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Sometimes I wish my journalist friends didn't have quite such a way with words. I was reminded of this over the weekend when I joined a few of them to try Ethiopian food for the first time. (We picked a place called [Dukem](#), one of perhaps [two dozen Ethiopian restaurants in D.C.](#))

"This must be what alien flesh feels like," one of my dining companions remarked as we tore off pieces of [injera](#), a thin-as-skin, spongy flatbread that felt cool and moist in my hands.

I fumbled for a nicer metaphor, but "damp dishtowel" was all I could muster.

I'm not actually sure what I ordered, which I think is the best approach to an ethnic eating adventure -- I simply confessed my ignorance to the waitress, and asked her to pick something. About 20 minutes later, she returned with an assortment of UFOs (unidentified food objects, that is) served on a giant circle of injera. She also handed each of us our own personal piece of injera, folded up like a large napkin.

"Should we ask for silverware?" I wondered out loud as the waitress left again.

"No, you eat with your hands," my friend informed me. "And with the, um, alien flesh."

The various dishes on our edible tablecloth included lentils, split peas, greens, cabbage, and a "salad" that would be called "fresh salsa" anyplace else. They were all tasty, but the highlight was the red stuff in the center: spice-soaked chunks of stewed chicken topped with hardboiled egg. Looking back at the menu, I decided that must be "[Doro Wat](#)," considered a staple of Ethiopian cuisine. It's flavored with [berbere](#), a spice mixture that varies from kitchen to kitchen but typically combines paprika, cardamom, ginger, garlic, fenugreek, salt and plenty of hot pepper. The slightly sour injera turned out to be a nice balance to all that spice, as well as a handy sponge to soak it up.

We devoured nearly everything in front of us, then discovered another fun fact: Injera can really pack a punch. I've never felt so full in my life! That's probably because injera is made from [teff, a cereal grain native to Ethiopia](#). Teff doesn't look like much -- it's the [world's smallest grain](#) -- but it happens to be a [powerhouse of protein, carbohydrates and minerals](#). (It's also very low in gluten, for those of you with gluten allergies.)

I look forward to more UFO encounters...what type of cuisine should I try next? Any suggestions?

Amanda Fiegl | [READ MORE](#)

Amanda Fiegl was a former assistant editor at *Smithsonian*.

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