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A man with a shaved head, wearing a white chef's jacket and dark jeans, stands in a field of tall grass at sunset. The background shows a hazy landscape with hills under a warm, golden light. The man is looking slightly to his right with a thoughtful expression.

AN INCREDIBLE JOURNEY

The nomadic chef's trek from
Ethiopia to a borrowed
restaurant near you

BY KATHERINE SELIGMAN

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HOME: EXPANDING A BATH

TRAVEL: MULTICULTURAL CURAÇAO

FOOD: THE CASUAL CAFE SAINT ROSE



Assistant Aida Catzin and Chef Eskender Aseged, creator of the traveling restaurant Radio Africa & Kitchen, prep the evening's prix-fixe meal.



CREATING RADIO AFRICA & KITCHEN

Eskender Aseged's moving experiment with North African, Californian and Mediterranean food mirrors his childhood

The Nomadic Chef stood in his backyard one spring day surveying his small garden. "I can wrap these around goat cheese tonight," he said as he snipped five grape leaves off a vine growing along one wall and stacked them carefully in his palm. He inspected the heirloom tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers and a fig tree. Then he checked the chives, mint and thyme sprouting at his feet to see what else he could use. "By September or October," he said, his speech so tinged with everywhere he's lived that it's hard to place, "everything I use will come from here."

In this scrappy patch in San Francisco's Mission District is an essential part of Eskender Aseged's story. It is here he first served his experimental meld of Mediterranean, African and Californian dishes to a widening circle of

co-workers, friends and, eventually, foodies who sat around a picnic table listening to African music. And it is here he negotiated a plan to re-create the scene in a local cafe two nights a week on a nomadic basis, calling it Radio Africa & Kitchen. Aseged does not advertise, but information about his unusual enterprise has spread slowly, first by word of mouth and then via the Internet, although he's not savvy about cyberspace. "When DailyCandy (the Web tip sheet on what's new in fashion, food and culture) called, it took me a while to call them back," he said. "I'm behind on messages and I thought, DailyCandy, who is that?"

It's not something he could have imagined when in 1981 at age 19 he fled his home in Ethiopia with only the clothes he was wearing, crossed the border into Sudan as a refugee and began a new life in the United States several years later. After living briefly in Newark,

BY KATHERINE SELIGMAN • PHOTOGRAPHS BY KAT WADE

N.J., and then in New York City, he moved to San Francisco. He worked as a busboy and waiter at a succession of increasingly elite restaurants, after first working in New York at the U.N. Delegates' Dining

vors. "I was getting paid and there was no homework," he said. "Well, it was my own homework."

In December Aseged, now 46, quit his job at Campton Place to work more than full time on Radio Africa & Kitchen. Recently he added a third night of cooking. Two nights a week he brings his act — a \$32 fixed-price dinner — to Velo Rouge Cafe on Arguello Boulevard in San Francisco and one night to Sweet Adeline Bakeshop in Berkeley. He starts some of the dishes — made with

ingredients that are mostly organic, from sustainably farmed land, whenever possible — in the tiny kitchen of his studio apartment, but does the bulk of the cooking in the cafe. These days if you consider all the time he spends planning menus, buying produce and fresh fish (he visited three stores one day to find wild salmon), preparing sauces and infused oils, cooking, critiquing his efforts and laundering table linens, he would earn about \$2 an hour.

"It's a lot of work, but I love it, so I don't consider it work," he said. "There are people who want to cook and I tell them try cooking three times a week for 13 or 14 hours. See how you like it."

The day I visited his garden he'd been up at 8, which is typical for him after a late night of cooking. His apartment is spare, a few nature photographs hanging on the walls and a magazine picture sticking to the refrigerator of a nomad and his camel in Mali. (The picture reminds him that he wants to visit Timbuktu one day, he said.) But the corner kitchen belongs to a cook. It is crammed with pots, strainers and glass jars of spices and homemade sauces, marinades and vinegars.

He'd already shopped for the wild salmon, which was more than \$15 a pound, meaning he'd take a loss on the evening meal, and had pinned up a copy of the night's menu above a kitchen window. The previous morning he'd slow-dried tomato confit in his oven, chopped and cleaned

Left: Eskender Aseged picks fresh chives from his home herb garden; right, he packs ingredients in his home as prepares to take them across town for dinner that night at Velo Rouge Cafe.

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Room (he didn't like the food) and ending at Campton Place (where he idolized the chef). He arrived knowing little English and much less about how to make a vinaigrette or hold a kitchen knife. But to him, waiting tables was like a college education. And it was free. When he wasn't delivering plates of food, he studied what was on them. Then he went home and stayed up late trying to re-create the fla-







Aseged shares a laugh with a friend while paying for organic vegetables at the Ferry Plaza Farmers Market.

vegetables and made a Moroccan marinade called chermoula and basil-infused olive oil by 2 p.m. So there was less to do on this day. "Every Wednesday I'm a rookie," he said. "Thursday is for perfection."

"It's unusual and kind of cool that he has this vision and he was always talking about it and now he's making it happen," said Daniel Humm, the former chef at Campton Place, who's now at New York's Eleven Madison Park and remembers

Aseged's curiosity about food. "For him, it's not about making it, it's about having fun. He's doing what he wants to do."

"It's not close to haute cuisine," said Scharffen Berger Chocolate co-founder Robert Steinberg, who has eaten at Velo Rouge and at Aseged's home. "But that's not what I'm looking for. It's very nourishing food and he is something of a perfectionist."

Ultimately, Aseged said, he'd like to

have his own place and to start an organization helping Ethiopian kids. In his two visits back home, the last in 1997, a year before his mother died of breast cancer, he was overwhelmed by the numbers of children wandering the streets. He feels a nagging guilt that he survived, has done well enough to travel and dream of having a restaurant while there is still such poverty in Ethiopia.

In some ways, cooking is a thread that



"We were Coptic Christians and we had a lot of feasts," he said. "This is a poor country, where we give time and attention to food. My mother never drank day-old roasted coffee. She always roasted fresh green beans that were washed and roasted in front of you."

There was no television. "We'd never heard of that," he said. Instead, he listened to the radio during the few hours in the morning and evening when there was a program on the one available station. His family was the only one in the neighborhood with a radio, so everyone came to hear music or soccer matches, whatever was on, while they munched on roasted garbanzo beans.

In the mid-'70s, Ethiopia's military dictatorship — which had overthrown Emperor Haile Selassie — imprisoned trade union activists, banned the church and enforced curfews and attendance at what were known as "people's committees." Aseged's father was killed at an anti-government demonstration. Aseged, already on a "watch list," stayed away from mandatory meetings and was outspoken about his opposition to the government. Fearing he'd be jailed, or worse, he decided to leave. He and his brother and two other boys escaped in the middle of the night. They brought no food or possessions because carrying bags would have made them look suspicious.

They walked for two weeks, up to 20 hours a day, in scorching temperatures, heading through the jungle on their way to Sudan. Aseged was stung on the neck by a scorpion and his legs were swollen from dehydration and lack of rest. He sipped what water remained in old truck ruts. After crossing each hill, his small band searched for villages, but found only deserted landscape. They were so exhausted and disheartened they barely spoke. "I remember eating on only three days," said Aseged, sitting at his dining table. He doesn't usually talk about that journey, he said, resting his chin on his hand and looking down.

"Nothing will ever shock me more," he said. "It would have to be death."

They finally reached the dusty town of Gedaref in Sudan and a refugee camp

where they found asylum. Aseged stayed briefly in the camp and then traveled to Khartoum, where he worked as a waiter at the American Club. He took Arabic classes and learned a little English from the diplomats, aid workers and expatriates who came to the club.

What he thought would be a few months stretched into a three-year wait to move to the United States. His sponsor helped him get a job in New York, where he was stunned by the traffic, crowds, neon signs, grocery stores and fast food restaurants, which were a mystery to him. Why did people eat so quickly or walk out with paper bags? At first he disliked American food. It was too bland.

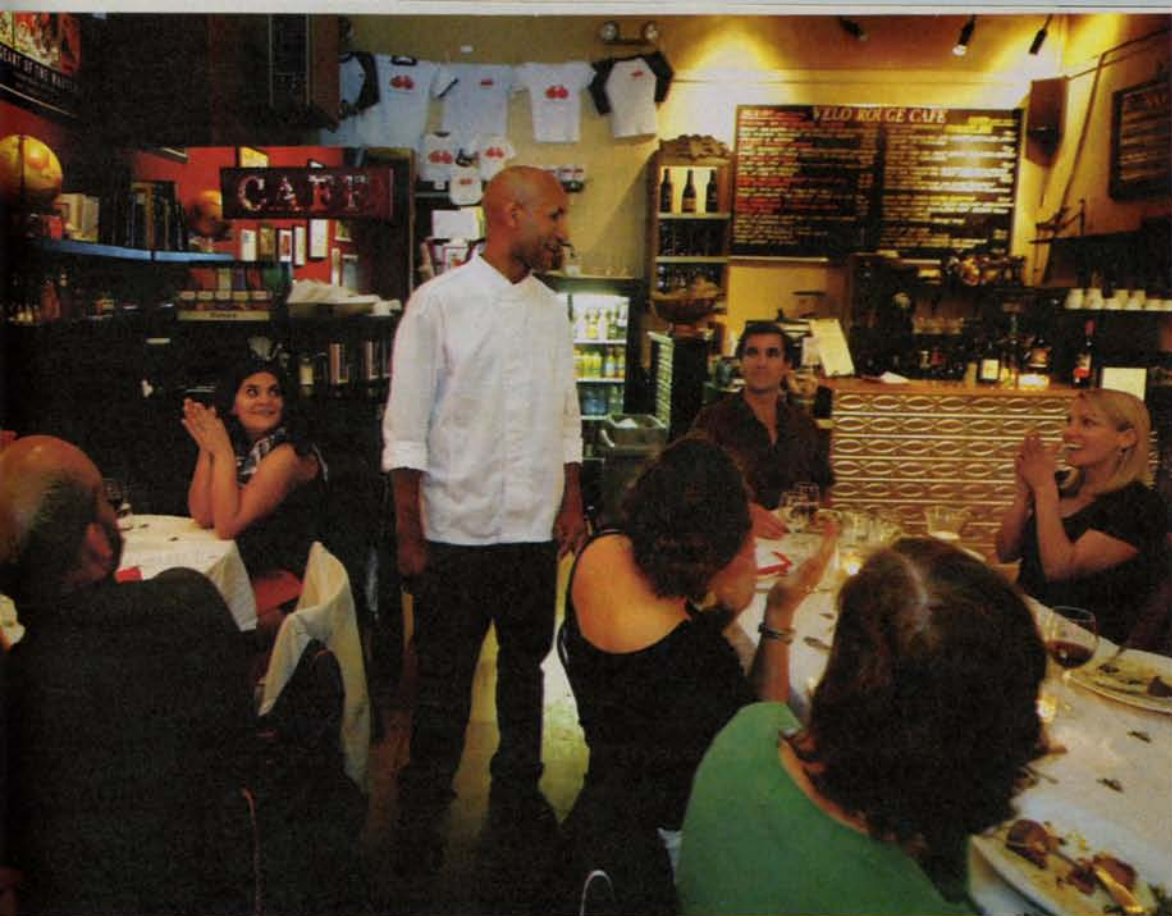
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In 1986, drawn by the "community and beauty" he encountered on a visit to San Francisco, he decided to move west. The city seemed more manageable than New York. He thought about starting a restaurant, but "the logistics were impossible," he said. He didn't have the money or backing. So he planned, instead, to study engineering. He enrolled at a community college and, to pay the bills, turned again to waiting tables. He worked at Cafe Majestic, trying with his limited English to figure out what people wanted when they ordered a glass of OJ. Later he was a busboy and runner at Jeremiah Tower's Speedo 690, where he helped the famed chef during cooking classes on Saturdays.

On his days off, he'd study the menu and try to duplicate the snapper and salsa or chicken in phyllo pastry. One day he attended a cooking demonstration given by chef Joyce Goldstein, former owner of Square One, in the basement of Macy's. He'd wanted to try Mediterranean cooking, so the next day he applied for a job at her restaurant, Square One, becoming first a busboy, then a waiter.

It was during this time he began having dinner parties once a month at his home. "My cooking was not very good," he said. "I was experimenting." He over-

ties Aseged's life together, the past with the present. He grew up in Gonder, Ethiopia, in a large family that was poor, like most he knew, but always had enough food. His father worked for the government and also as a carpenter, and his mother tended the house and garden. There was no stigma to men being in the kitchen and Aseged loved to help cook. His family often entertained friends and neighbors, sharing whatever they had.



Radio Africa & Kitchen patrons signal their appreciation after a four-course dinner at Velo Rouge Cafe.

cooked vegetables, the lamb was mushy and parts of the dinner were cold. The next time, he'd try to correct his mistakes. Engineering, although it would provide a more stable income, seemed less appealing. Aseged wanted to cook, even though his brother, who lives in Washington, D.C., and now has a master's degree, disapproved. His brother wanted him to return to school.

"It was a different level of cooking," Aseged said of Daniel Humm. "He knows how to leave a dish alone. It helped me to use essences, nothing that is overwhelming."

Instead, he went to work at Boulevard and then in 2000 decided to rent space during the day at a restaurant that served only at night. He specialized in North African fare, frittatas and ful. For a while business boomed, but then the dot-com world collapsed. He got a job at Hawthorne Lane, then landed at Campton Place when Humm was chef.

If his prior jobs were like college, he said, Humm's kitchen was graduate school. "It was a different level of cook-

ing," said Aseged. "He knows how to leave a dish alone. It helped me to use essences, nothing that is overwhelming."

The chef visited his house, along with other co-workers. Humm said he remembers the atmosphere more than the food. Meg Lynch, owner of Velo Rouge Cafe, recalls both. "He had an L-shaped table, and there was a jar so people could pay what it cost," she said. "The kitchen was tiny but the food was phenomenal." The two talked about Aseged using her cafe at night, when it was closed.

In the fall of 2005, he began cooking there. The kitchen, while bigger than his, is a tight space. Aseged keeps his dinner plates on a shelf along one wall, his linens in a bag on a chair, his ingredients in jars and bottles stored wherever he can find the space. One Wednesday night this spring he was stirring the Moroccan eggplant salad, in between putting on water for lentils and checking his menu. That night it included tiger prawns with harissa, arugula salad with edamame beans, Moroccan carrot soup with ginger creme fraiche, slow-cooked wild salmon, green lentils with pistachio essence, basmati rice, kumquat riata and fresh berries and ice cream.

Despite the pressure to prepare this range of dishes, Aseged appeared unhurried. He tasted every dish, then retasted after adding spices, putting a dollop on his palm, then washing his hands. "Daniel (Humm) always tasted everything," he said. "That's crucial." Recently he hired a helper, Aida Catzin, who acts as sous chef, washing pots and plating some of the food. But he cooks almost everything himself.

"Uh-oh," he said, looking at his watch. "I must go get the bread. It is late." It was 5 p.m. and with dinner starting in an hour and a half, he still had to drive across town to pick up bread. He left Catzin to cook the lentils ("Aida," he said in his musical voice, "more shalloots") and we jumped into his old Subaru station wagon.

He left the car, with the hazards blinking, and ran into Tartine for the bread. He'd rather drive across town for a just-baked loaf than serve a cold one to his guests, he said. On the way back, he lamented the impatience of American drivers. In Africa, he said, everyone honks all the time. It's like talking. Here, he said, there is desperation to arrive somewhere.

Back at the cafe, he began to cut and marinate the salmon. The first diners began to trickle in and place their orders. All wanted the prawns, seasoned with kumquats and lemon thyme. "We're in California," he said, as he put them in the pan one by one. "It's a collision of cultures." When they were done, he arranged them on a plate with marinated carrots and arugula. He rang a bell for Lynch, who delivered the dish to the table.

Yuri Futamura, who saw a notice at the cafe for Radio Africa & Kitchen while biking to work, first came a year ago. "Now I'm hooked," she said. She was sitting with co-workers at one of the two communal tables. A man at the other table said he'd discovered Aseged by searching the Internet for Ethiopian food. The cafe, which can seat about 35, wasn't full that night, although it usually is, often reserved weeks in advance. But Aseged said he is not interested in "hype" or "being the next cool place."

"Radio Africa & Kitchen is like storytelling," he said. "Here is what I remember, how I grew up, what I want to do for you. It's not conventional, but I took a chance."

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