

## Sugar? Yes, please!

Written by shabait Administrator

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The act of bestowing gifts as a sign of appreciation, love and good wishes, has a primordial essence. Human beings, and animals as well, have developed the habit to make the notion of sharing and giving as natural as possible.

Here in Eritrea, equally and extraordinarily for most of the times, we love to exchange with all means we have. After all, we are renowned, especially Eritrean women, for generosity and the typical sincere reception to guests.

Traditionally, people don't visit friends empty handed, rather, tag along snacks, roasted cereals and a fruits of all sorts while paying visits, in return the host, graces the visitor with tea or coffee, topped up by the 'brought' snacks.

In the long run, and referring to the Italian colony introduction of the modern bakery, bestowing cakes as a token of appreciation has set to be not only a trend but will be a convention.

In Asmara, down town, the commonly called 'Ketema' area, has a number of pastries. In fact, 80% of the 'Ketema' businesses are, according to my shabby statistics: pastries, bakeries, cafés and snack bars that include a variety of wow cakes in their menus.

Bar Vittoria is known for early morning services, so much so, that for more than four decades it has become a must visit place for many employees in their home-to-work morning route. Bar Royal, Asmara Sweet Café, Damera, Dolce Vita, Moderna, Pyramid and a whole long list of other cafés, and also, pastry houses such as: Giardino, Gebretinsae Bakery, Asmara Pastry, Zemenawi and more time-withstanding heritages, grace Asmara with an ocean of dolce variety.

Let me give you an insight to the locals' preferences. When people go out for a cup of coffee, as we globally say, it is common to accompany it by munch of cakes.

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Looking for a combination of a long lasting after-taste in your mouth? ...Here is the local theory. The recipe to this simple plate is simple indeed: if one is drinking something sweet, tea for instance, we normally get pizza, creamed or non-creamed brioche, English-cake, muffin or something crunchy, hence, biscuits.

Whereas, when the cake is creamed, so: Black forest, Mocca, Miglie-foglie alla crema Bianca or Al cioccolato, Pies, Cestino, Cheese cakes, Donuts , and so on, make sure to go for cappuccino, macchiato or coffee with a sprinkle of ginger. That's how it is done!

People, like I said before, choose to buy cakes from Asmara's prodigious pastry houses and cafés as they kindly enough receive orders for 'take-away'.

"I am the happiest person when I wake up at 3 in the morning, every day to bake and throughout the day; watch our customers enjoying our pastries. I am never tired!" says Finan Emaha, a young man (23), son and baker of Bar Vittoria!

There is no rule or a specific dictation over what to take on what occasion; baptism, graduation, honeymoon, an ordinary tea party or a traditional coffee ceremony (less on funerals). It all depends on the customer's wish.

Normally, it is easier to get a whole cake or 'torta' as we call it, but a variety of pastries is a common and mouth-watering choice. No problem whatsoever, as long as the kids are happy! They even have their very own way of calling the cakes. Say a loaf of pastry is topped by pink, strawberry-ish cream, then they call it 'melhas'; the Tigrigna word for tongue!

Perhaps it is because, the closest pink thing they perceive regularly, is their little pink tongue. Hilarious!

Yes, yes, okay... guilty as charged! We have nine entirely different cuisines for each ethnic group, save for, a communal sweet tooth!

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However, there is a paradox; many think that Eritreans inherited their sweet tooth, their keenness towards pastry and the beautiful tradition of sharing pastry as a token from the Italians. However that is not entirely true.

It is actually a tradition of centuries. Have you ever heard of Himbasha? Bet you did. Himabasha is seemingly a big round, soft, very supple, bread but when our mothers put dried grapes in the mix of the yeast, is something else. Yum!



Back in the days, shepherds of pastoral communities used to enjoy their fast-bakery. It's called Burkuta. What they did was practically make a yeast out of sweet grains such as corn and maize and a bit of wheat for consistency, mix it all together and cover it on top of a round burning stone, then they put it to bake, with little fire at low heat, for a long time out in the woods. When it's finally ready, they serve it to each other, with fresh milk! There was also a time, less now, when Guagu'ba was common: a steamed sugary bun that requires hours for the making.

And thank Heavens Hanza is still surviving in the era of instant foods! What is Hanza? Hanza is still a sweet bun but marvelously soft; so much so, it melts in the mouth before you even realize it. What makes Hanza special, is that it's covered with sweet spices, cinnamon for instance.

Moreover, we all crave for the pastries coming out of other cuisines such as the influence from Middle-Eastern countries. Honestly, the reason of why non followers anxiously await Muslim Holy Months and run after Muslim friends, and also a big reason of why Muslim friends are incredibly busy serving food to non-followers friends and families during Islamic Holy months are: Meklil, Taamiya, Sambussa or Dates!

So, all in all, our cravings for pastries have existed for as long as our tradition goes back. I am not denying the Italian influence –no I do dare not– which it, surely did modernize and enhance, the beautiful cultural harmony we witness coexisting in Eritrea's pastry houses and nowadays bakery tradition.

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One of my recommendation for tourists visiting Eritrea or anybody new to Eritrean culture; is to NOT go back without trying local pastry, and also to be part of our super addictive sweet tooth!