

FOOD



FOOD TWEETS

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5 TOP HOT CHOCOLATE

1 MONSIEUR TRUFFE
90 Smith St,
Collingwood, 9416 3101

CAN'T choose between bitter-sweet hot chocolate blends from Brazil, Ecuador or Africa? Try a tasting plate (\$8.50).

2 A SPOT FOR JOE
33 Little Ryrie St,
Geelong, 0451 419 855

HIDDEN away in a carpark alley, this funky cafe turns organic Ecuadorian cacao into a grown-up hot chocolate (\$4.50).

REVIEW

AFRICAN VILLAGE KITCHEN

43 Walker St, Dandenong,
0404 330 432





HOST POURS IT ON

This Dandenong cafe offers a homely taste of West Africa, writes **TIANNA NADALIN**

THERE'S an old African proverb that when the mouth stumbles, it is worse than the foot. On the night of Melbourne's biggest earthquake in decades, a friend and I stumble over both and into this homely African kitchen.

From the outside, the Dandenong cafe is not much to look at. Luckily though, our noses have done the leading, and we soon discover there is much more to this humble cafe than meets the eye.

Inside, the ochre-painted brick walls are adorned with artwork from the motherland, while tables are covered with brown patterned vinyl. We are the only people dining tonight, so we choose a comfy-looking spot by the window. With the TV on in the background, we feel right at home.

African Village Kitchen's menu is extensive, but owner/head chef Abdoullie Sallah cooks seasonally, so not all options are available on any given night. He also does not add thickeners, flours or additives to his food, believing that if you have learnt to cook properly

you will be able to find all the ingredients you need in a natural form — a revelation that my coeliac friend much appreciates.

As one of the only cafes in Melbourne dishing up West African cuisine, we ask Abdoullie to cook up a selection of what's on offer (and gluten-free), and settle in for an African feast.

We wait half an hour for our first dish, but it's worth it. As per custom, food is made to be shared, so the dishes come on a big platter (\$7 to \$8 per dish) with tomato-based rice on the side.



According to a quote from the menu, eating together from the same bowl establishes a communion, a pact of peace among individuals. There's peace at our table — mainly because we are too busy eating to talk.

First we try the mafe — a traditional beef stew that is similar to Indian-style korma curries.

The beef is cooked on the bone and is so tender it can be eaten with a spoon, while the aromatic peanut sauce has a lovely wholesome thickness.

Then we try the poulet yassa, or lemon chicken. This dish, from Abdoullie's home of Senegal, is made with chunky pieces of tender chicken breast sauteed in onion and garlic and soaked in a fragrant lemon and herb juice.

The platter also has a vegetarian black-eyed bean and vegetable stew (above right). The beans are soft and fluffy and the carrot, corn and peas add a hint of sweetness. They taste delicious with some of the mafe peanut sauce, and the side salad of fresh vegies adds a good crunch.

My favourite dish is the lamb molokhia (left). Literally "fit for kings", the spiced stew uses ground, spinach-like molokhia leaves, which give the lamb a rich coating without the heaviness of actual cream.



The last dish is the goat curry. With a flavour similar to lamb and also cooked on the bone, it is as tender as the beef.

The real highlight of the evening, however, is the tea-pouring ceremony (\$5). Like an old friend, Abdoullie sits with us, telling us how tea-drinking is all about hospitality, generosity and camaraderie.

On this occasion he brews an ordinary tea bag with a little sugar and mint. Traditionally it is made with attaya tea, and people normally drink four cups, each taking up to an hour to serve. He pours the tea from a height of about a metre into a cup the size of a shot glass; this allows it to aerate. He then pours that cup into another cup and repeats until the tea starts to bubble.

Enjoying tea and binyere

— a bigger, crispier version of doughnut holes (\$2) — our evening is complete.

African Village Kitchen is not for the time-poor. It is a cultural dining experience that reminds us of the importance of food.

All meals are paid for and visits are unannounced.

IN A NUTSHELL: Like going to a friend's house for dinner.

VIBE: Laid-back. Eating is a ritual, not a process.

STANDOUT: Lamb molokhia, goat curry, black-eyed beans.

SERVICE: Extremely welcoming and friendly.

NOISE: Quiet hum of the TV interrupted only by the banging of pots and pans.

VALUE: Exceptional. Mains start from \$7.