

Zerabruk Abay & Tsige Meshesha
Nile Grocery & Cafe
Charlotte, North Carolina

Date: April 12, 2017
Location: Nile Grocery & Cafe, Charlotte, North Carolina
Interviewer: Keia Mastrianni
Transcription: Technitype Transcription
Length: Forty-eight minutes
Project: Charlotte's Central Avenue Corridor

[INTERVIEW BEGINS AT 00:00:01]

Keia Mastrianni: OK. Today is Wednesday, April 12th 2017. My name is Keia Mastrianni. Recording oral history project at Nile Grocery. For the Central Avenue Corridor Project in Charlotte, North Carolina. Let's get started. Will you tell me your name and where we're at?

[00:00:30]

Zerabruk Abay: My name is, Zerabruk Abay. I'm originally from Ethiopia. My wife and, Tsige and I emigrated to the United States in 1999. Previously we'd been living in Germany as refugees and before that I was a student in the former Soviet Union. I officially I am, by profession I am a textile engineer, I studied textile engineering, both at home in Ethiopia and design in the former Soviet Union. After we immigrated to the United States, in 1999, we settled in Charlotte, in North Carolina. Hoping that we will have some kind of job opportunity in the textile industry, because by then in Charlotte, and Carolina was known for its textile industry. But as we came to Charlotte, the textile industry was outsourced at all, gone. So, for some time we were thinking what we can do next, just to raise our kids here. So, after certain time we decided why not we try Ethiopian restaurant, or Ethiopian grocery, because at that time there was, there were not that much, a large number of Ethiopians in Charlotte. And, there wasn't any, restaurant or grocery in Charlotte, so we decided to open the first grocery and then, restaurant, now that's, we are here for the last twelve years.

[00:02:46]

Keia Mastrianni: Wow. I didn't realize that you had lived so many places abroad. What was

the attraction of the United States after having been in Germany and the Soviet Union?

[00:02:58]

Zerabruk Abay: Well, as you know, the United States is the best place for any immigrant. Just, you cannot compare United States to the other places to live as a refugee, have freedom here when you, where you can easily integrate into the society. You can have good future for your kids. So, there isn't any, you not compare other countries, to live when, you know, it comes to living as a refugee. So, we were very glad to immigrate to the United States, to raise our kids here. Now we have two kids. One is now in college, he is studying music education. We hope he will have a bright future. And then the little one, he's now in ninth grade, and, he's just trying, he's going to college. I hope he goes to college. So, this is a very nice country, and we are very proud to be American citizens.

[00:04:03]

Keia Mastrianni: And were your children born in the United States?

[00:04:06]

Zerabruk Abay: One born in Germany, in Munich. And the little boy, Christian, is born here in Charlotte.

[00:04:14]

Keia Mastrianni: What is your college aged kid's name? What is his name?

[00:04:18]

Zerabruk Abay: His name is Malawi.

[00:04:21]

Keia Mastrianni: Malawi and Christian.

[00:04:22]

Zerabruk Abay: Yeah.

[00:04:23]

Keia Mastrianni: Beautiful. And can you tell me some of the reasons why you left Ethiopia, in the first place? You were seeking--

[00:04:34]

Zerabruk Abay: Yeah, you know, there was conflicts in—there was bad history in our country in the last, almost many years, the there was a bad regime, known as the brutal Marxist regime. So many young Ethiopians fled the country, because of persecution, because of lack of human rights, so many emigrated from Ethiopia here, because of political reasons. Our case is a little different, of course. We emigrated under the diversity lottery visa. So, we, just we came to the United States to have a better life [*mic noise*], or a better opportunity.

[00:05:25]

Keia Mastrianni: Right. So, before things got crazy there you, you kind of took the opportunity

on the diversity lottery visa.

[00:05:30]

Zerabruk Abay: Yeah.

[00:05:33]

Keia Mastrianni: Okay. Wonderful. And so tell me about. You, found a good community of Ethiopians in Charlotte when you got here? So, besides researching the textile industry, did you know that there was a community of Ethiopian people before you got here?

[00:05:56]

Zerabruk Abay: Yes. We didn't know that much many people from Ethiopia here. We knew certain families who are, were settled here before we, we came back. Surprisingly, when we came here, there was, even though it, there, they were few in number there was very strong Ethiopian community here. Very friendly, they are the one who help us to learn more about the city and there was actually one Ethiopian small church at the time, an Orthodox church. And it was very easy for us to adapt because of the closeness of the community. So we were very happy that we through the years, now we are just living like brothers and sisters with those people, who helped us adapt.

[00:06:56]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure. And did you find similar communities when you were living abroad elsewhere too?

[00:07:03]

Zerabruk Abay: No. Not like this, when we're, well, when I was in the former Soviet Union, just we were students, so we have, so there was a, there was not that much big community. In Germany? It, was there was situation but it's not like this. You cannot compare refugee life in Germany, with the United States. So, it was, here it was it's like your home here. It's like, we don't feel that we are refugees. We never feel that we are refugees, we are immigrants into the United States.

[00:07:39]

Keia Mastrianni: Beautiful. And, tell me about Nile Grocery. When you decided you wanted to open this place, what was your thinking behind it.

[00:07:50]

Zerabruk Abay: Yeah, just we decided, because before we came here we were in for a couple of months we were in [Washington] D.C. area because the people who were, who received us for when we when we arrived from Germany, they were in D.C., so, we did see some Ethiopian restaurants and groceries in D.C. area, so, based on that assumption we—just, we thought maybe in the future the number of Ethiopians will increase so there will be a need of Ethiopian grocery and restaurant in Charlotte also. We see people who are coming from different states to Charlotte, so we decided to open we are the first to open an Ethiopian grocery here. And then after [*inaudible*] years we add the restaurant business. So, now we are twelve years in this business.

[00:09:01]

Keia Mastrianni: Who does the cooking?

[00:09:03]

Zerabruk Abay: Well, it's Ethiopian traditional cooking belongs to the woman, so

[laughs]. Yeah. I try to but I help my wife in in every kind of job. But mostly, this is my wife's part of the job, you know?

[00:09:24]

Keia Mastrianni: Can we hear from you? *[Addressing Tsige Meshesha, Mr. Abay's wife.]* Can you tell me who you are and what you do here at Nile Grocery?

[00:09:31]

Tsige Meshesha: Yeah. My name is Tsige *[Meshesha]*. I am the one to cook everything here in the kitchen. I bake the *injera*, so—everything is in the kitchen, I do for myself.

[00:09:48]

Keia Mastrianni: Beautiful. And you've always cooked? You've always done good Ethiopian foods?

[00:09:55]

Tsige Meshesha: Yes. *[Laughs]* Yes.

[00:09:57]

Keia Mastrianni: Where did you learn?

[00:09:58]

Tsigie Meshesha: That's back home. When we grown up, everybody's cook at home. So, I have that is like my hobby. I like to cook all the time when I stay at home even. I do like that. So, when I come here, it is easy for me to cook. Yeah.

[00:10:20]

Keia Mastrianni: Tell me, did you have a big family, growing up? Or a small family?

[00:10:26]

Tsigie Meshesha: Where?

[00:10:28]

Keia Mastrianni: In Ethiopia, did you have many brothers and sisters?

[00:10:31]

Tsigie Meshesha: Oh, yeah. I have—one sister, so, the restaurant is my sister, Kate's, in Ethiopia. Yes. And my dad is now—eighty-seven years old. But my mom is, she pass away when she was twenty-seven years old.

[00:10:56]

Keia Mastrianni: Can you tell me about what kind of dishes, what kind of food can people find here?

[00:11:03]

Tsigie Meshesha: The most people is they like the vegetarian combo the best. And even *kitfo*. *Kitfo* is a grinded beef and with our traditional the chili powder, *berbere*. We bring everything is back home. So, the seasonings, they like it, so they like veggie (combo??/*genfo*?), *teffs*, and the *kitfo*.

[00:11:32]

Keia Mastrianni: When I'm here, I have wonderful coffee, and I was wondering if you would talk to me about the coffee ceremony here. It was—

[00:11:39]

Tsigie Meshesha: Yeah. Ethiopian tradition is coffee ceremony when people they order me, we do coffee ceremony, this coffee is back home, so, we do coffee ceremony a lot of people they like it, that coffee ceremony.

[00:11:56]

Keia Mastrianni: And that's the way you do it back home? Too?

[00:11:58]

Tsige Meshesha: Yeah, every day. Back home is every day. We do every day in the morning, sometimes is people when they come back from work, family, I mean, when they come back from work, oh, we are, this, sit down and we do coffee, so everybody, they enjoy that one.

[00:12:20]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah.

[00:12:21]

Tsige Meshesha: Yeah.

[00:12:22]

Keia Mastrianni: And, are you using different kind of coffee beans, green coffee beans, maybe? Or—

[00:12:27]

Tsige Meshesha: Yeah. That is green coffee. So, we roast it and we grind it. Yeah. We use that one.

[00:12:36]

Keia Mastrianni: Beautiful.

[00:12:37]

Tsige Meshesha: Thank you.

[00:12:39]

Keia Mastrianni: Is there any particular meaning behind just the, the presentation of the coffee, or is just the way you do it?

[00:12:47]

Tsige Meshesha: No, because—like my family, or in Ethiopia, any family, when they, before they left to work, they bring coffee like breakfast. So, we cook actually three times, the coffee. The first round, and really strong. And the second round we cook is a little bit light, and the third one too. More light. So, they enjoy it. Like my people, they use like breakfast, if they have time even on the lunch or dinner, they do like that. So, that is like they drink like breakfast or snack, afternoon, yeah.

[00:13:35]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah, and, um, tell me too, about, what is the most important meal of the day in Ethiopia? Breakfast, lunch, dinner?

[00:13:47]

Tsige Meshesha: Hmm. Yeah, in the morning, is most of people in the morning when we drink coffee or small meal. At lunch and at dinner is the most, or is *injera*, we eat most of the time, is *injera*. With different kind of like, oh, we have traditional *doro wat*. The one I do, it

when you come here. So, we have different kinds of, for the fasting people, so all the time is we eat *injera*. Yeah. With our dinner actually we eat *injera*. Lunch and the dinner. Yeah.

[00:14:31]

Keia Mastrianni: And can you describe what *injera* is to somebody who might not know?

[00:14:36]

Tsige Meshesha: Yeah. *Injera* is one of the bread we...we [*inaudible*] it with the *teff* flour. *Teff* means the gluten free. So, in my country only, we bake only the *teff*. Not, but here, in America, the water or the [*inaudible*] is not coming, only the *teff* flour. It's not coming like that, so. We add a little bit barley into self-rising flour, so, that means the spongy bread. In Ethiopia is really cultural food. That's why bake the here, we sell a lot in this grocery store. Yeah, that is *injera*.

[00:15:25]

Keia Mastrianni: And you also serve some other breads—here—

[00:15:29]

Tsige Meshesha: That is *ambasha*. That is like the breakfast—

[00:15:33]

Zerabruk Abay: Tea bread.

[00:15:34]

Tsige Meshesha: Yeah, tea bread, for coffee ceremony, we use that one. *Ambasha*.

[00:15:41]

Keia Mastrianni: And what is that made of?

[00:15:44]

Tsige Meshesha: That is the—whole wheat, or wheat flour and with the yeast.

[00:15:51]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah.

[00:15:52]

Tsige Meshesha: Yeah. With the yeast, some people, they use a little of sugar, or some people they didn't use only salt and the yeast and the wheat flour. Yeah.

[00:16:04]

Keia Mastrianni: And before you opened up the grocery, I mean the restaurant side, were when did you make the decision to say, you know, “Tsige, I'd like you to cook for the restaurant.” When did that happen? I mean—

[00:16:20]

Tsige Meshesha: Though—

[00:16:22]

Zerabruk Abay: Well, when we [*coughs*], initially, when we opened the grocery, it was in our plan, to add the restaurant business too. But there—we didn't know that much about the requirements of the city. [*Laughs*] So, we pass on many terrible things, because of the— because we are from another country and we were not integrated well. So, and it, because we were the first to open Ethiopian restaurant, there was not any way for us to learn from other Ethiopians about these things. So when we did that, it was very—so it took for us well, we opened the grocery in 2005 and— it took for us four years, or five years to open the, to add the, the restaurant, [*clears throat*], because it, this was not easy in terms of finance, it was not easy in terms of many things too. And we did a lot of wrong things just with signing the contracts, with the contractors, who—

[00:17:36]

Tsige Meshesha: Planners?

[00:17:37]

Zerabruk Abay: Planners. And other things and some of them were simple cheaters. You know, so, when finally, with God's help, with the help of our community, we managed to finish [*laughs*] the project, so—

[00:17:52]

Keia Mastrianni: So your community helped you, um—

[00:17:53]

Zerabruk Abay: Yeah, in so many ways, yeah.

[00:17:56]

Keia Mastrianni: Does, the Ethiopian community, I find this is a hallmark of a lot of immigrant communities, they will get together with their community, and everybody puts a little bit of money in to help one person, say, open a business, or purchase a certain amount of equipment, I know Korean communities do it, Jamaican, island communities have done it. Do you get that support—

[00:18:22]

Zerabruk Abay: Eh, no.

[00:18:23]

Keia Mastrianni: From your community?

[00:18:24]

Zerabruk Abay: No, not, I meant support means, in terms of, for example, there are people who are, who are well educated and were integrated into the system, so, they—help us to integrate and to know more about the systems, so that we can solve our problems in certain, the help in such a way that our community that is they know more about this system, so they are all—they are always with us. They were they support us and they, so because of their help, we are in this

situation now.

[00:19:03]

Keia Mastrianni: I've heard many stories about, you know, immigrant-owned businesses especially, navigating health department, and permitting and all that process, have you been able to help other restaurants, or share that knowledge with other Ethiopian restaurants?

[00:19:23]

Zerabruk Abay: Yeah, some people come and ask us about these things, and we are very glad, we don't want them to have the same problem. Even some people, and one time one lady came from Virginia even to learn now how to cook Ethiopian bread. [*Laughs*] Some people, come from Charleston, from some places and they are very, very glad. We tell them not to repeat the same mistakes, to be very careful, in terms of this process, because it's not easy. And in Ethiopia just you build the kitchen and everything, so you are responsible, you open it, so you take only the license from the government, so people think like that, and so when they come here they face all these problems, so. We tell them, we share our experiences with people.

[00:20:17]

Keia Mastrianni: That's great. So, the people who come to learn to make the bread, they're Ethiopian too, wanting to open their own businesses, like the woman from Virginia was?

[00:20:24]

Zerabruk Abay: Yeah, yeah. Even for example, for Ethiopians it's not— sometimes it's not easy

to bake the *injera*. I don't know what the chemistry [*laughs*]. So many just, so many women are just frustrated to get the bread so that they—they buy the *injera*, they don't bake at home. So, they ask for help my wife for that matter.

[00:20:49]

Keia Mastrianni: Ah! So, you're the *injera* expert?!

[00:20:53]

Zerabruk Abay: Yeah.

[00:20:54]

Keia Mastrianni: Teach everybody.

[00:20:55]

Tsige Meshesha: Yeah.

[00:20:56]

Keia Mastrianni: [*Laughs*] Tell me what it's been like to build a place for your community. I mean, it's been here for, you know, over ten years now, so, how has that been to see the response to Ethiopians and then finding a place where they can find Ethiopian things?

[00:21:14]

Zerabruk Abay: Yeah, they— yeah, this is a, like a community service, it's not only a business. But it is a place for Ethiopians to come, sit down, to have Ethiopian food, to have Ethiopian coffee, to have conversation. You know, we are like a close society, community, communal life. The coffee ceremony, it's not like coffee drinking, it's like social therapy. It is a—it's more than drinking the coffee. So, it's very important for them to come here, to sit down, to talk to the other. So, after this hard work, you know, everybody just works, some of them work two or two jobs—yeah, it's very important for the community, restaurant and the grocery supply. We are 13—14,000 kilometers away from our home, so it's not easy to get all these seasonings, snacks, and the rest. Just like home, so, it's is a--big contribution to the society too. So, we are growing as a community now. We have this restaurant community, and we have a couple of churches too, so we are well-integrated into the system now. And it keeps on growing, so. We are happy. We are happy.

[00:22:44]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah, and, and Charlotte seems to be such a welcoming place for refugees and immigrant communities.

[00:22:52]

Zerabruk Abay: Yes. Mm-hmm. Yeah. Charlotte is very good for this, if you come to work hard, to raise your kids, there is a good school system, and the, the, you can afford buying a house, or, in many ways, it is a nice place to raise to have, to have good life here.

[00:23:14]

Keia Mastrianni: Talk to me about non-Ethiopians who've come in here, how has that been to be able to introduce people to your culture, you know, what is important for you to, what, what is the message that is important for you to get across when you meet people and share your food and culture with them.

[00:23:31]

Zerabruk Abay: Yeah, yeah. Many people are now just coming here and introduce themselves to the Ethiopian food menu, we are very glad when we see other people from other cultures than our Ethiopians, because just it it's not only a business that we see, Ethiopian food is just becoming global now. Wherever you go it is, there are Ethiopian groceries and Ethiopians. So, it's a—we see it like Ethiopian contribution to the world, and it makes you happy. So yeah, we, if they never tasted Ethiopian food, we bring it some plates and we show them how to—to a piece bread, and how to, even, because there are, it, if it is the first time to taste Ethiopian food they, they start from scratch, so. We tell them about the food, we show them practically how to eat with the fingers. And it [*mic noise*] is just we tell them just about Ethiopia some initial things, so. Yeah, we do that, we welcome, and they, always they appreciate us, they write reviews on Google, and Yelp good about our restaurant, about our hospitality, and that— it makes us happy too.

[00:24:57]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah. I know you had a different career before you came here, and now, Tsige, were you always cooking, or, did you have a different career before you came? To open

Nile Grocery?

[00:25:14]

Tsige Meshesha: Yes, in Ethiopia, yes, I work in office. I am accountant, actually I finish with accounting, so I have, one office I am accountant. So, when I come here, to raise my kids, so, I don't have that time, another opportunity, so, actually, I start to bake the *injera* at home. I sell a lot of *injera*. And when I, when he born, Christian, I don't want to keep daycare or something, I want raise by myself, because we have, my, the oldest son, he have asthma, so. Yes, we suffered a lot for him, so, I never bring my kids to babysitter, or daycare, so I decide to raise in my home. So, I baked *injera* at home and I put on the stores. And some people, they buy from home. Because of that, so I decide, first I decide when I bake this, at home is at this apartment, so is a lot of *injera* in every day, is when I mold something when I soak so I have to rent some like this place to bake the *injera* for my kids. They don't have any problem when I baked it here. So, because of that, we decide and we rent this home. This, after that the health department is, he told us to start from scratch. But I can't bake *injera*, but for the food. So, I baked here all the time, and I sell the *injera*, just because of the *injera* is, we pay the rent, everything. At that time is, we sell a lot of *injera*. It's not the, now is a lot of competition, but at that time, is maybe two, three people. We sell a lot of *injera*. So, I bake day and night, so really more than eighteen hours a day. Yeah. So—before is I work at office, but when I come here, I have my hobby to cook at home, all the time, so.

[00:27:41]

Keia Mastrianni: Wow.

[00:27:41]

Zerabruk Abay: Mm.

[00:27:42]

Tsige Meshesha: From that is coming here.

[00:27:45]

Keia Mastrianni: And how is that, you know, I, like to bake on the side, and, you know, to, you know, have a job like accounting, and then to bake, and, it must have been a nice change, must have been relaxing for a bit. I mean, did you just find that you enjoyed that more, or—?

[00:28:01]

Tsige Meshesha: Yeah, I enjoy it, to cook. Even back home, after I work, um, when I come from office back home, all the days I cook it, I clean it, so I like it, and I enjoy it, so. Because of that, when I come here, is nothing different for me. I enjoy it with my kids, because, my kids is with me, I don't give for babysitters something, or they, they have asthma, I treat them, so. Because of my son, I start to bake the *injera*. [*inaudible*], Christian, when I born him, when he born here. Because of that, I start at home, to bake the *injera*.

[00:28:43]

Keia Mastrianni: That is— it's so funny to think of, just bread as so much more than bread. Right?

[00:28:52]

Tsige Meshesha: Yeah.

[00:28:53]

Keia Mastrianni: So you gave this to your community, to people who wanted it, it has some sustenance, and it provided a platform for you guys to grow your business.

[00:29:02]

Zerabruk Abay: Yeah.

[00:29:04]

Tsige Meshesha: Yeah. A lot of people, they like my *injera* at that time, still. It's I do carefully, for diabetic people, the Lupus, something, I do carefully to help. I use a lot of *teff*, the *teff* is gluten free, so. At that time, is really popular and I sell a lot of *injera*, so I cover my rent, so. I do good that time. So that's why I want to open the restaurant, too. Yeah.

[00:29:39]

Keia Mastrianni: Tell me the process of baking *injera*. Tell me how can you walk me through the process of it?

[00:29:45]

Tsige Meshesha: Ooooh—

[00:29:48]

Keia Mastrianni: [*Laughs*] A little bit?

[00:29:49]

Tsige Meshesha: Yeah, we duff it [*phone rings*] the flour, teff flour [*phone rings*] three days, it depend of the weather. When is winter, is like four days [*phone rings*] or more. When summer is two days. So, after that, we, [*phone rings*] we mix it with—. We, we duff the *teff* with barley, so. [*Phone rings*] After two day, is we mix it a little of self-rising flour [*phone rings*], and process—[*speaks to someone in distance*]. We have teff flour, from back home, with duff it with a little bit yeast. [*Cell phone starts ringing*]

[00:30:46]

Keia Mastrianni: Okay. [*Recording is paused*]. Talk to me about how we *injera*.

[00:30:50]

Tsige Meshesha: Yeah. We, we duff it with *teff*, the *teff* is back home flour, so with yeast like, with the winter, winter is three, four days it takes the fermentation. And when summer is warm, is two days. So, after that, we mix it with a little bit the self-rising flour from U.S., every hour, so after the self-rising flour, with the first *teff* flour, mix it and then blend with the machine. And we stay like seven, eight hour, after that is we bake it. But sometimes is coming, sometimes it's

no coming. It's really hard to here, I don't know why.

[00:31:43]

Keia Mastrianni: To—to?

[00:31:45]

Tsige Meshesha: To bake, is coming, you know, normal *injera*, sometimes is coming the right one, but sometimes it's not coming. The same recipe, the same process, I don't know.

[00:31:56]

Keia Mastrianni: You know, any sort of, fermented food like that—the air, you know, it's—

[00:32:01]

Tsige Meshesha: Yeah.

[00:32:02]

Keia Mastrianni: the air—

[00:32:04]

Tsige Meshesha: This—

[00:32:04]

Keia Mastrianni:--and the humidity—

[00:32:05]

Zerabruk Abay: Yeah.

[00:32:05]

Tsige Meshesha: Yes.

[00:32:05]

Keia Mastrianni: You know, in the winter—

[00:32:06]

Tsige Meshesha: Yes.

[00:32:07]

Keia Mastrianni:--that cold weather makes it--

[00:32:08]

Tsige Meshesha: Yeah.

[00:32:10]

Keia Mastrianni:...slower to start. And, um...

[00:32:12]

Tsige Meshesha: Yeah, yeah.

[00:32:13]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah. But the more you work with it, the more you these kind of things, like you're literally working with a living thing.

[00:32:20]

Tsige Meshesha: Mm-hmm.

[00:32:20]

Keia Mastrianni: So then you start to understand—

[00:32:23]

Tsige Meshesha: Yeah, we do—

[00:32:24]

Keia Mastrianni: It's behavior—

[00:32:24]

Tsige Meshesha: Yeah, we do I do three, four kind. When the one way is not working, the second one, I put the duff on the fridge when is really hot summer, some I put on the fridge, and when I mixed it, I bring the fridge very cold, duffed, and mix it. On the winter, I mean, on the

summer. On the winter is, I put on the hot, I put the half is heat. I open really hot and I put on the oven around to come in in the morning. Yeah.

[00:33:06]

Keia Mastrianni: It sounds like a lot of trial and error.

[00:33:10]

Tsige Meshesha: Yes.

[00:33:11]

Keia Mastrianni: And a lot of patience that you had to have—

[00:33:14]

Tsige Meshesha: Yes, it is!

[00:33:14]

Keia Mastrianni: -- to learn to—

[00:33:14]

Tsige Meshesha: That's why people they buy. And a lot of people, they didn't try to bake it. Because is a lot patience, and sometimes is coming, and sometimes is, it's not coming the same. So, they dump it, and they buy it.

[00:33:33]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure.

[00:33:33]

Tsige Meshesha: Yeah.

[00:33:34]

Keia Mastrianni: And you were calling the starter, you duff the flour in—?

[00:33:37]

Tsige Meshesha: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

[00:33:39]

Keia Mastrianni: --you were saying. What does that mean?

[00:33:40]

Tsige Meshesha: Duff means, when I mixed the flour and the yeast, we mix it with water, and we do it like, is coming with a stick, so that means is duff.

[00:33:57]

Keia Mastrianni: And I was looking at this, in the corner here. I was curious about what that is, and what it's used for.

[00:34:08]

Tsige Meshesha: That is, the name is *mesob*. So, in my country, people, we eat, we use like table. They sit down around and we put big plate, and family or friend or a special guest, when they come, it's like, for example, respect, we eat together on that.

[00:34:34]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah.

[00:34:34]

Tsige Meshesha: Yeah.

[00:34:35]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure.

[00:34:35]

Tsige Meshesha: Yeah, so.

[00:34:38]

Keia Mastrianni:--and they're usually made of what material?

[00:34:42]

Zerabruk Abay: Straw.

[00:34:43]

Keia Mastrianni: Straw?

[00:34:43]

Tsige Meshesha: Mm-hmm.

[00:34:44]

Keia Mastrianni: They're beautiful.

[00:34:45]

Tsige Meshesha: Yeah, is handmade.

[00:34:46]

Keia Mastrianni: Mm-hmm.

[00:34:46]

Tsige Meshesha: Yeah.

[00:34:48]

Keia Mastrianni: It's gorgeous.

[00:34:48]

Tsige Meshesha: Yeah.

[00:34:51]

Keia Mastrianni: Tell me a little bit about *doro wat*. What is on the plates when you—

[00:34:57]

Tsige Meshesha: Doro wat?

[00:34:58]

Keia Mastrianni: Mm-hmm.

[00:16:58]

Tsige Meshesha: Yeah. Doro wat means the chicken. The chicken or hen in back home or here. We buy it, and the whole chicken or only leg in America. So, yeah. A lot of process. It's not just when we bring it, we wash carefully with the lemon, with the salt, it takes a lot of time. After that we have the ready sauce, like *berbere*, onion. So, we mix it over there to cook. And after the cook is finishing, we use egg, and back home seasoning, everything, *butter*, we use back home. So, like, *corrirma*, a lot of garlic, ginger, so, lot of seasoning inside. That is *doro wat*, means chicken. Or hen.

[00:35:58]

Keia Mastrianni: Okay. Yeah, I, I just, I guess the display when you serve your food, it's kinda all laid out in a, in a beautiful—

[00:36:07]

Tsige Meshesha: Yeah, we put on the big plate. Last time when you come in, is we had the *doro wat*, with egg. As a *kitfo*, is with the *ayib*. *Ayib* means the cheese, homemade cheese. Yeah. And the cabbage, vegetables. And in one plate. That's why we use one with *mesob* even, we use like that with our culture.

[00:36:36]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah. And what do you want people to know about Ethiopian culture? Tell me about what makes you proud to be Ethiopian.

[00:36:46]

Tsige Meshesha: Yeah. Ethiopian culture is—the one in the people, they are wondering is about coffee ceremony, and because the coffee is, the coffee beans, the first coffee beans is from Ethiopia. The name of the place, the one they found it is Kaffa, and they give him the name is coffee. So, is popular anybody is going to come and roasted the ones, they smell it is everything. Is with the incense, and this big coffee ceremony, and even our culture with the traditional food, the one I tell you now is very good culture. People when they go back home, they try all these foods. But—they like it. That is traditional, and one of the good culture is like clothes. Clothes in Ethiopia, and the handmade what is the name of *shmana*?

[00:38:00]

Zerabruk Abay: Mm? Handmade. Handmade, woven.

[00:38:01]

Tsige Meshesha: Yeah. Because they use it with the hand and they do something, and it's very good design. You can really when people—one times when I was on UNC Charlotte, so from Charlotte, all the while, she wanted to explain to that clothes. So, weaving everything, they do handmade, is very good culture.

[00:38:30]

Zerabruk Abay: Yeah I—I want to add a few words.

[00:38:33]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure.

[00:38:35]

Zerabruk Abay: Yeah. Well—Ethiopia is one of the ancient countries. The word Ethiopia mentioned in Bible forty times, so we have a long history of government, a long history of culture, so Ethiopia survived before Christ and after Christ. It's so many things, and still exists as a free nation and it's a unique country in Africa. It's never been colonized Ethiopia is with its own alphabet. Ethiopian Orthodox Church is one of the oldest churches, one of the first Christians, you know. So, we have monasteries, fourteen, fifteen years, thous— fifteen-hundred years old. So, all these things are— makes Ethiopia one of the old and great nations, and there are many things that make, makes you proud—as an Ethiopian. One of them is, if you go to Ethiopia, one of the things you wonder is the hospitality of the people. And this is deeply rooted tradition. You don't feel like an outsider when you go to Ethiopia, and so everybody wants to

make your comfort, to give you some kind of [*inaudible*], so, that makes me very proud, so. When, even when we, people come here, we always, that tradition always works here, it's we— try to show people our hospitality, have to, it— it helps you in the business too. Yeah.

[00:40:26]

Keia Mastrianni: Did you ever envision, you know you had, like, a whole nother life as a textile engineer, and then to be the owner of you know, a small business now—how has that been for you, transitioning to that, and—?

[00:40:42]

Zerabruk Abay: Yeah, I never—business is not in my blood and—it's not I never think I will be in a, any kind of business, I'm always just tried to, to work something else. But you know, just you don't know what you face in life. Circumstances change you, so. Oh, well, I don't regret that we are [*laughs*] it is— it's okay for me, just work. So, it is just you raise your kids, you have, you live in a very peaceful, prosperous land, and you have opportunity. So you adapt it, you know?

[00:41:27]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah, I mean, it's an interesting, I think it's an interesting dichotomy to have, you know, you escape, or you leave one place for better opportunities. But there's a trade-off, right? You know, because the career that you had, it's difficult to integrate that, or find that, that position here. And I know that's the experience of many an immigrant, so it's a kind of double-edged thing that, that is part of your experience. You know?

[00:41:55]

Zerabruk Abay: Yeah, yeah, that's for sure, that when I was in Ethiopia I worked as a shift leader in a big factory, and then I went to the—former Soviet Union, I studied again textile, cotton weaving, textiles in general. If I go back, I work like in the factory in management. But—you know, just you I always just— think I'm blessed that I'm live here, in a peaceful land, in a and so, I always thanks God for what I have. This, I don't, I don't base my life on the past regret, or if I had this once, I had this once, so— it's the main thing is how you, thank God for what you have.

[00:42:53]

Keia Mastrianni: And, and you've created a community place, you know? That is comforting to people who are from Ethiopia, you know? And then, you're introducing people to, to new culture, who don't know Ethiopia. And so, it's a wonderful, it's a wonderful community place. Which is a beautiful thing, you know? Let me see what else. So, what do you hope people, [*cell phone rings*] what do you— is there anything that you'd like people to, to know about Nile Grocery, or just about you guys in general? Is there anything else that you'd like to share?

[00:43:32]

Zerabruk Abay: Yeah, I want— I will tell people just to, Ethiopia is very rich country, in so many things. If they come to they can, they, they visit Ethiopia, if they can. If not, come here, and taste what looks like Ethiopian food, Ethiopian snack, Ethiopian tradition, Ethiopian coffee ceremony. This has great, knowing other cultures, it's very rich in that you enrich your own life,

so. Knowing about other places, about other cultures, it is very good, so Ethiopia has a lot of things to offer to the world. It is just beca—it was just a hidden empire, so now it's just exposing to the world that, that there are a lot of things that can be, that can benefit the rest of the world. The one thing for example, *teff*, you know? It is a gluten free, it has been there in Ethiopia for I don't know how long. [Laughs] But, it looks now, it is very, very good grain for, especially in Europe now they make cereal for all the people it's gluten free, so— from now, the next fifty years, it will one of the big grains of the world. And so, we sell it all the time here, and the people come make *injera*, or any bread, anything from [inaudible] so. They can have healthy things. Ethiopian food is just you start from scratch and you prepare it at home, so in terms health, it's not a shelf food. So, there are a lot of benefits to have Ethiopian food, in terms of health.

[00:45:18]

Keia Mastrianni: Sure. And, tell me about the some of the things you sell here. Do you sell *teff* here? Or?

[00:45:24]

Zerabruk Abay: We sell *teff*. We sell— *teff* here. It is a package a pack of twenty-five pounds, it costs \$55. We sell *kolo*, it's like, it is—snack. We sell coffee green. Just green coffee, so you, you can roast at home. We take, we sell Ethiopian black tea. We sell—if not all, but the basic Ethiopian things items that we sell. Actually, we always had, we always had. Because this is the beginning of the Ethiopian grocers. It's not like the Indians, or the other,

the well-established industry. But, it's fast-growing. It's fast-growing.

[00:46:23]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah.

[00:46:23]

Zerabruk Abay: Yeah.

[00:46:24]

Keia Mastrianni: Yeah.

[00:46:24]

Zerabruk Abay: Yeah.

[00:46:25]

Keia Mastrianni: Well, yeah, this is—I'm so glad that we were able to come here and do this interview and learn a little bit more about your story. Yeah. And I think it's important, you know? I think it's important for people to understand the—immigrant experience and, you know, it's just helps to have a, a greater understanding of all human beings in general. And then, I think food is the great connector, right?

[00:46:52]

Zerabruk Abay: Yeah, yeah.

[00:46:53]

Keia Mastrianni: So, people come here and share a meal over a table and learn a little something too, right? [*Laughs*] Well, thank you so much for your interview.

[00:47:02]

Zerabruk Abay: Thank you, thank you. Thank you very much.

[00:47:06]

[*END INTERVIEW*]