been produced accidentally, when a stash of grain was soaked by rain and then warmed by the sun. If this mixture were spontaneously fermented by wild airborne yeast that thrives in just these warm moist conditions, *t'alla* would have been produced." That's a plausible scenario for the origin of *all* fermentation.

Ethiopians sometimes even consider *t'alla* to have nutrient value – it is, after all, made from barley and other fibrous grains. And it has a medicinal function: Before taking a dose of *koso* or *inqoqqo,* two plants used to rid you of tapeworms, you can dissolve the powdered antidote in a glass of *t'alla,* perhaps akin to the spoonful of sugar that helps the medicine go down.

If a batch of *t'alla* turns out badly, Tegegne writes, it could happen for myriad reasons – and by reasons, he means superstitions.

"Whenever the *t'alla* is bad," he says, "the excuse of the brewer is that the supernatural act of the demon or the sorcerer spoiled it. Tradition warns that if you kill a frog or a lizard, the dead animal will get into mother's *t'alla.* For this reason children seldom kill lizards and frogs."

Some other reasons for bad *t'alla*: A woman in her menstrual cycle, or one who spent the previous night with a man, can't start a batch, or a demon may bewitch the *t'alla* or the person making it. A "bewitched person" can mitigate these evil spirits by "having a magician pronounce a special formula."

You can prevent future catastrophes by smoking the vessel in which you brew the *t'alla* with an herb called *feto,* or as we know it in English, garden cress. You should also burn some frankincense near the vessel to ward off the demons. When the brewing is done, and you clean your vessel for the next batch, "one does not dump the residue alone on the sunny day for fear of the she-devil named *zarita*." That residue, by the way, is called *atella,* and the mix of soggy grains is sometimes used as livestock feed – no doubt to the cattle's buzzed delight.

In Ethiopia: black barley malt roasting on a *biret mitad* over an open flame, and fully sprouted barley on castor leaves. These are ingredients in traditional *t'alla* preparation.

And why *is* this drink called *t'alla*? Linguistics don't know why anything is called anything: Spoken language emerged as long ago as 200,000 years, and writing only about 5,000 years ago. The best that linguists can do is trace a word back to a theoretical origin, or cognate. And oddly, in the case of *t'alla,* that same Amharic word used today as a verb, rather than as a noun, means "to hate."

Tegegne speculates on the origin of the name in his rare and fascinating 1957 piece, published in the bulletin of the Ethnological Society of the University College of Addis Ababa.

He writes: "The word *t'alla* itself has a debatable origin. Ethiopian laymen argue that the former name of the present *t'alla* was *wädagye näh,* meaning 'you are my friend.' But as the drink became [an] intoxicant, people disliked its effect and called it *t'alla näw,* meaning 'we hate it.' Through the ages, *t'alla näw* shortened to *t'alla*."

If Tegegne is correct, then the strange disconnect between *t'alla* as a noun and a verb might not be so strange after all. He further connects the name to words in Ge'ez, the language of ancient Ethiopia, still used liturgically by the modern Ethiopian Orthodox church

"Clerics of this country detest this lay conception that a seemingly harmless drink became an intoxicant liquor," Tegegne says. "The parish priests argue that the word has its root in the Ge'ez word *täll*, meaning 'life.' The clergy refer to the liquor as *tall läleb*, 'life of the heart.' Laymen sometimes make fun of this explanation, claiming that the clergy have

attached a healthy meaning to the liquor because the average priest usually drinks more than the ordinary layman."

Not content to scandalize the Ethiopian clergy, Tegegne offers even more heresy.

"The origin of *t'alla* is hidden in the mist of history," he posits. "Some say that it existed in Ethiopia centuries ago. Others deny this, arguing that the drink referred to in the ancient legends of this country is not *t'alla* but milk, [so] it is likely that *t'alla* is of foreign origin. There is evidence that supports the idea that it was imported into Ethiopia. Ahmed Ramee, in translating Khayyam Rubaiyat's writing, refers to an old Phoenician drink called *tälliy,* [which in] Arabic means 'life giver' and is synonymous with the clerical conception of the Ge'ez word *täll.*"

But Tegegne still confidently assets that the *t'alla* of today has become an emblematic product of his homeland.

"Nevertheless," he says, "*t'alla* remains typically Ethiopian. The numerous kinds of malt liquors in other countries are no equivalent to *t'alla*. The European drinks such as ale, lager and beer may be cousins but not brothers of it. Historians assert that 'in Mesopotamia, 6,000 years ago, a sort of beer was made with a special bread baked for that purpose, which was mashed with barley malt and allowed to ferment.' This description fits one kind of Ethiopian *t'alla,* known as *yakita t'alla,* and adds a valuable piece of evidence to the theory of the foreign origin of the malted liquor."

In Tegegne's quaintly vivid evaluation, Ethiopians have since made it their own – and then some.

"To all Ethiopians, the mere mention of *t'alla* brings to mind a luxury that is wholesome to the body and palatable to the tongue," he writes. "During wedding days and festivals, it is not *t'ej* but *t'alla* that is served in the houses of common people. *T'alla* is too delicious and too tempting for most people to limit their consumption of it. Excessive consumers are abundant, and drunkards are not rare. Some sit and weep or giggle when they are drunk. Others feel sick, and still others are seized with a ferocious choler that drives them to smash the furniture. Many a drunkard suffers from insomnia, and every Monday morning, housewives are heard complaining at spending a sleepless night."

You are forewarned.

So *t'alla* has some history, and while it may not be as old or as "Ethiopian" as *t'ej*, it's been a part of the culture for a long, long time.

I got my first taste of *t'alla* in 2011 at the lovely and long-gone Gori Café, in Washington, D.C. Yonas Chalka only sold *t'alla* at his restaurant by the bottle, not a problem for this solo diner: It wasn't too alcoholic, and drinking a bottle with my big dinner provoked about as much of a buzz as two glasses of wine. It resembled tea or a dark amber *t'ej,* a little sweet (like cider) and a little grainy (from the barley), with effervescent bubbles. I

could taste the malt of the hops, like a microbrew, and the further down the bottle I got, the thicker and chewer it became, so I had to give my bottle a gentle shake to distribute the settled ingredients.

Yonas wouldn't say who made his *t'alla,* which he served in recycled wine bottles, sometimes still with the original label, with no cork or cap, just a piece of aluminum foil on top. All he would say is that some Oromo people in the community made it in their homes (so technically, we should call it *farsoo*). It was a unique treat in a city with so many Ethiopian restaurant choices.

Shortly before that encounter, I had tried making *t'alla* at home a few times, following a traditional recipe. My one good batch tasted enough like the stuff I had at Gori Café for me to say that it can be done. But it was a messy and laborious process, and I wasn't ready to plan a dinner party around it. To be honest, I'm still not.

Here, then, a dozen years after my initial taste of *t'alla,* is a look at what Menkir does, what I do, and how one day, during a visit to an Ethiopian market in Arlington, Va., I stumbled upon a way to make it more simply, efficiently, and as far as I can *t'alla,* somewhat successfully.

Traditional *t'alla* ingredients fermenting: At the end, you add more water to increase volume.

II. Making *T'alla*: The Fundamentals

Before we travel to our two kitchens, we need to discuss the recipe for *t'alla* and the basic process of making it.

To create an authentic *t'alla,* you need at least three ingredients, and a fourth optional one:

♦ Gesho *duket.* Gesho (*Rhamnus prinoides*)is a species of Ethiopian buckthorn. The woody branches (*inchet*) of the shrub flavor and ferment *t'ej.* The dried leaves ground into a powder is called *duket,* the form of gesho used in *t'alla.* Good Ethiopian markets in the U.S. sell it.

♦ *Bikil.* Germinated barley or wheat – that is, wheat kernels (sometimes called berries) soaked in water and allowed to sprout. You then dry it or roast it and grind it into a powder or flour. In English, beer makers call this malt. Barley is most common, but you

can use wheat or other grains as well. The length of time you allow it to germinate and roast imparts qualities onto the *t'alla*, such as color, aroma or mouth feel. You can buy the flour in some Ethiopian markets, or if you're really ambitious, soak some wheat or barley in water, let it germinate, dry it, and make the flour yourself.

"The sprouting process is a critical requirement for releasing the starch in a grain so the yeast can easily convert it into alcohol," Menkir explains. "Big malt companies have a modern streamlined process, but in the old days in Ethiopia, they used a more 'earthy' approach. I watched this whole thing while growing up in different parts of Wollo. The barley was soaked in water while a small circular pit of about six inches deep and 16 inches wide was dug in the ground. Then the bottom of this shallow pit was covered with *koba* leaves. The soaked grain was added to form a wet disk of about two or three inches thick. Then it was carefully covered with more *koba* leaves to make sure no dirt gets in, then covered with a thin layer of earth for a few days. When the grains sprout, they get entangled with one another and form a solid disk. You bore a small hole in the center of the sprouted disk and hang it in the kitchen where it dries and cures, just like modern brewing, where the sprouted grain is dried and cured on a flat surface or kiln before the roasting phase. It has to be cracked to expose the starch for the fermentation process."

He adds: "The difference between pale and dark malt is the length of time either has been roasted. Pale malt is generally the workhorse of your grain bill, 80 to 85%, and doesn't darken your brew. There's also one more category, crystal malt, which comes in different shades of color depending on the roasting but sidesteps the drying and curing process altogether. Instead, the wet sprouted grain goes directly into the roasting process. Apparently the science behind this process brings out different attributes than you would get from the pale and dark malts. Crystal malts are 'special effect' malts that are only used as part of the 20 or 25% of the grain mix."

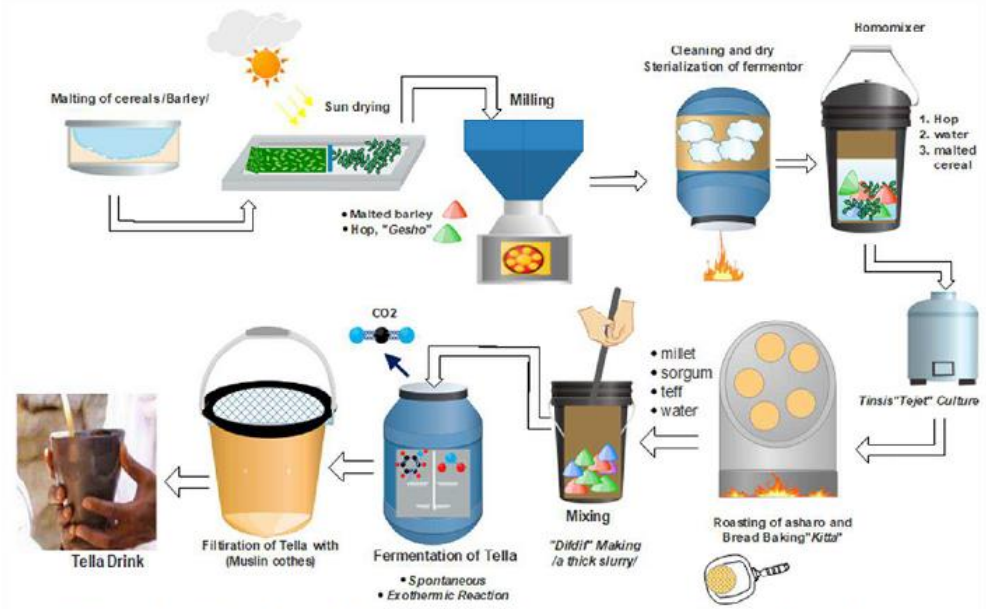
♦ *Asharo*. Roasted ground barley used in the form of a powder. Again, look for it in markets, or make it yourself by roasting the barley, discarding the husks, and grinding it into a powder. Ethiopians also use ground wheat, finger millet, sorghum or even teff, depending upon what they can find and afford. But barley makes the most traditional *asharo*.

♦ *Kita*. Served as a dish by itself, *kita* is a sort of Ethiopian pizza: a batter cooked on a skillet, then often spread with *niter kibe* (Ethiopian butter) and *berbere* (Ethiopian red pepper powder) to spice it up. (Break a *kita* up into little pieces before eating it and you have *chechebsa*). An optional element in making *t'alla*, unflavored *kita* adds fuel to the fermentation. Cook the *kita*, let it cool, then break it up into small pieces to add to the mix of other ingredients. But don't put *kibe* or *berbere* on it for making *t'alla*. You can even buy bags of *ye'kita ehl* (*kita* grain), a blend of several flours intended to be turned into *kita* for making *t'alla*.

Or perhaps, it's not so optional. One of the oldest recipes I can find for *t'alla*, from the 1924 *Amharic Reader* by J.I. Eadie, says that on the third day of fermenting the grains, "a chapati of any kind of grain is broken up and put together with malt into the jar. It stays

there four days so that it may ferment." Eadie's reader, made up of short passages about Ethiopian culture, has side-by-side Amharic and English passages, and the Amharic version of his *t'alla* recipe, reprinted later in this piece, says *kita*. He translated *kita* as chapati to give a better picture to readers who knew nothing about Ethiopian food.

Menkir adds: "Every brewer's crumbled *kita* or *dabo* [bread] is different in three ways – the mix of grains and flour, the thickness of the *kita* or *dabo*, and the length of time it's baked." So there are some chef's choice variations in *t'alla*-making.



This detailed flow chart shows the process of making *t'alla*.

[Here's a look at a variety of flowcharts – some simple, some much more detailed – that illustrate the steps involved in making *t'alla*. Also: See Appendix A below for regional *t'alla* recipes.]

Using these basic ingredients, you'll get a darker *t'alla*, which you might hear called *tikur* (black) *t'alla.* There's also *nech* (white) *t'alla* – which is more yellow, like honey wine – produced by using much less dark roasted barley in the grain mix. But the dark version is standard, so most people just call it *t'alla*, with the *tikur* understood. If your *t'alla* is *nech*, you'll want to say so.

"I think *kita* might be important for a couple of reasons," Menkir says, "mouth feel and additional food for the yeast during a secondary fermentation. But I have to verify that. My second hazy *nech t'alla* had some teff *kita* in it and showed quite a lot of carbonation when I first opened the bottle. Generally, *t'alla* doesn't form a head like beer after pouring, but I have seen it happen when they first try to open a bottle that hasn't quite finished fermentation completely. I think that's what happened with my second *nech t'alla*."

Drinkable *t'alla* can be characterized in two ways: *gush* and *filter*. (No, not filtered: The word in Amharic is a transliteration of *filter*.)

***Gush* literally means unfiltered or impure, and in reference to *t'alla*, it means not aged, or freshly brewed. It also means you may have some floaters – that is, bits of the grains used to make it, retained when someone ladles out a glass full. "*Gush* came with a reward," writes an Ethiopian woman on a Facebook page. "Drink *gush*. It's a healthy drink made from all grains." *All* grains.**

***Filter* means, well, filtered: The grains have been strained out of it, so the drink looks purer, just the dark brown liquid. You can also call this version *ye't'era t'alla*, where *t'era* means purified, clarified or refined. (My "Epilogue: What's in a Spelling" will explain those pesky apostrophes.) You can achieve that by filtering the brew or by racking it – that is, transferring it from one vessel to another, and in doing so, the non-liquid elements can settle into the bottom of the new vessel, making the liquid clearer.**

This is *gush t'alla*: unflitered, with little bits of the grain still floating in the liquid.

The brewing of traditional *t'alla* take place in three phases: *tejet*, *tenses* and *difdif*. In each phase, the brewer prepares and adds ingredients, mixing the ingredients with an appropriate amount of water to create a liquefied mush called wort in English, each step provoking or stoking fermentation, then allowing it to ferment for one or two weeks. During the *tenses* phase, for example, the brewer may roast some cracked grain in a little bit of moisture, then let it cool before adding it to the mixture. This is called *enkuro*, and it's purely optional in *t'alla* making.

In Ethiopia today, it's made in large lidded containers – wood, plastic or glass – where it's washed with the leaves of the Ethiopian grawa plant (bitter leaf in English) and then smoked with olive wood chips before the start of the rest of the process, with nature providing the fermentation yeast. At the end of the process, you might add some smoked olive wood to balance the acidity. Then, you strain the mixture to get rid of the soggy mire of its solid components to produce a beverage of perhaps 5% alcohol, depending upon the ingredients and how long you allowed it to ferment. (Here's a recipe that goes through this full traditional process.)

Before the western world brought plastics, glass and whiskey barrels to Ethiopia, people used traditional terracotta jugs of three different sizes. The biggest one is called a *gan,* the next size down is an *ensera,* and the smallest is a *gembo.* "The size you chose for brewing depended on your needs and means," Menkir says. "My mom brewed her holiday *t'alla* and *t'ej* in a *gan* so that she had enough for all the well wishers who would stop by."

Just one more thing: You can certainly try to allow (or hope for) natural fermentation like they do in Ethiopia. But to get things going, and to insure we'll have fermentation, Menkir and I add a hearty ale yeast of the species *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* – I use SafAle US-05, Menkir uses White Labs WLP001 – which occurs naturally in *t'alla* and *t'ej.* There's nothing quite as crushing in home brewing as waiting for days and days to see those lovely fermentation bubbles rising up from the bottom of your vessel – and then never having them appear.

But if that does happen, then you still have something. It's called *keribo* or *kinato*: a fermented drink, with the grain mix of *t'alla,* but made in a way that doesn't allow it to produce any measurable alcohol. (Non-alcoholic *t'ej* is called *berz,* a mix of honey and water that hasn't had time to ferment.) *Keribo* is a drink suitable for the whole family, earthy and refreshing like *t'alla* but without the buzz. Keep *keribo* in mind, and we'll return to it when we get to my *t'alla* making.

In international cities with good Ethiopian markets, nobody needs to germinate their own wheat or grind their own grains to make *t'alla*: You can simply buy ready-made *bikil, asharo* and gesho *duket.* In Ethiopia, most people use the traditional method, which is time consuming and labor intensive.

Needless to say, the larger your batch of *t'alla,* the messier it will be at the end of the process, when you have to pour several gallons of liquid from a heavy container through cloth to strain out the soaking wet grain powders. You can ladle it out, scoop by scoop, which takes time but may lead to fewer spills.

And you must also mix the ingredients in the right quantity to get the proper taste. Too much of one ingredient or the other can make the *t'alla* too dark or astringent.

Menkir is deeply knowledgeable about his homeland's food culture, and he's become passionate lately about producing a good *t'alla* at home using some of the tools of modern beer science. He laments what's happened to *t'alla* in the past few decades.

"I love *t'alla,* but good *t'alla* is hard to find these days for a couple of reasons," he tells me. "It's always a bridesmaid to *t'ej,* and industrial beer didn't give it a chance to gentrify. It got relegated to be the drink of the poor. And as the incomes of these rungs of society eroded over the decades, so did their abilities to drink good *t'alla*. People started substituting corn, sorghum and other cheaper grains for barley. The second reason is also related to the first. *T'alla* being both ingredient- and labor-intensive relative to *t'ej,* it should have commanded a higher price than *t'ej* to justify its *raison d'etre*. That didn't happen, partly due to the commanding position of *t'ej* in the society, and partly due to

factory beer. So the return on investment didn't justify the right environment for *t'alla* to thrive in its native land, and it's still struggling for its survival."

He adds: "The smallholders [farmers] I have spoken with are poorer now than their parents. Their grain for *t'alla* and *areqe* [a grain alcohol] is corn because it's affordable. You can imagine what their answers would be to Ronald Reagan's famous campaign line: 'Are you better off now than you were four years ago?' I often use this very example to point out their eroding situation. Their fathers used to drink *t'alla* and *areqe* made from barley, and now they have learned to make do with corn."

Bikil, asharo, gesho: the parts of *t'alla*, which you can buy in markets and prepare yourself.

***T'alla* also has a shorter shelf life than *t'ej*, so you have to drink it more quickly, although numerous scholars have researched the science of *t'alla* production and ways to produce *t'alla* with a longer shelf life by using more modern brewing methods. In 1990, Samuel Sahile wrote a thesis at Addis Ababa University on the microbiology of *t'alla*. A 2022 piece provides lots of details and pictures, and a study from 2019 discusses the use of laboratory fermenters and vacuum filtering, tools that traditional *t'alla* making, in the countryside of Ethiopia, doesn't use. That's what Menkir experiments with as you'll soon see.**

You can refrigerate it, but some Ethiopians don't like it that way. I've kept my *t'alla* in the refrigerator for almost two weeks without the flavor changing and without it turning sour, but I haven't tried it for longer than that, in part because I only make small batches – and drink it quickly.

III. Menkir's *T'alla*: Traditional…Yet Modern

In 2008, I met Menkir Tamrat over a bottle of *t'ej* in The Ethiopian Restaurant in Berkeley, Calif.

That sentence contains a bit of wax and gold, which is the Ethiopian term for wordplay in Amharic.

First, there were two Ethiopian restaurants in Berkeley at the time, so "The" doesn't mean I had lunch at the town's only one: That was its decidedly unimaginative name. (The other, Finfine, was owned by a friend of Menkir's, and both have since closed.) And second, Menkir wasn't there. But the restaurant served his Yamatt Tej, so I enjoyed a glass, the last portion in the restaurant's open bottle. I asked the server if I could take the bottle with me.

When I returned home, I began searching. Menkir worked with Rabbit's Foot Meadery in Sunnyvale, Calif., to create his *t'ej*, and from its website, I learned that "Yamatt" blended the names of his sons, Yared and Matias, and that the word also means mother-in-law. "I would say this is a win-win," Menkir wrote. "The kids are happy, and the wife's side of the family is happy, too."

Eventually, through email, I made contact, the start of a beautiful friendship during which I've come to enjoy Menkir's sly wit and value his unparalleled insights into his culture and its cuisine.

I had already begun making my own *t'ej* when we met, and my early failed attempt at making *t'alla* came soon after. Fifteen years later, Menkir began experimenting at home with making *t'alla*, "modifying the western homebrew approach to produce a shelf-stable *t'alla* and still maintain its traditional characters."

In other words, he didn't make his *t'alla* in terracotta jugs like many people do in Ethiopia. Instead, he used equipment that folks can buy in their local brew shop, something between the elaborate (and expensive) setup of a professional brewery and the more grassroots method of his homeland.

His current *t'alla* project began with his memories of growing up in Ethiopia.

"My mom and her older sister brewed some superb *filter t'alla* for the big holidays," Menkir recalls. "She even brewed some incredible *nech t'alla*. I was too young to appreciate it and drink more of it back then. Unfortunately, her *t'alla* didn't have a long stable shelf life – about 10 days on the average before starting to develop off flavors. I think we can plug in the missing brewing science and process steps by borrowing from the proven beer brewing techniques and create a shelf stable *t'alla* with all its original personalities."

So he began some research – reading books, watching YouTube videos of Ethiopians making *t'alla* – and set out to sing his own song, harmonizing the traditional with the modern.

Menkir's *t'alla*: *nech* (left) and *tikur*. On the right, the *tikur* fermenting.

He explains: "The main change from the western homebrew approach is the use of gesho instead of hops. I also use commercial brewer's yeast instead of wild yeast, and strict adherence to sanitation protocols, to establish a more streamlined, efficient and repeatable process for the *t'alla* home brewer."

Let's look at that. Home brewers must select a type of hops to flavor their beer. Ethiopians have long used gesho as their hops in *t'ej* and *t'alla*, and Menkir wasn't about to change that. Ethiopians let natural yeast from the environment and the ingredients cause fermentation, but Menkir didn't want his brew going south – after all, different yeasties inhabit the air over Addis than the air in Northern California. (In fact, who knows *what's* in California air!) And finally, this was no open-air brewing: His equipment, easy to use at home, insures that no other microbes will invade his blend of ingredients.

"A few years ago," Menkir recalls, "I went through a [traditional] mini-*t'alla* brewing project with guidance from a lady in Oakland. I think we brewed a five-gallon batch. I wouldn't want to do it again. That's why I'm trying to find a better mousetrap. Adopting some of the well-established home brewing practices can change the situation without killing *t'alla*'s identity – I believe."

I chatted with the owner of an Ethiopian market in Maryland this summer who said some people use raisins or dates to sweeten their brew during fermentation. But Menkir refuses to add any such thing.

Before he left for his visit to Ethiopia this year, Menkir reflected on "a few new-fangled attempts where some home brewers make honey-sweetened *t'alla*. I hate it," he told me, "and I'm glad it isn't gaining popularity. I have started to realize that you can't put a strait jacket on the evolution of cuisines. They change over time depending on exposures – the willing and unwilling kind." The honey only enters the *t'alla* when a customer orders a glass because adding it earlier will provoke new fermentation.

Menkir even discovered a word for sweetening *t'alla* with honey, spoken by a woman on a YouTube video: *firundus*.

But then, he was humbled.

"Just spent sometime with my high school buddy who still has relatives in parts of Gojam," he wrote in mid-November, "and he told me that *firundus* isn't something new but an old tradition that hadn't made its way to Addis and Wollo during my exposures to *t'alla*. Just when I thought I'd heard it all." He later paid a visit to Selo Craft Brewing, an innovative three-year-old pub and restaurant in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital, that makes six varieties of *t'alla*, including a *firundus*. More on that a little later.

Menkir made his first three recent experimental batches at his home in the bay area of northern California: one batch of *t'alla*, and two of *nech t'alla*. Then, he left the U.S. in September 2023 to spend a few months in Addis Ababa, and he tried another batch there. Here's a detailed look at what he did from both places.

♦ First, he prepared his grains, using slightly different combinations and preparations for each of his three batches. In the lingo of *t'alla*, this is his *bikil* and *asharo*. He also prepared his gesho *duket*, harvesting fresh gesho *kitel* (leaves) from the plants he grows in his backyard and reducing them to a green powder.

"You can go in one of two ways from here," he explains, "no-boil brewing, or you can boil the wort for one hour. I tried both methods in my trials. In both cases, the wort needs to cool down to room temperature (around 70 degrees) before transferring it to a fermenter and pitching the yeast. All other things being equal, I prefer the no-boil method – much less work." In Ethiopia, Menkir says, they never do the boiling step.

Menkir's two versions of *nech t'alla*.

For his two batches of the lighter yellowish *nech t'alla*, he used a blend of mainly barley and wheat malt, no roasted or pale barley. He made the first batch using the boil method and the second using the no-boil method. The grain bill for each also differed slightly.

For his sole batch of *tikur t'alla*, he added "a very high amount of dark roasted barley malt, and it turned out undrinkable. My *tikur t'alla* mistake was that I added 50% black malt instead of the average 4% for dark beers – beginner mistake. I have since come to learn that 85% of your grain bill should be pale malt as your workhorse and the remaining 15%" – the dark roasted grain – "for special effects."

"It's like making dark beer," Menkir says. "The malt is roasted before the coarse milling or cracking of the grains. *Nech t'alla* is not common and only a few skilled brewers managed to do a good job with it. And it seems to have a slightly shorter shelf life than the common *tikur t'alla*. The malt is not roasted for *nech t'alla* and the final product looks like your typical German Hefeweizen, a little hazy but bright and refreshing."

♦ Next, he soaked the ingredients – his "grain bill," or malt – in water of around 160 degrees for one hour before cooling the wort to room temperature.

♦ Home brewers use a system that they call "brew in a bag" (BIAB), which Menkir says is "efficient and less messy for such scale." With his malted grains and gesho *duket* ready to ferment, he bought brew bags that fit into a five-gallon water cooler from Home Depot. He then poured his 160 degrees hot water into the cooler, placed his grains in the bag, pulled

the string to prevent the grains from coming out, submerged it into the hot water and closed the lid to maintain a steady temperature for about one hour.

♦ Next, he "smoked" the fermenter with olivewood chips and sanitized it. He then filled it with the wort he had just prepared and, finally, added the yeast. Using a hydrometer, he measured the specific gravity – called the OG, or original gravity – of the solution. By comparing this number to the final gravity (FG), he could calculate the percentage of alcohol (ABV, or alcohol by volume) in his finished beer. He also used an airlock to monitor the fermentation activity and to keep out unwanted microbes.

♦ Fermentation usually lasts five to 10 days, during which time he went about his daily life, keeping an eye on his soon-to-be-beer-filled vessel.

♦ At the end of the fermentation cycle, he chose not to strain the *t'alla* through a filtering mechanism. Using the spigot on his fermenter, and a sanitized half-inch clear plastic tube, he put the *t'alla* directly into beer bottles and sealed them using a bottle capper. "Everything that touches the wort and *t'alla* must be sanitized," he says, lest the final steps introduce microbes that can undermine his earlier careful work.

Does this all sound like a lot to do? Well, it sort of is – much more than what I did as you'll read about soon. But this is what good home brewers have done for a long time to make their idiosyncratic brews. Menkir seeks to use this workable lay system, hoping it will create a *t'alla* that lasts longer in the bottle than what they produce more naturally in Ethiopia.

Not quite 100 bottles of beer, but a nice yield for Menkir.

And how did his brews turn out?

"Well, the verdict is in," Menkir wrote to me on June 13 – not his luckiest of days! – after tasting his first batch. "The *tikur t'alla* didn't pass – the super dark barley malt overpowered everything else, including the gesho, and left a sort of astringent taste. Too much *asharo*. The *nech t'alla,* on the other hand, got a qualified pass with only two issues: low ABV, maybe under 4%, and a rather weak mouth feel. I need to add other adjunct grains like oats and barley in the next iteration to fix that. It's the same logic of traditional *t'alla* brewing that adds different grains in the form of *kita*. As for the next steps, I'm going to dump the *tikur t'alla* and get a tried and true recipe for a future run. I'll keep the *nech t'alla*, drink some and keep some to test shelf life." [See Chapter VI below, Dec. 20, 2023, entry, for the results of the test.]

Menkir hoped to do another run in California some day following the cold-brew method for New England hazy IPA.

"The wort boiling/cooling routine is just too much, especially to adopt to Ethiopia," he says. "I know there are some stability issues with cold-brewing, but I think it's worth exploring further. I think this experiment has also shown that gesho (instead of hops) can be used in this process. The *nech t'alla* almost looks like *t'ej."*

Two months later, as he prepared for an extended visit to Ethiopia, he made a decision.

"I've mothballed my *t'alla* project for now," he told me, "but it's still under observation for shelf life. I have about 48 bottles capped and stored in the closet to test in December after my return. The main thing that eluded me was the very weak mouth feel – I will discuss this with some folks during this trip. I think it might be related to not adding *kita* and/or teff. I think the low alcohol content is related to fermentation: I couldn't get to my target of 5%+ ABV. That might be related to mouth feel, but it's solvable. On the positive side, I have seen that cold brewing can work for *t'alla* very well, and this will avoid the cumbersome routine of boiling and chilling the wort."

After a few weeks in Ethiopia, Menkir decided that "heating the grain bill to extract the starch," which some modern home brewers do, is "one of the processes I plan to try. I plan to soak my cracked grains at 158 degrees for one hour in a brew-bag, discard the spent grain, let the wort cool down to room temperature, and add my gesho, crumbled *kita* and yeast in the fermenter with an airlock and wait for the paint to dry, five to seven days. This is very close to the western no-boil brewing method, and I feel it will work just fine."

He then decided to take advantage of the 80-degree low-humidity days back home in the Ethiopian highlands and made a 10-liter batch during his stay in Addis.

To do this, he had to get the ingredients and assemble the parts. He brought *bikil* and *asharo* with him from back home in Berkeley, then bought gesho and *ye'kita ehel* to bake his own *kita* in Addis.

After he prepared and blended the ingredients – including *kita* chunks – fermentation began that same day. "It might be a combination of the temperature and the altitude," he says. "The ambient temp was around 80 degrees when I pitched the yeast. It took a while to cool down the mash, even after I dragged it out to the balcony to take advantage of the evening cool breeze."

In fact, Menkir worried about having to deal with "runaway fermentation" because of the higher altitude in Addis: The lower air pressure of higher altitudes allows yeast to expand and work faster. Even his refrigerated sourdough bread continues to ferment in Addis, albeit it at a slower pace.

But his *t'alla* fermentation progressed nicely, at a lively and suitable pace. In fact, it was so bubbly that he allowed it to ferment 10 days rather than the seven days of his California batches to see if he could "complete" the fermentation – that is, turn as much of the carbohydrates into alcohol as possible. "Maybe I gave it a bit too much yeast food when I added 700 grams of *kita*," he speculates. "Regardless, I'm going to use this formula as my baseline and tweak one variable at a time going forward if need be."

And how did this batch turn out?

"I took a liter of my *t'alla* to one of my brothers' place last Sunday," he wrote from Ethiopia, "and it passed with flying colors!!!!!!" The exclamation points are all his.

"I had one more feedback on my *t'alla* from my cousin's wife who drank my mom's *t'alla* back in the day," he wrote a few days later. "She said there was something missing from the overall flavor profile. Then, before I even said a word, she asked me if I had used some kind of *ersho* (starter) because she didn't taste that extra 'something' my mom's *t'alla* used to have. I told her I used a commercial ale yeast instead of the traditional wild yeast in order to insure that I don't attract unwanted or bad bacteria."

Menkir grows gesho to make the powder for his *t'alla*.

Still, the taste test went well, and it got even better. Menkir wondered how his *t'alla* would taste as it aged. He soon had his answer.

"She called back yesterday and raved about it," he reports. "She had kept some of it in the fridge overnight and served it alongside *ye'misir wot* for lunch the next day. Maybe it was the food pairing. I told her it will even get better with a few more days of 'conditioning.' I'm happy."

And then: "Got more input tonight from my wife's aunt – another nod of approval." So that settles it.

The conversation about wild yeast left him thinking about not adding a commercial ale yeast to future batches, and just letting the yeast in the air begin fermentation, or even using *ersho*: that is, some fermented *t'alla* from a previous batch to begin fermentation in the new one.

"Maybe next time, I will run a batch with wild yeast you can catch from the air, usually some form of sweetened liquid left in the open and used as a trap," he said. "I have to think about that some more. I'm sure the Fremont wild yeast will be different from the ones in Addis The latter method is known as 'spontaneous' fermentation. I have started digging a bit into this and my initial findings suggest that this form of brewing was practiced in Belgium and other parts as far back as the 13th century, and it's known as lambic beer. Finding out how to make a shelf-stable *t'alla* by following this method is now my Chapter 2 in this journey. Who would have thought that the invisible ingredient of this

whole process provides the ultimate expression of *terrior* in brewing, just like in sourdough bread baking."

As with any true scientist, his experimentation may never end.

Several months after making his American batches of *t'alla*, Menkir learned something that will inform his future brews.

All-grain western brewing is 85% malted barley or wheat, and the remaining 15% cracked grains and flakes. Traditional *t'alla* is only 12% malt and the 88% grain or flour in the form of *kita.* "So the ratios of malt to grain for beer versus *t'alla* are completely opposite," he says. "I think that may have to do a lot with the mouth feel in *t'alla* – I think."

And he adds: "I had also noticed, with some of the discussions I had on the subject in Addis, that *t'alla* people spoke of malt in a cautious way. They felt that too much malt, like in beer, can result in unwanted outcomes. I will tweak my grain bill for my next trial to only have 15% malted barley or wheat, with the remaining 85% coming from milled grains and *kita.*"

I'll be sure to report the results.

IV. My *T'alla*: Something Old, Something New

I began making *t'ej*, the Ethiopian honey wine, during the summer of 2007, after finding some gesho *inchet* (stick) at an Ethiopian market in Washington, D.C. Gesho *inchet* helps to flavor the *t'ej* and stoke fermentation. Without gesho, it's just honey wine.

***T'ej* is easy to make: Mix the water and honey in the proper proportions, add some gesho and yeast, and let it ferment for an appropriate period of time. (My other website describes the making of *t'ej* in detail). But as you've just seen, *t'alla* is much more complicated – and much sloppier: more ingredients, more straining, more this and that. I tried it a few times about 15 years ago, germinating my own wheat, and roasting my own barley. I mostly made a mess, and it tasted mostly unpleasant. Never again.**

Until the summer of 2023.

Menkir had begun his skilled home brewing a few months earlier. I envied his success and knew I could never, ever do anything like that. The best I could hope for was finding *t'alla* when I visited cities with big Ethiopian populations.

As it turned out, easier said than done: *T'ej* is copious in markets and restaurants, but Ethiopians only make *t'alla* for holidays and special occasions, like weddings, and even then in smaller quantities, not enough to market.

But kismet intervened, and at the redoubtable Desta Market on Danforth Avenue in Toronto, I found two brands of bottled *t'alla.* Made by local women, in large enough

quantities to stock Desta, they tasted delicious – each bottle somewhat sweet, so the brewers may have added honey or fruit during the fermentation, a component that Menkir eschews, but that this adulterated *ferenj* very much enjoyed.

So a few months later, on a two-week vacation in Washington, D.C., I made it a priority – no, a *mission* – to find some *t'alla.*

I visited almost every Ethiopian market in the DMV area (that's D.C., Maryland, Virginia), and one by one, they shattered my hopes: No *t'alla* anywhere, nor any *t'alla* a month earlier when I spent a long weekend in Columbus, which has a sizeable community. Several market owners in both places said that if I came back around the Ethiopian new year, on Sept. 11, they might have some. But that was a big "might," and I couldn't return anyway.

Then, on Friday, Aug. 18, 2023, around 3 p.m. on a typical 90-degree summer DMV day, everything suddenly changed.

I had spent the day visiting markets and restaurants in the contiguous Virginia towns of Falls Church, Alexandria and Arlington, looking for *t'alla.* Nothing. But as I was about to return to D.C., I visited Afomia Organic Market on Columbia Pike in Arlington, my last stop of the day, where Beshah Feyisa and Wosenyelsh Argaw *t'alla*'ed my world.

The husband-and-wife owners of the market didn't have *t'alla*, and we chatted about it. They said that I should contact them a few weeks before my next trip to DMV and they could make some for me. Then, as I continued to talk with Beshah, Wosenyelsh slipped away – and returned with a clear plastic bag of greenish-brown powder in her hand.

These are the two brands of *t'alla* mix that I used: *yalekelet t'alla* from Afomia market, and *diblik t'alla ehel* from Sheger Market.

It was *yalekelet t'alla*, or "all-in-one" *t'alla*, a blend of the three primary ingredients, already reduced to a powder: gesho, *bikil* and *asharo*, plus some nice chunks of the optional ingredient *kita*, all of it really to mix in water for making *t'alla* in a simpler, more compact, and much less messy and labor-intensive way.

In 2013, I had read about an Ethiopian woman, Mulunesh Alene, who received a patent for creating a powdered *t'alla* mix. (Here's a video, in Amharic, where she talks about it.) At the time, I pictured something like instant coffee, but of course, that's ridiculous: No powder, mixed with water, could instantly create a fermented beverage. I now suspect that she created the first *yalekelet t'alla* product, and patent or not, others seem to have done it as well.

But does it work? Wosenyelsh assured me it would. Her mother had mixed the blend in Ethiopia, and Afomia packaged it in clear plastic bags, each weighing about three pounds, for a mere $4.99 a pound. I bought the larger of the two bags that Afomia had on its shelf. I wish now that I'd bought both.

It had no instructions, so I pointed to some *t'ej* in a standard 750 milliliter wine bottle and asked: For that much liquid, how much *yalekelet t'alla*? Wosenyelsh told me four or five "big spoons." That's the proportion I now use, translating "big spoons" into tablespoons.

Six days later, on a trip to Takoma, Md., to visit a few more markets and restaurants – still hoping to find some *t'alla* – I stopped by Sheger International Market (it's really just Ethiopian) and found another brand of *t'alla* mix called *diblik t'alla ehl*, which means "mixed *t'alla* grain," this brand with no *kita* chunks. Priced at $9.99 a pound, in two-pound bags, it was pre-packaged in Ethiopia, not hand packed like the mix I got at Afomia, and had brewing instructions for the entire bag in Amharic on the printed label. Menkir translated them for me: "Mix with two liters of water. Let ferment for seven days. Then mix with seven liters of water and let it settle. Use a natural cotton fiber material to filter before drinking." I did some quick math, and it seems that the proportions are close to what Wosenyelsh told me for hers.

So what exactly is in these bags of "instant" *t'alla*? Good question: They have no label with ingredients. But Menkir speculates: "I think your mix has all that's needed for traditional *t'alla*: straight unroasted *bikil*, pan-roasted cracked *asharo*, kita, etc." I can live with that.

Or can I? There's an African savannah elephant in the room – that's a species found in Ethiopia, its easternmost range – and you only need look at Menkir's experience to discern what it is.

Menkir's batch of *tikur t'alla* was "undrinkable" because he used too much of one ingredient rather than more of another. His *nech t'alla* got a "qualified pass" that "might be related to not adding *kita* and/or teff." He can now tinker with his blend of grains and how he prepares them. When you do it all from scratch, tomorrow is always another day.

But with a pre-mixed *t'alla* blend, you could easily be gone with the wind, utterly at the mercy of the "chef" who prepared it. When you buy a product in a jar at a supermarket, you can only hope it will taste good. No doubt we've all spilled something pre-fabricated down the drain. I already know that my *yalekelet t'alla* blend has *kita* and my *diblik t'alla ehl* doesn't. Will that make a difference?

So a *t'alla* mix is a leap of faith – something I soon learned when I used mine – and I would hazard to guess that it's harder to blend just the right ingredients for such a mix than it is to make spaghetti sauce or salad dressing, considering how delicate the balance might be with something like brew science, let alone trying to transform a wild brew into a more domesticated one. Just ask Menkir.

Nonetheless, I left D.C. exhilarated by what I'd found, eager to try it, and after I returned home with my treasured *t'alla* blends, the rest of my story is pretty short.

In a 52-ounce plastic container that once held orange juice, with a lid that I could seal tightly, I mixed the proper amount of Afomia's *yalekelet t'alla* powder and water, added a good ale yeast, and 24 hours later, I had rigorous fermentation. I loosened the lid when I saw the fermentation bubbles and it hissed beautifully at me. After that, I either kept the lid loose or opened the container every day. (I like the hiss: It reassures me that the fermentation is active.) I stopped it after seven days, filtered it by pouring the liquid into a pitcher through cheesecloth to catch the soaked powder, let it chill for 24 hours in a pitcher, then bottled it.

***Voila*! It was that easy.**

My *t'alla*: two tall batches of *yalekelet* mix, and a sour batch from the *diblik*.

My first batch tasted…well, I'm not sure how to describe it: Perhaps like a hearty tea, with a tiny kick of alcohol. The liquid smelled a lot like the blend of powders that went into making it: Can I call it leafy, or grainy, or…dusty? I hope this doesn't sound unpleasant because I enjoyed drinking it, both by itself (in sips) and with food (two glasses per meal).

Unfortunately, I have no way of getting a sample to Menkir to let him tell me if it tastes anything like authentic *t'alla*, or just some water infused with glorified tea leaves.

I also don't own a hydrometer, so to measure the alcohol content of my *t'ej* and *t'alla*, I perform a test using a neuro-cranial buzzometer. If a glass of merlot or burgundy that I drink is 12% alcohol and gives me a particular buzz, and my homemade *t'ej* gives me a comparable buzz, I know that my *t'ej* is somewhere around 12% alcohol, adjusted accordingly for a buzz of lesser or greater effect.

Based on this unimpeachable pseudo-science, I'd say my first batch of *t'alla* was maybe 3% alcohol. Maybe. Menkir talked about spontaneous natural fermentation capturing yeast in the air – lambic beer. I will never try that. I get little enough fermentation *with* a commercial yeast, so I fear that any attempt at natural fermentation would merely end up being. . .lame-bic.

A few weeks later, I brewed another batch using the *yalekelet t'alla* powder, this time fermenting it for eight days. It tasted about the same as the first batch. I enjoyed a 16-ounce bottle with a homemade Ethiopian meal, and if my first batch was *maybe* 3% alcohol, then my neuro-cranial buzzometer measures the second batch at a solid 3% – ish.

And then, a few weeks after that, I brewed a batch with the *diblik talla ehl* from Sheger, this time using a half-gallon mason jar. It didn't go so well. After two days, I couldn't see the familiar stream of fermentation bubbles – could the absence of *kita* chunk make that much of a difference? – but I did see some bubbles form on the top of the liquid inside the jar, and flakes of powder getting gently tempest tossed, floating up and down from time to time. Something was happening, albeit not much. So I pitched a little more yeast to see if that would get it going. It seemed to – for maybe a day.

Then, I turned to sacrilege: raisins. I added a few to see if a fructose fix might fuel the fermentation. Again, for about a day, I saw some action. Or did I? Like the poet said (more or less), hope is the thing with bubbles.

After seven days, I decided to strain and chill what I had. At first, I tasted what seemed to be a sweetness, which surprised me: Just a few raisins for a few days gave it a tang. But the more I drank, and the longer it chilled in my refrigerator, the more it began to taste sour, like a mild brown lemonade.

This means the batch was probably "infected" with *Lactobacillus* or *Pediococcus*, two bacteria found naturally in the human microbiome, and among the bacteria responsible for fermenting cabbage in such dishes as sauerkraut and kimchi. They're considered to be probiotics ("good" bacteria) essential to promoting a healthy gut – if you can tolerate the taste in certain foods. In sauerkraut, no problem. In beer? Maybe not. Sour beers are a real thing in brewing, produced by design, not by disaster. But *t'alla* isn't supposed to be one of them.

In Menkir's California kitchen: milling the barley, and boiled wort before adding yeast.

So why did this happen? Did the souring bacteria enter during the fermentation process – that is, were they floating about in my kitchen – or were they already present in the bag of *diblik t'alla ehl* mix that I bought? There's no doubt that the dusty bag had sat on the market shelf for a while, and although it was sealed – well, who knows? Maybe the bacteria came from Ethiopia, or maybe it entered on the shelf in Maryland while it waited for some *ferenj* to buy it and take it home to Pittsburgh.

I wondered now if this would happen again when I used the *diblik* mix. I soon had my answer.

As for its alcohol content: It barely registered on the buzzometer. In fact, the nebulous buzz I felt might just have been the end of a long day.

And so let's call this batch *keribo*, the slightly fermented but non-alcoholic version of *t'alla*. In fact, it's reassuring to know that I produced *something* vaguely Ethiopian from what I thought was a calamity, even if it's not what I intended.

Sampling the two brews side by side, I detected very small differences in taste, apart from the sourness that ultimately emerged in the *diblik* batch, although again, it's hard to find words to describe the variance. The *yalekelet* brew smelled and tasted leafier and thinner than the *diblik* brew, which was a bit thicker, with an aroma that I can best describe as – well, to be honest, I can't. It just smelled different. But I drank full glasses of each, and neither spawned a detrimental (or deleterious) effect. In fact, the *Lactibacillus* may actually have helped my digestion. It certainly didn't hurt.

Still, after my *diblik* batch of *t'alla* got only as far as *keribo*, I had to know: Had *all* of my *t'alla*-making collapsed into its non-alcoholic kin, or was the second blend of powder simply inferior? So I began two fresh batches at once, one with each blend – two jars, side by side, same ambient temperature, same brand of yeast, watching them day by day.

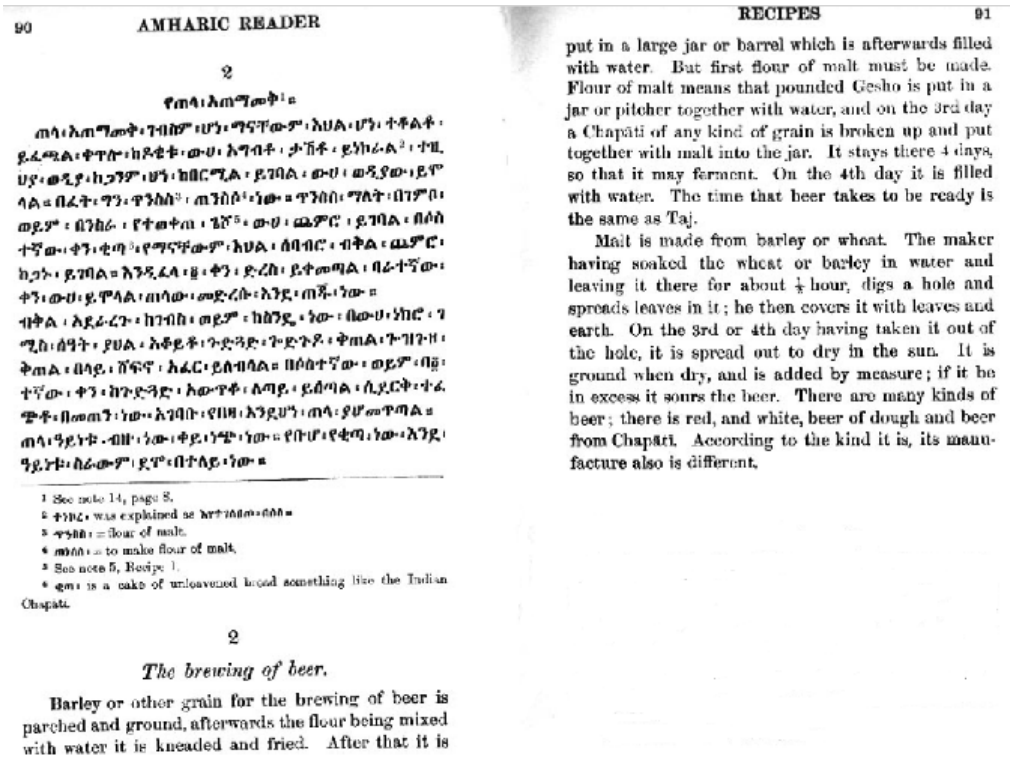
But when I mixed them, I tried something a little different. The printed instructions on the *diblik t'alla ehl* bag says to mix the *whole bag* with two liters of water, let it ferment for seven days, and then add seven more liters of water, increasing the volume of the concentrated fermenting mash before filtering and drinking. Could it be that the mix needs to ferment in a more muddy concentrated emulsion, with the yeast saturated in its carbohydrate-rich nutrient?

In each container, I added the proper amount of powder. But I only filled the jars about half of the way with water. I then pitched the yeast and stirred it into the nutrients and water. Fermentation took off in both, and the smaller *diblik* batch hissed after three days when I opened it. The larger mason jar with the *yalekelet* did not, but I saw more bubbly movement of ingredients in that one.

Fermentation in both seemed to slow after five days, and I added a bit more yeast. That got things started again, so I soon moved on to the last step: more water to fill the jars. I added water to the *yalekelet* batch after seven days, and surprisingly, it created lots more bubbling. I strained it on day eight into a pitcher to chill before bottling. Also on day eight, I added the extra water to the *diblik* batch and strained it the next day to chill. All that remained to do was taste them.

The *yalekelet* tasted exactly as it did for the first two batches, and on the buzzometer, I'd rate it a solid 3%, perhaps even a fraction of a buzz higher. It had no sour taste, nor did the two earlier batches with *yalekelet* mix. But the *diblik* still had the sour taste of the invasive bacteria, only this time, it didn't emerge after a few days: I tasted it immediately, when I strained and bottled it. Once again, I survived drotinking it, although the alcohol content was still low – *very* low, *keribo* low, barely a buzz at all.

And so it goes: All *t'alla* mixes are not created equal.



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ጠላ፡አጠማመቅ፡ገብስም፡ሆነ፡ማናቸውም፡እህል፡ሆነ፡ተቆልቶ፡ ይፈጫል፡ቀጥሎ፡ከጾቂቱ፡ውሀ፡አግብቶ፡ታሽቶ፡ይነከራል[2]፡ተዚ ህያ፡ወጂያ፡ከጋንም፡ሆነ፡ከበርሜል፡ይገባል፡ውሀ፡ወዲያው፡ይሞ ላል። በፈት፡ግን፡ዋንክስ[3]፡ጠንሰሶ[4]፡ነው። ዋንበስ፡ማለት፡በገሙቦ፡ ወይም፡በንክራ፡የተወቀጠ፡ጌሾ[5]፡ውሀ፡ጨምሮ፡ይገባል፡በሶስ ተኛው፡ቀን፡ቂጣ[6]፡የማናቸውም፡እህል፡ሰባብሮ፡ብቅል፡ጨምሮ፡ ከጋኑ፡ይገባል። እንዲፈላ፡፱፡ቀን፡ድረስ፡ይተመጣል፡ባራተኛው፡ ቀን፡ውሀ፡ይሞላል፡ጠላው፡መድረሱ፡እንደ፡ጠጁ፡ነው።

ብቅል፡እደራረጉ፡ከገብስ፡ወይም፡ከስንዴ፡ነው፡ቤውሀ፡ነክሮ፡ግ ሚስ፡ሰዓት፡ያህል፡አቆይቶ፡ጉድጓድ፡ጉድጉዶ፡ቅጠል፡ጉዝጉዘ፡ ቅጠል፡በላይ፡ሸፍኖ፡አፈር፡ይለብሳል። በሶስተኛው፡ወይም፡በ፱፡ ተኛው፡ቀን፡ከጉድጓድ፡አውጥቶ፡ለማደ፡ይሰጣል፡ሲደርቅ፡ተፈ ጭቶ፡በመጠን፡ነው። አገባቡ፡የበዛ፡እንደሆነ፡ጠላ፡ያሾመጣል።

ጠላ፡ዓይነቱ፡ብዙ፡ነው፡ቀይ፡ነጭ፡ነው። የቡሆ፡የቂጣ፡ነው፡እንደ፡ ዓይነቱ፡ስራውም፡ይሞ፡በተለይ፡ነው።

[1] See note 14, page 8.
[2] ተነክሮ፡ was explained as ከተነከረው፡ዕህል።
[3] ዋንክስ፡ = flour of malt.
[4] ጠነሰሰ፡ = to make flour of malt.
[5] See note 5, Recipe 1.
[6] ቂጣ፡ is a cake of unleavened bread something like the Indian Chapati.

RECIPES 91

put in a large jar or barrel which is afterwards filled with water. But first flour of malt must be made. Flour of malt means that pounded Gesho is put in a jar or pitcher together with water, and on the 3rd day a Chapāti of any kind of grain is broken up and put together with malt into the jar. It stays there 4 days, so that it may ferment. On the 4th day it is filled with water. The time that beer takes to be ready is the same as Taj.

Malt is made from barley or wheat. The maker having soaked the wheat or barley in water and leaving it there for about ½ hour, digs a hole and spreads leaves in it; he then covers it with leaves and earth. On the 3rd or 4th day having taken it out of the hole, it is spread out to dry in the sun. It is ground when dry, and is added by measure; if it be in excess it sours the beer. There are many kinds of beer; there is red, and white, beer of dough and beer from Chapāti. According to the kind it is, its manufacture also is different.

2

The brewing of beer.

Barley or other grain for the brewing of beer is parched and ground, afterwards the flour being mixed with water it is kneaded and fried. After that it is

A *t'alla* recipe from *The Amharic Reader* (1924)

Clearly, the invasive bacteria came with the *diblik* mix and didn't enter in my kitchen. Wosenyelsh at Afomia in Arlington got her *yalekelet t'alla* designer ingredients from her *enat* (mother) in Ethiopia, making it a true home recipe. She measured three-pound portions of her mother's fresh mix into plastics bags sealed with twist ties, and then put them on the shelf at her market. The *diblik* from Sheger in Takoma seemed to be more of a "product," factory sealed and labeled. It also had spent a good deal of time on the shelf before I bought it.

The upshot: There's nothing like *y'agerbet t'alla azegajejet* – that is, home *t'alla* cookin' (more or less).

Could a variation of the western home brew process – boiling the wort and cooling it before transferring it into a fermentation vessel – work with the powdered all-in-one mix, and might that kill the *Lactobacillus*? Menkir thinks not.

"The reason I will be able to brew my *t'alla* in a two-step process, soaking the grain bill at 158 for one hour and add the remaining ingredients after cooling the wort, is because I will have all the three main ingredients separately," he says. "My concern with heating the *yalekelet* mix is with the gesho, and to a lesser extent with the *kita,* since it has already been through some heat during baking. I know the hops in western brewing are subjected to some precise timing and temperature phases during the boil, but crushed gesho leaves are never heated for fear of unwanted flavors."

As for why one mix "works" to create more buzz and the other doesn't, that will ultimately have to remain a mystery – but not really. When I shared this all with Menkir, he said what I suspected, adding some homeland cultural wisdom.

"Sounds like there's a material difference between the two bags, and I'm not surprised," he says. "Never mind that the two businesses are totally different, and so are the ingredients and process contributing to variations in the final product. You will be lucky to find consistency from batch to batch even from the same establishment. The industrial concept of zero-defects hasn't yet made its way to the mom-and-pop cottage industries. It's like playing Russian roulette with fake bullets. But you still get to pull the trigger again: Weak or bad *t'alla* hasn't killed anyone yet."

I can't swear to "anyone," but it hasn't killed me: So far, I've lived to *t'alla*. The flatter first *diblik* batch may have weakened my spirits (in more ways than one), but I'm still standing.

To get my alcohol content higher, I decided to brew a batch with Lalvin EC-1118, a wine yeast that I use to make my *t'ej* and that tolerates higher alcohol levels. I've found accounts of some people who use it in beer to raise the ABV, and they say it works, although others say 1118 doesn't metabolize (i.e., convert to alcohol) maltrose and maltitriose, two carbohydrates present in the grains used to make beer. One brewer tested it and found that it did convert them, and another found that it ate the maltrose but not the maltitriose. Some brewers even report good results with a strong bread yeast – and some say bread yeast doesn't work in beer.

All of these folks sound credible, so I'll keep experimenting – and hoping: science, meet séance.

In fact, in the weeks after my nascent batches, I tried a few modest variations. Here are some quick results:

♦ *Yalekelet t'alla* mix, EC-1118 wine yeast. Fermentation started, then slowed, so I added some of my ale yeast. Fermentation seemed to return. The result: just like earlier *yalekelet* batches – same taste, low alcohol.

♦ *Diblik t'alla ehl* mix, ale yeast, but for this batch, I soaked the grains in 150 degree hot water for a while, hoping to kill the *Lacto* bacteria that made earlier batches sour. The result: no change, still sour, very low alcohol (on the buzzometer), hence *keribo*.

♦ *Diblik t'alla ehl* mix, instant bread yeast, to see if this stronger commercial yeast made a difference. The result: See above.

And that's it so far, with more experiments to come. I may not be getting a buzz that makes me weep or break up the furniture, but at least I can produce something remotely like *t'alla* in my humble Rust Belt kitchen.

After those last two batches, I considered throwing away the rest of my *diblik t'alla ehel* powder - and I have a lot of it. But then, I drank a few chilled bottles with Ethiopian food, and I'm beginning to enjoy it, so I'll keep tweaking the process to see if I can provoke a higher alcohol content. Whatever it is I'm getting out of it, the mix came direct from Ethiopia, so it's an authentic *something*.

We don't have a lot of Ethiopians in Pittsburgh, but fortunately, we do have Tana, our sole Ethiopian restaurant, owned by Seifu Haileyesus. So I took a sample of my *t'alla* to Tana for Seifu to taste, and on the day I visited, an Ethiopian friend of his was there as well.

Their verdict was the best that I could have hoped for under the circumstances: They said my brew smelled and tasted like *t'alla*, but without much alcohol. The first part was a relief, and it told me that the *yalekelet* mix produces something on the way to being authentic. I already knew I had no real alcohol content, so that didn't surprise me. Now I just need to find a way to give my brew some buzz.

Menkir and I had hoped to have one more vital experiment to report: How well does the *t'alla* powder mix work for *him*, and how does it work in Ethiopia? This was especially important to me because I need him to tell me if the result of a powdered mix tastes anything like the *t'alla* he makes and that he drinks in Ethiopia.

But after spending almost two months in Addis Ababa in 2023, Menkir couldn't find any of the mix.

He thought he had a solid lead on some prepared powder: a woman at Cherkos, a huge Ethiopian marketplace, "four-story structures with all kinds of stalls and stairways, selling brand new pots and pans, cereal grains and milled flour – you name it and it was there." But he couldn't find any *t'alla* powder, dolefully reflecting, "Who was it who said, 'After all is said and done, a hell of a lot more is said than done?' Here ambiguity and enigma rule over clarity."

It's not like he didn't try.

Bethel *t'alla* at Abay in San Diego (left), and Fitzhugh *t'alla* from a brewery in Texas.

"The lady who was supposed to sell the mix is named Tigist," he reports. "And when we finally located her stall, called Bale Roba, it was shuttered and locked. But there were a couple of phone numbers scribbled on the wall, and a girl selling traditional coffee in a corner shouted as to which one was the correct number when she saw me getting ready to call. Tigist finally answered and said she doesn't have the item because of transport issues between Bahir Dar and Addis. Apparently, she used to have it shipped from there. I thought the location of the source was appropriate since the lady who first came up with the idea 10 years ago and won the big prize was from Bahir Dar."

I then suggested that he try the famous Merkato, Ethiopia's largest marketplace, but he told me, "I will need very specific information about the item before venturing there, else it will be like trying to find a needle in a haystack."

For now, then, Menkir's experiment with a *t'alla* mix will have to wait until he returns to California and looks for some at the many Ethiopian markets in Oakland and Berkeley.

In the meantime, I have the *yalekelet t'alla* mix experience of Wilhelmine Stordiau – and it's not encouraging.

Wilma lives in Frankfurt, Germany, and owns Begena Tedj, which makes several varieties of Ethiopian honey wine as well as *katikala,* a traditional grain alcohol. Born and raised in Ethiopia (she had an Ethiopian great-grandmother), her family returned to Europe when she was 18. Decades later, still close to her Ethiopian upbringing, she launched Begena.

When I told Wilma that I made *t'alla* with a mix, she surprised me with the news that she, too, had tried a *t'alla* powder. And the result?

"Horrible." Not what I wanted to hear, although in the shadow of my own experience, not a surprise.

"It is like instant coffee versus *buna,*" she says, using the Amharic word for coffee. "I'm very skeptical about it. You don't put all of the ingredients together at once while preparing *t'alla,* having everything as powder. The taste variation of *t'alla* is like beer, very broad compared to *t'ej,* and everything depends on the roasted grains. Then of course you have the vessels smoked with olive branches. Horrible work and effort, but I would give a bottle of *t'ej* for a good glass of *t'alla.*"

And adding a touch of cultural memory, she says: "In some regions, you have the *t'alla* served with bread as well, and the bread is part of the drink. But I never liked it served that way."

Wilma encountered *t'alla* with bread soaked right in the drink during her life in Ethiopia more than half a century ago. It happened on a picnic in the countryside, when a shepherd boy who came along stopped to sit and watch the visitors. She recalls offering him some food or Coke. The boy thanked her and soon wandered away.

"After a while he came back and offered me the *t'alla* with bread," Wilma says. "It did not look nice to me, and I did not like the taste and the consistency. I could only thank him and drink and eat it. It was really not to my taste, but what could I do?"

Menkir has never heard of this custom, but he says it's "reminiscent of Italians dunking their biscotti in a glass of Chianti."

"Traditionally, Ethiopian usually did not drink while eating," Wilma adds, remember how they did it when she lived there. "Eating was eating, and usually one did not talk much while eating. Drinking was drinking and one talked a lot. Women did not drink in public but at home."

Wilma says she always preferred *tikur t'alla,* "brown and not clear, a muddy color, which was usually sold and brewed in most of the households, not very strong in alcohol. The bitterness varied based on the amount of gesho, and you could have a very mild one or a very bitter one. I personally like the middle version. Men would buy it and drink it sitting on a bench, a rock or whatever was available." She even remembers them sometimes squatting rather than sitting on something, "talking and sipping their *t'alla."*

As for filter *t'alla,* or *ye't'era t'alla*, she recalls it as an "upper class" drink, not commonly found for sale, "stronger in alcohol, not muddy, and my favorite."

Regarding Wilma's experience with the powder, and mine as well, Menkir observed earlier that "the mix is only as good as the sum of each ingredient, and all kinds of weak links exist unless you control it. I think it should work, as I don't see much difference between the western all-grain brewing and traditional *t'alla* brewing, with the exception of heating the grain bill to extract the starch for modern home brewing. In fact, that's one of the processes I plan to try."

So for my peace of mind, the final word on these powdered mixes will have to wait until Menkir, my Ethiopian food sensei, has a chance to try one – or two, or three, because as we've learned, results may vary.

As for my *t'alla*, I've paired it tastily with various dishes: one evening, a full Ethiopian dinner of *ye'beg tibs, duba wot, shiro* and a *sinig*; once with *shiro shorba b'qualima* (a spicy chickpea soup with sausage) and *dirkosh* (dried *injera* "crackers"); and a few times, because I had some left, with non-Ethiopian meals. The sweetness of *t'ej* especially complements spicy meals, but if you ask me, *t'alla* goes with anything, although Menkir says that as a rule (made to be broken), you should pair *t'ej* with meat dishes and *t'alla* with vegetarian.

And he adds: "*T'alla* should never be sweet, although some newbies try to tell us otherwise."

I hope he wasn't raisin' a finger at me.

T'alla from around Ethiopia: The Amharic on the cup on the left says *godada* and means "majestic" or "manly."

V. *Cul Sec:* Try This At Home

Have I convinced you yet to make some *t'alla* of your own? No, probably not. That isn't my goal anyway.

But let's say you want to do it. Where do you get that all-in-one *t'alla* powder mix? I can't find an Ethiopian market that sells it *conveniently* online, but I did find an imported Ethiopian-made *t'alla* mix sold in some markets that mention it on their websites.

The product is called YeTela Ehel (grain for *t'alla*), and it's made by an Ethiopian company, Barkot Baltena, under the brand and company name Engocha Baltena. In the U.S., it's sold at and distributed by Engocha Market, located at Skyline Plaza, a well-known cluster of Ethiopian businesses in Falls Church, Va. The Virginia branch of Engocha seems to be the U.S. outlet and partner of the Ethiopian business. Lucy Market in Nashville also advertises the product on its social media. So you might see if they're willing to ship it, or you can look for it at an Ethiopian market near you.

And the well-stocked Addis Ababa Grocery in Columbus sells the Engocha *yalekelat t'alla*, along with its own blend, called *meten t'alla*, or "measured *t'alla*." I visited the market in July and took pictures of both products (see below), thinking they were each just one of the numerous grain components for making *t'alla*. On my next visit to Columbus, I'll bring both products home and give them a try.

Here are two brands of *t'alla* mix that I found at a market in Columbus, one from Ethiopia (left), the other apparently assembled by the market under the name "meten *t'alla*," or measured *t'alla*.

The newly opened online Gibe Store in Ethiopia sells a brand of *yalekelet t'alla* powder packaged by Korintos, an Addis Ababa company that specializes in tours of Ethiopia. The company seems to have a shipping arm as well, and its website says that "we will deliver to all U.S states." But it also says that they only take larger orders of their *yalekelet t'alla*, 100 kilos or more, and they make each batch to order. So unless you plan to open a brewery, Gibe might not help.

Digging around the internet, I found a few places that make their own *t'alla*, or something that seems to be close.

Abay market and restaurant in San Diego bottles and labels two varieties of their own beer: Bethel Ethio Stout, with a label that says "brewed based on a recipe for filtered *t'alla*," and Bethel Ethio Golden, with a label that says "brewed based on a recipe for *nechi t'alla.*" This is quite a rarity. In fact, when Menkir learned of this, he told me: "I feel vindicated on my *nech t'alla* pursuit. Because so few people know about it, some folks might think it's some new-fangled idea I pulled out of thin air."

Fitzhugh Brewery in Dripping Spring, Texas, about 20 miles from Austin, made a batch of *t'alla* in 2021 as a specialty beer. For their grain bill, they used sorghum, teff, millet, maize, barley – and honey, no doubt to sweeten an exotic brew for American tastes. It looked like the *t'alla* that Menkir and I make, and the brewery sold it in 32-ounce cans. "Traditionally, this beer is bittered with an herb called gesho, which lends a subtle spiciness and earthiness that hops can't quite match," the company says on its website. Of course, just as traditionally, Ethiopians don't make it with honey.

And for a short while, Home Brewing Co. of San Diego seems to have made a sort of on-demand *t'alla* during its 10 years in business. The company closed in 2022.

A number of breweries in Ethiopia bottle standard beers and export them internationally: St George, Walia, Bati, Habesha, Harar, Asmara (from Eritrea), Dashen, Bedele, Castel – you can find them at many Ethiopian restaurants and markets around the world. Heritage Winery in New Jersey, which produces Axum Tej and several other brands of Ethiopian honey wine, makes a brand of beer called Addis.

The unique Addis Teff Amber Ale, from Negus Beer Co. of Manassas, Va., uses teff as one of its fermentation grains, and the company's website call it "our rendition of the famous *t'alla* beer made with a unique ingredient, brewed using the same recipe that was passed down, but slightly adapting it to the current modern brewery setups."

They're all solid beers, although there's really nothing "Ethiopian" about the imported ones, apart from their being made there. In fact, the Dutch company Heineken owns the factory that makes Harar and Walia, Swinkels (also Dutch) owns Habesha, and the British company Vasari Global owns Dashen, all made at factories in Ethiopia.

In 2018, an NPR correspondent chatted in Ethiopia's famous Merkato Market with Melkie Tewelde, a third-generation *t'alla* maker who prepares it "just once a year to celebrate the Virgin Mary," she explained. "*T'alla*, she says, is healthy," the correspondent reports. "It allows the body to make more blood. Melkie tells me that she has been brewing *t'alla* since she was a child. Her mother ran this beer house before her, and her grandmother opened it."

When Ethiopians drink the beverage outside of their homes, it will probably be at a *t'alla bet*, literally, "*t'alla* house," a bar that usually serves only *t'alla*. They're typically very small and, let's just say, homey. A wooden post with a rag, can or bag atop it, planted vertically outside of a shack or hut, signals that you'll find a *t'alla bet* inside.

But sometimes (if rarely) you'll discover a fancier place that makes it. Selo Craft Tella, in the Ethiopian capital city of Addis Ababa, makes an organic *t'alla* and sells it in a convivial brew pub atmosphere.

Selo Craft Tella varities: honey-infused, wheat, corn

Founded in 2020, Selo moved to a spacious new location in 2023. The pub makes or has made at least six varieties of *t'alla*, each with a name: Mebreq, made with wheat; Somsoma, made with barley; Andenet, a multigrain variety; Fundisha, made with corn; Welele, a honey-infused variety, hence *firundus*; and Mestefaqir, made with millet. They all can become *firundus* upon request by adding a touch of honey. The offerings have evolved, and Surafel Solomon described Selo's initial six varieties a March 2021 article in the English-language Ethiopian magazine Linkup (page 25).

The company and its pub have a robust social media presence, with Instagram, TikTok and Facebook pages that feature lots of pictures and videos. They offer a menu of tasty dishes to go along with their *t'alla*, some of them Ethiopian (meat and vegetarian), some of them not (like a black bean burger).

Menkir found his way to the place in November, and he had a revelatory experience.

Ethiopians perform a ceremony for serving coffee, and it seems that Selo has made something of a ceremony out of serving its *t'alla*.

"They did a great job with the presentation and visual," Menkir says. "The *t'alla* is brought in plastic jugs before it's poured into the smoked/fumigated *masero* and served in tin cups. *Masero* is a word that I had almost forgotten: It's a terracotta vessel smaller than a *gembo*. They burn a few olive-wood chips and then put out the fire to capture the smoke quickly, flip the *masero* upside down over the smoke to trap it, then put a lid on it and bring it to your table. They open the lid and pour the *t'alla* into the *masero* from a jug, thus displacing the trapped smoke." [Here's a video of what that looks like.]

To get the *t'alla* from the *masero* into the cup, Menkir says, "you need two hands. You lift the *masero* with the two 'ears' and pour the *t'alla* into the tin cups. The tin cups are reminiscent of what the Forty-Niners used during the gold rush."

At Selo Craft Tella in Addis Ababa: pouring the *t'alla* into a *masero* smoked with olive wood, and *aba choma*, the broad bean meal that accompanied it.

Their *t'alla* came with a side dish that Selo calls *aba choma*, large boiled beans sprinkled with chopped jalapeno peppers, onions and a little *awaze* (a spicy *berbere* sauce) that "had a nice kick and went very well with the *t'alla*," Menkir says. He's never had a dish like that, and it seems to be a unique Selo creation, one of numerous side dishes that you can order with its *t'alla*. He also had a more familiar beef dish, *chiqina tibs*, along with it.

"We tasted five different *t'alla* renditions before deciding on two of them: wheat and barley," Menkir says. "The other three were corn, mixed grains and *firundus*, the honey-laced *t'alla*. Don't tell anyone, but this *firundus* was extraordinary, and it almost made me change my stubborn stand on the matter. They have managed a perfect balance between *t'alla* and the honey sweetness. Our server told me that *firundus* is only prepared at the time of a customer order, where the *t'alla* is sweetened with the honey. It can't be made in advance precisely because adding the honey will activate new fermentation."

Of course, the yin and yang of *firundus* is all a matter of taste, and tastes change. Ethiopians, both at home and abroad, often gravitate toward foreign-made beers, perhaps as a status symbol. In the countryside, where people don't have access to bottled beer made by breweries, *t'alla* still reigns. But those revelers are some of the poorest people in the country, and their meager marketplace can't compare to what professional breweries earn.

James McCann, perhaps the world's foremost scholar of Ethiopian food, has enjoyed *t'alla* for more than half a century. Now an emeritus professor at Boston University in Cambridge, he's spent a lot of time in Ethiopia over the years conducing his research, and he cherishes the cuisine and its culture. His 2009 book, *Stirring the Pot*, explores several African cuisines and has two chapters on Ethiopia.

"I love *t'alla*," he tells me. "My first experience was in Addis in 1973 when I was served it in my Amharic teacher's house. As I wrote then to my family: *T'alla* tastes and looks like a Coke gone flat that someone had put a cigarette butt in it! When I was back for malaria field work in a rural area in 2005, I bought rounds of local *t'alla* for my group. Four rounds in Gojjam for about 20 people cost me 35 Ethiopian birrs, pre-inflation – then about $7. The *t'alla* was lovely. But that *t'alla* and everywhere else I visited used maize and not other grains. [A friend] who [recently] lived and processed food in [Ethiopia] confirmed the same. Things are changing rapidly."

That's akin to what Menkir fears for *t'alla* in Ethiopia, and it's unlikely that things will return to how they were in his youth half a century ago.

"With modern breweries all over the place," Menkir admits, "*t'alla* has an uphill battle for its survival. Everyday Ethiopians know all the steps and ingredients to go through. They brew a big batch for a special occasion and folks drink it until it's gone, before it turns astringent. So it needs to borrow processing and ingredient efficiencies from brewing science to survive, and a price increase to catch up with *t'ej*. My view."

And one worth considering.

VI. The *T'alla* Tales Continue

I published this story on Dec. 9, 2023, but as promised above, our *t'alla* experimentation will continue. So in this chapter, which will grow with time, I'll added some dated details of what came after the story you've just read. I hope you'll return now and then to see what's new.

Dec. 20, 2023. When Menkir made his first batches of *nech t'alla* in May and June, he wanted to test their shelf life after six months. He now has his results:

"Both passed, no off flavors or any astringency," he reports. "The second batch had some teff *kita* that produced quite a bit of effervescence. That has now subsided quite a bit, but the *t'alla* still had small bubbles, which made it rather refreshing, with a bit of a mimosa-like structure. My conclusion: Following modern home brewing protocols, a shelf-stable traditional t'alla, good for a minimum of six months, can be made at home."

That's the good news. The less-good news is that Menkir can't find any *yalekelet t'alla* mix anywhere in the bay area of northern California. He even spoke with NTS Enterprises in Oakland, the first company in the U.S. to import Ethiopian spices, launched by two Ethio-Americans in 1984. One of the owners, Menkir tells me, "had heard of it but was certain that it's not in any of the Ethiopian markets in the bay."

And so, he says, Mohamed will have to go to the mountain: Menkir plans to make his own *yalekelet* mix, enough for a 10-liter batch. He made *kita* in Addis, and he'll mix the *kita* and the other ingredients together all at once. He even plans to use wild yeast – that is, natural

spontaneous fermentation – although he "may cheat a little and add a pinch of yeast nutrient."

We'll keep you posted.

Dec. 26, 2023. Using my dependable *yalekelet t'alla* powder blend, I modified my brewing method to make my first batch since posting *A Tale of Two T'allas*, and it was my best one yet – but still not nearly good enough.

In the past, I had measured the grains into a plastic container and then filled it with water. But this time, I only added enough water to create a muddy-looking mash at the bottom. That's how they do it in Ethiopia. (Here's what it looks like in large batches.) The plastic container noticeably swelled after four days, so I opened the lid to release some pressure, and it emitted a robust and heartening hiss. In the following days, I saw more bubbling, and the container swelled again. Fearful of letting too much pressure build up, I opened and closed it quickly, just a notch, at least once a day – always to the sound of another aggressive hiss.

Then, after nine days of fermentation – it seemed to be going well, so I allowed it to ferment a little longer than usual – I filled the rest of the container with water and let the rustled grains rest for 24 hours before straining and bottling.

The result: Same taste as always for the *yalekelet* mix, and despite the hissing, still not a high enough alcohol content on my buzzometer – I'd say a solid 3%. I paired a bottle with a chicken *tikka* dish using a spice blend from an Indian market. The two went well together, but after drinking the *t'alla,* I wasn't as ፍጩሰ (*ye'chabasa* – that is, tipsy) as I'd hoped to be.

For my next batch, I'll add some Firmaid K yeast nutrient to the mix to see if that can stoke fermentation and get the yeast converting more of the grain carbohydrates to alcohol – I'm shooting for 5%, which Menkir achieved.

And as a side note: A few days ago, I spiked a glass of *t'alla* with half a shot of *areqe,* a traditional Ethiopian grain alcohol (*not* homemade). It was great! The *areqe* added a buzz to the grainy flavor of the *t'alla* without overwhelming it. So I'll certainly do that again if I can't get my *t'alla* to have more of a kick.

Four *t'alla* mixes. 1. Hand-mixed in Ethiopia. 2. Packaged in Ethiopia. 3. Packaged in Ethiopia. 4. Hand-mixed in the U.S.

Epilogue: What's In a Spelling?

Search around the internet and you'll find numerous ways to write, in English, this traditional Ethiopian beer: Is it *t'alla* or *talla* or *t'ella* or *tella* or *tela* or – well, that may be it, although when it comes to transliterating Amharic fidels into English letters, you never really know.

Here's how the word looks in Amharic: ጠላ. The first letter is an aspirated T, spoken with the tongue on the roof of the mouth to give a little bit of a spitting sound when you say it. The second letter is an L.

The Ethiopic writing system is an alphabyllabary, which means that every letter represents a consonant and a vowel together. In the lingo of linguistics, this is called an abugida, not an alphabet. The language has seven vowel sounds, so each

In Ethiopia, Menkir holds a decorated *ensera*, filled with *t'alla* and sealed with an upside down *folé*, a traditional drinking cup made from a dried gourd. Then, he enjoys a cup of *t'alla* from the *folé*. A family friend made the *t'alla* at her home and shared it with Menkir. On the right, inset at the top, is a closeup of the *folé* filled with *t'alla*.

consonant has seven forms, or fidels, with each fidel representing that consonant and its vowel.

The second letter in the word is indisputably the fidel that we transliterate into English as L-A. That's why all spellings of *t'alla* end with L-A. But as you can see, there's only one ላ in the word ጠላ. So why do some spellings have that double L? Good question. There's just no reason for it, and yet, that's almost always how you'll see it written, regardless of what vowel comes first. Says Menkir: "Spelling in Ethiopia is freeform, left to the beholder."

As for that first vowel, here's where it gets tricky. The aspirated T fidel ጠ in the word is the form with the first Amharic vowel, which sounds somewhere between "eh" and "uh." On some charts of the Ethiopic alphabet – from the Library of Congress, for example, or the language website Omniglot – you'll see the fidel ጠ written as a T-A, and on others,

you'll see T-E. Or you may see the vowel represented as ä, the phonetic symbol for that vowel sound.

And here's another weird complication. The drink is called ሰዋ in Tigrinya, the language of northern Ethiopia, and it's always spelled *suwa* in English. But that ሰ S fidel at the beginning has the same vowel as the ጠ T fidel for *t'alla.* Why, then, does ሰዋ almost always begin S-U and not S-A or S-E?

Don't ask me. Even *farsoo,* the name in Afaan Oromo, is something written *farso*.

As for the apostrophe: That represents the aspirated Amharic T, as opposed to the other Amharic T that's not aspirated. Not that anyone who doesn't speak Amharic would know that. And by the way, as noted earlier, the word ጠላ *t'alla* as a noun means traditional homemade beer, but the identical word used as a verb meant "to hate."

So how *do* we write the name of this Ethiopian beer in English? To my eye and ear, *t'alla* sounds a *little* more like the Amharic pronunciation. Writing *t'ella* invites people to pronounce it TELL-A, which isn't how it should sound. But you'll usually see *tella,* not *talla* or *t'alla.* And, sometimes, *tela.*

So in the end, I prefer *t'alla* – both to represent the aspirated T, and to capture the sound of the word in Amharic – and Menkir perfers *tella*. I wonder if there's [a song in that](#).

	hoy		läwe		ḥäwt		may		śäwt		rə's		sat		š		qaf		qaf	
ሀ	hä	ለ	lä	ሐ	ḥä	መ	mä	ሠ	śä	ረ	rä	ሰ	sä	ሸ	šä	ቀ	qä	ቈ	quä	
ሁ	hu	ሉ	lu	ሑ	ḥu	መ	mu	ሡ	śu	ሩ	ru	ሱ	su	ሹ	šu	ቁ	qu			
ሂ	hi	ሊ	li	ሒ	ḥi	ሚ	mi	ሢ	śi	ሪ	ri	ሲ	si	ሺ	ši	ቂ	qi	ቍ	qui	
ሃ	ha	ላ	la	ሓ	ḥa	ማ	ma	ሣ	śa	ራ	ra	ሳ	sa	ሻ	ša	ቃ	qa	ቋ	qua	
ሄ	he	ሌ	le	ሔ	ḥe	ሜ	me	ሤ	śe	ሬ	re	ሴ	se	ሼ	še	ቄ	qe	ቌ	que	
ህ	hə/ø	ል	lə/ø	ሕ	ḥə/ø	ም	mə/ø	ሥ	śə/ø	ር	rə/ø	ስ	sə/ø	ሽ	šə/ø	ቅ	qə/ø	ቍ	quə	
ሆ	ho	ሎ	lo	ሖ	ḥo	ሞ	mo	ሦ	śo	ሮ	ro	ሶ	so	ሾ	šo	ቆ	qo			

	bet		täwe		č		ḫärm		nähas		ñ		'älf		kaf	
በ	bä	ተ	tä	ቸ	čä	ኀ	ḫä	ኈ	ḫuä	ነ	nä	ኘ	ñä	አ	ʾä	ከ	kä	ኰ	kuä
ቡ	bu	ቱ	tu	ቹ	ču	ኁ	ḫu			ኑ	nu	ኙ	ñu	ኡ	ʾu	ኩ	ku		
ቢ	bi	ቲ	ti	ቺ	či	ኂ	ḫi	ኲ	ḫui	ኒ	ni	ኚ	ñi	ኢ	ʾi	ኪ	ki	ኲ	kui
ባ	ba	ታ	ta	ቻ	ča	ኃ	ḫa	ኋ	ḫua	ና	na	ኛ	ña	ኣ	ʾa	ካ	ka	ኳ	kua
ቤ	be	ቴ	te	ቼ	če	ኄ	ḫe	ኌ	ḫue	ኔ	ne	ኜ	ñe	ኤ	ʾe	ኬ	ke	ኴ	kue
ብ	bə/ø	ት	tə/ø	ች	čə/ø	ኅ	ḫə/ø	ኍ	ḫua	ን	nə/ø	ኝ	ñə/ø	እ	ʾə/ø	ክ	kə/ø	ኵ	kua
ቦ	bo	ቶ	to	ቾ	čo	ኆ	ḫo			ኖ	no	ኞ	ño	ኦ	ʾo	ኮ	ko		

This is about 60% of the full Ethiopic alphabet. It's complicated.

Appendix A: Regional *T'alla* Recipes

Just as American recipes can vary slightly from region to region – think of New England and Manhattan clam chowder, or the hoagie, sub, grinder or hero genus of sandwiches – so can *t'alla* recipes. The many cultures of Ethiopia often have their own recipes and secret ingredients.

The 1980 book *Ethiopian Traditional Recipes*, published by the Ethiopian Nutrition Institute, has *eight* different recipes, each one a little distinct from the other, and each from a region of the country, sometimes with its own name drawn from local languages. Numerous other cookbooks offer variations as well. Here are some of them.

♦ The complex Gojam *t'alla* requires barley, corn, wheat, millet and teff flour, germinated wheat and barley flour, and ground gesho powder.

♦ For spicy Gurage *t'alla*, called *shamit*, it's barley or emmer wheat flour, germinated barley flour, toasted barley flour, *mitmita* (a blazing hot pepper powder), cardamom, coriander and bishop weed – but apparently no gesho.

♦ Shoa *t'alla* used germinated wheat, toasted barley, teff flour, and gesho sticks and powder.

♦ In the northern Tigray region, a variety called *dukka* demands millet and teff flour, germinated barley flour and ground gesho. Also from Tigray, *tserai* uses ground gesho, millet and teff flour, germinated barley flour and toasted barley flour.

♦ The simpler Begemdir variety, *korefe*, requires teff, millet and barley flour, gesho sticks and powder, and germinated barley flour.

♦ The Gamo culture makes *farso* with wheat, barley, maize, sorghum and finger millet, then they spice it up with garlic, ginger and *berbere* (a milder but still piquant pepper powder). This recipe comes from John Arthur, a scholar who writes about Gamo culture.

♦ *The Empress Menen School Cookbook*, from 1948, recommends gesho stick and leaves, germinated wheat, roasted barley or wheat, and teff or barley bread, which surely means *kita*. The book even instructs how to make the *bikil* and *enkuro*.

♦ The National Literacy Campaign Organization published the *Ethiopian American Cook Book* in 1964, with a mix of homespun recipes from both countries. It seems to adapt Empress Menen's recipe: gesho stick and leaves, germinated wheat, roasted barley or wheat, and teff, barley or wheat meal (possibly meaning *kita*). This book also features the preparation of *bikil* and *enkuro*.

♦ *Merisa* is a beer made in Sudan with dates, millet and sorghum, and the national cookbook has an Ethiopian variety made with toasted barley flour, millet, red sorghum, teff, germinated wheat flour, and gesho sticks and powder.

Appendix B: Some Additional Reading & Viewing

Here are some videos, papers, theses and dissertations about *t'alla* done by scientists, scholars and chefs. I'll add more to this as I find them.

♦ In this three-part video series, spoken in Amharic, an Ethiopian woman shows the many steps that it takes to make *t'alla*, with closeup images of the process. For readers who don't understand Amharic, the videos show steps that match the descriptions above. Part 1. Part 2. Part 3.

♦ Uniqueness of Ethiopian Traditional Alcoholic Beverage of Plant Origin, *T'alla*,by Mooha Lee, *et. al.*

♦ Fermentation Dynamics of Ethiopian Traditional Beer by Asamnu Berhanu.

♦ The Microbiology of *T'alla* Fermentation by Samuel Sahile

♦ Production of *T'alla* from Barley by Aytenew Getaye *et. al.*

♦ Isolating the Dominant Yeast in *T'alla* and *Tej* by Haimanot Abebe Safaye

♦ The Science of *T'alla* Production by Berhe Tekle Adhanom